

# Indecent Calvinists and Vanilla Secularism: Redefining Decency in The Netherlands

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## Abstract

Using Althaus-Reid's *Indecent Theology* as a methodology, this article contributes to reflections on the contextuality and physical dimension of Dutch theology: its relation to the Protestant white (mostly male) bodies of its practitioners and its support of and contributions to colonial power and colonial racializing discourse. We do this in a context of a 'return to decency' in political discourse in which 'our' Calvinist roots are evoked to construct a 'shared' past. Using two case studies, we analyse how the in/decent is constructed in the Netherlands. As secularism is more 'vanilla' and Calvinism more indecent than is usually assumed, engagement with *indecent texts* and untidy roots of Calvinism is needed to re-member both the violent character of Calvinist hermeneutics, as well as its potential for indecent readings.

## Keywords

Indecent theology, Dutch Calvinism, vanilla secularism, postcolonial, Islamophobia

Perhaps the lemon vendors with their skirts fluttering around their knees and their odours of sex and fruit, were just in time to stop us from saying goodbye to theology for good. In our theological studies the implicit norms were Western, male-dominated, and not critical of constructions of power, gender and ethnicity. In other words: the implicitly normative questions asked were the questions of a field of study that until recently has been dominated by mainly white male scholars for whom their privileges and position in a society shaped by its colonialism were not of primary concern. What bothered us, was that the theology we were taught was devoid of reflections on the contextuality of its

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authors and never addressed the physical dimension of their enterprise: its relation to their Protestant white male bodies. And, as impressive as their intellectual efforts might be, their scholarship thus not only disregarded their bodily and sexual questions, but also neglected the concerns of other (indecent) bodies: non-whites, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer (LGBTQ), Muslims, Catholics, women etc. Issues of gender, race, sexuality and religious diversity, however, are increasingly characterizing Dutch debates on ‘acceptable citizenship’ and belonging. There is a growing emphasis on what politicians refer to as the ‘regular Dutch person’, the ‘normal Dutch person’ or the ‘hard-working Dutch person’. For the elections in March 2017 the People’s Party for Freedom and Democracy (VVD) used the slogan “Act. Normal” (*Normaal. Doen*). What is left unsaid and therefore only implicitly present in these political discourses of the normal, is the question of who is then the exemplary not-normal person whose belonging is suspect. While there are several individuals or groups who qualify for this label (Eastern European immigrants, ‘leftist’ or ‘elitist’ persons from urban areas, or in general those who are in favour of the European Union), the most obvious not-normal persons in the Netherlands are currently believed by many to be Muslims. Historically in the discourse of the evidently nationalist and right-wing Party for Freedom (*Partij voor de Vrijheid*), led by Geert Wilders, Islam is framed as a self-evident threat to the Dutch welfare state, freedom of speech and the emancipation of sexual minorities and women. In the run up to the elections of 15 March 2017, also parties which until recently had been less pronounced in their nationalist ideologies would echo this perspective on Islam in Dutch society. Very often, the political discourse on a ‘return to the standards and values of decency (*fatsoen*)’ are supported by an appeal to the presumed ‘Judeo-Christian roots’ of present-day Dutch culture. ‘Our’ Calvinist roots are evoked to conjure a past in which ‘we’ shared a no-nonsense attitude of hard work and modesty. Moreover, in the ‘Carré-debate’ between eight party leaders on 5 March of that same year, Christian Democrat leader Sybrand van Haersma Buma stated that ‘for thousands of years’ Christian thinking had been the source of equality in the Netherlands. It is in the context of this ‘return to decency’ in combination with a melancholy longing for presumed Christian values and beliefs that we realized that theology, if it wants to contribute to these debates in a meaningful and critical way, will need to address the bodily dimension of human experience and appeals to the sacred.

Reading Marcella Althaus-Reid in this context not only felt as if someone opened a window, rather, it became clear that the whole house, including its foundation, was in need of rebuilding. In *Indecent Theology*, Althaus-Reid takes as her starting position the observation that:

every theology implies a conscious or unconscious sexual and political praxis, based on reflections and actions developed from certain accepted codifications. These are theo/social codifications which configure epistemologies, visions of life and the mystical projections which relate human experience to the sacred (2000: 4).

