

# Under the Spell of the Ring: The Role of Marriage in Moral Debates among Orthodox Reformed Christians in the Netherlands<sup>1</sup>

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Among orthodox reformed Christians in the Netherlands fierce debates have occurred on moral aspects of Christian life. This essay discusses three major controversial moral issues that are related to conceptions of sex, gender, and sexuality: divorce/remarriage, women's ordination, and homosexuality. By analysing several contributions to debates on these issues, it proposes and explores a hypothesis that concerns the role of a particular understanding of marriage as characterized by a hermeneutical construct: a communal, deeply rooted and subconscious normative principle that drives our interpretations of texts and practices. This essay illustrates the problems of both the dominance of marriage within Christian communities and lived faith, as well as the modern, romantic aspects of this particular understanding of marriage.

**KEYWORDS** gender, hermeneutics, homosexuality, marriage, ordination

<sup>1</sup> This article is partly based on earlier research presented in a Dutch non-refereed journal (M. Derks, T. Tromp and P. H. Vos, "In de ban van de ring: over het huwelijk als dominant construct in seksegerelateerde kwesties," *Radix* 36.1 [2010], 2–21) and a seminar paper by Marco Derks at the conference of the Society for the Study of Theology in York on 13 April 2011.

## Introduction

Over the last couple of decades, fierce debates on controversial moral issues have occurred among clergy, theologians, and lay persons of all Christian denominations worldwide. Whereas in the history of Christianity most ecclesiastical controversies concerned dogmatic issues (e.g. Christ's divinity, the doctrine of the Trinity, or the doctrine of justification), the emphasis has gradually shifted from orthodoxy to orthopraxy. Most of the moral issues that cause the heaviest debates and tensions among Christians and churches (marriage, divorce, remarriage, abortion, women's ordination, homosexuality, euthanasia, etc.) concern the human body — often its sex, gender, and sexuality — and have become “litmus tests” of being orthodox or liberal.

In many polarized debates between “conservative” and “progressive” Protestants the discussions end up in fundamental disagreement about the way biblical texts that are supposed to refer to these issues should be valued. The focus in such debates seems to be on the applicability of biblical prescriptions to contemporary issues. However, we suggest that behind such explicit arguments more implicit convictions are at work as well, convictions that are deeply rooted in the collective (sub)consciousness of Christian communities. From this perspective, debates about these issues turn out to be not serious attempts to reconsider current practices critically, but rather occasions to express and reassert these profound convictions.

In this essay we focus on debates about divorce and remarriage, women's ordination, and homosexuality among conservative Protestants in the Netherlands. We want to make plausible that the diverging positions in these debates are not merely the result of changing views on the applicability of explicit biblical prescriptions, but — more profoundly — strategies to maintain or to criticize the way relations between men and women are structured in church and society. Remarkably, the status quo in conservative Protestant churches is not as “biblical” as conservatives like to suggest, but it leans on a modern (and romantic) understanding of the role and character of (Christian) marriage. This understanding of marriage can be taken as a major organizing principle of heteronormativity, which, according to Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner, consists of

the institutions, structures of understanding, and practical orientations that make heterosexuality seem not only coherent — that is, organized as a sexuality — but also privileged. Its coherence is always provisional, and its privilege can take several (sometimes contradictory) forms: unmarked, as the basic idiom of the personal and the social; or marked as a natural state; or projected as an ideal or moral accomplishment. It consists less of norms that could be summarized as a body of doctrine than of a sense of rightness produced in contradictory manifestations — often unconscious, immanent to practice or to institutions.<sup>2</sup>

To emphasize both its contingency and its effects on the application of biblical prescriptions to contemporary questions, we call this understanding of marriage a

<sup>2</sup> L. Berlant and M. Warner, “Sex in Public,” *Critical Inquiry* 24.2 (1998): 547–66 (548 n. 2).

*hermeneutical construct*, defined as a communal, deeply rooted, and often or partly subconscious view that is part of what is conceived as the moral and ontological order of creation, and that motivates our interpretations of texts and practices. It is rarely questioned — not only because it is part of common sense, but also because its articulation would unveil its contingency and incoherence. Often those who take a position which they themselves call “biblical” try to resolve the debate by simply asking the rhetorical question whether or not the opponents are willing to obey the Bible. Such *ad hominem* arguments may be an indication that this (hidden) hermeneutical construct is about to come to the surface.

We confine ourselves to several written discussions among ministers and theologians — and incidentally some lay persons — in some closely related reformed denominations in the Netherlands that generally tend to hold “orthodox” or “traditional” views on theological and moral issues: the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands (liberated) (RCL), the Christian Reformed Churches (CRC), the Netherlands Reformed Churches (NRC), and the so-called Reformed Union (RU) within the Protestant Church in the Netherlands (PCN).<sup>3</sup> Each of these denominations considers Scripture a *norma normans*, while the so-called “Three Forms of Unity” (the Belgic Confession, the Heidelberg Catechism, and the Canons of Dordt) are considered *normae normatae*. The first three of these denominations have a Presbyterian polity with a strong emphasis on the authority of each congregation — hence the plural “Churches” in their names — and together they have about 230,000 members.<sup>4</sup> The RCL and the CRC each have a private theological university/seminary in Kampen and Apeldoorn respectively, while most NRC ministers have been trained at the NRC seminary after obtaining an academic degree from the CRC university or another university. The RU is a right-wing movement within the mainline PCN and about 290,000 PCN members attend Sunday services with a RU flavor.<sup>5</sup> Most RU ministers have been trained at the Protestant Theological University or one of its predecessors.

## Divorce and remarriage

As in many western countries, in the Netherlands divorce rates have risen drastically over the last few decades as a result of the process of individualization, the growth of prosperity, and the sexual revolution.<sup>6</sup> This situation compelled

<sup>3</sup> The respective Dutch names of these denominations are: *Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland (vrijgemaakt)*, *Christelijke Gereformeerde Kerken*, *Nederlands Gereformeerde Kerken*, and *Gereformeerde Bond in de Protestantse Kerk in Nederland*. All translations of sources in Dutch are by the authors of this essay.

<sup>4</sup> J. H. Kuiper (ed.), *Handboek 2013 van de Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland* (Goes: Oosterbaan & Le Cointre, 2013), 554; F. Quant et al. (eds), *Jaarboek 2013 van de Christelijke Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland* (Amsterdam: Buijten & Schipperheijn, 2013), 174; J. M. Mulder (ed.), *Informatieboekje van de Nederlands Gereformeerde Kerken* (Amsterdam: Buijten & Schipperheijn, 2013), 149.

