

Reimagining Christianity and Sexual Diversity in Africa: A Queer Theologian's Appraisal

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SHORT BIO

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ABSTRACT

The recent publication by Adriaan van Klinken and Ezra Chitando, titled *Reimagining Christianity and Sexual Diversity in Africa* (2021), continues to garner much attention from the theological community. This publication is important on numerous fronts. At least two are noteworthy and inform the present appraisal. First, van Klinken and Chitando's work speaks to the religious, particularly Christian, realities that beset contemporary Africa. Second, their work takes seriously the ways in which the lives of Africans are being rendered precarious because of the limited socio-political progress with regard to LGBT+ rights. This review article is offered taking seriously the ways in which LGBT+ lives are rendered precarious by the oppressive logic of forms of Christianity. This article has three movements. First, it offers an appraisal of the publication by van Klinken and Chitando. Second, the article critically considers the moment in which the publication was produced. Here an investigation into a particular Christian conservatism, which has led to fundamentalism, is provided. This reality, it is argued, renders this publication quite important. Third, it offers contemplation on the method that three queer theologians in South Africa are employing in their scholarship. Making this third move, the article responds to what is considered a limitation in the publication. This review article attempts to contribute and continue the work of re-imagining that van Klinken and Chitando invite readers to. Through their publication van Klinken and Chitando offer an invitation. This invitation is most clear: we are requested to re-imagine Africans who are LGBT+ as humans—fully human, and thus creatures of God. It is this invitation to which this review article responds.

KEYWORDS

LGBT+, queer theology, sexual ethics

Introduction

The recent publication by Adriaan van Klinken and Ezra Chitando, titled *Reimagining Christianity and Sexual Diversity in Africa* (2021), continues to garner much attention from the theological community. At the time of publication of this review in AJGR, the book had already been reviewed by Kevin Ward (2021)¹ and Michael Battle (2021)². Within the present African

¹ Kevin Ward, "Reimagining Christianity and Sexual Diversity in Africa," accessed May 16, 2021, <https://www.eupublishing.com/doi/full/10.3366/swc.2022.0378>

² Michael Battle. "Reimagining Christianity and Sexual Diversity in Africa," accessed May 16, 2021 <https://www.churchtimes.co.uk/articles/2022/11-march/books-arts/book->

discourse on religion and human sexuality, the importance of this publication by van Klinken and Chitando's cannot be overstated. It is therefore pertinent to offer an appraisal of this work focusing on its promise and noting further work that may be required considering its limits.

Attempting to contribute to the intellectual dialogue to which van Klinken and Chitando invite readers—who I take to be people of Christian faith in Africa—like Ward and Battle, I offer a consideration of van Klinken and Chitando's work. Unlike more concise reviews, this review article formulates four points worth reflection when engaging van Klinken and Chitando.

First, it offers an appraisal of the publication. Second, as a church historian I am intrigued by the historical dimensions that shape this moment. For this reason attention is afforded to global and local developments regarding LGBT+ rights.³ Third, writing as a South African, I consider contemporary queer theologians who are contributing to the growing body of literature.

An Appraisal

Of the numerous fronts on which van Klinken's and Chitando's publication is important, at least two are noteworthy and these inform the present appraisal. First, van Klinken and Chitando's work speaks to the religious, particularly Christian, realities that beset contemporary Africa. Second, their work takes seriously the ways in which the lives of Africans are being rendered precarious because of the limited socio-political progress with regard to LGBT+ rights. Taking seriously the invitation to reimagining that the authors extend, this appraisal is divided into two parts: first, it attempts to outline the contours of the work; and second, it considers the framing of the invitation to re-imagine.