A theology that follows these ‘accepted codes’ to Althaus-Reid is a ‘Vanilla Theology’ that sticks to the ‘accepted scripts’ of gender and sexuality (2000: 52). *Indecent Theology*, then,

is a theology which problematizes and undresses the mythical layers of multiple oppression in Latin America, a theology which, finding its point of departure at the crossroads of Liberation Theology and Queer Thinking, will reflect on economic and theological oppression with passion and imprudence. An Indecent Theology will question the traditional Latin American field of decency and order as it permeates and supports the multiple (ecclesiological, theological, political and amatory) structures of life in my country, Argentina, and my continent (2000: 2).

To Althaus-Reid there is no neutral, disembodied theology, although Christian theology, including Liberation Theology to which she relates most explicitly, has often presented itself as such. Liberation Theology has taken seriously the needs of the poor and addressed the inequalities that have contributed to their marginalized position, but in the process 'the poor' have become 'the deserving and asexual poor' (2000: 30). Althaus-Reid instead argues for an 'indecenting' of theology: a reevaluation of the embodied, everyday life sexual experiences and stories that have been written out of Christian dogmatics.

Our own backgrounds and national context differ fundamentally from Althaus-Reid's, and in order to 'transfer' indecent theology to The Netherlands, as is our aim in this article, we will first account for these differences. Althaus-Reid was raised in the 'Global South', writing from a Roman Catholic perspective in a former colony. We were raised and educated in the 'Provincial North'. Our context is religiously and culturally shaped by (dominant) Calvinism, the Protestant-Catholic struggle, and the presently contested position of Islam. Moreover, we as white scholars and Calvinists live and work in the context of a former colonizer (of Indonesia, Surinam, the Dutch Antilles, and New Guinea, among other countries and regions) which based its practices on a colonial racializing discourse which was moreover (partly) supported by Protestant theology. Finally, the recent 'return to decency' in political discourse sits uneasy with the perhaps equally dominant discourse of liberal secularism, which is seen as a product of the sexual revolution and is expressed in mass events like the Amsterdam Canal Parade and emancipatory legislation like same-sex marriage. As such, liberal secularism is both Calvinism's and Islam's cultural mirror image of presumed autonomy and emancipation.

In this article we apply Althaus-Reid's *Indecent Theology* as a methodological approach in order to understand how the lines between the decent and the indecent are drawn in the Netherlands today. This means we are not merely exploring the construction of the 'normal', but more specifically how appeals to sexuality, gender and the sacred figure in cultural demarcations of the 'normal'. Our argument is, first, that secularism as a cultural practice, though often perceived as the indecent follow-up of prudish Calvinism, is much more vanilla than its supporters may want to acknowledge. Second, that Calvinism, often framed in opposition to 'naughty' secularism, is much more indecent than assumed when its untidy roots and messy archives are recognized. Third, that these untidy roots and messy archives must be interpreted in conjunction with Calvinism's entanglement with colonial projects, including the sexualization and 'indecenting' of colonial and Muslim subjects. Fourth, that in present-day nationalistic discourses Islam is 'caught in the middle' between the dominant framings of the secular and the Dutch Calvinist heritage, alternately being understood as Dutch culture's too decent or not decent enough Other. Finally, we will argue that in the Dutch context, rather than engaging in a project that necessarily aims at the 'indecenting' of theology and society, we

need a critical perspective on how the decent and the indecent are valued in particular time frames and contexts in the first place, who has the power to define where the lines between the decent and the indecent are drawn, and what the effects of such categorizations are for those who are rendered (in)decent.

In this article we address first the complicated ways in which secularism, Calvinism, Roman Catholicism and Islam are entangled in contemporary public debates in the Netherlands. We will then discuss two case studies where we further explore the workings of the (in)decent. Realizing that '[t]heology requires pleasure which comes from the provoking side of sharing our ideas, in the recognition of the other and also in points of identification from our sexual storytelling' (Althaus-Reid, 2000: 75) our case studies are taken from everyday lived and embodied experience. The first case study discusses the (in)decency of Muslim women's bodies. The second case study discusses the indecency of Bible reading practises at Calvinist kitchen tables. We will then draw some conclusions on what can be gained by applying Marcella Althaus-Reid's concept of indecent theology in the context of the Netherlands.

