

# Queering Scholarship on Christianity and Queer Sexuality: Reviewing Nuances and New Directions

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## *Abstract*

Most reviews of scholarship on the intersections of Christianity and queer sexuality (particularly in Africa) tend to conclude that Christianity and queer sexuality are irreconcilably contradictory. This scholarship is often based on the conviction that Africa is largely heteronormative and homophobic. While a decolonial lens does not erase the actual lived experiences of those who experience sexual and religious dissonance and homophobic violence, it does alert scholars to the nuances and new directions of scholarship in this area. These trends move beyond the “irreconcilable contradiction” to more negotiated living at the intersections of belief and sexuality; to even charting a path to an arguably transformative religiosity. The purpose of this article is to review how the scholarship in this area has developed from the trajectory of the irreconcilable contradiction to the path of transformative religiosity. This article advocates for the importance of studies which focus on the lived experiences of queer religious people in order to highlight issues, practices, people, and theories which do not often take centre stage in the discipline of sociology or theology. This article makes use of queer and decolonial theories in order to analyse literature and to argue for the importance of examining the relationship between the lived experiences of queer people and religion in Africa. Further, it aims to encourage sociologists who study religion, and theologians who study gender, to engage in interdisciplinary and intersectional scholarship and develop more compelling theoretical frameworks, which engage with religion and sexuality as variable social structures through the lived experiences of people in the context of religion.

**Key Terms:** Queer sexuality, queer studies, intersectionality, Christianity, identity.

## **Introduction**

The persistence of violence against queer people and their continued marginalisation in society has been linked through statistics and research to conservative religious, often Christian, beliefs. These religious beliefs have commonly been shown to support conservative

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moral principles about individual sexual activity and gender roles. This rhetoric espoused by popular media as well as academia has largely positioned religion (especially the Abrahamic faiths) and queer sexuality in contradiction to one another. This has especially been the case with scholarship and popular discourse focusing on Africa, religion and queer<sup>2</sup> sexuality<sup>3</sup>.

Scholarship has often positioned Africa as a conservatively religious continent which infuses cultural discourses of 'African-ness' with religious conservatism to create and sustain the perception of an irredeemably queer-phobic continent. Scholars have shown that anti-queer attitudes and religious moral claims have been dominated by discourses about queer sexualities as un-African and as secular western imports which go against inherent, God-ordained African heterosexuality<sup>4</sup>. It is possible that South Africa has been seen in a somewhat more forgiving light. Claims can be made to it being the first country in the world to enshrine protection for its citizens on the basis of sexual orientation and the fifth country to legalise same-sex unions<sup>5</sup>. However, research such as the survey conducted by the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) in 2015 demonstrates that the country is not exempt from the dominant discourse characterising Africa. In this HSRC survey three quarters (76 percent) of the South African respondents agreed with the statement "God's laws about abortion, pornography and marriage must be strictly followed before it is too late,"<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> I have chosen to use the term queer rather than LGBTI+ or other terms as it allows me to recognise the fluidity of identities and to explore a range of scholarly texts which encompass varied gendered and sexuality performances.

<sup>3</sup> Thabo Msibi, "The Lies We Have Been Told: On (Homo) Sexuality in Africa," *Africa Today* 58, no.1 (2011): 55-77; Louise Vincent and Simon Howell, "'Unnatural', 'Un-African' and Ungodly': Homophobic Discourse in Democratic South Africa," *Sexualities* 17, no. 4 (2014): 472 – 483; HSRC and The Other Foundation, 2015. "Progressive Prudes: A Survey of Attitudes Towards Homosexuality and Gender Non-Conformity in South Africa," [https://theotherfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/ProgPrudes\\_Report\\_d5.pdf/](https://theotherfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/ProgPrudes_Report_d5.pdf/); Adriaan van Klinken, "Queer Love in a 'Christian Nation': Zambian Gay Men Negotiating Sexual and Religious Identities," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 83, no.4 (2015): 947-964; Ezra Chitando and Tapiwa Mapuranaga, "Unlikely allies? Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTI) activists and church leaders in Africa," in *Christianity and Controversies over Homosexuality in Contemporary Africa*, ed. Ezra Chitando and Adriaan van Klinken (New York: Routledge, 2016): 171-183.

<sup>4</sup> van Klinken, "Queer Love," 947 -964; Adriaan van Klinken and Masiwa Gunda, 2012. "Taking up the Cudgels Against Gay Rights? Trends and Trajectories in African Christian Theologies on Homosexuality," *Journal of Homosexuality* 59, no.1 (2012): 114-138.

<sup>5</sup> Wendy Isaack, "Equal in Word of Law: The Rights of Lesbian and Gay People in South Africa," *Human Rights* 30, no.3 (2003): 19-22.