Coming to Terms with the Contours

To come to terms with the contours of the work, we must consider the people and processes that seem to be at the centre of the publication. This part of

[reviews/reimagining-christianity-and-sexual-diversity-in-africa-by-adriaan-van-klinken-and-ezra-chitando](#)

³ Following van Klinken (2019:x) I use the term LGBT+ "as an indication of the unstable and unfixed nature of these categories." However, I do so with difference by including the '+' to denote those categories in human sexuality that are yet to be defined.

the review first discusses the people (theologians) on whom the authors draw on for reimagining, and second it outlines the processes that LGBT+ are employing in the pursuit of reimagining.

Quite interestingly the authors draw on the work of four pioneering African theologians: Desmond Tutu, Mercy Oduyoye, Jean-Blaise Kenmogne, and Musa Dube. This is perhaps quite unorthodox for a publication focused on sexuality, a topic which remains side-lined by African Christian theological discourses. Utilising the insights of these important theologians the authors set forth not only a liberatory theological trajectory for Africa's gender and sexual imagination, but quite significantly, they allow these theologians to speak on their own terms. In varying degrees each of the four theologians have articulated a vision for society and the church which affirms the lives and loves of LGBT+ Africans. However, to the question, who are the LGBT+ theologians who are currently writing and imagining this affirmation of life and love? the authors van Klinken and Chitandao provide no clear response. This is perhaps the publication's greatest limitation. I offer a reflection as response to this question that the book has failed to answer, in the third part of this review article that contemplates method,

Part two of the book is perhaps a more practical section of the book outlining how communities are directly impacted by the project of reimagining. By looking at what was previously done and is being done now throughout Africa, the authors note two organisations doing important work. First, readers are called to consider the World Council of Churches' Ecumenical HIV and AIDS Initiatives and Advocacy, previously known as the Ecumenical HIV/ AIDS Initiative in Africa. The project sought to focus attention on the epidemic of HIV and AIDS in the continent, which, in time, became a vehicle to address violence directed at LGBT+ people. The second institution is the Fellowship of Affirming Ministries. Regarding this organisation, van Klinken and Chitandao⁴ write: "The Fellowship of Affirming Ministries is an African American organisation that in recent years has become active in Africa, aiming to build a pan-African progressive Christian, LGBT-affirming movement." Both organisations highlight the work already underway in Africa preparing faith communities to re-imagine how gender and sexuality

⁴ Adriaan van Klinken and Ezra Chitandao, *Reimagining Christianity and Sexual Diversity in Africa*, (London: Hurst Publishers, 2021), 113.

are being configured, challenging, and nudging the faithful to commit to an affirming theology that dignifies the lives of LGBT+ people.

Alongside these important institutions, van Klinken and Chitando suggest that art is, in fact, the lifeblood to recognise the dignity and rights of those who are LGBT+. In part three of the publication no less than four chapters are devoted to art produced by LGBT+ activists, claiming their sexuality and re-claiming their spirituality. Their art ranges from storytelling to poetry to visual arts. This appeal to the arts draws out the very imagination to which the authors invite readers. In these varied art forms, van Klinken and Chitando contend⁵ that “Stories of struggle become testimonies of affirmation and liberation.” The artwork of LGBT+ people communicate not only their hurt and harm but also, more importantly, their hope and healing.

Reimagining Bodies and the Body

What form, then, does our reimagining take? Quite simply, this reimagining is embodied and en fleshed. This requires a recognition of the importance of bodies and the Body (*Corpus Christi*, Body of Christ). Briefly outlining the history of Christianity in Africa, van Klinken and Chitando⁶ note that the Body of Christ as well as understanding of body must be understood in terms of European colonial expansion. In the present, discussions in Africa, given the religious influence on sexuality (especially homosexuality), the impact of colonialism must not be understated. However, in the attempt to offer a decolonial alternative, the authors are quite clear that what is required now is a break from the colonising forms of sexual socialisation.

It is here that the authors challenge us to take the task of reimagining seriously. van Klinken and Chitando write⁷,

The African queer body—that is, the bodies of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and other people perceived to be deviant because of their gender and sexuality—is too often stigmatised and silenced, discriminated against and excluded from the community.