<sup>5</sup> G. de Jong and J. Kregting, “Stromingen en hun sympathisanten binnen de Protestantse Kerk”, *Religie & Samenleving* 6.2 (2011): 230.

<sup>6</sup> In the Netherlands the divorce rate has risen from 24% in 1980 to 36.5% in 2011 (Statistics Netherlands, ‘Marriage dissolutions; due to divorce and death’, 24 July 2012, accessed 21 October 2013, [http://statline.cbs.nl/StatWeb/publication/?DM=SLEN&PA=37425ENG&D1=a&D2=o,10,20,30,40,50,\(1-1\)-1&LA=EN&VW=T](http://statline.cbs.nl/StatWeb/publication/?DM=SLEN&PA=37425ENG&D1=a&D2=o,10,20,30,40,50,(1-1)-1&LA=EN&VW=T)).

churches to rethink their prohibition of divorce and, consequently, of remarriage. In this section we focus on recent discussions on this issue in one reformed denomination in the Netherlands, the RCL.

The traditional view was advocated by Jochem Douma, professor of Christian Ethics at the RCL university between 1970 and 1997, and an authority among orthodox reformed Christians in the Netherlands throughout his career.<sup>7</sup> He addressed the issues of divorce and remarriage by referring to the traditional idea of two “biblical grounds for divorce.” The first ground was adultery, for Jesus had said that “[w]hoever divorces his wife, except for unchastity (*porneia*), and marries another commits adultery” (Mt. 19.9). The second ground Douma called “desertion by a non-believer” (abandonment by an unbelieving partner), based on a statement by Paul in 1 Cor. 7.7–16.<sup>8</sup> However, he did not accept the structural disruption of a marriage as a third ground for divorce.<sup>9</sup> Many orthodox reformed Christians agreed with him on this matter — at least until recently.<sup>10</sup>

However, during the '90s this view was losing its support among RCL ministers, due to the fact that not only in society but also in the churches a growing number of divorces were neither the result of adultery nor of desertion by a non-believer. One of the strategies they developed was to classify various other situations under the headings of these two traditional grounds for divorce. To give one example, in 1996 an advisory committee of the RCL's general synod suggested considering some censurable sexual behavior by way of analogy as acts of adultery, such as “pre-marital unchastity of which the partner was not aware before marriage, or homosexual intercourse, or incest.”<sup>11</sup> Moreover, it opened up the possibility of considering unchristian convictions and behavior (“unbelief in word or deed”) by way of analogy as cases of “desertion by a non-believer.”<sup>12</sup> In the course of the '90s, many congregations took a “pastoral move” by recognizing the brokenness in people's lives and allowing room for the believer's own consciousness. Those situations that society and mainstream Protestant churches had regarded as “structural disruption” (which Douma had rejected as an unjustified ground for divorce) were now tolerated.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>7</sup>J. Douma, *Echtscheiding* (Kampen: Van den Berg, 1988), esp. 73–74. For a similar view in the USA, see e.g. D. Instone-Brewer, *Divorce and Remarriage in the Bible: The Social and Literary Context* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002), 269.

<sup>8</sup>Discussing traditional Evangelical views on divorce, Cristina Richie only mentions the first ground for divorce (C. Richie, “Disrupting the Meaning of Marriage? Childfree, Infertile and Gay Unions in Evangelical and Catholic Theologies of Marriage,” *Theology & Sexuality* 19.2 [2013], 123–42 [130 n. 7]).

<sup>9</sup>Douma, *Echtscheiding*, 77–78. A similar position has recently been advocated by an RU minister: J. Belder, *Echtscheiding en hertrouwen* (Apeldoorn: Gereformeerde Bond in de Protestantse Kerk, 2011).

<sup>10</sup>Both Dutch civil law and the canon law of the more liberal Reformed Churches that would later become part of the PCN did consider the structural disruption of a marriage a legitimate reason for divorce. See e.g. *Acta van de Generale Synode van Sneek 1969 en 1970 van de Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland* (Kampen: Kok, 1971), 352 (art. 395).

<sup>11</sup>“Rapport Deputaten echtscheidingszaken,” in *Acta van de generale synode van de Gereformeerde Kerken (GKv) Berkel en Rodenrijs 1996* (Barneveld: De Vuurbaak, 1996), appendix IV, 233.

<sup>12</sup>“Rapport Deputaten echtscheidingszaken,” 235. For a similar argumentation in the RU see Belder, *Echtscheiding en hertrouwen*, who suggests that extramarital sexual intercourse, homosexuality, pedophilia, zoophilia, incestuous practices and even pornographic addiction are examples of *porneia* and can, therefore, be considered as biblical grounds for divorce.

<sup>13</sup>Hays also mentions this general tendency (R. B. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: A Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics* [San Francisco: Harper, 1996], 370).

In 2002, a new advisory committee of the synod, with Ad de Bruijne (Douma's successor in Kampen) as one of its leading members, took a different approach. By distancing themselves from the idea of any grounds for divorce altogether, the committee argued for an ethics of radical imitation of Christ, in which both divorce and remarriage are inappropriate to a way of life in accord with "the lifestyle of the Kingdom." Christians should be faithful in marriage even if one partner is unfaithful or commits adultery. For this reason it recommended the renouncement of both divorce and the churches' confirmation of second marriages categorically.<sup>14</sup> Yet it also advised that local church councils be rather reticent in taking any disciplinary measures.<sup>15</sup> Moreover, where communal moral deliberation is concerned, the committee argued for room for local church councils to look for ways to apply biblical standards concerning divorce and remarriage in new situations, similar to the way Paul gives new instructions in a new situation in 1 Corinthians 7.<sup>16</sup>

This committee's report was heavily criticized within the churches. Several ministers accused the committee of introducing a "hermeneutical approach." One minister was "afraid" that in such an approach "the church brings forward her own context in the reading of the Scripture in such a way, that ... the concrete sayings of the Scripture are silenced."<sup>17</sup> Two other ministers argued that the committee "brings in a dangerous and incorrect way of interpreting Scripture into the church, which could have bewildering consequences."<sup>18</sup> These critics claim to hold on to the traditional conviction that the Bible is clear in providing only two grounds for divorce.<sup>19</sup> On the other hand, some critics (including defenders of the two grounds for divorce theory) opposed the committee's advice to renounce the churches' confirmation of second marriages, arguing that in some cases "church councils consider it *reasonable* to sanction a second marriage,"<sup>20</sup> for example in cases in which the remarrying partner was innocent of his or her earlier divorce. As one minister argued, "[n]ot to remarry and not to confirm second marriages in church ... I don't see its reasonableness nor its compelling biblical ground."<sup>21</sup> The committee answered these objections in 2005, holding on to the former lines of argumentation but — remarkably — making an exception for the issue of remarriage: the churches' confirmation of second marriages should be considered

<sup>14</sup> In the Netherlands only a state registrar can conduct marriages — the church then, according to Reformed thought, only "confirms" such marriages.