## **Secularism vis-à-vis Christianity, Islam, and Colonialism**

As stated above, a familiar trope about Dutch society is that of a front-runner of indecency, a paradise of gender emancipation, a place where explicit sexuality flourishes on television, in films, in literature and on the streets. The self-understanding of many Dutch as being particularly tolerant of sexual diversity is strongly tied to the narrative of secularization. In this narrative it was the emptying out of the churches that filled the boats of Canal Parade; the loss of authority of pastors and priests that made way for the gay TV host, the forgetting of Psalms that made possible the singing along with the Eurovision Song Contest. These images are misleading, however, in their representation of the liberatory effects of the sexual revolution, which has not changed the fact that heterosexuality and monogamy have remained the norm in the Netherlands (Buijs et al., 2014). Moreover, LGBT emancipation has been possible mostly in a context of whiteness and only when gays and lesbians follow the patterns of the 'normal', that is, when they copy heterosexual lifestyles as much as possible (Hekma and Duyvendak, 2011: 629). This led to a 'heterosexualisation' of homosexuality, thwarting the acceptance and social safety of more 'queer' (e.g. non-monogamous, gender non-binary and/or racialized) others. Processes of embracing the indecent, then, always seem to have a backlash: while the previously 'suppressed' indecent becomes mainstreamed and therefore decent, new unwanted indecent and too decent Others emerge. In this section we discuss two examples of secularism's 'new Others'.

The first example is that of 'Backward Christians'. Debates on homosexuality in general and the introduction of same-sex marriage in particular provide a good starting point for exploring the othering of conservative Christians. When the Netherlands introduced same-sex marriage in 2001, many Dutch took pride in the fact that 'we' were the first country to adopt gender neutral marriage legislation. To the surprise of many foreign journalists the first 'gay marriage' did not even seem to be such a shocking event and did not lead to massive protest marches in the same way the issue of same-sex marriage would, in later years, do in countries like France and Spain. In the aftermath of the

introduction of same-sex marriage, however, there was a lingering debate on the position of marriage registrars who did not want to conduct same-sex marriages at the city hall. As Marco Derks (2016; Derks, 2017) has argued, though the number of objecting registrars was relatively low, and various reasons for objections could be imagined besides biblical, Christian or even religious ones, the refusal to conduct same-sex marriages would soon be framed as a ‘social issue’ exemplary for what was generally understood as the necessarily homophobic attitude of Calvinist Christians. Through this framing of the backward Calvinist spoilsport a tolerant, emancipatory secular ‘we’ emerged that suggested that same-sex marriage advocacy had historically been a central part of Dutch culture instead of being a recent phenomenon. The secular, liberal ‘we’ is not only framed vis-à-vis domestic Calvinists, but also in opposition to Roman Catholic Others, who were historically the Christian minority in the Netherlands (in terms of representation rather than actual numbers) and who in public debate are personified by the Pope. As Mariecke van den Berg and Zlatiborka Popov Momčinović (2015) have observed in similar debates in secularized Sweden, public statements on homosexuality by Pope Benedict in particular were often understood as exemplary of the backwardness of the Roman Catholic Church. Participants in the public debate moreover worried about believers in ‘third world countries’ in Africa and Latin America who might not be educated enough to resist buying into Benedict’s heteronormative rhetoric. Francis, on the other hand, after his famous ‘interview on the plane’ on the topic of homosexuality (‘who am I to judge?’) is increasingly becoming a Pope who could perhaps be ‘one of us’. These debates show how in the context of the Netherlands the historical ‘indecent Others’ (gay and lesbian citizens) are now ‘made decent’, while acceptance of sexual diversity has become a ‘litmus test’ for ‘tolerance’ (Van den Berg et al., 2014, see also Mepschen et al., 2010; Dudink, 2011). It appears that this shift does not only imply a change in conceptions of ‘good’ citizenship, but also ‘decent’ citizenship: in the cultural ideal of being Dutch, a person is to have a specific relation to sexuality (that is, approving of regulated and public forms of homosexuality) and to the sacred (which can be evoked in public debate only insofar as it is not in variance with the acceptance of sexual diversity).