⁵ van Klinken and Chitando, *Reimagining Christianity*, 145.

⁶ van Klinken and Chitando, *Reimagining Christianity*, 17.

⁷ van Klinken and Chitando, *Reimagining Christianity*, 129.

Given that the bodies of Africa's LGBT+ people are rendered precarious, our undertaking to re-imagine must seek ways to recognise their dignity. We are to take seriously the affirmation that gender and sexual minorities are made in the image of God, and affirm their inherent sacredness.⁸

This is an area in which the Church has abysmally fallen short. Throughout Africa, Christian faith communities remain sites of unconscionable violence for LGBT+ people. By calling readers to re-imagine the queer body, the authors also claim that ecclesiology must re-conceived—that the life of the church must be considered as profoundly enriched by the diversity of sexualities and genders. This reimagining of the Body—yes, the *Copus Christi*—is best seen in the chapters in parts one and two of the publication. Throughout these chapters the church is presented, perhaps even reimagined, as the vehicle of God's compassionate justice for LGBT+ by dignifying their lives and loves. The invitation to which the authors call the readers is clear: "This call for an African queer reimagination is not just about a reimagining of 'African sexuality' but of 'Africa' much more generally, highlighting the interconnectedness of sexual, social, economic and political spheres of life on the continent"⁹ It is a call to re-imagine our bodies and the Body.

Considering the Moment

In the past twenty years of the twenty-first century the global community has been pushed to ever increasing levels of polarisation. More pointedly, this polarisation is heightened by a reified far-right politics – which often facilitates the conditions for forms of religious fundamentalism. This, then, is the moment into which van Klinken and Chitando's publication has been born – a time of pervasive social regression as it concerns the recognition of LGBTI+ rights. The rise in far-right politics, with the sustenance of religious fundamentalism, directly affects not only the Africa of and to which van Klinken and Chitando write, but it is also a global reality. Reflecting on this, Ashby writes,¹⁰ "From Brazil to the United States, Hungary to New Zealand,

⁸ van Klinken and Chitando, *Reimagining Christianity*, 74.

⁹ van Klinken and Chitando, *Reimagining Christianity*, 7.

¹⁰ Heather Ashby, *Far-Right Extremism Is a Global Problem*, last modified January 15, 2021, accessed May 18, 2022, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/01/15/far-right-extremism-global-problem-worldwide-solutions/>

right-wing extremist ideas and groups are posing a grave threat to democratic societies.” She continues this analysis, by offering a stern warning: many sectors of progressive society have incorporated the logic of right-wing populism into its political imagination; therefore, this moment calls for an ideational struggle for the re-claiming of “democracy, equality, rule of law, and human rights.”

Without falling into the temptation of homogenising Africa, one is able to note the influence of evangelicalism throughout various parts of the continents. For Forster the rise in the African reception of one form of evangelicalism, with its profound social conservatism, is linked to the ascendancy to power by the former American president Donald Trump. He writes,

Religion, politics and money are deeply intertwined among Trump-supporting African evangelicals – and dangerously so. American evangelicalism is part of the “software” that allows the “hardware” of American exceptionalism to spread throughout the world... Many African evangelical leaders receive funding from US bodies. Many fall in line with the Trump government's views on abortion, homosexuality, science and Christian Zionism.¹¹

It is within this context that van Klinken and Chitando are responding to the challenges that the West, at times, impose on the African continent – especially the development of its religious communities. Yet, interestingly, the West's perception of Africa is “as a homophobic continent in which gay and lesbian people are marginalised and discriminated against, becoming victims of a deeply ingrained homophobia that illustrates the ‘backward’ nature of African cultures and societies.”¹² Ironically, in general, the conservative forms of Christianity in the West, is blamed for the homophobia rampant on the continent. However, this analysis stops short of locating the origin and continued facilitation of such conservatism (which itself leads to religious fundamentalism).