<sup>15</sup> "Rapport Deputaten Echtscheiding," in *Acta van de generale synode van de Gereformeerde Kerken (GKv) Zuidhorn 2002–2003* (Barneveld: De Vuurbaak, 2003), 430–32.

<sup>16</sup> "Rapport Deputaten Echtscheiding," 411–16.

<sup>17</sup> P. L. Storm, "Het rapport echtscheiding en hertrouwen — een doorbraak?," *Nader Bekeken* 11.5 (2004): 136; cf. A. Kamer, "Geen radicaliteitsproefpolder: wijsheid bij echtscheidingszaken," *De Reformatie* 80.11 (2004): 178.

<sup>18</sup> P. L. Voorberg and H. Pathuis, "Echtscheiding en hertrouwen," *Gereformeerde Kerkbode Groningen Fryslan Drenthe*, 26 March 2004, 199.

<sup>19</sup> Similar critiques can be found in letters from several local churches to the synod: *Acta van de generale synode van de Gereformeerde Kerken (GKv) Amersfoort-Centrum 2005* (Barneveld: De Vuurbaak, 2006), Chapter III, 54–57.

<sup>20</sup> "Rapport Deputaten Huwelijk en Echtscheiding" (Generale synode van de Gereformeerde Kerken (GKv), Amersfoort-Centrum, 2005), 22 (emphasis added), accessed 6 June 2013, <http://www.kerkrecht.nl/main.asp?pagetype=onderdeel&item=167>.

<sup>21</sup> Storm, "Het rapport echtscheiding en hertrouwen," 137.

to be an option in certain circumstances.<sup>22</sup> The synod of 2008 took up this stance.<sup>23</sup>

The question is why the new approach advocated by De Bruijne and others was this fiercely criticized and why so many pleaded for the confirmation of second marriages. At first sight, criticism seems to be directed particularly to the way the committee takes into account the social and literary context of biblical texts and the cultural context of modern society. Against this approach a more fundamentalist interpretation of the Bible seems to be advocated.<sup>24</sup> We, however, suggest that the fundamentalist emphasis on the authority of the Bible has first and foremost a symbolic meaning.

First, modern cultural contexts matter to a greater extent than the conservatives are ready to acknowledge. They only seem to point to the *context* of divorces (the rise of divorce rates both outside and within the churches), while criticizing their opponents for allowing this context to affect their moral position. However, cultural changes are also to a great extent decisive in their interpretation of the Bible. In the so-called “biblical view on marriage” all kinds of modern ideals concerning emancipation, mutuality, and equality are being included, thereby actually eliminating patriarchal elements in biblical representations of marriage. For example, having sexual intercourse with a married woman was forbidden by the Torah, not because it was sexually immoral, but because it violated the *property* rights of the woman’s father or husband (cf. Exod. 20.17).<sup>25</sup>

Moreover, behind the argumentation of conservatives and progressives alike, a highly valued (romantic) ideal of marriage seems to function as a directive “hermeneutical construct.” This can explain the critique on the committee’s first report and the change of view in the second one. It implies that Christians in principle have the right to marry and remarry — and that it is the churches’ duty to acknowledge this right — or at least that being married is a happier state than being unmarried. This conviction is not so much present in the form of direct claims, but in hidden presuppositions in the discourse. Let us provide some examples from several marriage courses and pastoral guides. One author asks, “If someone at an early age ... has entered thoughtlessly into a marriage that ended soon, does he have to do penance for the rest of his life?” The suggestion here is that being unmarried *as such* is a penance (although he himself thinks staying unmarried after divorce is what God requires of Christians who caused the divorce by committing adultery).<sup>26</sup> Marriage seems to be considered a way of cohabitation in which two people find their most complete fulfillment with respect to sex, love,

<sup>22</sup> “Rapport Deputaten Huwelijk en Echtscheiding,” 23.

<sup>23</sup> *Rapport Deputaten M/V in de kerk 2008* (Generale Synode van de Gereformeerde Kerken Zwolle-Zuid, 2008, 5), accessed 6 June 2013, [http://www.gkv.nl/data/styleit/files/Rapport\\_Zwolle\\_2008.pdf](http://www.gkv.nl/data/styleit/files/Rapport_Zwolle_2008.pdf); *Acta van de generale synode van de Gereformeerde Kerken (GKv) Zwolle-Zuid 2008* (S.l.: Riemer & Walinga, 2008), 65.

<sup>24</sup> See e.g. Douma’s colleague at the CRC university, who had accused mainstream churches of arguing on the basis of societal developments instead of the Bible in public sexual morality: W. H. Velema, *Midden in de maatschappij: over ethiek en samenleving* (Kampen: Kok, 1979), 88–108.

<sup>25</sup> J. Martos, “Marriage,” in *Perspectives on Marriage: A Reader*, ed. K. Scott and M. Warren (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 33.

<sup>26</sup> Belder, *Echtscheiding en hertrouwen*, 2. According to Belder, the answer depends on criteria provided by the two traditional grounds for divorce.

intimacy, and companionship. One of the underpinnings of this conviction is the idea of the complementarity of the sexes: “a man cannot live without a woman and a woman cannot live without a man. They mutually complement each other.”<sup>27</sup> And: “Man and wife differ physically, rationally, emotionally. ... They ‘complement’ each other.”<sup>28</sup> Another speaks of a “primordial difference” and even an “enormous difference.”<sup>29</sup> In addition, one can find indications of marriage being the best *locus* for a spiritual life: “a window through which we also get sight on God Himself”<sup>30</sup> and a means “to grow in one’s relationship with God.”<sup>31</sup>

These argumentations *imply* that only married people are complete and that only marriage offers the conditions necessary for human fulfillment. As these authors would not agree with these implications, this shows that they make these general claims with only heterosexual couples in mind that are married or aspire (re)marriage. This idea does not stem from a biblical conception of marriage, as assumed by the authors mentioned above, but from what Giddens calls “romantic love”: a generic social idea originating from the eighteenth century holding that the beloved can make one’s life “complete.” The other, by being who he or she is, makes up a deficiency of shortage, which has to do with self-identity: the flawed individual is made whole.<sup>32</sup> Paradoxically, convictions like these may weaken marriage and its indissolubility, especially when they are mixed up with late modern ideals of sexual emancipation and autonomy: when a marriage does not meet the high ideal of human fulfillment, it might not be a *good* marriage and divorce might become an option, while the same ideal motivates looking for a new relationship and remarrying.