<sup>6</sup> HSRC and The Other Foundation, "Progressive Prudes," 7.

with one in three people declaring “very strong”<sup>7</sup> support. Similar data emerged for the statement “women should obey their husbands.”<sup>8</sup> These findings demonstrate how religious beliefs and attitudes continue to sustain patriarchal as well as heteronormative norms and values in South Africa. Thus, not only are religion and queer sexuality positioned as contradictory, but Africa and being ‘African’ has been lumped together with religion as a comrade in opposition to queer sexuality.

Fortunately scholarship has emerged which, through a decolonial and queer lens, provides a more nuanced perspective of the relationship between Christianity, queer sexuality and ‘Africanness’. The purpose of this article is to review how the scholarship in this area has developed from the trajectory argument that there is an irreconcilable contradiction between religion (and African Christianity) and queer sexuality, toward the path of mapping out an arguably transformative religiosity.<sup>9</sup> In order to do this I first discuss the dominant literature which presents queer sexuality and religion (African Christianity), either as irreconcilably contradictory or as something which needs to be negotiated (with something always being sacrificed in the process.)<sup>10</sup> I then draw on literature which makes use of a queer and decolonial lens to discuss some of the literature which “talks back”<sup>11</sup> to the predominant scholarship and which charts the way forward toward a transformative religiosity. Lastly, I discuss some of the gaps which continue to persist in the literature and advocate for the importance of decolonial and queer studies which focus on the lived experiences of queer religious people, specifically in Africa. This article aims to highlight issues, practices, peoples, and theories which do not often take centre stage in the discipline of sociology or theology. Further, it aims to encourage sociologists who study religion, and theologians who study gender, to engage in interdisciplinary and intersectional scholarship and develop more compelling theoretical frameworks which engage with religion and sexuality as variable social structures through the lived experiences of people in the context of religion.

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<sup>7</sup> HSRC and The Other Foundation, “Progressive Prudes,” 7.

<sup>8</sup> HSRC and The Other Foundation, “Progressive Prudes,” 7.

<sup>9</sup> This article is mainly concerned with literature discussing Christianity in relation to queer sexuality, although an examination of the literature on Islam, queer sexuality and Africa (and indeed other religious traditions) would be equally important components to discussing queer sexuality in Africa.

<sup>10</sup> It is important to note here that some of the literature discussed in this article drifts between the various broad arguments. Therefore the same work may be cited to illustrate differing points.

<sup>11</sup> bell hooks, *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black*, Boston: South End Press, (1989).

## The Irreconcilable Contradiction

Conservative or restrictive theological arguments place biblical Scripture as firmly opposed to same-sex sexual relations.<sup>12</sup> In these writings homosexual behaviour or feelings of sexual attraction to the same sex is characterised as “disordered, evil and sinful.”<sup>13</sup> In this sense scripture is considered authoritative and, fixed on the matter and deviations from scripture, are considered deviant themselves. African theologians opposed to homosexuality have been shown to employ arguments resting on inculturation theology<sup>14</sup> and argue that “Christianity in Africa, if it seeks to be truly Christian and authentically African, cannot tolerate homosexuality.”<sup>15</sup> Similar discourse has been used outside of Africa to characterise queer sexuality as a European or western import. Andrew Yip’s<sup>16</sup> study on queer British Muslims relate how their communities often frame their non-normative sexualities as a “western disease” where Muslims are negatively influenced by the secular western culture, what Yip terms “westoxication.”<sup>17</sup> Scholarship and discourse concerned with positioning queer sexuality as something ‘western’ or European continues to create a false binary between a liberal, accepting America/Europe and a backward, hostile Africa. Thus, the myth that Africa cannot be a sight of liberative, life-affirming religious experiences and institutions for queer people is created and sustained.

Some interpretations of the argument of the “irreconcilable contradiction” separates homosexual behaviour from homosexual identity. Here, the

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<sup>12</sup> Richard Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: A Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics*, San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, (1996); Robert Gagnon, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice: Texts and Hermeneutics*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, (2002); Dogara Gwamna, “Biblical Teaching on Marriage and Sex: A Case Study of Leviticus 18&20,” in *Biblical View of Sex and Sexuality from African Perspective*, ed. S. Abogunrin and J. Akao (Nigeria: Nigerian Association for Biblical Studies, 2006): 28–47; Bebson Igboin, “A Moral Appraisal of Homosexuality in Biblical, Western and Africa Worldviews,” in *Biblical View of Sex and Sexuality from African Perspective*, ed. S. Abogunrin and J. Akao (Nigeria: Nigerian Association for Biblical Studies, 2006): 340-358; Anna-Marie Lockard, “Homosexuality: Legally Permissible or Spiritually Misguided?,” *Conspectus: The Journal of the South African Theological Seminary* 5, no.3 (2008): 135 – 167.

<sup>13</sup> Jodi O’Brien, “Wrestling the Angel of Contradiction: Queer Christian Identities,” *Culture and Religion* 5, no.2 (2004): 184.

