

## 'I can now thank God when I come'

*Sex, faith and the body in the lives of non-heterosexual Dutch Protestant women*

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### Abstract

Dynamics of belonging and exclusion and the notion of being 'in-between' are common in dominant discourse regarding sexuality and Christianity in Dutch society. Homosexuality and Christianity are considered as incompatible, with religious homosexuals moving *in between* religiosity and sexuality. This dominant discourse in both media and academia mainly focuses on homosexual men. As a consequence, the lives and narratives of religious non-heterosexual women are silenced and made invisible – an exclusion which this article seeks to address. Based on in-depth interviews with non-heterosexual Protestant women, this article foregrounds the stories, practices, and experiences of these women. It explores different strategies these women use to move beyond the dominant discourse of incompatibility. Instead of positioning Christianity and non-normative sexuality as opposites, these women show how religion and religiosity can affirm love and desire for women. This article argues that the faith of these women enables them to express love and desire in other parts of their life, such as in relations with women. At the same time sexuality, especially same-sex sexuality and female sexuality, is largely unspoken or even condemned within the Churches that these women attend. These women use various strategies to establish a sense of community by questioning established boundaries through an experience of sex as positive and empowering. Through these negotiations of God, sex, love, and the Church, these stories emphasise the agency and creativity of these women by showing the diverse ways in which religion and sexuality intersect and are embodied. As such religion and sexuality are co-constructed and embodied by these women as empowering modes of negotiation.

**Keywords:** gender, sexuality, lived religion, protestantism, lesbian, embodiment

## Introduction

I can now thank God when I come. I have my sexuality as a gift from Him. My lesbian sexuality is a gift from God. (Dieke, 53 yrs)

Dieke<sup>1</sup> is a Dutch Protestant woman living in a small town in the northern provinces, where she is an active member of her church and works as a pastoral worker. A few years ago, Dieke came out and began to describe herself as lesbian after she divorced her husband, whom she was married to for twenty-four years. She is currently living with a woman, Mina. In her former marriage, Dieke considered sex mostly a marital duty rather than a site for pleasure. During our conversation, Dieke told me that 'now', in her relationship with Mina, she can enjoy sexuality and can even thank God for this.<sup>2</sup>

Dieke was raised in a rather strict Protestant church, where she learned that sex was useful for procreation, and a women's task was mainly to become a wife and mother, with her sexuality directed at the needs of her husband. More recently, Dieke's perspective has shifted and she no longer considers sex as a requirement, a necessity of being a Protestant married woman. Instead, she considers her own sexuality as a gift from God in which her own pleasure is central. How might we understand Dieke's claims? I suggest that by this statement, she not only reclaims her body, but she emphasises the interconnectedness of pleasure, sex, and her own lived religion, as I will explain more in-depth further on in this article. This implies she does not only experience faith in church or in rituals, but also through her body and in her sex life, for instance when she orgasms. This embodied experience of faith enables Dieke to recognise herself as a simultaneously and inherently connected religious and sexual self. In the context of female sexuality and the role of lesbian women in the Dutch Protestant church, we can thus ask; what does it mean to experience sexuality as a gift from God?

Dieke's claim is formulated against a general background in which homosexuality and religion are positioned in tension to each other. Dutch media reports on the matter are characterised by a narrative that tells us that 'being gay' and 'being Christian' is incompatible and a notion of 'in-between' that suggests that religious homosexuals continue to move in-between conflicting areas of religion and sexual identification.<sup>3</sup> The structure of this narrative reiterates a connection between sexual liberation and secularism, with sexual freedom and ideals of gay tolerance considered to be strictly secular. As Sarah Bracke argues, the process of sexu-

ality increasingly becoming a public matter, with the state as the site of sexual regulation, coincides the process of religion becoming a private matter, with public expressions of religion often approached either as backward or threatening (Bracke, 2013, p. 249). Yet, the understanding of Christianity and non-heterosexuality as two separate mutually exclusive spheres obscures the diversity of experiences among people in the Netherlands who identify as both Christian, in this case Protestant, and non-heterosexual, in this case self-identified lesbian, queer, and bisexual women.