## The ordination of women

A second example of discussions that are determined by marriage as a hermeneutical construct are those on women’s ordination. Besides some rare exceptions, in the history of Christianity there have been no officially ordained women up to a few decades ago — ordained in the sense of inclusion in the orders of bishops, priests, or deacons (in Catholicism, Orthodoxy, or Anglicanism), or in the orders of ministers, elders, and deacons (in e.g. Calvinist Protestantism). The patriarchal structure of society prevented an immediate cause for a rereading of Scripture and tradition. Only in the twentieth century this social hierarchy began to loosen up. In the pre-modern era the exclusion of women from ordination was an affirmation of culture, but

<sup>27</sup> Velema, *Midden in de maatschappij*, 101.

<sup>28</sup> H. P. Dam, “Een huwelijk tot Gods eer,” in idem *et al.*, *Huwen en houden: lees- en werkboek voor een huwelijkskursus* (Barneveld: De Vuurbaak, 1996), 20.

<sup>29</sup> H. de Jong, *Trouwen, scheiden en alleen blijven: over Matteüs 19:1–12* (Kampen: Kok Voorhoeve, 1997), 10.

<sup>30</sup> J. J. Schreuder, *Dienende mannen en vrouwen in het huwelijk en in de kerk* (Bedum: Woord en Wereld, 2010), 7.

<sup>31</sup> J. H. F. Schaeffer, *Trouwen als je vrijheid je lief is* (Franeker: Van Wijnen, 2008), 63–64.

<sup>32</sup> A. Giddens, *The Transformation of Intimacy: Sexuality, Love and Eroticism in Modern Societies* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1992), 37–45. See section 5 for further explanation of this idea.

now it has become an antithetical stance against a secular culture that advocates the full equality of women and men.<sup>33</sup>

Among orthodox Protestants in the Netherlands, the position of women is changing. An increasing number of reformed married women have a job and even fulfill a management role. Within the churches they perform many functions that were confined to ordained men for a long time, for example pastoral work, confirmation class teaching, or leading a committee.<sup>34</sup> Moreover, women (some of whom are theologians) have participated in RCL and CRC committees that were commissioned by their general synods to study questions on the role of women in the churches. However, with the exception of some NRC communities, women are not allowed to “climb the pulpit” or to serve the Lord’s Supper — the gates to ordination have remained firmly closed. This ambivalent situation — especially the fact that women are allowed to teach confirmation classes but are not allowed to preach — indicates that the ordination of women is not problematic on a practical level, but on a symbolic level.

Orthodox reformed churches in the Netherlands recognize three offices: minister, elder, and deacon. The offices of minister and elder are considered “teaching and ruling offices,” which makes it more complex for these churches to open up these two offices to women than the office of deacon. Regarding the office of deacon, some have drawn a connection between the contemporary Reformed deacon and the female deacon in Romans 16.1–2. In 1998 the CRC decided not to allow women to the offices, although a minority was in favor of women ordination.<sup>35</sup> In 2004 the NRC’s national meeting allowed the ordination of women in all three offices and in 2011 the first female minister was ordained. However, most of the NRC congregations still do not accept the ordination of women in any of their offices.<sup>36</sup> The RU is part of the PCN, in which women can be ordained, but the RU’s national board and most RU congregations do not accept this.<sup>37</sup> In 2013 an RCL advisory committee recommended to open all offices to women.<sup>38</sup>

Remarkably, the argumentation to legitimize practices advantageous to women shows a parallel structure with the argumentation against women’s ordination. Both new practices of women’s participation in the churches and the resistance to women’s ordination are directly being legitimized from the Bible. The traditional position against women ordination has recently been defended by RCL ministers

<sup>33</sup> For example, an RU report has argued that our culture “has proclaimed equality as a high norm” and that this is “a breach with biblical thought” (*Mannelijk en vrouwelijk schiep Hij hen: over man, vrouw en ambt* [Apeldoorn: Hoofdbestuur van de Gereformeerde Bond in de Protestantse Kerk in Nederland, 2012], 16).

<sup>34</sup> *Rapport Deputaten M/V in de kerk*; G. Dekker, *De doorgaande revolutie: De ontwikkeling van de Gereformeerde Kerken in perspectief* (Barneveld: De Vuurbaak, 2013), 78.

<sup>35</sup> See the CRC report *Vrouw en ambt* (Amsterdam: Buijten & Schipperheijn, 1999), 156–57.

<sup>36</sup> The NRC have no synod but only a “national meeting.” Its decisions are only advisory. Local church councils can still reject them.

<sup>37</sup> The RU national board recently concluded that there was no need to change the former position (*Mannelijk en vrouwelijk schiep Hij hen: Over man, vrouw en ambt* [Apeldoorn: Hoofdbestuur van de Gereformeerde Bond in de Protestantse Kerk in Nederland, 2012]). Nevertheless, some local RU churches have opened certain offices for women (*Nederlands Dagblad*, 22 July 2008 and 22 August 2012).

<sup>38</sup> *Mannen en vrouwen in dienst van het evangelie: rapport Deputaten M/V Generale Synode Gereformeerde Kerken Ede 2014*, 15 September 2013, accessed 27 September 2013, <http://www.gkv.nl/getdownload/304A7385-B90F-4AB1-82CD-A491EDA1664C>.