¹¹ Dion Forster, “Trump is Out, but US evangelicalism remains alive and well in Africa,” last modified January 17, 2021, accessed May 18, 2022, <https://theconversation.com/trump-is-out-but-us-evangelicalism-remains-alive-and-well-in-africa-151117>

¹² van Klinken and Chitando, *Reimagining Christianity*, 1.

Confronting Conservative Evangelicalism

At present it would seem that a specific form of evangelicalism is operative in the conservatism that has taken hold of various parts of Africa. Of course, the argument here proffered is not that that evangelical Christianity in its totality is the source of homophobia, transphobia, and queerphobia in the continent. Rather, one specific strand of this tradition is considered influential in the present rise of conservatism, and this strand is woven into the political imagination of far-right politics – such as has been observed regarding Trump.

Setting out to take this analysis further, it is necessary to offer a definition of evangelicalism. Balcomb offers the following definition:

Evangelicalism is that aspect of the Christian faith that emphasizes the good news of the gospel of Jesus Christ, which is proclaimed as an invitation to whoever believes and receives it into a personal encounter with God through Christ that leads to the transformation and renewal of the lives of its recipients.”¹³

The notions of the good news, its proclamation, a sequential personal encounter, and one’s transformation is thus foundational to understanding the theology of evangelicalism. For African evangelicals the theology of this tradition draws together both African spirituality and contemporary conceptions of materialism and individualism.¹⁴ Evangelicalism understood in this fashion, practiced by Africans, is not a problem.

In order to come to terms with the regressive impact of the more conservative strand of evangelicalism it is helpful to see its links to culture. This may be observed in two forms: funding and political commitments. First, there can be no doubt that the global evangelical project, particularly in Africa, is largely dependent on the beneficence of the Global North – here the United States of America is of particular importance. Kaoma helpfully notes, “conservatives’ dominance in Africa is extending to social services—

¹³ Anthony Balcomb, “Evangelicalism in Africa: What it is and What it does” in *Missionalia* 44, no. 2. (2016) 117.

¹⁴ Balcomb, “Evangelicalism in Africa,” 120.

although they are opposed to supporting the U.S. poor in their own backyard.”¹⁵ The funding received by African faith-based organisations is predicated on the acquiescence to the theological commitments of the funder, which in this case is conservative evangelicalism. Van Klinken already gestured toward this in *Kenyan, Christian, Queer*, noting the influential role Christian formations play in the politics of Kenya, when funded by evangelical conservatives.¹⁶

The second form of influence the US funders have on the development of African evangelicalism is related to politics. Given the priority evangelicalism affords the experience of a personal encounter and its leading to transformation, there is no doubt that the tradition does directly seek to impact broader society. Because of this, Hutchinson and Wolffe argue that this undoubtedly leads to these faith-based organisations' influence on electoral results. They observe regarding evangelicals, that they:

act as interpreters of meaning for rising cultures in need of a greater sense of meaning than that provided by the programmatic political rationality traditionally offered as the pathway to modernisation. Evangelicalism in the developing world provides political actors with 'symbolic effectiveness.'¹⁷

Considering the work of the conservative formation, the Institute on Religion and Development, Kaoma argues that their goal is a total takeover, he notes the institute's own wording:

“Conservatives have won surprising victories on key theological and sexuality issues at recent church conventions. Now is the time to translate those victories into real influence for conservatives within the permanent governing structures of these churches, so they can help renew the wider culture of our nation.”¹⁸

¹⁵ Kapya Kaoma, “Globalizing the Culture Wars: U.S. Conservatives, Africa Churches and Homophobia,” (Somerville: Political Research Associates, 2009), 9.

¹⁶ Adriaan van Klinken, *Kenyan, Christian, Queer: Religion, LGBT Activism and Arts of Resistance in Africa* (Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University, 2019), 42.

