



The God of the Ostracised: The use of Lived Religion Theory in advancing Queer Spirituality

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Abstract

The South African Constitution and the law have ensured noticeable progress in acknowledging the LGBTQI community's rights. Consequently, there is now a legal framework that protects LGBTQI people, and any discriminatory behaviour and utterances can be prosecuted by law. The struggle now lies within the religious sector, where limited progress has been made. This paper focuses on the progress made within the Christian religion in terms of creating policies and regulations to protect LGBTQI community members' safety. We focus on same-sex relationships by arguing that even today, such relationships are not openly accepted by the Church. Using lived religion theory, we revisit Ntombana et al.'s (2020) findings and argue that queer people are closer to God and more spiritual than the homophobic Christians who attend daily Christian fellowship meetings. As queer people are in the minority and oppressed by the church system, we use Tutu and Boesak's theology to argue that they are closer to God than homophobic Christians. We highlight that during the COVID-19 lockdown, the Christian community suffered, while the queer community flourished because their spirituality is not based on the Church's orthodox tradition but on their relationship with God.

Keywords: Sexuality, lived religion, LGBTQI, sexual orientation, queer spirituality

Introduction

The fundamentalist approach to biblical interpretation which assumes that Biblical texts are against same sex relationships has already been challenged by various scholars such as Krause, (2011), Gunda (2011), Togarasei, and Chitando, (2011), Gnuse, (2015); Setyawan (2022) In this paper we are by no means repeating that discussion, instead we use lived religion theory to interpret Ntombana' et al. (2020) findings to make a point that queer people's spirituality is sturdier than most Christians for the reason that it is built outside the walls of institutional religion. This paper does not intend to repeat the already exhausted debate on biblical exegesis on whether the Bible affirms or is anti same sex relationships. Instead, we explore the role and meaning of spirituality through Ntombana's et al. (2020) participants' lived experiences. We contend that institutional religion has historically been used as a mechanism for heterosexist intolerance and the oppression of homosexuals and non-normative genders (Grozelle, 2017; Levy, 2008). Traditionally, the Christian Church has always accepted heterosexual romantic relationships as the only godly norm and has always rejected



homosexuality and bisexuality (Nainggolan 2022). The teaching has always been that God created Adam (man) and Eve (woman) for a specific purpose and that other forms of sexual orientation are contrary to the procreative purpose of sexual intercourse and attack the basic unit of society: the family (marriage) (Brooke, 1993). In general, Christians have resisted considering other forms of sexuality, despite several liberal democracies having accepted homosexuality and allowed for same-sex marriages in their constitutions. Both in South Africa and across the African continent, homophobia has played itself out most vociferously in religious discourse (Ncube, 2023: 22). In Africa no less than 43 countries have, in one way or another, criminalised same-sex relationships, with Uganda considered as the most notorious example (Boesak, 2011:20). Even in the new democracy in South Africa, during the consultation stages, it was the religious organisations such as the Southern African Catholic Bishops' Conference, the Muslim Judicial Council and the Christian Lawyers' Association that openly opposed the inclusion of same-sex marriages in the South African Constitution (Judge et al., 2008:116-133). In 1996, South Africa added an anti-discrimination clause to the Constitution, which stated that "no one may discriminate against anyone because of their sexual orientation". Interestingly, the African Christian Democratic Party (said to be founded on Christian principles) was the only political party that opposed the clause and lost to the majority vote (Dunton & Palmberg, 1996). The fact that the African Christian Democratic Party rejected this progress speaks to the homophobic attitude of most Christians that still see same-sex relationships as abominations in God's eyes. Davids (2020:301) agrees that religious communities are the most significant violators of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, Queer and Intersex (LGBTQI) people's human dignity.