Schreuder and Wilschut on biblical grounds.<sup>39</sup> In 1984, Jakob van Bruggen, then professor of New Testament Studies at the RCL university, had argued for the re-establishment of the office of women deacons as we know it from the New Testament and other early Christian sources. This office of “deaconess” needed to be a distinct office beside the three offices of minister, elder, and deacon, because allowing women into the “teaching and ruling office” is “expressly forbidden by Scripture.”<sup>40</sup> About twenty years later, RCL minister Erik de Boer emphasized that women were among Jesus’ first followers and were highly valued by him for their practical skills as well as their spiritual capacities. He suggested assigning gifted women a role that is not limited to the area of diaconal ministry, but remarkably did not argue for women ordination as such.<sup>41</sup> In 2001, a CRC committee came to similar conclusions based on a broad overview of biblical texts.<sup>42</sup>

This brief sketch shows that most participants in the debate apply the New Testament prescriptions directly to the contemporary issue of women’s ordination, even when they acknowledge that the three offices as such cannot be derived directly from the Bible. At the same time, many other Pauline prescriptions are flexibly put aside as no longer prescriptive (for example, lifting up holy hands in prayer [1 Tim. 2.8], the uncovering of men’s and the covering of women’s heads [1 Cor. 11.4–5] or slaves regarding their masters as “worthy of all honor” [1 Tim. 6.1–2]).<sup>43</sup>

The 2013 RCL report, however, focuses on *hermeneutical* aspects of Paul’s argumentation. It leans heavily on a study on the Pastoral Epistles by Myriam Klinker-De Klerck, who was the first female theologian to defend a PhD thesis<sup>44</sup> at the RCL university. She demonstrates that Paul uses various argumentative strategies (especially a “discourse of honor and shame” common among Paul’s contemporaries) to defend that women have to be subordinate to men in general and to their husbands in particular. Most importantly, Paul argues that women should behave in line with the rules of a patriarchal society. Klinker-De Klerck concludes that it is therefore inconsistent to apply these prescriptions directly in our context, while many other prescriptions are easily put aside.<sup>45</sup> In this line of thought the committee’s report concludes that Paul affirms the subordinate position of women by following the common moral standard of his time and using Christian notions in his argumentation to affirm a particular understanding of social order: his main motivation is “not to hinder the proclamation of the gospel.”<sup>46</sup> Adopting the same arguments in our time, however, would bring

<sup>39</sup> Schreuder, *Dienende mannen en vrouwen*, 7; H. J. C. C. J. Wilschut, *Vrouw en kerkelijk ambt: een bijbelse verkenning* (Zwaag: Van Berkum Graphics, 2010), 7.

<sup>40</sup> J. van Bruggen, *Ambten in de apostolische kerk: een exegetisch mozaïek* (Kampen: Kok, 1984), 116.

<sup>41</sup> E. A. de Boer, *Zij aan zij: pleidooi voor een vrouwelijk ambt in de kerk* (Barneveld: De Vuurbaak, 2005), 143.

<sup>42</sup> *Eindrapport studiedeputaatschap Dienst van de vrouw, Generale Synode 2001*, accessed 25 September 2013, [www.cgk.nl](http://www.cgk.nl) (Generale synode > downloads).

<sup>43</sup> See J. van Bruggen, *Emancipatie en Bijbel: Kommentaar uit 1 Korinthe 11* (Amsterdam: Bolland, 1974), 64–65; Schreuder, *Dienende mannen en vrouwen*, 54, 61–62; Wilschut, *Vrouw en kerkelijk ambt*, 56–57, 67–68.

<sup>44</sup> M. Klinker-De Klerck, *Herderlijke regel of inburgeringscursus? Een bijdrage aan het onderzoek naar de ethische richtlijnen in 1 Timoteüs en Titus* (Zoetermeer: Boekencentrum, 2013).

<sup>45</sup> M. Klinker-De Klerck, *Als vrouwen het Woord doen: Over Schriftgezag, hermeneutiek en het waarom van de apostolische instructie aan vrouwen* (Barneveld: De Vuurbaak, 2011), 133–36.

<sup>46</sup> *Mannen en vrouwen in dienst van het evangelie*, 16.

Christians in an unnecessarily isolated position, which actually *does* hinder the proclamation of the gospel. As it is in line with Paul not to oppose what is common in our culture (equal regard of men and women) when it is not necessary, there is no longer a need to exclude women from the offices.<sup>47</sup> Soon after the report appeared, critics opposed it by repeating the traditional arguments and claiming that this “hermeneutic approach” is not in line with biblical instructions.<sup>48</sup> After fierce debates the RCL general synod finally judged that the committee’s biblical argumentation was too weak.<sup>49</sup>

How can we explain that “conservatives” still argue firmly against the ordination of women while they are at the same time so flexible in putting aside other New Testament prescriptions? The traditional explanation is that they evaluate various biblical prescriptions in the light of Scripture as a whole and its internal references (e.g. Paul’s reference to God’s “creational order” concerning the relation between man and woman is considered to be more substantial than his culturally determined prescriptions about clothing). The fact that the fierce opposition against the ordination of women is undergirded by a rather complicated biblical argumentation should be seen as a sign that there is more at stake than just a battle between a “biblical” (or “orthodox”) versus a “hermeneutical” (or “liberal”) approach. Our suggestion is that this so-called “biblical” approach can also — and more convincingly — be explained as an unconscious strategy that tries to keep a gender hierarchy alive *on a symbolic level*. The conservative position does not so much depend on biblical underpinnings but rather on convictions about what is essential to an orthodox Christian belief and on hidden presuppositions concerning sex and gender. This becomes clear when we closely examine the pattern of argumentation of those who oppose women’s ordination. They start from the conviction (derived from Paul and projected onto Gen. 1–2) that husband and wife are of the same value (*gelijkwaardig*) but not equal in position (*gelijk*), and that a husband has authority over his wife because man was created first.<sup>50</sup> They move towards claims about the relation between women and men in the Church (cf. Eph. 5; 1 Cor. 11, 14; 1 Tim. 2; 1 Pet. 3) with the same outcome.<sup>51</sup> For example, Schreuder concludes that when it comes to the relation between men and women, in the Bible “we discover the same two lines [of argumentation] as in marriage. The one of same value [between man and woman] and the other of male leadership.”<sup>52</sup> That is why it is forbidden for women to teach and to have authority over men in the congregation. At the same time, modern,

<sup>47</sup> *Mannen en vrouwen in dienst van het evangelie*, 18, 23, 26–27.

<sup>48</sup> See E. J. Hempenius, “Niet wetenschap, nieuwe visie tast Bijbel aan,” *Nederlands Dagblad*, 23 September 2013; C. van Dijk, “Mannen en vrouwen in dienst van het evangelie,” *Nader bekeken* 20.10 (2013): 163; the editor, “Commentaar: Standpunt over vrouw in ambt GKV,” *Reformatisch Dagblad*, 7 September 2013.

<sup>49</sup> [www.gkv.nl/meer-bezinning-op-ambten-nodig-vrouw-ambt-vooralsnog-stap-te-ver/](http://www.gkv.nl/meer-bezinning-op-ambten-nodig-vrouw-ambt-vooralsnog-stap-te-ver/) (accessed 9 August 2014).