<sup>14</sup> “A type of Christianity that (re)values African cultural and religious traditions positively (though critically) and seeks to incorporate them in expressions of the Christian faith that are authentically African” (van Klinken and Gunda, “Taking up the Cudgels,” 117).

<sup>15</sup> van Klinken and Gunda, “Taking up the Cudgels,” 132.

<sup>16</sup> Andrew Yip, “Negotiating Space with Family and Kin in Identity Construction: The Narratives of British Non-Heterosexual Muslims,” *The Sociological Review* 52, no.3 (2004): 341.

<sup>17</sup> Yip, “Negotiating Space with Family,” 341.

act is a sin but the desire is an affliction. The response thus changes from outright condemnation and exclusion to a pastoral call for clergy to counsel homosexuals and to convert them back to heterosexuality.<sup>18</sup> This argument perpetuates views, which were prominent in the 1940s and 1950s, of homosexuality as a medical or psychological sickness to be cured.<sup>19</sup> This reasoning, I argue, relegates people identifying as queer, to the margins of the church and in need of more 'saving' than others. This negatively characterises queer individuals as infirm and excludes them from being actively contributing members of the church or the religion. Heterosexuals are thus placed in the role of saviour and queer individuals, in the role of sinner – thus, creating a problematic hierarchical theology of the concepts of 'sin' and 'saved'.

It is not only Christian theologians but also scholars and activists advocating on the side of queer rights and inclusion who find no harmony between queer sexuality and the church.<sup>20</sup> These arguments seem to rest on the conclusion that the church is irredeemably patriarchal and heteronormative. For example, using Cognitive Dissonance Theory, Pikria Meladze and Jac Brown<sup>21</sup> work with understandings that conflicting identities cause shame and internalised homonegativity (a negative attitude towards their own sexual orientation). Thus, they argue, that the inherent conflict between the views of Christianity, Islam and Judaism, and sexuality among gay men, causes an incongruent identity which is harmful to the individuals' psychological health. In their research, the only way the gay men in their study seem to find congruency is through either leaving their religion or denying their sexuality. Similarly, Eric Rodriguez and Suzanne Oullette<sup>22</sup> describe a more temporary denial of one of these identities through

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<sup>18</sup> Gagnon, "The Bible and Homosexual Practice," ; Lockard, "Homosexuality," 135-167.

<sup>19</sup> R.W. Holmen, *Queer clergy: A History of Gay and Lesbian Ministry in American Protestantism*. Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, (2004), 6.

<sup>20</sup> Eric Rodriguez and Suzanne Oullette, "Gay and Lesbian Christians: Homosexual and Religious Identity Integration in the Members and Participants of a Gay-positive Church," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 39, no.3 (2000): 333 – 347; Adrian Coyle and Deborah Rafalin, "Jewish Gay Men's Accounts of Negotiating Cultural, Religious, and Sexual Identity: A Qualitative Study," *Journal of Psychology & Human Sexuality* 12, no.4 (2001):21- 48; Andre Grace and Kristopher Wells, "The Marc Hall Predicament: Queer Rights v. Institutional Church Rights in Canadian Public Education," *Canadian Journal of Education* 28, no.3 (2005): 237-270; Andrew Wood and Abigail Conley, "Loss of Religious or Spiritual Identities among the LGBT Population," *Counseling and Values* 59, (2014): 95-111; Pikria Meladze and Jac Brown, "Religion, Sexuality and Internalized Homonegativity: Confronting Cognitive Dissonance in the Abrahamic Religions," *Journal of Religion and Health* 54, (2015): 1950 – 1962.

<sup>21</sup> Meladze and Brown, "Religion, Sexuality and Internalized Homonegativity," 1950-1962.

<sup>22</sup> Rodriguez and Oullette, "Gay and Lesbian Christians," 333-347

using compartmentalisation, by de-emphasising one of their identifications depending on the context. For example, when attending a religious institution, the gay identity is de-emphasised and, when attending a gay festival, the de-emphasis is on the religious identity.<sup>23</sup> However, Rusi Jaspal and Marco Cinnirella<sup>24</sup> question how appropriate these strategies are if religion is experienced as an integral part of a person's life narrative, and the meaning attached to other social identifications.

In Grace and Wells'<sup>25</sup> sociological examination of the Catholic Church in Canada, they seem to completely dismiss the role of the institutional church for queer Christians and argue for a complete separation of church and state schools. The authors cite arguments<sup>26</sup> which position the church as an outdated, traditional institution which goes against a modern democratic state's interest for equality of sexual orientation.<sup>27</sup> As illustrated by the article's title, "Queer Rights v. Institutional Church Rights in Canadian Public Education," the expanded argument of the article, namely, that the rights of queer people and the institutional church are opposing forces which will inevitably result in a winner and a loser, is clearly demonstrated.