¹⁷ Mark Hutchinson & John Wolffe, *A Short History of Evangelicalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 256.

¹⁸ Kaoma, “Globalizing the Culture Wars”, 17.

The reality that international formations are funding a conservatively regressive social agenda in Africa should not go by unnoticed.¹⁹ In fact, it should be called into question, and the cultural imperialism it denotes should be interrogated. Further, these formations, such as the Institute on Religion and Development, play a paramount role in determining the development of evangelicalism in Africa. For this reason, it is essential to consider this strand of evangelicalism as profoundly fundamentalist.

Faith to Fundamentalism

Without critical interrogation this strand of evangelicalism could easily lead to a form of religious fundamentalism. While not explicitly articulating this, van Klinken and Chitando do consider this. They write, “A major part of the problem is the history of colonial imaginations of ‘African sexuality’ which continue to shape perceptions and attitudes today.”²⁰ A cursory reading of evangelicalism, as a contemporary faith tradition in Africa, is showing ties to a particular conception of neo-colonialism – which I relate to the colonisation of Africa.

What, then, is fundamentalism? Offering a definition, Herriot notes:

The first and most basic distinguishing feature of fundamentalist movements is that they are reactive. Fundamentalists believe that their religion is under mortal threat from the secularism of the modern world, and they are fighting back. They may resist in different ways, but they are all essentially oppositional; they have to have an enemy.²¹

Still, there are three other characteristics linked to this foundational claim, first of which is a fundamentalists’ fixation on an enemy which requires a reaction. Second, in order to cement the need for an enemy, fundamentalist logic is predicated on a dualism, and religion is conceived through binarized thought. Third, fundamentalists draw their inspiration from a holy book –

¹⁹ Carl Collison, “US Conservatism Funds Churches in Africa, Stifling Queer Rights,” Last modified April 13, 2017, accessed May 18, 2022, <https://mg.co.za/article/2017-04-13-00-us-conservatism-funds-churches-in-africa-stifling-queer-rights/>

²⁰ van Klinken and Chitando, *Reimagining Christianity*, 4.

²¹ Peter Herriot, *Religious Fundamentalism: Global, Local and Personal* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 2.

which serves in the role of supreme authority. However, their interpretation and application of this holy text is profoundly selective. Fourth, having its origin in the previous century, fundamentalists affirm millennialism, the view that God would in an expected period erect God's rule over the world. In each of these characteristics, second to fourth, the imagined enemy (fundamentalism's foundational claim) is the cause for reacting. Yet, Herriot offers a reminder: fundamentalism, in the form here observed, is a modern invention, that arose in the twentieth century.²² This strand of evangelicalism, given its social conservatism, may thus be argued to be fundamentalistic – precisely because it antagonises LGBT+ people, rendering them enemies. I posit that it is this reality of fundamentalism, as produced by one form of African evangelicalism, that van Klinken and Chitando respond to with their publication.

An analysis of fundamentalism, as it relates to this strand of evangelicalism in Africa, requires a consideration of how culture is conceptualised. I agree with Balcomb (as previously stated), that this form of evangelicalism is at home in Africa because of the priority it affords to indigenous spirituality. This, however, does not mean that fundamentalist evangelicals are not engineering culture in the manner they see fit; for this discussion, their aspired culture is anti-LGBT+. Offering a glimpse into this desired culture, van Klinken and Chitando write:

The critical role of Christian religious leaders and of Christian-inspired political speech in fuelling homophobic campaigns in countries across the African continent has now been widely documented. Thus, Christianity has been a key part of colonial and postcolonial imaginations of Africa as a heterosexual continent, and of African nationhood and citizenship as excluding LGBT[+] people.²³

Having to reify itself, and create legitimacy for its existence, fundamentalist evangelicals in Africa have made LGBT+ people their sworn enemy. Doing so, fundamentalists are constantly required to point out the behaviours and acts of this enemy. Herriot posits, "Fundamentalists are indeed different;

²² Herriot, *Religious Fundamentalism*, 2.