Moreover, the overrepresentation of homosexual men in this discourse, both in academic work as well as in the public debate, implicitly frames homosexuality and Christianity without taking gender differences into consideration. Many feminist scholars have argued that, in Western Europe, the private sphere is historically associated with femininity, while the public sphere is masculine (Lloyd, 1984, p.104; Scott & Keates, 2004). Though this is by no means a clear cut or fixed structure, it does have implications for the process in which sexuality becomes a public matter, as is the case in the Netherlands. What we see here is that women, and the notion of female sexual experience, are pushed to the background in this public discourse.<sup>4</sup> Besides this invisibility in public discourse, lesbian sexuality, let alone the sexuality of non-heteronormative Protestant women in the Netherlands, remains rather unexplored in scholarship, both within feminist theory as well as within religious studies (Scott, 2009; Nynäs & Kam-Tuck Yip, 2012; Braidotti, 2008).

This article specifically focuses on women's experiences of non-heteronormative sexuality and religion; not as separate axes of significance, but intrinsically connected and interwoven in the narratives of my interlocutors. The women I spoke with constructed a sense of self as a sexually religious subject, always already multiple and intersectional. Their experiences can therefore tell us something about the multiplicity of subjectivity, not experienced as conflicting, but as enhancement in both the practice of religion as well as sexual and loving relations. What is the meaning of lesbian sexuality for Dieke and the other women I talked to? And what does the temporality, the 'now' in Dieke's words, imply? This article analyses the meaning of sex and faith in the personal lives of non-heterosexual women who are members of the Protestant Church in the Netherlands, and does so in three sections. It first elaborates on the meaning of sexuality and the notion of lesbian for my interlocutors. A second section turns to the experience of faith in Protestantism and the changing images of God held by the participants. In the third section, I continue this line of think-

ing to look at the experiences of sexual pleasure and relationships with other women, in order to elaborate on the ways in which sexual religious subjectivity is experienced, reflected upon, and constructed relationally. This will allow us to further unravel Dieke's claim 'I can now thank God when I come'.

## Method and approach

This article is based on a three-month research project, in which I held twelve in-depth interviews with self-identified non-heterosexual women between the ages of 26 and 72. The women in this project came from various Protestant churches in both small towns and cities in all provinces of the Netherlands except for the southern provinces. The Protestant Church in the Netherlands is a mainly white institute in which the main language of service is Dutch. Although this was not a selection criterion, all women were white Dutch nationals. I got in touch with these women through various networks. Of the group, ten were ciswomen, meaning their gender as female matches the sex they were assigned at birth, one identified as a transwoman, and one as genderqueer.<sup>5</sup> Most women described themselves as lesbian, with the exception of one as queer and one as sexually fluid. Almost half were in a relationship with a woman at the time of our interview, five were single, one woman was a widow and another woman had never been involved with a woman. Seven were mothers.<sup>6</sup> All the interviews were held with the same list of open questions, giving as much space possible to the perspectives of the informants and positioning myself as an active listener foremost. In this project, the PCN, the Protestant Church Netherlands, is central, which is one church that knows much variety in local communities. Even though some guidelines have been established in synods, such as which Bible translation is used during services, it is mostly an organisational and practical partnership.

My main approach in the analyses of these stories is one of lived religion, which is a mainly ethnographic approach that encompasses the role of religion in daily life as practices and meaning (Hall, 1997, pp. 7-12; Nynäs & Kam-Tuck Yip, 2012). This is not opposed to a structural or institutional approach, but, according to David Hall, it seeks to break the distinction between what is considered 'high' and 'low' areas of interest in religion studies by working from daily life, thus 'lived', religion. When theology is included, it will be mainly seen as a practice and experience, rather than a

question of truth (Hall, 1997, p. 9). This has to do with the initial focus of lived religion studies toward lay religious people, though nowadays it encompasses a wide spectrum of mostly ethnographic research. In this project, most women could be considered 'lay' as opposed to theologically schooled clergy, but many women are, or have been, church elder, deacon, or pastoral worker within their community. A focus on these practices from the approach of lived religion allows for multiple practices and experiences, using mainly emic concepts.