Despite advances in the legal construction of homosexuality in South Africa, homophobia continues to pervade religious life (Potgieter & Reygan, 2011:60). Across various Christian denominations, the discussion regarding the morality of homosexuality in the eyes of God has persisted for centuries, showing no signs of reaching a conclusive resolution in the foreseeable future (Nkosi & Masson, 2017:73). The majority of Christian churches maintain the perspective that homosexuality is considered a transgression against God's law and poses a challenge to traditional family values (Kaoma, 2014:229). Literature across the globe shows that the Christian attitude and theology concerning homosexuality are adverse. Even though there has been a change in the attitudes towards homosexuality in the medical field and the general population, the Church is still debating the morality of homosexuality (Brooke, 1993). A study conducted by Cameron-Ellis (1999) in Pretoria among Methodist Church members found that the general population still hold negative attitudes towards same-sex relationships and these attitudes are worse among older males than among women. Cameron-Ellis (1999:67, 68) suggests that one of the main reasons for male resistance could be that males are more likely to hold traditional religious views than their female counterparts. That is the reason for Davids (2020:302) asserting that "LGBTQI bodies are often misrecognized because heteropatriarchal templates are set in patterns of hierarchical, binary constructive organised thought." This speaks to the reality that churches in general are still led by patriarchy and the LGBTQI society threatens male ascendancy and supremacy. In general, it seems that religious teachings inflict pain on those with different sexual orientations. Similarly, Block's (2021) participants were more bothered by the Church's theology concerning homosexuality than by the treatment of others. Block (2021) conducted studies among lesbian and gay communities in British Columbia and Alberta. In contrast, Ntombana et al.'s (2020) studies suggest that young women in Bloemfontein, South Africa, were less bothered by homophobic teachings. Even though their churches preached against LGBTQI, it was the rejection by their fellow churchgoers that hurt them the most. Ntombana et al. (2020) published a paper on queer spirituality which explored how a group of young lesbians carve out their spiritual/religious identities with their different sexual orientations in a homophobic world.

Other studies have shown that most gay men and lesbians ranked "church" as the least supportive and most hostile environment in which to be (Bryant & Demian, 1994). In this paper,



we question such attitudes and agree with Ntombana et al.'s (2020) findings that LGBTQI people of faith are spiritual individuals who are involved in spiritual practices outside church buildings. We revisit Ntombana et al.'s (2020) findings and apply lived religion theory as a framework for analysis to argue that LGBTQI Christians are more spiritual than the homophobic churchgoers found in most South African faith-based fellowships. We analyse relevant literature to place our argument in the context of COVID-19 when public gatherings were prohibited to curb the spread of the virus. We propose that the temporary closure of church gatherings created a space for the religious community to engage in discussions about what constitutes religion, worship and fellowship. We further argue that a new reality with new opportunities for ministries emerged and some churches are making use of these opportunities. Our main contention is that, to some extent, the new wave of spirituality has encouraged minorities and other spiritual identities, such as queers, to draw closer to God. During the COVID-19 lockdown, there was not much interaction with homophobic church members and individuals could choose the type of TV and online preaching that best suited them; they relied on God as the source of their spirituality and not the judgment of Christian traditions provided by Church physical gatherings.

Theological progress made so far: literature on biblical interpretations.

Although the mainstream theological discussion on religion and same-sex relationships is recent, at least within the theological debate there has been some progress towards acceptance of queer. For a long time, the known and popular theological/Christian viewpoint was that of fundamentalism, which condemned homosexuality (Boughton, 1992:141-153). According to Cameron-Ellis (1999), "fundamentalism is a closed minded, ethnocentric mindset, simplistic religious attitude which induces intolerance towards those that differ, and the tendency to discriminate." Many fundamentalists frequently reference familiar passages from the Old and New Testaments to oppose homosexuality. Specifically, they point to the biblical narrative of Sodom and Gomorrah, contending that God's destruction of these cities was a response to the widespread immoral and detestable behaviour that had become ingrained in the lives of their inhabitants.