The literature discussed above (all) shares a common conclusion that religious belief and practices particularly (though not exclusively) within the context of the church and a queer sexuality, inherently stand in contradiction to one another. This conclusion seems to offer little hope for queer Christians who cannot be 'respectable' Christians and queer, nor can they be 'good queers' and be religious. As Elizabeth Stuart<sup>28</sup> asserts, "queer Christians find themselves caught as it were between the devil and the rainbow, aliens in both lands." The argument seems to rest on a false conceptualisation of religious beliefs and practices as static. This assumption can be refuted when one considers the changing views

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<sup>23</sup> Rodriguez and Oullette, "Gay and Lesbian Christians," 333-347; Coyle and Rafalin, "Jewish Gay Men's Accounts," 95-111.

<sup>24</sup> Rusi Jaspal and Marco Cinnirella, "Coping with Potentially Incompatible Identities: Accounts of Religious, Ethnic, and Sexual Identities from British Pakistani Men Who Identify as Muslim and Gay," *British Journal of Social Psychology* 49, no.4 (2010): 849-870.

<sup>25</sup> Grace and Wells, "The Marc Hall Predicament," 237-270.

<sup>26</sup> For example "[t]he judiciary has internalized much of 'traditional' religious dogma in this area and has tended to give precedence to conservative religious interests over the interests of equality of sexual orientation, especially when young people are involved" (Bruce MacDougall, *Queer Judgments: Homosexuality, expressions, and the Courts in Canada*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, (2000):99-100.)

<sup>27</sup> Grace and Wells, "The Marc Hall Predicament," 262.

<sup>28</sup> Elizabeth Stuart, *Religion is a Queer Thing: A Guide to the Christian Faith for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgendered People*. Ohio: Pilgrim Press, (1997), 13.

and practices of various churches and faith traditions in history regarding topics such as women's inclusion as clergy, remarriage of divorcees, and abortion. Further, these texts make little reference to how religion, sexuality and other identifications intersect and interact with each other in different spatial and temporal contexts. The literature discussed above therefore fails to take into account how individuals experience their religious and sexual identifications in their everyday lived realities. I will now turn toward another trajectory of scholarship which *does* work with more nuanced understandings of religious and sexual identities as variable, co-constitutive and intersecting. Furthermore, they begin to question how queer Christians experience, negotiate and reconcile these identifications.

## **Negotiating Sexuality and Religion**

Scholars have demonstrated that some who identify as queer and as Christian employ a variety of strategies to negotiate (or converge) what is otherwise assumed to be an unnegotiable contradiction between identifications.<sup>29</sup> These strategies result from the experience of both sexuality and religiosity/spirituality being framed as intimately tied to individuals' whole being and life narratives.<sup>30</sup>

One strategy of negotiation which scholars identify, involves joining or building different religious spaces and communities that subscribe to theological interpretations which do not position homosexuality as a sin. Scott Thumma<sup>31</sup> examines, for instance, the case of the "gay

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<sup>29</sup> Scott Thumma, "Negotiating a Religious Identity: The Case of the Gay Evangelical," *Sociological Analysis* 52, no.4 (1991): 333-347; Rodriguez and Oulette, "Gay and Lesbian Christians," 333-347; Melissa Wilcox, "Two Roads Converged: Religion and Identity Among Lesbian Transgender Christians," PhD thesis, University of California (2000); Coyle and Rafalin, "Jewish Gay Men's Accounts," 21- 48; Kelly Schuck and Becky Liddle, "Religious Conflicts Experienced by Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Individuals," *Journal of Gay & Lesbian Psychotherapy* 5, no.2 (2001): 63-82; Andrew Yip, "Sexuality and the Church. Forum: The Catholic Church, Paedophiles and Child Sexual Abuse," *Sexualities* 6, no. 91 (2003): 60-64; Jaspal and Cinnirella, "Coping with Potentially Incompatible Identities," 849-870; Melissa Wilcox, "'Spiritual Sluts': Uncovering Gender, Ethnicity, and Sexuality in the Post-Secular," *Women's Studies* 41, no.6 (2012): 639-659; Wood and Conley, "Loss of Religious," 95-111; Meladze and Brown, "Religion, Sexuality and Internalized Homonegativity," 1950-1962; Igor Pietkiewicz and Monika Kolodziejczyk-Skryzypek, "Living in Sin? How Gay Catholics Manage their Conflicting Sexual and Religious Identities," *Arch Sex Behav* 45 (2016): 1573-1585.

<sup>30</sup> Gill Valentine and Louise Waite, "Negotiating Difference through Everyday Encounters: The Case of Sexual Orientation and Religion and Belief," *Antipode* 44, no. 2 (2012): 474-492.