²³ van Klinken and Chitando, *Reimagining Christianity*, 11.

they seek to establish their difference at every available opportunity.”²⁴ Of course, when read in relation to evangelicalism in Africa, the difference between fundamentalists and their enemy is primarily sexual and gender identity. The desired culture is thus heteronormative, rendering LGBT+ people as “others,” truly enemies. Rejecting this desired culture, van Klinken and Chitando take issue with the notion that being LGBT+ is un-African. Instead, they put forth a “call for an African queer reimagination (that) is not just about a reimagining of ‘African sexuality’ but of ‘Africa’ much more generally, highlighting the interconnectedness of sexual, social, economic and political spheres of life on the continent.”²⁵ In short, the conservative strand of evangelicals in Africa may be argued to be fundamentalist, by virtue of the antagonising of LGBT+ people.

In this second part of the review, I have attempted to grapple with the moment in which Klinken and Chitando birthed their work. This reading of contemporary history has highlighted the fact that far-right politics is impacting the world in a rather pronounced way. Related to this, we are witnessing a rise in a rather conservative strand of evangelicalism, which is gaining traction in the African continent, and, quite importantly, this strand has direct links to right-wing politics in America. Finally, I posit that this strand of evangelicalism should be regarded as fundamentalist in nature, and doing so it offers us the tools to make sense of this moment.

Contemplating Method

Informed by this discussion of the moment in which Klinken and Chitando’s publication was produced, it is well worth considering the method employed by scholars who are reflecting on sexuality and religion in South Africa. By drawing on authoritative theologians in Africa who have impacted religious reflection in telling ways, van Klinken and Chitando invite readers to consider human sexuality alongside other liberatory modes of theologising – such as those that grapple with race, gender, and economic inequality. In this section, then, attention is afforded to the meaning and method with which LGBT+ people are approaching the development of Christian theology in

²⁴ Peter Herriot, *Religious Fundamentalism*, 4.

²⁵ van Klinken and Chitando, *Reimagining Christianity*, 7.

South Africa. This is presented as a case study, aimed to shed light on the ongoing work by LGBT+ activists and academics.

Responding to the limitation previously noted, I argue that it may be helpful to read *Reimagining Christianity and Sexual Diversity in Africa* alongside the works of scholars who present themselves as queer theologians. It is well worth noting that queer theology has, in recent years, gained traction in the South African academy, by both early career academics and more senior researchers at various institutions. These scholars offer their work as response to the reality of queerphobia practiced in Africa, especially when informed by Christian observance.

Charlene van der Walt

In recent years various works reflecting on queer theology—that is, theological reflection by LGBT+ people—have been produced in South Africa. One important contributor to this body of works is Charlene van der Walt, an associate professor at the University of KwaZulu-Natal's School of Religion, Philosophy and Classics. Since completing her doctoral studies in the Biblical Sciences, van der Walt has continually contributed to the ever-growing body of literature of queer theology. Through the publication of numerous journal articles van der Walt has advanced the work of her doctoral dissertation, which was focused on unravelling the ideologies at work in biblical interpretation.²⁶

In one key text, the journal article titled 'Wording oneself into being: Lesbian musings on discovering the queer insistence of Joan Hambidge,' van der Walt reflexively offers a meditation on how she has made sense of herself and her work as a queer theologian, who is also an ordained minister in the Dutch Reformed Church by drawing on the artistic work of Joan Hambidge. Thinking through how she has had to navigate the world, van der Walt) writes:

²⁶ The dissertation, originally completed in Afrikaans is titled *Ideologie en mag in Bybelinterpretasie: op weg na'n kommunale lees van 2 Samuel 13*. It was later reworked into an English monograph with the title *Toward a Communal Reading of 2 Samuel 13: Ideology and Power within the Intercultural Bible Reading Process* (Indiana: Institute of Mennonite Studies, 2014)