<sup>50</sup> See e.g. Wilschut, *Vrouw en kerkelijk ambt*, 21: “Read Genesis 1 and 2 and you will see: each time Adam comes first. He is created first.” However, this is of course not at all what Genesis 1 tells us. The RCL general synod of 2014 speaks of two biblical lines: the one of the same value of man and woman and the other of difference in responsibility of man and woman ([www.gkv.nl/meer-bezinning-op-ambten-nodig-vrouw-ambt-vooralsnog-stap-te-ver/](http://www.gkv.nl/meer-bezinning-op-ambten-nodig-vrouw-ambt-vooralsnog-stap-te-ver/), accessed 9 August 2014).

<sup>51</sup> Schreuder, *Dienende mannen en vrouwen*, 47, 51, 61–62, 78; Wilschut, *Vrouw en kerkelijk ambt*, 20–21, 30–31, 51–52, 54–56, 65, 78–79.

<sup>52</sup> Schreuder, *Dienende mannen en vrouwen*, 47.

romantic language on the complementarity of the sexes is used in the interpretation of Genesis 2. Schreuder stresses the “incompleteness of a man without a woman”<sup>53</sup> and Wilschut argues that, “[b]ecause she is different, the woman can complete the man. She can give him what he lacks and what makes them complete.”<sup>54</sup>

What happens here is that a particular understanding of the relation between husband and wife (of the same value but not equal in position), connected to the supposed orders of creation and to an understanding of marriage (the complementarity of the sexes), is juxtaposed to the relationship between men and women within the Christian community and, consequently, to an understanding of the ministry. On the basis of these ideas women’s roles in all kinds of functions in the churches are tolerated, but women cannot be permitted to serve in the offices.

## Homosexuality

Although more and more traditional Protestants are developing a more affirming attitude towards the issue, questions concerning homosexuality have caused the most serious debates and divisions among orthodox reformed Christians in the Netherlands. The same factors that could explain the rise of divorce rates (individualization, the growth of prosperity, and the sexual revolution), as well as other factors (e.g. emancipation projects of secular and Christian LGBT organizations, news items in secular and Christian media), might explain why churches have witnessed an increasing number of gays and lesbians coming out, both in and outside the churches. Nowadays, the traditional prohibiting stance towards homosexuality has begun to lose its persuasiveness also among Christians who used to be — and in a way still are — conservative on theological and moral issues.

Current debates on this issue are far more heated than the discussions on the two issues mentioned above. In the summer of 2005, CRC minister Bert Loonstra published a book in which he argued in favor of faithful and committed homosexual relationships.<sup>55</sup> He received such sharp criticisms from colleagues and other CRC members that he withdrew his book from the market — an almost unique decision — and stepped back as a member of the CRC university’s supervisory board.<sup>56</sup> In January 2008, George Harinck, a leading church historian and extraordinary professor at the RCL university, gave an interview to a Christian newspaper in which he mentioned in passing: “Homosexuality is, of course, a controversial issue in my circle [i.e. in the RCL], but I really don’t think it’s a bad thing. ... Male friendships: fine.”<sup>57</sup> This and other statements (e.g. on women’s ordination) caused such heavy criticisms from RCL members that the

<sup>53</sup> Schreuder, *Dienende mannen en vrouwen*, 22.

<sup>54</sup> Wilschut, *Vrouw en kerkelijk ambt*, 20.

<sup>55</sup> B. Loonstra, *Hij heeft een vriend: homorelaties in de christelijke gemeente* (Zoetermeer: Boekencentrum, 2005).

<sup>56</sup> “Loonstra trekt boek terug over homofilie,” *Nederlands Dagblad*, 21 October 2005; “Loonstra trekt zich terug als curator,” *Nederlands Dagblad*, 12 November 2005.

<sup>57</sup> G. Harinck, “God, niet Jezus Christus zozeer.” Interview by P. Bergwerff in *Nederlands Dagblad*, 26 January 2008.

university eventually issued an official statement that sounded almost the opposite of the light-hearted nature of the interview. It was signed by George Harinck and several members of the university's management and supervisory boards, and it said: "Concerning the male friendships which dr. Harinck calls 'fine', he declares to refer to friendship relations and not to relations comparable to those between a man and a woman. On that issue, also according to dr. Harinck, the Bible is clear in condemning homosexual behavior."<sup>58</sup> Both Loonstra and Harinck received many *ad hominem* reproaches and even their professional positions were at risk.<sup>59</sup>

Issues related to gender and sexuality seem to have become Christianity's moral core business — and especially the Church's position towards homosexuality has become a major identity marker.<sup>60</sup> As the statistical number of people directly affected by the discussions on homosexuality (gays, lesbians, bisexuals) is smaller than the number of people directly affected by discussions on ordination (women) and divorce/remarriage (married/divorced heterosexual couples), one would suspect otherwise. Divorces and remarried couples, ordained women, and same-sex couples all both undermine and reinforce several aspects of (heterosexual) marriage. In the ordination of women this is the least obvious, because it is not explicitly connected to marriage. In divorce and remarriage conceptions of sex, gender, and sexuality are not affected (but only the idea of the indissolubility of marriage), and remarriage participates again in the "production" of (heterosexual) marriage. But same-sex relationships do undermine these conceptions.

Most orthodox reformed Christians base their opinion about homosexuality on their interpretations of particular biblical passages on same-sex sexual activities, discussing to what extent they are applicable to the desire of gays and lesbians to share their lives.<sup>61</sup> They relate their interpretations of these passages to what they consider the moral implications of the order of creation to be — and they see heterosexual marriage as part of this order. Interestingly, not only those who take a conservative or prohibiting stance towards homosexuality, but also most of those within these conservative reformed circles who argue in favor of intimate or sexual same-sex relationships, emphasize that same-sex relationships are part of what they call "the brokenness of creation."<sup>62</sup> To some this means that gays and lesbians should refrain from homosexual activity and live a celibate life.<sup>63</sup> Others argue to allow faithful, committed homosexual relationships, although they still consider them *categorically* a second best to (heterosexual) marriage. For example,

<sup>58</sup> The editor, "Universiteit buigt zich over uitspraken prof. George Harinck," *Nederlands Dagblad*, 5 February 2008.

<sup>59</sup> Cf. D. J. Bos, *De aard, de daad en het woord: een halve eeuw opinie- en besluitvorming over homoseksualiteit in protestants Nederland, 1959–2009* (Den Haag: SCP, 2010), 28–30.