<sup>31</sup> Thumma, "Negotiating a Religious Identity," 333-347.

evangelical”<sup>32</sup> identity where new religious communities are formed by melting together an evangelical Christian culture in a queer context. Melissa Wilcox<sup>33</sup> studied lesbian, bisexual, and transgender women’s spirituality and its connections, or lack thereof, to religious organisations. Wilcox<sup>34</sup> found that all participants who identified as spiritual had some communal way to practice their spirituality in non-traditional ways as, for example, with “alternative religions such as Unitarian Universalism and Religious Science.”<sup>35</sup> For the women in Wilcox’s study, these forms of worship are not only a negotiating strategy, but are also part of the larger movement toward post-secular forms of religious expression which can be characterised as a blend of religious tradition and various cultural beliefs. These expressions are often reactions to addressing concerns about the inclusion of non-normative identifications in more ‘traditional’ religious traditions.<sup>36</sup>

Another concrete strategy of negotiation prioritises personal experiences of faith over institutional religion and religious authority structures. Yip’s<sup>37</sup> work, for example, points to a postmodern move where queer Christians prefer individual spirituality rather than communal religiosity. This means a move away from rigid doctrines, ritual and practices in a community of religious people, to a personal, internal connection with the divine/spiritual, which is not arbitrated by an institution. Yip draws on the experiences of queer Christians to argue that this move can be attributed to the irredeemably patriarchal, undemocratic and exclusive Church which is resistant to change.

Other negotiating strategies have been illustrated by Jaspal and Cinnirella,<sup>38</sup> who studied how gay Muslims living in the United Kingdom choose to separate ‘homosexual acts’ which they engaged in (and which they viewed as wrong) from defining who they were. These acts were also seen as something which they could not control either because they were born ‘with this ‘sickness’ or because they blame mainstream

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<sup>32</sup> Thumma, “Negotiating a Religious Identity,” 344.

<sup>33</sup> Wilcox, “Spiritual Sluts,” 639-659.

<sup>34</sup> Wilcox, “Spiritual Sluts,” 639-659.

<sup>35</sup> Wilcox, “Spiritual Sluts,” 644.

<sup>36</sup> Eva Midden, “Gender, Religion and New Media in the Netherlands: Rethinking the position of Dutch Muslims through Critical Multiculturalism and the Post-Secular,” in *Religion, Equalities and Inequalities*, ed. Dawn Ilewellyn and Sonya Sharma (New York: Routledge, 2016):151-162.

<sup>37</sup> Andrew Yip, “The Persistence of Faith Among Nonheterosexual Christians: Evidence for the Neo Secularization Thesis of Religious Transformation,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 41, no. 2 (2002): 199-212.

<sup>38</sup> Jaspal and Cinnirella, “Coping with Potentially Incompatible Identities,” 849 – 870.



‘western’ culture for influencing their actions. Jaspal and Cinnirella’s work shows how queer religious people work within the framework of conservative or restrictive theological arguments to separate their actions from their identity in order to negotiate and make sense of the contradiction. The work of Igor Pietkiewicz and Monika Kolodziejczyk-Skryzypek illustrates how Polish, Catholic gay men make use of a range of strategies to negotiate their identities including; “limiting their religious involvement, questioning interpretation of the doctrine, undermining the priests’ authority, trying to reject homosexual attraction, putting trust in God’s plan, using professional help, and seeking acceptance from clergy.”<sup>39</sup>

Brian Gerow’s<sup>40</sup> arguments problematise literature which presents negotiation between religious and sexual identity as the only way in which queer religious people navigate the apparent contradiction. These strategies allow views for and against same-sex relationships to exist but they do not seem to engage with long-standing traditions and institutions, and in this way the idea, that church and religion cannot change, is reinforced. These strategies require the individual alone to compromise aspects of themselves in order to find “congruency” with their identifications. These strategies then continue to operate within conservative and restrictive theological framings which present the queer individual as the “irredeemable problem,”<sup>41</sup> while the institution and social systems of power are left largely unquestioned. There also seems to be no space for possibilities where these seemingly incongruent identifications can be reconciled in life-affirming ways. Addressing this critique, the literature below problematises the institution of church while queer identities are conceptualised as possible catalysts for transforming understandings and practices of church and religion.

## **A Transformative Queer Religiosity**

Much of the literature discussed thus far works from the base assumption that religious identity and queer sexuality can be theorised and is experienced as inherently incongruent, binary identifications. Scholars such as Cathy Cohen<sup>42</sup>, Jodi O’Brien, Andrew Yip, Claudia

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<sup>39</sup> Pietkiewicz and Kolodziejczyk-Skryzypek, “Living in Sin?,” 1573.

<sup>40</sup> Brian Gerow, “The Pulpit at the End of the Rainbow: How Queer Clergy Enter Into and Maintain Religious Occupations,” MA diss., Portland State University, 2010.

<sup>41</sup> O’Brien, “Wrestling the Angel,” 194.