Recently, authors such as Gnuse (2015); Nkosi and Masson (2017); Van Klinken (2020) and Davids (2020) have suggested that the Church revisit its interpretation of both the Old and New Testament passages used against homosexuality. Among other things, these scholars propose rereading the Old Testament texts in the original Hebrew. Mtshiselwa (2010a:1) goes on to argue for a theological approach that recognises that there are historical and cultural distances between the 21st century and the times when the text was produced. For instance, Genesis 19:4-11 has nothing to do with whether or not genuine love expressed between consenting persons of the same sex is legitimate. Rather, it is about Sodom and the sin related to hospitality (Nkosi & Masson, 2017:78) or the sin of holding power and dominance over strangers whom they perceived to be weak and vulnerable (Cameron-Ellis, 1999:119).

Equally, the argument made about the New Testament is to follow the culture and the Greek language; it is argued that the New Testament scripture has nothing to do with same-sex relationships. According to Gnuse (2015:71), there is an assertion that the term 'homosexuality' in these contexts has been inaccurately construed and actually refers to male prostitutes, as per the original Greek meaning. Nkosi and Masson (2017:76) contend that the primary intent of these passages is to explore why humanity has strayed from a connection with God, rather than focusing on condemning homosexuality.

Another progressive argument is that some of the anti-LGBTQI and homosexuality campaigns are not necessarily based on biblical texts. Van Klinken (2020:1) asserts that the anti-LGBTQI campaigns have become deeply politicised in African societies in recent decades as part of postcolonial identity politics. He mentions African countries such as Uganda, Ghana, Zambia and Kenya and suggests that the dynamics in these countries are a form of "protective



homophobia". Van Klinken (2020:1) further argues that these African countries are driven, at least partly, by funding and support from conservative American evangelists who have been failed by the democratic process in their countries and consequently are forced to advance a conservative Western agenda towards queer identities elsewhere.

The foregoing conversation has not only been taking place in the literature; church members of various denominations have been engaging in conversations among themselves concerning the issue for quite some time. Behind closed doors and in the media, church members have spoken about their sexual orientation or that of a loved one, or even about their suspicions about the orientation of members of their congregation (Bentley, 2012:1; Ntombana, et al., 2022). The Somizi Mhlongo story referenced by Ntombana et al. (2020) created a strong public conversation which was particularly evident in social media. The discussion divided society and it became evident that more and more churchgoers have since changed their stance on same-sex relationships. In 2014, the South African Council of Churches sent a letter to the South African Parliament, specifically to the chair of the Portfolio Committees on Home Affairs and Justice and Constitutional Development, stating that there is no single Christian perspective on marriage and that Christian churches hold divided opinions on both same-sex relationships and same-sex marriage. The letter further noted that:

Currently, most churches uphold the union of one man and one woman as the only valid model for Christian marriage. At the same time, there is a growing number of dissenting voices in all denominations ... people who see equal validation of homosexual and heterosexual unions as consistent with their understanding of the inclusiveness expressed through the unconditional love referred to as God's grace.

In summary, the letter acknowledged that most churches accept same-sex orientation but have a problem with the sexual behaviour that comes with it. They appear to accept queer people as long as they choose celibacy and do not expect the Church to marry them. It seems that the most contentious issue the letter addresses is the law, which expects church ministers to officiate same-sex marriages even though that is against their conscience. The letter is explicit that most Christian denominations are not yet ready to accept and bless same-sex marriages and Christians request the government to respect their stance. In January 2023 one of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa (MCSA) Ministers, Rev Nolingolo from Mdantsane, South Circuit, East London received serious media backlash due to his homophobic preaching against same sex relationships (Cape Argus, 2023). Consequently, the MCSA wrote a media statement expressing apology and further distancing itself from Rev Nolingolo's utterances. The public statement highlighted three issues; firstly, that the Church did not share his sentiments about same-sex relationships, secondly that the Church accepts different sexual orientations and lastly, the Church is still wrestling with officiating same-sex marriages.