## Theoretical framework

The Netherlands is a nation often associated with sexual freedom and liberal values in academic writings but also in public discourse in the nation and beyond (Buijs, Hekma, & Duyvendak, 2011). It was after the 1960s sexual revolution, Gert Hekma argues, that this nation came to be known as gay friendly and sexually liberated (Hekma, 2011, p. 130). These values of gay tolerance and sexual diversity have become markers of Dutch national identity, in a politics that is increasingly becoming homonationalist – a concept coined by Jasbir Puar to refer to the appropriation of LGBT bodies and politics to represent boundaries of a nation (Puar, 2007). In this process, 'gay tolerance' is celebrated as evidence of the Dutch nation as liberal and progressive (Bracke, 2013). There are many limits on this tolerance and only some bodies can, are, or will be able to be recognised as such homonational citizens. Transnational scholars have argued that this tendency to exalt the own nation is always relational, often depending on the imagining of an Other against which nationalist ideology defines itself as unique. In the Dutch context, this absolute Other has become the figure of the immigrant Muslim, often portrayed as incommensurable with nationalist Dutch ideals such as gay tolerance (Jivraj, 2011; Bracke, 2008). This cultural racism in the form of Islamophobia, as Etienne Balibar describes it (Balibar, 1991), makes the position of Dutch mainstream religious institutes paradoxical. Scholars as Ernst van den Hemel have noted that the Dutch political climate is becoming more conservative, calling for a strengthening of 'traditional Dutch values', which increasingly imagines the Dutch national citizen as secular (Van den Hemel, 2014). Though the Netherlands is often imagined as a secular nation, this idea of Dutch nationalism and symbolic citizenship is built on a particular understanding of secularism as specifically grounded in Christianity. Even though religion can be seen as privatised in the Netherlands, it becomes public through

conservative and homonationalist politics, in which institutionalised religion is often referred to as antithetic with secularist liberal ideals while simultaneously called upon in nationalist politics (Buijs, Hekma, & Duyvendak, 2011; Van den Hemel, 2014). The hesitation of large Christian institutes to take on these values of 'sexual freedom' is seen as a major problem in Dutch politics and popular media because, as Mariecke van den Berg et al. argue, Christian notions of homosexuality appear to clash with secular Dutch images (Van den Berg et al., 2014). Narratives of conflict are central in these discourses as homosexuality and religion are often paired as oppositional, connected but inevitably leading to conflict. From the perspective of queer religious studies, however, it has been argued that, even though presented as oppositional, religion and sexuality are nevertheless inseparably linked and co-constructive in the discourse of Dutch citizenship (Derks, Vos, & Tromp, 2014). Where gay tolerance is staged as a crucial element of Dutch identity, this becomes disconnected from historical processes and power relations, and sanctified as a traditional value of progress. As much as nationalism is connected to sexuality and religion, this homonationalist and secularist discourse is gendered as well. Mainly cismen are taken to be representative of 'the' LGBT community, where gay liberation is aligned with narratives of progress and visibility in the public sphere, a space historically associated with masculinity. Feminist postcolonial and transnational scholars have valuably argued that women often have a different political role in national imaginings (Alexander, 1994, 2005; McClintock, 1997). This is similar in the Dutch case, and this research argues for an approach to religion and sexuality in the contemporary Netherlands that takes into account the gendered complexities of this discourse.

The role of sexuality in Christian discourse is one that has often been examined, contested, undermined, or reconsidered. Sex is political, as Michel Foucault stated in 'the History of Sexuality' (Foucault, 1978). Sex is shaped by discourse, discourses that are accessed differently in different power relations. So, we cannot look at 'sex' as isolated, untouched by race, ethnicity, nationalism, gender, and religion. Approached as a constraining mechanism of sexuality, Foucault argues that confession was one of the ways in which sex was presented, through discourse, as a secret: 'What is peculiar to modern societies [...] [is] that they dedicated themselves to speaking of it ad infinitum, while exploiting it as the secret' (Foucault, 1978, p. 35). Throughout the 19th and 20th century, sexuality became individualised and situated at the level of desires. Foucault argued that the dominant notion of sexuality present in contemporary Europe is the idea that

individuals have access to their own body, identity, and intelligibility through sexuality. Judith Butler further argues that sexuality is not a part of bodies as some innate nature, but constructed through discourse (Butler, 1993). Because femininity has historically been associated with matter, and as such as an object without access to the domain of discourse and decisions, an emphasis on materiality and power is a central concern in Butler's work. Understanding the constructions and movements of bodies, sexuality, and gender thus is a crucial feminist project, as Butler and many other feminist scholars argue. Yet, besides as a constructed institution of patriarchal power, such as Catholicism in Foucault's work, religion remains absent from most Foucauldian and feminist analyses.

