

# ***Called and Queer: Lived Religion and LGBTQ Methodist Clergy* by Megan Robertson**

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SHORT BIO

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## **General overview**

*Called and Queer: Lived Religion and LGBTQ Methodist Clergy in South Africa* represents an important, insightful, and nuanced contribution to scholarly literature seeking to understand the lived experiences of queer clergy as they navigate the structures of intersectional oppression within the church and society. The study is ethnographic in nature, using the framework of lived religion to deeply explore the experiences of six queer clergy within the Methodist Church of Southern Africa (MCSA). The research involved the author spending a week with each of the participants, joining in and observing their day to day activities inside and outside of the church. The author also conducted in depth interviews with each participant to shed light on their lived experiences of being queer clergy in the MCSA, exploring the ways in which the church represented a space of both belonging and exclusion, and the ways in which the clergy navigated these realities.

The lens of lived religion is a particular strength of the study, allowing for a complex analysis of the ways in which various forms of oppression are

upheld and reinscribed. This is done, not only through more commonly analyzed structural means in the shape of legal and policy frameworks, official stances, or ways of understanding the bible and theologies, but also through the understudied, less covert (but no less powerful) everyday discursive and material practices and realities within the MCSA. Robertson makes a compelling case that lived experience has been broadly marginalized within scholarship and yet these “invisible and taken-for-granted ways of doing things”<sup>1</sup> are key to understanding the ways in which power relations of race, gender, and sexuality are reproduced and sustained. As such, these must be taken seriously in any project seeking to “queer” the church and promote relations of equity and social justice. In this regard, the book centers the day-to-day lived realities of six queer clergy to provide a more holistic understanding of the ways in which power operates within the MCSA, at both structural and individual levels, to include and exclude and to privilege and oppress.

The chosen methodology also allows for an important conversation between structure and agency. While the work offers necessary engagement with the structures that shape the landscape of queer inclusion and exclusion at a broader level (from a wider continental level, to the particularities of the South African landscape, to the specific context of the MCSA within South Africa), there is an insistence that this does not represent the full picture. The study then offers a recognition of individual agency and a commitment to exploring the ways in which people navigate the contexts of which they are part. This is particularly necessary because there are not always clear lines of connection between what is taking place at a structural level and at a personal level. People’s lived experience, including the ways in which people navigate their day-to-day lives, make decisions, and construct their relationships, are frequently unexpected and disconnected from what one would assume if they only looked at the broader structures and the official policies and positions.

Robertson’s commitment to rejecting binaries and disrupting static positions is clear throughout the book and forms an important part of her orientation to the queering project.

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<sup>1</sup> Megan Robertson, *Called and Queer: Lived Religion and LGBTQ Methodist Clergy in South Africa*. (Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 2.

## Chapter by chapter overviews'

The book consists of five chapters: an introduction, three chapters exploring, engaging, and analyzing the study's main findings, and a conclusion.

The introduction provides a broad background, rationale, and orientation for the study. It engages with the landscape of LGBTQ inclusion and exclusion within South Africa, with the country being seen as a "queer utopia" given its progressive constitutional framework and protections of queer rights, particularly in comparison to many other African countries. However, it also acknowledges that this categorization belies the still deeply engrained homophobia that is perpetuated both ideologically and materially across various sites, including that of the church. The chapter also introduces the MCSA through, what Robertson sees as, three distinct institutional cultures that are in operation within the church that she has categorized according to key Methodist figures whose stories in some way exemplify these discourses. Robertson also sets out her methods, asserts her own positionality and commitments, introduces the six clergy, builds a foundation for how she seeks to explore the dialectal relationship between structure and agency, and grounds her approach to and understanding of the idea of "queerness" and the work of "queering".