<sup>42</sup> Cathy Cohen, “Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics?,” *A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 3, (1997): 437 – 465; O’Brien, “Wrestling the Angel,” 179 – 202; Yip, “Sexuality and the Church,” 60-64; Andrew Yip, “Queering

Schippert, and Tiffany Steinwert who draw on queer theory as propounded by Judith Butler;<sup>43</sup> and queer theologians (such as Marcella Althaus-Reid and Adriaan van Klinken)<sup>44</sup> suggest that a different response exists in the form of a transformative queer religiosity. The emphasis in the literature below moves away from “negotiating” sexual and religious identifications towards reconciling and co-producing more life-affirming identifications.

Queer theology questions the assumed heterosexuality which frames theologies and argues for the potential of “dissident, marginalized epistemologies in thinking God”<sup>45</sup> which can transform the ways in which Christianity and church is understood and practiced. Robin Gorsline<sup>46</sup> points to how queer theology creates space for a queer Christendom or a “Queendom of God” which seeks to question and transform heteronormative understandings and practices of Christianity. Queer theology in the African context has made significant steps in using this queer lens to examine the possibilities and the realities of an emerging queer Christendom in Africa. Adriaan van Klinken and Lilly Phiri in their joint<sup>47</sup> and separate publications have also significantly contributed to examining the possibility (and indeed, developing) an African queer theology. Van Klinken<sup>48</sup>, for example, incorporates understandings of individual agency and resistance to account for his participants’ ability to co-produce understandings of love, religion and sexuality with their religious leaders and the church. Van Klinken’s work shows that his participants do not simply negotiate around queer-phobic religious institutions and messages, but rather reconcile their sexuality and

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Religious Texts: An Exploration of British Non-Heterosexual Christians’ and Muslims’ Strategy of Constructing Sexuality-Affirming Hermeneutics,” *Sociology* 39, no. 1 (2005): 47-65; Claudia Schippert, “Queer Theory and the Study of Religion,” *Revista de Estudos da Religio* 4, (2005): 90 – 99; Tiffany Steinwert, “Homosexuality and the United Methodist Church: An Ecclesiological Dilemma,” PhD thesis. Boston University, 2009.

<sup>43</sup> Judith Butler, “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory,” *Theatre Journal* 40, no.4 (1988): 519-531.; Judith Butler, *Gender trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity*. New York: Routledge, (1990).

<sup>44</sup> Marcella Althaus-Reid, “On non-docility and indecent theologians: A response to the panel for Indecent Theology,” *Feminist Theology* 11, no.2 (2003): 182 – 189.; Marcella Althaus-Reid, “From the Goddess to queer theology: The state we are in now,” *Feminist Theology* 13, no.2 (2005): 265-272; van Klinken, “Queer Love,” 947 -964.

<sup>45</sup> Althaus-Reid, “From the goddess,” 271.

<sup>46</sup> Robin Gorsline, “Queering Church, Churching Queers,” *Conversation, Conflict and Community* 49, no.11 (1999): 114.

<sup>47</sup> Adriaan van Klinken and Lilly Phiri, “In the Image of God’: Reconstructing and Developing a Grassroots African Queer Theology from Urban Zambia,” *Theology & Sexuality* 21, no. 1 (2015): 36-52.

<sup>48</sup> van Klinken, “Queer Love,” 947-964

religious faith through struggling with the church, the church leadership, and themselves to create new understandings of what it means to be Christian and queer. Van Klinken argues that queer Christians, such as the Zambian men in his study, have agency and resist discourses which frame them as evil and sinful by subscribing to and asserting more universal understandings of love (in relationships with others and God).<sup>49</sup> Similarly, the doctoral dissertation by Phiri<sup>50</sup> on identity construction, and the Masters dissertation by Themban Chamane<sup>51</sup> focusing on the coming out experiences of gay Zulu Christians, document comparable strategies of agency and resilience. Queer theology thus provides an understanding of how queer Christians in Africa are co-producing a transformative, subversive theology.

The work of African queer theologians has made significant headway in framing Africa as a prime sight for exploring how a transformative queer religiosity may take shape. They have also illustrated the importance of paying attention to the complexities of the construction, deconstruction and intersection of identifications. However, as the decolonial theorist Francis Nyamnjoh<sup>52</sup> argues, binary and complete thinking exists only in the abstract. In reality, human experience reflects something much more messy and incomplete, and it is this incompleteness that should inform theoretical thinking. Therefore, I want to argue that a queer theology and decolonial lens are not the only factors which are necessary to support the idea of a transformative queer religiosity, but there is a need for research to focus on peoples' lived experiences.

Jodi O'Brien's ethnographic work, on how "*Wrestling the Angel of Contradiction*"<sup>53</sup> between queer and Christian identities gives rise to a particular expression of queer Christianity, is an important contribution to scholarship on queer religiosity. O'Brien's work shows how queer Christians are able to turn the popular rhetoric of conservative/restrictive theology of 'love the sinner, hate the sin', which usually frames the sinner as the queer individual and the sin as queer love, on its head. Rather, queer Christians in O'Brien's study frame the sinner as the

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<sup>49</sup> van Klinken, "Queer Love," 947-964

<sup>50</sup> Lilly Phiri, "*Construction Sites*": *Exploring Queer Identity and Sexuality at the Intersections of Religion and Culture in Zambia*. PhD thesis, University of KwaZulu-Natal (2016).