Within the heteronormative there is only space for heterosexual experiences, constructions and realities and no other alternatives are tolerated... Heteronormativity, and the resulting intolerance of sexual diversity, often gives rise to homophobic attitudes, hate crimes and violence... LGBTIQ+ bodies, like my own, experience surveillance and violence because they embody their sex, gender, and sexuality differently than what is dictated within the heteronormative ideal.²⁷

For van der Walt, then, queer theology—which is always transgressive—must grapple with the heteronormative world within which LGBT+ people must exist. Further, linked to this, such queering transgression requires an interrogation into the ideologies that give rise to various homophobic and transphobic modes of biblical interpretation.

Hanzline Davids

Another important interpreter of queer theology in South Africa is Hanzline Davids, a researcher at the Institute for Gender Studies, in the College of Human Sciences (University of South Africa). Prior to this, Davids served as a minister in the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa (URCSA) and later as process coordinator for the non-governmental organisation “Inclusive and Affirming Ministries.” While being an early career academic, most of Davids’ publications focused on Christian ethics and human sexuality. His contribution to the development of queer theology in South Africa, then, cannot be overstated.

In an article published in the Stellenbosch Theological Journal, titled ‘Recognition of LGBTIQ bodies in the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa: An indecent proposal?’ Davids touches the very heart of the project of queer theology. Centring himself, his body and his lived experience, Davids reflects on how URCSA has conceived human sexuality, and the resultant continued forms of sexual oppression.²⁸ Taking the doctrinal

²⁷ Charlene van der Walt, “Wording Oneself Into Being: Lesbian Musings on Discovering the Queer Insistence of Joan Hambidge,” *Stilet*, 32, no. 1 & 2, (2020): 141.

²⁸ ‘Hanzline Davids, “Recognition of LGBTIQ Bodies in the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa: An Indecent Proposal?” Stellenbosch Theological Journal 6, no. 4 (2020) 303.

confessions of Christianity seriously, quite similar to van Klinken and Chitando, Davids draws on the very tradition of URCSA's doctrine to offer an alternative queer possibility, which he terms "an indecent proposal." Reflecting on the Belhar Confession, Davids notes:

This confession talks about the 'suffering, despair and humiliation' of black people in South Africa... LGBTIQ people whose SOGIESC [sexual orientation, gender identity, expressions and sex characteristics] is deemed deviant do not fit into the anthropological dualism of heteropatriarchy and therefore experience "suffering, despair and humiliation" on a continuous basis in the URCSA. Confessions, as statements of faith are not documents that are dead.²⁹

This text, in addition to Davids' other works, uncover the promise of queer theology in South Africa. This promise lies in its grappling with the violence directed at LGBT+ people and its transgressive courage to imagine a different reality, all while drawing on the faith that inspires and informs the community.

Megan Robertson

Another pioneer contributing tremendously to the field of queer theology in South Africa is Megan Robertson, a senior researcher at the Desmond Tutu Centre for Religion and Social Justice (University of the Western Cape). Robertson's approach to Christian theology may be observed as intentionally more transgressive, and I suspect this may be because of her sociological background. Throughout her work, Robertson has been concerned with both social construction and the implications of gender and human sexuality, reading them through a religious lens.

In her doctoral dissertation Robertson investigated the way in which her denomination reflects on ministry and human sexuality. In it she "explored the lived experiences of six queer clergy (one of whom was discontinued) in the Methodist Church of Southern Africa (MCSA), in order to understand the complex relationship between institutional power and the ordinary lived

²⁹ Davids, "Recognition of LGBTIQ Bodies," 311.

realities of clergy”³⁰ This, of course, is a ground-breaking contribution to the theological study of human sexuality in South Africa for two reasons: first, it affirms the call to ministry of LGBT+ people amid the continued violence; and second, the MCSA is the largest denomination in South Africa (with the largest cohort of members of parliament in office).