The second chapter, "The Church of Mandela: Black Methodism and Queer Identity", explores the first strand of institutional culture and discourse that Robertson identifies that was exemplified by Nelson Mandela, the first president of democratic South Africa and a Methodist. This categorization denotes a prominent strand within the MCSA that links the denomination with historical resistance to apartheid and a broad orientation to social justice. Importantly, Robertson notes that this narrative and reality of the MCSA as a beacon of social justice is contested, with experiences of "division, marginalisation, and... violence" existing alongside "safety, status, and social belonging",<sup>2</sup> particularly for queer congregants and clergy in the church. Robertson draws poetic parallels between these contestations and those relating to the legacy of Mandela within South Africa. Mandela is prominently seen as a symbol of liberation, social justice, and progress but has, in more recent years, also been associated to "the failure of realizing the vision of an equal, democratic, and inclusive society".<sup>3</sup> Besides

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<sup>2</sup> Robertson, *Called and Queer*, 74.

<sup>3</sup> Robertson, *Called and Queer*, 55.

identifying the MCSA with narratives of (albeit contested) social justice, the title of “The Church of Mandela” also speaks to a prominently black, traditional expression of Methodism that is widely seen and understood as the denominationally pure and legitimate expression. Within this framing, Robertson unpacks the key role that race plays “in shaping participants’ experiences and their understanding of their identities as queer individuals, clergy, and Methodists”,<sup>4</sup> and analyses the ways in which participant’s navigate issues of belonging, power, and legitimacy within this racialized landscape.

The third chapter, “The Church of Purity: Gender Binaries and Gendered Bodies”, explores a second aspect of MCSA’s institutional culture. The categorization of “The Church of Purity” identifies the MCSA as a church that is *officially* committed to gender equality, an orientation seen to be evidenced in the fact that a woman, Purity Malinga, held the highest position of presiding bishop at the time of writing. However, it simultaneously a church in which the patriarchy is alive and well, reproduced through various mechanisms and in various ways. The chapter notes how this story of what may be (rightly) seen as a success in addressing questions of representation of women in key positions of leadership, gets deployed in ways that instead work to uphold unequal and problematic gender power relations. This takes place through the exceptionalization of stories like that of Malinga and others, a mechanism that works to “individualize their achievements while obscuring the continued existence of gendered norms that continue to keep most women and other minorities from holistically participating in and contributing to the Church”.<sup>5</sup>

The fourth chapter, “The Church of Ecclesia: Sex, Love, and Marriage”, explores a third aspect of the MCSA’s institutional identify through the story of Ecclesia De Lange, a queer minister who was fired following her announcement that she would be marrying her same-sex partner. This story highlights the ambiguities of the MCSA regarding its stance of so-called inclusion and claim of being “a community of love rather than rejection”<sup>6</sup> (quoted from the MCSA’s 2001 conference proceedings) given its

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<sup>4</sup> Robertson, *Called and Queer*, 61.

<sup>5</sup> Robertson, *Called and Queer*, 92.

<sup>6</sup> Robertson, *Called and Queer*, 5.

simultaneous refusal to condone same-sex marriages, foregrounding the various mechanisms through which heteronormative ideas about sex, family, and relationships are upheld. Robertson crucially notes that “implicit within a stance such as the MCSA's which claims to accept all people regardless of their sexual orientation, yet which simultaneously rejects same-sex marriage, is the expectation of queer celibacy”.<sup>7</sup> The lens of lived experience and lived religion sheds light on the significant gap that exists between the “public transcript” that aligns to the official church position on all things sex, love, and marriage versus the stance embodied in the “hidden transcript”.<sup>8</sup> In the shadow of the official position that leaves no space to understand sex and relationships outside of heterosexual marriage, Robertson's work reveals a “queer sub-culture” where sex and relationships are explored in a myriad of ways within people's lived religion and experience. However, importantly, this too is a site of contestation. While holding potential for liberatory possibilities, this culture is also imbibed with patriarchal and positional hierarchies that work to reinscribe gender norms and power dynamics in nuanced and complex ways.

The final chapter, “Conclusion: Queering the MCSA”, engages and brings together the book's key contributions, highlighting the myriad of “unacknowledged ways that race, gender, and sex are inscribed in the institutional culture of the Church”.<sup>9</sup>

## Interesting insights and key contributions

The book reveals several interesting insights and key contributions, a few of which I will touch on below.