As already noted, not all church ministers/pastors express discrimination in their preaching or make comments against same-sex relationships. Reading from the above-mentioned SACC and MCSA statements, the reasons for accepting same-sex relationships are not because of theological teachings but because of the law and South African Constitution which recognise same-sex relationships. Currently, in South Africa, LGBTQI Christians do attend churches, where some experience homophobic comments and sometimes hear homophobic sermons but this does not deter most of them from attending church services (Ntombana et al., 2020:82). Homophobic sermons are not necessarily prevalent – a case like Somizi's is rare – and consequently, after the incident, Somizi returned to his church and attended services as usual (Ntombana et al., 2020:77). In highlighting the Church's hypocrisy, Mtshiselwa (2010b:73) notes that it seems as if homosexuals are accepted as long as they do not engage in homosexual acts, do not take leadership positions, and do not demand the blessing of same-sex unions and ordination.



The narrative on the subject has progressed to more contentious debates, such as the ordination of same-sex couples and the officiating of same-sex marriages with which the South African Christian community is currently wrestling with. It seems that same-sex relationships are accepted by the church as long as they remain private, and that has to be recognised as progress and some kind of tolerance towards the LGBTQI society. The problem begins when queers want to make their sexual preferences public, either by wanting to get married or by demanding ordination, which is currently allowed for heterosexual people only.

Lived Religion Theory and Queer

The orthodox definitions of religion espoused by various disciplines are traditionally concerned with concepts more aligned to orthodoxy, texts, structures, institutions, systems, social phenomena, origination, etc. (Nyhagen, 2017:496). The modern definitions have moved away from traditional approaches, specifically lived religion theory, which is the basis for the contention of this paper that goes beyond institutions, structure, and texts. The term “lived religion” comes from the French tradition of the sociology of religion, “la religion vecue” (Hall, 1997:vii). David Hall is credited with introducing the term in the USA (Neitz, 2011:47) and together with Robert Orsi, popularised the concept. According to Orsi (1997), “Lived religion scholars build on earlier studies in the area of popular religion”, which has been taken to mean the religion of the ordinary people that happens beyond the bounds and often without the approval of religious authorities.”

In this study, we interpret lived religion to mean both an approach and a conceptual stance. As an approach, it builds from the ground up and emphasises empirical case studies but also uses them to reflect critically on existing concepts and theories, bringing attention to phenomena, people, and locations marginalised by conventional perspectives. Roeland and Ganzevoort (2014:91, 93) argue that praxis is the domain of lived religion. They make a compelling argument that praxis is primarily concerned with what people do rather than focusing on religious institutions’ theological dogma. The understanding of religion, as defined by lived religion, brings meaning and definitions to ordinary members of a faith. Faith is no longer interpreted by clergy and a few selected individuals alone, mostly males given that most faith-based groups are patriarchal. Within the concept of lived religion, individuals can expand faith beyond what is authorised by the institutional church; there is no formality, no liturgy or Eucharist because all those are administered and performed by the “selected” few. According to Knibbe and Kupari (2020:159), the “lived religion approach has pioneered a strand of ethnographically grounded scholarship that navigates between several imposing bulwarks of research which make up the landscape of religious studies and sociology of religion”.

The study of lived religion has become a prolific strand of research in the sociology of religion and religious studies (Knibbe & Kupari, 2020:157). Recently, this theory has been used to study various facets of lived experiences, for example, Ogidi and Chiroma (2021) employed this theory to reflect on youth ministry in Nigeria, while Helland (2005) used this theory to examine spirituality around “online religion”, which takes place through the Internet. Nyhagen (2017:498) critically assesses the lived experiences of religious secular feminists. Wendel (2003) explores lived religion in family therapy, where one can explore patients’ lived experiences of faith. Jentile (2018) also applied this theory in his argument concerning Bantu Biko’s spirituality in which he argued for spirituality from below. If one looks at various studies which used lived religion theory, they are all out of religious orthodox and creed and are about solace praxis and spirituality.