M. Jacqui Alexander critiques this absence of divine relations in feminist theory and argues that 'spirituality matters' (Alexander, 2005, pp. 295-300). Thus, she suggests that spirituality is not only an important site of inquiry – it matters, as something out-of-this-world – but it is materialising as well, it has matter. According to Alexander, spirit relations have real, tangible, noticeable, effects in what is often seen as 'real life' (opposed to spirit life). Spirituality thus influences the construction of subjectivity, it can influence daily life experiences and practices, not only as a top-down process coming from institutions, but as lived and questioned divine relations. These material effects of spirituality are central in my analysis of embodiment of religion and sexuality, with spirituality as important factor in lived relations and thus in the construction of subjectivity. Studying subjectivity and relationality in the context of power structures cannot be without considering the various religiosities and spiritualities that are materialised and embodied. Such a project aims to destabilise the implied secularism in dominant feminist approaches by emphasising on the importance of religion as materialising source of motivations and inspirations. As Grace Jantzen states: 'The point is that Foucault, by failing to problematise male sexuality, thereby also spreads false generalisations over the tradition of Christian spirituality and with it something so central to Christian thought as what it might mean to experience the love of God' (Jantzen, 2007, p. 247). Jantzen argues for a diversification of meaning of beliefs in theory, which is absent in Foucault, as this work falsely generalises the history of Christian spirituality. Continuing this, Jantzen rhetorically asks '[w]here then, are the women?' (Jantzen, 2007, p. 247), directing this question not only to Foucault's work but also in relation to dominant theology and religious studies. When women are present in theology, they are merely presented as objects for male sexuality, violence, or abuse. Similar to Butler, Jantzen argues that women have been associated with

the body – in the case of Jantzen the theological concept of the flesh – with sin and, irrationality. The notion of salvation from the flesh, central to Christian belief systems, thus has possibly very different implications and meanings for female identified bodies than masculine bodies, which have been valued as knowing, rational, and closest to God. When we continue this historical role of women in Christianity along the lines of Butler's emphasis on female materiality, the project of researching women's religiosity and experience of God is not an immaterial or merely discursive project. Because women, in Christian theology as well, have been seen as flesh, objects of male sexuality, the ways in which women themselves construct an Image of God can tell us something about the various ways in which gendered norms in faith are embodied, undermined, and contested. Women are not only constructed by this discourse, are not only oppressed by Christianity as institutional, but play an important role in the construction of Christian discourse from below. Examining their sense of sexuality and relation to the Divine – in this case God – as intrinsically connected provides us with examples and tools to untangle these often implicit links between sexual emancipation, nationalism, and secularism in the Netherlands as a postsecular nation.

## Sexually religious subjects

From the moment that I was aware that I could fall in love with women, of course I started thinking how that stood in relation to faith. But I never experienced a problem toward God. (Nienke, 43 yrs)

Nienke identifies as a lesbian ciswoman and she lives in a city where she is a member of a church. In her childhood, she attended a different church with a more orthodox character,<sup>7</sup> where she was raised with an image of lesbian sexuality as deviant, and with heterosexuality and motherhood as norm. When Nienke discovered her love for women during her studies, she struggled with her faith, church, and family. 'But', she adds, she never experienced a problem toward God. Her relation with and to God is a foremost personal bond, which is separate from the doctrine and opinions within her church. In this statement, Nienke disconnects Protestantism as bound to a church, from her personal relationship to God. This disconnection of church and personal beliefs recurred in more of the interviews. For most women, the period of gradual self-discovery and identification as lesbian implied a change in God's image. One of the participants did not



identify as lesbian; Karlijn recognises herself more in the notion of queer, because, for her, the word 'lesbian' is connected exclusively to love between two women. Karlijn feels uncomfortable with the label of woman, which is why the word lesbian thus does not work to describe her sexuality. Notwithstanding this exception, I will elaborate further on the meaning of 'lesbian' among the other women in this project, as there is much diversity in perspectives and experiences with the label of lesbian. Most refer to lesbian as a form of identity, as an element of who they *are*. Others connect this to love relations and sexuality, in which being a lesbian is determined by acts; it is something they *do*. The notion of 'lesbian' is thus broader than a sexual orientation alone, but encompasses sexual acts as well as a sense of being. For Nienke, her self-identification as lesbian was first connected to attraction to other women in general, but it was only when she engaged in a relationship with another woman that she openly began to identify and express herself as such. For Ellen and Astrid, being lesbian is more a sexual orientation and part of their identity. Their self-definition as lesbian was mainly a relief because they experienced a deeper understanding of their selves through this discovery. For them, their sexual orientation is then a part of their being, an important part, but not all-encompassing. Dieke, on the other hand, finds it explicitly important to make herself known as lesbian in terms of personal identity, because she feels like this identity has brought her pleasure and happiness since she rediscovered herself and has more love and joy nowadays than she had during her heterosexual marriage. After being married to a man for twenty-four years, Dieke discovered why she was not happy in this marriage, namely because she loved women instead of men. When I asked, Dieke told me that she had only 'been' a lesbian for a few years. She did not call herself lesbian right away, but did come out to her husband about her desire for women. After this coming-out, Dieke and her husband stayed together for another six years after which Dieke eventually decided to ask for a divorce. Her identification as lesbian began after her divorce, when she entered her relationship with another woman, Mina, and acted upon the feelings that she had been calling 'lesbian feelings'.