<sup>60</sup> Cf. e.g. R. D. Williams, "Knowing Myself in Christ," in *The Way Forward? Christian Voices on Homosexuality and the Church*, ed. T. Bradshaw, 2nd edn (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003), 12; S. Bates, *A Church at War: Anglicans and Homosexuality* (London: Tauris, 2004); J. R. Jakobsen and A. Pellegrini, *Love the Sin: Sexual Regulation and the Limits of Religious Tolerance* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2004); L. Viehues-Bailey, *Between a Man and a Woman? Why Conservatives Oppose Same-sex Marriage* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010).

<sup>61</sup> The main focus is on Lev. 18.22; 20.13; Rom. 1.26–28. Apart from an occasional reference to David and Jonathan, suggestions that there are homo-erotic or queer characters or practices in the Bible that are not condemned, or that are even affirmed, are rather rare among traditional Protestants in the Netherlands.

<sup>62</sup> E.g. De Jong, *Trouwen*, 41; A. L. Th. de Bruijne, "Is de Bijbel duidelijk over homoseksuele relaties?," *De Reformatie* 80.37 (2005): 668; Loonstra, *Hij heeft een vriend*, 75.

<sup>63</sup> E.g. Douma, *Homofilie*; W. H. Rose, "We hebben elkaar wat te vertellen," in *Open en kwetsbaar: christelijk debat over homoseksualiteit*, ed. A. L. Th. de Bruijne (Barneveld: De Vuurbaak, 2012).

Loonstra argues in favor of same-sex relationships, but adds that “[a] homosexual relationship is not of the same value as a heterosexual marriage. ... Although for homosexuals their relationship is an alternative to marriage, it is not an alternative marriage.”<sup>64</sup>

In a more general and formal sense, orthodox reformed Christians consider heterosexual marriage a divine institution, which for them is not the case when it concerns a homosexual relationship.<sup>65</sup> More specifically, there are at least two characteristics of (heterosexual) marriage that affect the attitude of orthodox reformed Christians towards same-sex relationships. The first characteristic is that it is directed at procreation. De Bruijne defines sexual intercourse as “an intense way of communicating love, of giving and receiving at the same time in a shared experience of happiness and pleasure. At the same time it is precisely this which causes the expansion of the human race.”<sup>66</sup> However, he leaves open whether procreation is — or ought to be — an *essential* part of sexual intercourse.<sup>67</sup> Loonstra argues that “same-sex couples should face the fact that their relationship lacks a dimension that, in general, enriches a heterosexual marriage: the perspective of getting children. ... That future-orientation is absent in a homosexual relationship.”<sup>68</sup> Yet it remains unclear why they should “face” it instead of taking it for granted or discovering other levels of future-orientation. Moreover, orthodox reformed Christians do not seem to consider infertility a reason for not getting married. In the lives and minds of many of them (esp. younger generations), sexuality and reproduction have become detached.<sup>69</sup> This detachment is a romantic dream come true through the qualitative and quantitative increase of birth control techniques. To some extent orthodox reformed theology has hardly substantiated this departure from the Christian tradition. The existence of gays and lesbians brings this inconsistency from the cultural subconsciousness to the fore. It seems that in response one projects unto the homosexual other a norm that heterosexuals themselves actually do not meet — and do not *want* to meet — any longer.<sup>70</sup>

Second, some say that same-sex relationships cannot have the same polarity and mutuality as opposite-sex relationships.<sup>71</sup> For example, according to Douma, “[m]an and woman have to rely on each other and, therefore, they have received both physically and mentally the equipment that should enable their complete unity.”<sup>72</sup> But he does not explain for what purposes they need to rely on each

<sup>64</sup> Loonstra, *Hij heeft een vriend*, 77; cf. De Jong, *Trouwen*, 40–41.

<sup>65</sup> E.g. Loonstra, *Hij heeft een vriend*, 77.

<sup>66</sup> De Bruijne, “Is de Bijbel duidelijk over homoseksuele relaties?,” 667.

<sup>67</sup> Cristina Richie has pointed to similar complexities in traditional Evangelical views on procreation (Richie, “Disrupting the Meaning of Marriage?,” 130).

<sup>68</sup> Loonstra, *Hij heeft een vriend*, 77.

<sup>69</sup> Dekker, *De doorgaande revolutie*, 109, with reference to an enquiry by the evangelical broadcasting organization EO in 2005.

<sup>70</sup> Cf. S. Hauerwas, “Why Gays (as a Group) are Morally Superior to Christians (as a Group),” in *The Hauerwas Reader*, ed. J. Berkman and M. Cartwright (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2001).

<sup>71</sup> Cf. Richie, “Disrupting the Meaning of Marriage?,” 135: “Sex difference, therefore, is the last bastion that traditional Evangelical and Catholics will claim as necessary for marriage, since biological children clearly are not needed.”

<sup>72</sup> Douma, *Homofilie*, 60.

other, what makes their unity “complete,” and on what level(s) this unity is necessary within a marriage. De Jong argues that the difference between men and women is the foundation of marriage and, therefore, homosexuals are unfit for marriage. However, they should be allowed to live in a relationship that meets their “sexual deviation [from the order of creation].”<sup>73</sup> This seems to be an oversimplification of the dialectics of sameness and difference in human relations in general. The idea of gender complementarity, which we have already discussed in the previous sections, is a modern and romantic ideal that is losing its credibility.<sup>74</sup>

Interestingly, though, these argumentative strategies lead to several inconsistencies. First, the widespread opinion (which is also at work in discussions on divorce and remarriage) that human beings can only find fulfillment in a monogamous, romantic, and erotic relationship, seems often to be left unmentioned in debates on homosexual relationships or explicitly criticized in order to argue against such relationships. Second, homosexual relations are tested against the norm of (heterosexual) marriage, but this strategy leads to internal tensions when on the one hand homosexual relationships cannot be considered marriages, while on the other they still need to meet (some of) the criteria of heterosexual marriage, often caught in the adage of “in love and faithfulness.”<sup>75</sup> This brings Loonstra even in the ironic situation of using jealousy as a moral guideline:

How far does the analogy [of homosexual relationships] with marriage need to be drawn? We have just stated that a homosexual relationship is not an alternative marriage. Doesn't that give room for having a more uninhibited opinion on homosexual relationships than on marriage? ... When Christians in a homosexual relationship would accept a greater freedom than in marriage, sooner or later this freedom would be claimed for marriage as well. ... Therefore, out of respect for Christian marriage as instituted by God homosexuals themselves are also required to accept the limits of marriage.<sup>76</sup>

To conclude, to whatever extent one discerns either similarities or differences between same-sex relationships and heterosexual marriages, a particular understanding of marriage functions as a criterion for the evaluation and structuring of same-sex relationships.