Lived religion theory introduced a fresh approach to defining and understanding religion; a non-institutional approach that argues for religious actors’ agency. The theory is critical in examining, understanding, and arguing for the marginalised members of faith-based



organisations, including the LGBTQI community. This group is usually rejected by religious orthodox processes. As presented in this paper and other writings cited here, the LGBTQI community has been ostracised by all religious affiliations, including Christians. The theory recognises that LGBTQI community members are as spiritual as other people.

The lived religion lens through which spirituality is observed and interpreted was evident in the theology and lives of apartheid activists and church leaders such as the late Archbishop Tutu and Dr Alan Boesak. During apartheid, they adopted a theology from below and argued for a God who identified with the oppressed and the marginalised. At the time, the black majority was at the receiving end, which is why they sacrificed their positions and joined the struggle against apartheid. In the democratic government, the LGBTQI community members are among those who are at the receiving end.

Dr Boesak's stance on the LGBTQI community is eloquently captured in his speech delivered at the United Reformed Church of Southern Africa (URCSA) Synod in 2008 (Boesak, 2015:94; Davids, 2020:309-310).

How could the same church that took such a strong stand against apartheid and racial oppression, gave such inspired leadership from its understanding of the Bible and the radical Reformed tradition; that had, in the middle of the state of emergency of the 1980s with its unprecedented oppression, its desperate violence, and nameless fear given birth to the Belhar Confession, that spoke of reconciliation, justice, unity and the Lordship of Jesus Christ, now display such blatant hatred and bigotry, deny so vehemently for God's LGBTI children the solidarity we craved for ourselves in our struggle for racial justice, bow down so easily at the altar of prejudice and homophobic hypocrisy? (Boesak, 2015:94; Davids, 2020:309-310)

In the foregoing speech, Dr Boesak questioned why URCSA was still struggling to welcome and affirm the LGBTQI community (Davids, 2020:309-310). Boesak drew parallels between the Church's struggle against racial injustices and the failure of the Church to recognise its systemic structures of oppression against the LGBTQI community. The Belhar Confession referred to by Dr Boesak was drafted and adopted by the Dutch Reformed Mission Church in South Africa to denounce apartheid and racism as sins against God. By quoting this document, Dr Boesak implied that the LGBTQI community's struggle is as painful as the struggle against apartheid and racism. Dr Boesak calls the Church out for its double standards and exclusion theology. His approach to LGBTQI matters is embedded in the theology of activism, which was also embraced in the late Desmond Tutu's theology which was eloquently expressed in his sermon at the Southwalk Cathedra (McCarty, 2013).

Tutu went further to embrace his daughter who is a lesbian who married her same-sex partner. Tutu was open about his support for the LGBTQI community to the point where he openly supported his daughter coming out as a lesbian and her choice to marry while she was an ordained Anglican priest. This stance made Tutu unpopular among his colleagues but that did not hinder him from openly supporting those with different sexual orientations. Both Tutu and Boesak are true representations of activism, which is reinforced by Mikkie Van Zyl who, as a white Afrikaner woman, embraced her feminist struggle against violence against women and queers and fought for the liberation of the black oppressed. Van Zyl's (2015:1) participation in the anti-apartheid struggle locked her into the egalitarian discourses concerning human rights, which she embraced with fervour – especially for women, queers and black South Africans. We contend that activism cannot be one-sided; activists should identify with minorities, those who are ostracised and oppressed, and the above-mentioned political leaders and academics are examples of true activism. Boesak (2011:12) further argue that “uncritical claims based “on the Holy Bible” not only does the Bible an injustice; it is the guarantee for continued injustice covered with “biblical” sanction”.