Similar to these diverse understandings of the term 'lesbian', my interlocutors often do not refer to one specific moment as their 'coming-out'. While other women do not often speak about their lesbian sexuality, some, like René, found it important to express this identity right away as a precondition for entering a social relation. She found it especially important that people 'knew' in the first years after her initial coming out, as a way to know how their relationship would proceed. If the other person, 'collea-

gues, people in the bus, everyone I spoke to', responded negatively to her self-identification as lesbian, she would not engage further with this person. Being open about her lesbian sexuality thus created several moments of coming-out, in which the response of the other person was a precondition for entering a social relationship. Nowadays, she does not feel the need to tell people about her lesbian sexuality anymore, because she feels like her relationship with Marja speaks for itself. Marja and René often go together to a service in her church, and she feels like fellow church members know without her needing to explicitly speak out about her lesbian identity. Moreover, she does not experience negativity from within her church. Similar to René, most women in this research do not see one central point as their coming-out as lesbian, but see this as a gradual process. They continue to navigate through life with several moments of openness of both their sexuality as well as their religion. Instead of seeing either as a mere private aspect of their life, both are private as well as public concerns and influence the social relations of these women outside their church or homes. Evident in these stories of self-identification is that this reflection on the self cannot be distinguished from the role of faith and their relation toward God. This becomes especially noticeable in the case of Hanneke, whose experiences are in stark contrast to René's rather 'smooth process of becoming lesbian,' as she described it herself.

Hanneke comes from a rather conservative church and has, until recently, condemned her own lesbian sexuality while she took on the notion that one is allowed to 'be' lesbian without acting upon it, which is present in more churches with a conservative or orthodox character (Bos, 2010). Hanneke thus made the decision to live in sexual abstinence, refraining from entering relationships or having sexual contact. Because this burden was eventually too heavy to carry for her, and this partly caused a depression and burn-out, she eventually let this promise go. Hanneke thus decided to be open for a relationship when she was in her early fifties. In order to legitimise this choice, both internally as well as towards her church, she became more reflective and individual in her faith. For Hanneke, being a lesbian was mostly a burden given by God. She had often asked herself 'why' He made her this way. Yet, in the recent years, her image of God began to change to a more accepting God. But, mostly, she felt like she could no longer uphold this abstinence even though she recognised this as a religious prescription. For Hanneke, actively looking for a partner continues to be a risk since she remains uncertain that this is in accordance with her religious tradition or even her personal relation with God.

This relation between images of God and sexuality brings me to the following section of this article. I asked all women how they regarded their lesbian sexuality in relation to God. Some women, such as Astrid, hold a view that is contrary to that of Hanneke. For Astrid, being lesbian is not deviant nor an abnormality; she considers sexuality as merely a fact of life. Astrid told me that God perhaps did not intend to make people love others of the same sex, but at the same time she refuses to see herself as a mistake. Dieke even takes this a step further in her statement that her sexuality, her lesbian sexuality, is a gift from God, something given to her in order to experience joy, love, and pleasure. Most women, no matter how they become, are, or act lesbian, have experienced a change in their relation to God as parallel to their self-discovery as lesbian. This period is either experienced as confusing or, in the case of Ellen, Astrid, and Dieke, a moment of relief because it allowed a fuller understanding of their subjectivity. Yet, together with this gradual self-definition as lesbian, women are confronted with images from the church that condemn same-sex sexuality or leave it unspoken and they negotiate these different perspectives to construct a sense of self as religious and sexual, mutually enabling and interwoven.