## Expanding conceptualizations of resistance

The theme of resistance is explored throughout the book. Robertson questions the expectations often placed on those marginalized (in this example, the queer clergy) by harmful and oppressive structures in the church to resist and challenge these structures. Here, she notes that “the

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<sup>7</sup> Robertson, *Called and Queer*, 127.

<sup>8</sup> James C. Scott. *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts*. (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1990).

<sup>9</sup> Robertson, *Called and Queer*, 2.

coupling of agency with resistance, negotiation, transformation, and change suggests that one cannot be queer and Christian without performing a particular type of queer identity — one which is inherently tied to a form of activism”.<sup>10</sup> Robertson also troubles the limitations of how resistance is often framed and understood, offering a more expansive engagement with how people exercise agency and navigate power dynamics in varied ways for varied reasons.

Robertson unpacks several examples throughout the book that illustrate what this exercising of agency looks like and how it is often contested, resisting oppressive norms in certain ways, and reproducing the power dynamics of the status quo in other ways. Examples of this include how the queer clergy subvert and appropriate widely held harmful theologies to advocate for LGBTQ justice and inclusion, how the queer women clergy resist the dress-code that the church seeks to enforce upon them, the ways in which the queer clergy embrace varied expressions of “queer families and kinship”,<sup>11</sup> and how exploring the clergy’s “privacy and silence” about their sexuality acts “as a form of less overt resistance”.<sup>12</sup>

## **Policing and surveillance as disciplinary mechanisms**

Another key theme that emerges throughout the book is the various ways in which policing and surveillance take place within the MCSA, directed in particular ways at certain bodies.

Robertson highlights the ways in which the dress codes of particularly queer, black, women clergy are heavily surveilled and policed. An expectation is put on these women to present themselves in ways that “fit comfortably within normatively feminine framings”.<sup>13</sup> As theorized by Foucault in *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, for the successful creation of what he terms “docile bodies”, surveillance must go hand in hand with punishment of transgressions.<sup>14</sup> In the case of the queer, women clergy’s non-compliance with prescribed dress codes, punishment ranges from

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<sup>10</sup> Robertson, *Called and Queer*, 14.

<sup>11</sup> Robertson, *Called and Queer*, 147.

<sup>12</sup> Robertson, *Called and Queer*, 144.

<sup>13</sup> Robertson, *Called and Queer*, 97.

<sup>14</sup> Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. (Vintage Books, 1995).

“subtle reprimands” to “more formal procedures of assessment”,<sup>15</sup> and “violently misogynistic act(s) of imposed dominance and gender ‘correction’”.<sup>16</sup>

Robertson also finds evidence of the “policing of behaviour and mannerisms”,<sup>17</sup> specific to queer, men clergy who are expected to perform their masculinity in specific ways. Similarly, the sex lives and relationships of the queer clergy were policed in various ways, with women bearing the brunt of this.

## **Tensions between belonging and exclusion**

Another theme that arose in the Robertson’s analysis was the complex tension between belonging and exclusion in the MCSA. Robertson comes to this topic with her own backstory of simultaneous belonging and exclusion from the MCSA, which she includes in her self-reflection in the book, as well as with the reflections of the six queer clergy whose stories form the substance of this work. One participant reflected on how, in their younger years, the church represented a site of belonging, particularly in contrast to their experience at school, and yet, since then, they had experienced various forms of exclusion at the hands of this very same church.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, Robertson’s work, *Called and Queer: Lived Religion and LGBTQ Methodist Clergy in South Africa*, is an important contribution across several fields. Its commitment to, use, and theorization of a lived religion framework as an analytical imperative to uncovering of the covert ways in which power relations are reproduced is vital. Moreover, its engagement with ideas around queerness and what the queering project must involve is necessary and insightful. The light that it sheds on the experiences of queer clergy in the MCSA, how they navigate this space, and how problematic relations of power get reproduced and reinscribed is timely and important.

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<sup>15</sup> Robertson, *Called and Queer*, 97–98.

<sup>16</sup> Robertson, *Called and Queer*, 107.

<sup>17</sup> Robertson, *Called and Queer*, 104.

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