The type of oppression experienced by gay and lesbian citizens is visible on all fronts, but especially within religious communities. In the same breath, lived religion theory describes apartheid as evil and provides the lens through which the LGBTQI are seen as oppressed. One can argue that in the same way that God delivered black people from the system of apartheid, He will deliver the LGBTQI community from the oppressive hand of the Church's hegemonic theology. The Church should move away from the biblical texts to reflect on peace, love, and serenity. Ganzevoort and Roeland (2014) argue for "garden spirituality" in reference to the peace and harmony experienced by a woman working in a garden. One can argue about the peace experienced by gays or lesbians who accept their sexual identity as God's purpose. "Therefore, members of the LGBTQI community experience their sexual orientation as part of God's creation and not as a result of an intrinsic orientation to evil" (Haslan & Levy, 2006). As already noted, LGBTQI people of faith are spiritual individuals who are involved in spiritual practices outside the Church (Ntombana et al., 2020). The peace received from within, and God's loving hand is so strong that the rejection by other Christians cannot affect their spirituality. Ntombana et al. (2020) note this about their participants:

Participants did not view their sexuality as 'abnormal' and 'sinful' and therefore did not feel a need to reconcile the two concepts of homosexuality and Christianity. They perceived their relationship with Christ as the same as that of any other Christian. Participants were mostly impacted or affected in the beginning stages of realising and accepting that they were sexually attracted to people of the same sex.

By employing lived religion as a lens to scrutinize the subjects in Ntombana et al.'s (2020) study, one could posit that the hardships they faced, originating from the Church's rejection, redirected their dedication and rendered them more spiritually inclined than denominationally aware. The presence of homophobia failed to deter their prayers; in fact, it spurred increased devotion, drawing them closer to their divine creator. This tenacity underscores the importance of spirituality in their existence and propels them to adopt strategies to reconcile any apparent conflict between their Christian and sexual identities. Notably, participants strategically chose to renegotiate their Christian identity rather than their sexuality, disassociating their spirituality from rigid Church traditions. A significant number managed to separate their connection with God from the Church, attributing the adverse impact on the latter to the discrimination they endured. For these individuals, identity did not necessitate acceptance or rejection; they acknowledged the intricacies of their selves. It's worth noting that among those who continued attending church services, their participation in church activities dwindled, yet the services continued to enrich their spirituality.

To clarify, this reflection does not intend to diminish the importance of church culture and theology. Instead, while seeking spiritual and religious support, participants discovered solace beyond the confines of the official church structure. Ntombana's findings bears some similarities with the study conducted by Kelsey Block in conservative Christian communities in British Columbia and Alberta, Canada. Block also found that all of the participants shifted to a more personalized faith and view Christianity as a resource instead of a requirement (Block, 2023: 254)

Conclusion

There is evidence that religion and spirituality may also contribute to the health and well-being of LGBTQI people (Block, 2023: 239). For LGBTQI individuals in general, before any other struggles that they experience, there are two main struggles by which they are characterised. The first is accepting who they are despite their identity being outside societal norms and the second is coming out and dealing with the backlash. These are life and death issues for many queer people, and both require spiritual intervention. According to lived theory, questions pertaining to creation, identity and belonging constitute a deeply spiritual journey. Different



sexualities are strengthened by the creator who made them and that explains why homophobic preaching and exclusion treatment do not destroy them. One can argue that being different, just like people who live with a disability, is in itself a spiritual journey in the sense that one needs the comfort and encouragement that can only come from spiritual powers. The God that the LGBTQI community can relate to cannot be not found within the walls of the homophobic Church. We posit that LGBTQI individuals of faith have undergone a separation from traditional religious denominations, evolving into more spiritually engaged individuals outside formal church settings. Their challenges redirect their commitment, emphasizing a spirituality transcending denominational awareness. The Bible's concept of "true spirituality" opposes hypocrisy, akin to the Pharisees' portrayal. COVID-19 closures of places of worship inadvertently paved the way for genuine spirituality, benefiting the LGBTQI community. The pandemic led to private online worship, enabling enjoyment of sermons, gospel music, and diverse Bible interpretations. Lessons from queer spirituality in Ntombana et al.'s (2020) study reveal a redefined spirituality beyond church structures and religious indoctrination. As already argued, lived religion helped to explain spirituality from below and the spirituality of those marginalised by mainstream religion. Such an attitude – finding God in adversity – requires a certain level of spiritual maturity and hence we argue that other Christians can learn a lot about spirituality and maturity from queer people.

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