## Images of God and religious individualism

First, I really thought God would be proud of me for not giving heed to it. Then, at a certain point, I thought, it cannot be the case that He is happy that you're born at first, and then all of a sudden He's not because you're of *vrouwenliefde* [women's love]. (Astrid, 46 yrs)

In the years following Astrid's discovery of her love for women, she refrained from putting this into action, had some boyfriends, and was not open about these feelings toward her family. This, Astrid told me, had to do with her image of God, and the objections from within her church she encountered. After a few years, however, her relation toward God and the church changed. During our conversation she described how her idea of God was no longer commensurable with a condemnation of 'women's love', as she put it. Though this was a gradual process, Astrid overall did not feel like she experienced any internal religious conflict during her coming-out. Although she put it in such strong terms during our interview, she did struggle with her position in church, but these concerned conflicts with her direct social circle rather than a personal conflict of her identification as lesbian in relation to God. Other women did struggle with their role

as faithful women vis-à-vis the church, God, or family when they began to define themselves as lesbian. In this section, I will look more closely at this noticeable shift in the images of God among my interlocutors. All of them describe their relation to God as a relation of love and support, and for some women this is in stark contrast with the image they have been raised with. As argued before, a distinction can be found between church and God as a strategy to negotiate one's religious beliefs with churches that condemn same-sex sexuality. Here, personal experiences are often regarded more valuable than church-given interpretations. This shift toward personal interpretation and reflection to reclaim space for religious subjectivity is a strategy that Melissa Wilcox describes as religious individualism, a pattern in which contemporary religion becomes a process of conscious negotiation (Wilcox, 2009, p. 3). This process shapes religious identifications and subjectivity as they become more and more reflexive; similar, Wilcox argues, to sexual subject positions. Looking at the various resources and rhetorics, by which women negotiate these sexually religious subjectivities, these can be seen as exemplary for contemporary subjectivity constructions. What I argue based on the analyses of the experiences of my interlocutors, is that religion, for these women, is interconnected with their sexuality and thus intersectional in their reflection on their subjectivity as both religious and sexual. During our conversation, Ellen explained where she sees the most important aspect of her faith:

You have to put effort in claiming space to be who you are. And there is space that you can claim, that you may really demand. That no one can ever take from you; I think that's the most important. And that you... you can find inspiration and strength from your faith. (Ellen, 48 yrs)

Ellen, here, sees faith as a source of inspiration to continue to claim space for self-expression. In other moments, she explained that she sees her relationship with God as a bond in which God loves, supports, and guides her, while she considers herself as responsible to make choices in life that are in line with God's will. Even though God is her guidance, her choices are nevertheless individual and her own responsibility. Protestantism as a religious tradition generally provides room for such individual beliefs (Woodhead, 2007). Nevertheless, there is a lot of variety among Protestant connotations and, even within the PCN, there are many different nuances in which the individual communities and pastors vary widely. More orthodox connotations tend to consider all humans as born with sin, referring to the notion of original sin, with God as ultimate judge and Jesus as saviour.

Other strands within Protestantism carry out a more nuanced image of God as, for example, loving instead of strict (Bos, 2010). Nevertheless, the role of the individual, though always in relation to the community, is crucial in Protestantism in which one's own faith and actions can bring salvation. Even though these actions are shaped and influenced in church, through statements of hierarchised church boards and pastors, it is important to keep in mind that this individualism takes place in this particular setting of Protestantism. Furthermore, in mainstream Protestantism, the Bible is considered the only true source of faith, there is no veneration of saints, and most importantly, no divine authority besides God as holy trinity. This has implications for the relationship that Protestants have toward faith and religion, and gives a lot of space for self-reflection, which is, for many women, an important element of their beliefs; to be responsible for one's own actions in the face of God (McGrath & Marks, 2004). It is exactly because they can make a self-reflective distinction between their personal beliefs and the message and interpretation from their church that these women negotiate their stance in Protestantism. This sometimes conflicts with the way that they have been raised but these personal negotiations nevertheless do not separate them from faith, even though they do experience a sense of non-belonging in relation to the church. This tendency toward individualism is exemplified by many of my informants. Most women describe their current relation toward faith as a relation of love and support that enables them to refer to themselves as loved and valuable. For some, this is the same image that they have been brought up with, for others, this is in contrast with a strict God as constant judge. For Dieke, this has been a major turnover, in which she describes:

It was like 'I have to be obedient to God'. So I have to do as He says. And [now] I think, 'God, here I am. And you can be angry at me if I do things that aren't good, but I'll still do those things.' So that was a whole shift. [As well] to regain confidence in God still, that God likes you anyway. (Dieke, 53 yrs)