<sup>51</sup> Themban Chamane, "An Exploration of How Zulu Gay Men Negotiate their Christian and Cultural Beliefs in the Process of Coming Out." MA diss., University of KwaZulu-Natal, (2017).

<sup>52</sup> Francis Nyamnjoh, "Incompleteness: Frontier Africa and the Currency of Conviviality," *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 52, no.3 (2017): 253-270.

<sup>53</sup> O'Brien, "Wrestling the Angel," 179-202

church and the sin as the institutional arrogance of filtering love. O'Brien makes the argument that some queer Christians seem to understand the apparent contradiction between their faith and sexuality, as their *raison d'être*, as they see it as part of their endeavour to create transformed, more inclusive understandings and expressions of Christianity. O'Brien's work demonstrates how, through studying the lived experiences of queer Christians, possibilities for escape from the space between "the devil and the rainbow"<sup>54</sup> are presented.

In Tiffany Steinwert's,<sup>55</sup> work on homosexuality and the United Methodist Church, she argues that, alongside theology, the ecclesiological identity and polity of the church needs to be interrogated.<sup>56</sup> Mark Jordan in *The Silence of Sodom*<sup>57</sup> makes a similar claim about the Catholic Church and argues that in order to challenge the restrictive stance of the church, scholars need to engage with, not only the theology and official policies or documents of the church, but also the clerical culture, rituals and traditions – essentially the institutional culture. These scholars point to the need to devote empirical attention to ecclesiology and churches institutional cultures. These scholars differ in their methods as Steinwert<sup>58</sup> focuses on analysing the policies and engaging with policy-makers, while Jordan<sup>59</sup> works with the understanding that church policies and doctrines are embedded in lived experience. However, they both maintain the argument that an understanding of the lives of queer members of the church must be made visible and audible, (and I add responsibly and rigorously theorised) in order to understand how church doctrines are experienced and resisted, and where there are possibilities for transformation. Amongst African scholars, outside of theology, similar work which embraces the lens of queer theory and which engages the institutional church in relation to queer Christian experiences has been scarce.

## Moving Beyond the Contradiction

Much of the literature reviewed above uses the false assumption that queer sexuality and religion are two natural opposites as a springboard from which to conduct theoretical and empirical work. This often results

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<sup>54</sup> Stuart, "Religion is a Queer Thing," 13.

<sup>55</sup> Steinwert, *Homosexuality and the United Methodist Church*.

<sup>56</sup> Steinwert, *Homosexuality and the United Methodist Church*, vii.

<sup>57</sup> Mark Jordan, *The Silence of Sodom: Homosexuality in Modern Catholicism*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, (2000).

<sup>58</sup> Steinwert, *Homosexuality and the United Methodist Church*.

<sup>59</sup> Jordan, "The Silence of Sodom".

in too narrow arguments which position queer, religious individuals either as irredeemable sinners, or as unreformed queers who believe in a false god (the Church) which will always condemn rather than welcome.

The assumption that queer sexuality and religion are in opposition also means that scholars concerned with queer experiences of religion often focus on how queer religious individuals negotiate between these two opposites and often how they *have to* compromise one or more of their identifications in order to navigate their everyday realities. In these instances religion or sexuality (or both) are presented as fixed, essentialised identities with no hope of being reconciled. However, in other areas of scholarship where a gender lens is cast onto religion - religion, gender, sexuality and other social identifications such as race have been shown to be constructed, performed and variable. The work of the queer African theology discussed above, Nancy Ammerman<sup>60</sup>, Courtney Bender et al.<sup>61</sup>, and Rachel Rinaldo<sup>62</sup> for example show how religion can be viewed as a variable social schema and identification which is significant in different ways at different times as it interacts with other identifications and contexts.

The predominant assumption that there exists a natural contradiction between queer sexuality and religion has also meant that studies have focused on 'gay moments.' I use this term as it reflects how the scholarship has largely been concerned with the experiences of men and focused almost exclusively on topics such as same-sex marriage, on the experience of coming out, or on other key moments where sexuality is performed or expressed (such as Jodi O'Brien, Melissa Wilcox, Brian Gerow, Darren Sherkat, Kylan de Vries and Stacia Creek, and Themban Chamane)<sup>63</sup>. This exclusive focus on moments of sexuality has also meant that studies on religion often emphasise negative experiences of violence and marginalisation, especially within the realm of the Church.

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<sup>60</sup> Nancy Ammerman, "Religious Identities and Religious Institutions," in *Handbook of Sociology of Religion*, ed. Michelle Dillon (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003): 207-224; Nancy Ammerman, "2013 Paul Hanly Furfey Lecture: Finding Religion in Everyday Life," *Sociology of Religion* 75, no.2 (2014): 189-207.