## Evaluation: marriage as a hermeneutical construct

Let us recapitulate and explain how marriage as a hermeneutical construct operates in various (contradictory) ways in the discussions mentioned above. The belief that men and women are in themselves incomplete in the way that they can only find their ultimate fulfillment in a relationship with someone of the opposite

<sup>73</sup> De Jong, *Trouwen*, 40.

<sup>74</sup> Cf. C. E. Gudorf, “The Erosion of Sexual Dimorphism: Challenges to Religion and Religious Ethics,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 69.4 (2001): 863–91.

<sup>75</sup> As in the title of M. van Loon, *In liefde en trouw? Een studie naar homoseksuele relaties in de christelijke gemeente vanuit Romeinen 1* (Barneveld: De Vuurbaak, 2012).

<sup>76</sup> Loonstra, *Hij heeft een vriend*, 78.

sex puts believers on a straight path towards marriage, allows them to divorce when they do not find this fulfillment, and allows them to remarry in order to finally find this fulfillment. With respect to women's ordination there are two things to note. First, the belief that man and woman are essentially different has become an impetus for women's emancipation and the opening of ordination to women. Second, this difference is also connected to an asymmetry between husband and wife, which is juxtaposed to the relationship between men and women within the Christian community and, therefore, to not allowing women into the offices.

When it comes to the debates about homosexuality, things get a bit more complicated. First, the belief that ultimate fulfillment can *only* be found in a marriage relationship (or at least in a relationship of only two) is one of the causes of the desire of gays and lesbians to marry or at least to have a relationship that comes close to heterosexual marriage. Second, the belief that men and women are in themselves incomplete in the way that they can only find their ultimate fulfillment in a relationship with someone of the opposite sex is being used to exclude gays and lesbians from marriage: a same-sex relationship will always be considered second best — and, for many, there is no room for second bests at all. Third, the belief that marriage exists for the sake of procreation, which is connected to the idea of the biological complementarity of man and woman, is also being used to exclude gays and lesbians from marriage.

What is lacking in many contributions to these debates is an awareness of the role of the socio-historical context of the interpreter, of the genealogy of what they consider Christian marriage, and of the doctrinal or systematic theological issues involved. This is partly due to their doctrine of Scripture, for their emphasis on the *claritas Scripturae* and their use of (strong or weak versions of) Divine Command Theory seem to exempt them from taking such hermeneutical questions seriously.

From the Early Church until the Middle Ages, marriage used to be much less important than it is nowadays. Contrary to natural expectations within Judaism, Jesus and Paul were unmarried men — the latter even wrote that “[t]o the unmarried and the widows I say that it is well for them to remain unmarried as I am” (1 Cor. 7.8). Many theologians in the Early Church questioned the value of marriage, but none of them put marriage above celibate life.<sup>77</sup> This changed at the time of the Reformation. In the early Reformation critical questions were being posed against compulsory celibacy for priests. Within only a couple of years, Martin Luther turned against the institution of celibacy itself — without providing theological substantiation. In 1525 marriage had become the litmus test of devotion to the ideals of the Reformation.<sup>78</sup> According to Jakobsen, “[t]his shift to marriage is also a shift from communalism to individualism.”<sup>79</sup> This can be explained against the background of what Charles Taylor has called the

<sup>77</sup> C. White, *Christian Friendship in the Fourth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 9; M. D. Jordan, *The Ethics of Sex* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), 71; J. M. Bennett, *Water is Thicker than Blood: An Augustinian Theology of Marriage and Singleness* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 86.

<sup>78</sup> J. Shaw, “Reformed and Enlightened Church,” in *Queer Theology: Rethinking the Western Body*, ed. G. Loughlin (Malden: Blackwell, 2007).

<sup>79</sup> J. R. Jakobsen, “Sex + Freedom = Regulation: Why?,” *Social Text* 23.3–4 (2005): 294.

Reformation's "affirmation of ordinary life": instead of considering marriage and vocation optional, higher states, the Reformers argued against the celibate life of monks and priests, and rehabilitated marriage.<sup>80</sup>

Since then, the concept of marriage has changed dramatically. In pre-modernity, most marriages were contracted, not on the basis of mutual sexual attraction but of economic circumstance.<sup>81</sup> The conception of marriage that dominates contemporary discussions does not go back to pre-modern — or even "biblical" — views but to what Giddens calls "romantic love." It began to make its presence felt from the late eighteenth century onwards and drew upon the ideal of passionate love (a universal phenomenon expressing a connection between love and sexual attachment, and marked by an urgency that sets it apart from routines of everyday life). But it also introduced the element of freedom as a normatively desirable state (in contrast with ancient ideas of love, making one un-free). The idea is that the beloved can make one's life, as it is said, "complete."

The rise of the romantic love complex has to be understood in relation to several sets of influences which affected women from about the late eighteenth century onwards. One was the creation of the home. ... A second was the changing relations between parents and children; a third was what some have termed the "invention of motherhood".<sup>82</sup>

The image of "wife and mother" reinforced a "two sex" model. Since the sexual revolution, ideals of romantic love tend to be transformed into what Giddens calls "confluent love": an active, contingent love in which the achievement of reciprocal sexual pleasure is a key element in a relationship that is not necessarily monogamous and no longer "for ever."<sup>83</sup>

The elements of what might be called a romantic version of marriage are easily recognized in the hermeneutical construct used by orthodox Protestants to build up their biblical account on divorce, remarriage, women's ordination, and homosexuality. This understanding of marriage differs on many levels from biblical accounts of marriage. We presume that, under pressure of changes in the surrounding culture around the emancipation of women, the character of marriage, and the position of gays and lesbians, orthodox Protestants tend to take a countercultural position by maintaining the ideal of a rather romantic concept of marriage, supported by explicit biblical prescriptions and a rather complicated biblical argumentation. Marriage has become "the norm" and celibacy has become an impossibility, a risk too high to take, or a last resort, especially for gays and lesbians. In comparison to the pre-modern era, conservative Protestants in the Netherlands have moved away from the original countercultural view of marriage and celibate life, a view that is quite moderated about marriage, distinct about fidelity, stimulating the contribution of women, and rather positive about being single. Acknowledging that hermeneutical constructions are always at

<sup>80</sup> C. Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 222–27.

<sup>81</sup> Giddens, *Transformation*, 38.

<sup>82</sup> Giddens, *Transformation*, 41.

<sup>83</sup> Giddens, *Transformation*, 61–63.



work in debates about ethical issues can help to start a constructive dialogue on these matters.

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