Dieke was raised in a conservative church, in which obedience to God was central. This is a central Protestant notion of an imagined relation that is open and direct, granting the possibility of direct contact with God, while simultaneously deeply humble and focused on obedience. These two notions, of direct responsibility toward God, as well as of obedience and the idea of being born a sinner, has been central in the childhood of other women as well, such as Astrid and Annelies. Dieke nowadays has confidence in herself and in her relation with God to refrain from this constant

obedience. She claims space in the face of God; she positions herself as autonomous and as possibly doing things that are not considered 'good' by God. And, most importantly, as she adds, Dieke can do things that might be considered wrong, but God loves her anyway. This noticeable shift and construction of their subjectivity as religious has everything to do with their sexual subjectivity, which, in turn, cannot be separated from their experiences of love for women. This interwovenness of their God's image and lesbian self-identification does not end here though, at an individualised self, picking and choosing and negotiating as she goes, but has impact on their love relations and influences their bodily experience and perspective to their sex life. Based on these narratives, I would argue that God and sex are not two separate scopes that, when combined, inevitably cause conflict. Rather, faith enables sexual pleasure and these Protestant women describe their identity as multiple and intersectional, providing renewed perspectives for feminist anthropology and theory.

### **Faith, love, sex**

That's how I see Eefje, God, and myself, as a strong chord. That can simply not be broken. And then I would like God's blessing upon that... I do feel very strongly that we are together, and as well together with God. (Astrid, 45 yrs)

Referring to a biblical text,<sup>8</sup> Astrid describes her relation as a threefold bond with her, her partner, and God. For example, Eefje and Astrid pray together, visit church together, and read the Bible every day, which are moments that, for Astrid, are most valuable. Most women see their love relation as blessed, though there is diversity in the wish to marry.<sup>9</sup> The women who do not express a strong desire to marry, are mainly women who have been married to a husband prior to their coming-out and current relation with a woman. These experiences of heterosexuality have a great influence on their experience of sex and sexuality as well. All women, with the exception of Karlijn, have been involved in heterosexual relations, from casual dating during their teenage years to long term marriages of Annelies with a woman before her coming out as transwoman, and Dieke's twenty-four year of marriage to her husband. Dieke describes that her biggest motivation to marry Peter was her wish to become a mother. About sex, she said:

It was nice as long as we had children... and for the rest... I was raised [with the idea that] you have to please your husband. So I did... but yeah... it didn't bother me that much no... [...]. And I discovered when I was with Mina; this is the kind of intimacy I've been looking for all that time. And it isn't due to the fact that he... that I didn't get along with Peter... it's because he is just a man. (Dieke, 53 yrs)

Dieke, here, makes a difference between the way she was raised, and the sexuality she came to consider as 'her own'. She was raised with the notion that, as a woman, you have to please your husband first during sex, something that she did not enjoy but felt required to do. When she got in touch with Mia, and was intimate with her for the first time, she discovered her own sexuality and intimacy, something that she had wished for but did not see room for in her marriage to Peter. When these women stepped out of heterosexual relations, in which the sexual role of women was mainly defined as opposed to men's, they entered a different space for sexual subjectivity in their contact with other women. Feminist theologian Grace Jantzen argues that women are present in heteronormative religious discourse mainly as objects for male sexuality, and not as subjects (Jantzen, 2007). Following her argument, it could be argued that, through sexual relations with other women, these women move out of the sphere in which they are defined as an object for male sexuality, and instead come to recognise themselves as autonomous subjects. No longer defined or restricted by expectations where women's sexuality was opposed to men's, together with an idea of sex for procreation, they experience sexuality more fully and autonomously. Interwoven with these changes in self-image and experience of sexuality, are the aforementioned changes in images of God. The gradual change of a strict God to a loving God is reflected in the idea of sexuality as a central, crucial aspect in their lives and bodies and as something women can and should enjoy, also when they have sex outside heterosexual marriages. Karlijn, for example, a student in her late twenties, feels that her personal relation to God gives her confidence to experiment with sexuality and an open relationship. Although Karlijn feels like this type of relationship is something that can be frowned upon by society, it is not a cause for conflict for herself as she feels supported by her faith. Nienke told me that, even though she asked herself how her sexual orientation stood in relation to religion, she never experienced that many problems toward God. And for Dieke, whose statement brought the initial questions to the fore in the introduction, sexuality is nowadays something she can enjoy and in which she can experience God

through her body; she can now, now that she is a lesbian, thank God when she comes. All of the women I spoke to experience a lot of space to feel pleasure and joy in their intimate relationships, something which stands in contrast with the social norms they were raised with. Here, faith is not something separate, but an essential and central element in their experience and practices of love and sex.