Following her doctoral studies, while also advancing its focus, Robertson has set out to consider the mode in which LGBT+ people are theorising their own subjectivity. In an article for *Religion Compass*, Robertson locates the focus of her study in Southern Africa. She does so while also recognising that:

The complexity of a region which juxtaposes conservative ‘Christian nations’ with constitutionally progressive and pluralistic ones, with experiences of both violence as well as liberation for queer people, provides fertile ground to examine the various African and queer subjectivities and embodiments emerging from scholarship.³¹

In this work Robertson notes the invaluable contributions of numerous individuals and institutions who are reimagining human sexuality within the African Christian space in rather profound ways. Taking note of the evolving queer scholarship in Southern Africa, Robertson concludes,

It provides a site for challenging imagined universalised ideas of queer rights and the secularisation of queer freedoms. It is a site where anti-colonial sentiment, decolonial commitments and queer possibilities intersect. In response to calls for theory and theology to proceed from the epistemological starting point of lived experience, scholars have begun to generate more complex and nuanced pictures of queer Christian subjectivities within this regional and political terrain.³²

³⁰ Megan Robertson, *Called and Queer: Exploring the Lived Experiences of Queer Clergy in the Methodist Church of Southern Africa* (Belville: University of the Western Cape, 2020), ii.

³¹ Megan Robertson, “Queer Studies and Religion in Southern Africa: The Production of Queer Christian Subjects,” *Religion Compass* 15, no. 1. 2021:4.

³² Megan Robertson, “Queer Studies and Religion”, 8.

Employing a more sociological approach to the study of the Christian faith, Robertson is able to offer a more intentionally transgressive analysis. Given this approach, this analysis helpfully acknowledges the historical developments that have given rise to the present while also challenging readers to imagine something new.

Recognising van Klinken and Chitando's limitation, the prioritising of African theologians who do not self-identify as LGBT+, opens the space for advancing theological reflection by those who do. For this reason, the reimagining van Klinken and Chitando invite readers to is being witnessed to in van der Walt's approach to biblical interpretation, Davids' querying of Christian dogmatics, and Robertson's transgressive queering of Christian theological reflection. Of course, these three scholars are not the only ones writing on queer theology in South Africa, much less the broader African continent, however, by noting their important contributions one is better able to set out on the work of reimagining alongside van Klinken and Chitando.

Conclusion

Through their publication van Klinken and Chitando offer an invitation. This invitation is most clear: we are requested to re-imagine Africans who are LGBT+ as humans—fully human—and thus creatures of God. Perhaps what is most striking about the publication is not the argument set forth in its chapters, but the form of its conclusion. The authors do not offer an open-ended conclusion,³³ they do leave it inconclusive—it requires the reader to come to terms with the realities of the present, and thereby to re-imagine what sexuality may yet be and become in Africa. In an un-concluding fashion, van Klinken and Chitando offer these words of invitation: "Only the future will tell what will become of this."³⁴ In search of that future, the reader is bid to re-imagine here and now.

This review article has sought to consider this publication by providing an appraisal. This appraisal was offered by one who identifies as a queer theologian, who, in reading the publication, was filled with hope for the future of this emerging discipline. Further, attention was also afforded to the

³³ van Klinken and Chitando, *Reimagining Christianity*, 197.

³⁴ van Klinken and Chitando, *Reimagining Christianity*, 203.

shaping of this global and local moment, in which global Christian fundamentalism is directly impacting the African continent—reading van Klinken and Chitando’s work this should be reflected on critically. Finally, by contemplating on the method employed by practitioners of queer theology, this article responded to the most noteworthy limitation of the publication. A brief discussion was provided of pioneering queer theologians in South Africa who are pre-emptively responding to van Klinken and Chitando’s invitation to re-imagine.

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