<sup>61</sup> Courtney Bender et al., eds. *Religion on the Edge: De-centering and Re-centering Religion First Edition*. New York: Oxford University Press, (2012).

<sup>62</sup> Rachel Rinaldo, *Mobilizing Piety: Islam and Feminism in Indonesia*. New York: Oxford University Press (2013).

<sup>63</sup> O'Brien, "Wrestling the Angel," 179-202; Wilcox, "Two Roads Converged.," Wilcox, "Spiritual Sluts," 639-659; Gerow, "The Pulpit at the End of the Rainbow.,"; Darren Sherkat, Kylan de Vries, and Stacia Creek, 2010. "Race, Religion and Opposition to Same-Sex Marriage," *Social Science Quarterly* 91, no.1 (2010): 80-97; Chamane, "An Exploration of How Zulu Gay Men,".

Yip<sup>64</sup> and Ammerman<sup>65</sup> have critiqued this and argued that scholars need to go beyond focusing primarily on acts which confine sexuality to certain moments of expression but should work with it as intersecting with all aspects of a person's lived reality. Ammerman<sup>66</sup> argues,

In looking at the places where identity work was obvious, we have perhaps avoided the basic questions about social life that ought to inform any attempt to understand the place of religion in it. How and why do people act as they do? What guides and constrains that action? Under what conditions do people orient themselves toward religious institutions and realities?

This shift from 'gay moments' to everyday lived experiences allows for research to explore more nuanced, holistic understandings of queer experiences in different contexts.

The new trends in scholarship highlighted in this article begin to move beyond the assumption that queer sexuality and religion are contradictory. This area of scholarship provides spaces to think beyond finding new spaces and religions for queer Christians to find congruency in their identifications. It also goes beyond arguing for the mere inclusion of people of 'diverse' identities into current religious institutions. Rather, it advocates for the deconstruction and transformation of existing normative identifications and systems of power within Christianity and the church. However, so far the queer lens only seems to map out the potential that queer Christian experiences and queer theology may have for transforming understandings of Christianity and church. For example, in O'Brien's work, if "living the contradiction" can create change, what is not clear is how it does so and to what extent. It cannot be assumed that a queer Christian sitting in the pews (or indeed standing at the pulpit) of the church will bring about change. Similarly, if a church or religious institution changes its policies and doctrines on accepting same-sex marriage and gay and lesbian ministers – this does not necessarily impact on the heteronormative traditions, theologies, readings and rituals which make up the life of the institution. Little nuanced attention has been given so far to answering these questions by examining how individual Christian or religious identities are experienced in relation to the wider institutional culture and rhetoric of the church.

Scholarship which has employed queer, intersectional, decolonial lenses through which to examine queer Christianity in Africa has thus far been

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<sup>64</sup> Yip, "Sexuality and the Church," 63.

<sup>65</sup> Ammerman, "Religious Identities," 207-224.

<sup>66</sup> Ammerman, "Religious Identities," 209.

dominated by the discipline of theology. Unfortunately, much of the literature around a transformative queer religiosity also lacks sociological analysis of how race, class, culture and other social divisions characterise everyday queer Christian experiences. Perhaps this is because much of the scholarship (especially sociologically) has taken place in 'western' contexts. This has meant that there has been a lack of rigorous scholarship concerned with how the institutional church and religion interacts with the everyday lived experiences of queer Christians in Africa. It seems therefore, that disciplines outside of theology have not pulled their theoretical and empirical weight when it comes to debunking the myth that Africa cannot be a sight where possibilities of a transformative queer religiosity can be explored.

## **Conclusion**

Christianity has largely been characterised as being overtly and irreconcilably anti-queer. This argument has been amplified when characterising a queer-phobic African Christianity linked to widely held conservative theologies and cultural beliefs. Through a review of the literature, I have argued that there is a trend in scholarship which has begun to debunk both these myths. It is clear, however, that there is still a need for more rigorous research (internationally and in Africa) which does not abstract the conversation but which focuses on queer lived experience and which locates these in spatial and temporal contexts. In order to sustain and deepen the scholarship concerned with framing a transformative queer religiosity, scholars should go beyond exploring moments within queer life but focus on everyday experiences in order to explore more nuanced, holistic understandings of queer experiences in different contexts. There is also a need for disciplines outside of theology to focus on how institutionalised religion (shaped by theology, doctrine and policy) produce certain identifications - but also how the lived experiences of queer Christians and religious people influence institutional cultures and the practices and policies which shape it. Furthermore, this line of enquiry can support and nuance understandings of how identifications and social institutions continually shape, contest, alter and reinforce transformative queer religiosities. Lastly, in order to deconstruct binaries which seem to exclude Africa from possibilities of hope for queer religious people, it is pertinent that this scholarship begins to emerge more strongly from an African context.

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