## Conclusions

A lot had to change in her life before Dieke could thank God during sex, and an in-depth analysis of these experiences points to many different ideas and experiences of subjectivity. Instead of two opposing spheres, religion and sexuality are interwoven and interconnected in Dieke's construction of subjectivity and practices of the self, which is exemplary for most women I spoke with. Feeling bodily pleasure during sex with women does not exclude this religious element of the self, but these are instead inseparable. For most of my interlocutors, feelings of sexual pleasure go hand in hand with a reclaiming of space within religion, both within their churches, as well as their own position vis-à-vis God. I have argued in this article that these reflections on sexually religious subjectivities are in contrast with the image of God that most of my interlocutors experienced in their childhood's church, where sexuality was presented foremost as functional, either reproductive or as a marital duty to the husband's pleasure in the case of Dieke. By analysing the experience of God and sex as material and embodied, I argue that faith, even in dominant institutions as the PCN, takes place beyond the church, through the body as both personal and relational. What I wish to argue for here, is that, in order to understand the narrative of Dieke and others, we need more tools than mainstream feminist theory has to offer, which is often based on a secular approach. Rather, religious studies combined with feminist thinking can bring us further to see the many ways in which 'religion' materialises in everyday practices, and how this is not merely an institutional site of oppression, but can be empowering for women as well. Such a project aims to destabilise the implied secularism in dominant feminist approaches by emphasising on the importance of religion as a materialising source of motivations and inspirations. In any case, experiences of 'religion' are very diverse, complicated, and intrinsically connected to gender and sexuality; not only as excluding or oppressive. Following the argument of Alexander that spirituality *matters*, the importance of accounting for all these layers of self-



reflections, bodily experience, and religious practices has been emphasised. These material strategies go beyond a mere notion of coping or otherwise dealing with conflict. This focus on personal experiences of faith and sex does not mean that these women are unaffected by norms and expectations, but that these women should be recognised as creative agents. Even though some women have struggled with these issues more than other, nowadays during our conversations, all women have a sense of balance connecting their sexual and religious subjectivity. Faith, as such, is sexual, as much as sexuality is shaped in relation to faith, and both are experienced together, through the body. Coming from all these negotiations, self-reflective stances toward church, and practices of lesbian love and sex, we can now understand what Dieke actually said when she stated: 'I can now thank God when I come'.

## Notes

1. All names are pseudonyms.
2. Instead of a relation of adoration, praise or blessing, the relation to God in mainstream Protestantism in the Netherlands is a relation of humility in which gratitude toward God reflects the most common use of religious language. Therefore, the word 'thanks' in this quote does not only reflect the dominant language of Dutch Protestantism, but implies a certain kind of relation to the divine in which God is imagined as both giving and merciful.
3. See for example the article of May 2014 in *HP de Tijd*, a Dutch popular journal, called 'Seks & Politiek: Het Nieuwe Niet-Neuken', in English 'Sex and Politics: The New Non-Screwing'. Here, Frans van Deijl (2014), together with sexologist Rik van Lunsen, describes the role of sex and politics in the ever more sex-negative Dutch society. This sex negativity, or new sexual abstention according to Lunsen and van Deijl, comes from a deep Calvinistic (Protestant) notion that finds sex sinful, with Christian norms as the foremost explanation.
4. A 2013 nation-wide research to 'sexual health among LGBT people' from the Rutgers group, shows a gendered bias concerning sexual pleasure, taken on by many LGBT organisations. The most noticeable results of this research were presented as, for men, '9 out of 10 [gay/bi] men enjoy sex a lot', while, for women, 'one in five bisexual women has a sexual problem'. Where 'two third of men masturbate several times a week', 'a third of lesbian women did not have sex in the past six months'. Presenting these results in this way mirrors the broader tendency to focus on female sexuality as connected to sexual problems, without acknowledging them as sexual agents, opposed to men for whom pleasure and lust tends to be the focus. See De Graaf, H. Bakker, B., & Wijzen, C., 2014.
5. An additional participant identified as transman and his data was not part of the analyses of this article.
6. Both the role of Dutch nationality and motherhood in relation to the PCN are discussed in the broader research thesis.

7. Orthodox churches in this article refer to more conservative, restrictive communities within the Protestant Church in the Netherlands, and have no relationship with, for example, Eastern Orthodox Christianity.
8. Preacher 4:12 'a chord of three strands is not quickly broken', or, in Dutch Prediker 4:12, 'Een koord dat uit drie strengen is gevlochten, is niet snel stuk te trekken'.
9. See chapter three of the research thesis, available upon request.

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Lieke Schrijvers (1991) has a bachelor's degree in cultural anthropology and recently graduated cum laude from the researchmaster in gender and ethnicity at Utrecht University – during which she spent an extensive period at the University of Toronto – with a thesis on religion and sexuality among non-heterosexual Protestant women in the Netherlands.