Whereas Protestant (and sometimes Roman Catholic) orthodox<sup>1</sup> religion is often rendered the oppositional Other of Secularism, it is definitely not secularism’s primary Other, and there are important differences between the ‘othering’ of Christians in the Bible Belt, and the ‘second Other’ discussed here: Dutch Muslims. While for example the ‘decent’ clothing of Christian women is rendered inappropriate by advocates of secularism – as these women supposedly do not fully embrace their sexual female bodies – the ‘decent’ clothing of Muslim women on the other hand is framed as inappropriate markers of the migrated, non-integrated body which poses a threat to security. In other words, the in/decentcy of Dutch Muslims is questioned in terms of Europeaness, and Dutchness: they are considered ‘allochtonous’ (meaning: from another soil), whereas the ‘autochtony’ (from this soil), and thus whiteness/Dutchness, of Christians in the Bible

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1. In this article, the term ‘orthodox’ is used as it is generally understood in the Dutch language, namely as a denominator of conservative religion (it therefore does not refer to Eastern Orthodox traditions).

Belt is never questioned. Consequently, in the context of this analysis it is important to underline that European secularism's primary indecent other has always been its colonial subjects, including its Muslim gendered and sexualized 'other' (Mahmood, 2009; Asad, 2003; Sayyid, 2015). In terms of nineteenth century Orientalism, the 'Orient', the Near East as a place of Christian origin, functioned as a mirror image against which Western Europe could construct its own identity as modern and secular, over and against Muslim/Arab subjects who would never be, or were always in the process of becoming modern and secular (Said, 1979; Librett, 2014). This process was intimately tied to the construction of (religious/racial) hierarchies within Europe, in which 'the Jewish question' – the question whether Jews could become national citizens – was articulated in colonial and racial terms too, including its sexualized and gendered fantasies (Brunotte et al., 2015; Kalmar and Penslar, 2005; Heschel, 1998). Consequently, whereas European Christianity, most particularly Liberal Protestantism, was regarded the precondition for secularism's and modernity's progress, Judaism in particular, but also Catholicism, and to some extent orthodox Protestantism, were seen as modernity's antithesis or obstruction (Jung, 2011). Importantly, these hierarchies were asymmetrical: whereas discourses around the Jewish question mirrored colonial phantasies, Catholicism and orthodox Calvinism were never discussed in terms of being 'outside' of Europe, modernity or the secular.

In the context of this article it is important to underline how the in/decenting of Muslims and orthodox Christians in the Netherlands vis-à-vis the secular must be understood in its (post)colonial context: while Muslimness is problematized in terms of national security and 'integration', this dimension of racialization is absent in the way in which orthodox Calvinists are 'othered'. In addition, many orthodox Christians today reproduce Islamophobic discourses and are in support of political actions limiting the freedoms of Muslims and migrants. It is important to analyse these attitudes not in isolation, but rather as part of a much longer history of dis/continuities of Calvinism's investment in colonial and racial politics. This double bind implicates orthodox Calvinists on the one hand as the 'indecent other' of secularism, while on the other hand historically, Calvinist traditions have informed race ideologies of Apartheid in South Africa and colonial politics of 'the Dutch East Indies', one of the biggest Muslim majority countries. Secularists, on the other hand, have vanillified the past, by relegating the negative forces of history to the side of religion, thereby disregarding state violence, sexism, racism and intolerance. And while 'Judaism' in nineteenth century discourses was shorthand for everything detestable in the Roman Catholic church, referred to as the 'Judeo-Christian', nowadays (liberal) Judaism has been included in the self-conception of Western identity, forming the basis of a now positively coined 'Judeo-Christian civilization'. Islam on the other hand, is still considered to be the epitome of primitive religion and antithesis of the secular (Slabodsky, 2014; Topolski, 2016).

For our discussion on (in)decenting Calvinist traditions, it is important to take into account that while Calvinism is considered inappropriate in the face of secularist cultural practices, Calvinists and Secularists share a history of anti-Muslim (and anti-Jewish) attitudes. In order to turn these tables, we will first explore how and why Althaus-Reid's 'indecent' lemon vendors could best be compared with the 'decent' clothing of Muslim women in the Netherlands today, and second, we will explore the possibilities of engaging indecently with biblical texts in this Secularist and Islamophobic context.

## (Im)possible Female Bodies

In the Spring of 2015, Stegeman and Westerduin co-organized an event titled: 'The Rebel: Islam and Resistance' which was held at De Nieuwe Liefde [The New Love] a debating centre. The central question during the event was how religion in general and Islam in particular can function as a source for religious rebellion and resistance against racism and sexism. In a context in which Islam is mostly paired with oppression of women, violence, and injustice, this seemed a rather 'indecent' framing of the matter. One of the speakers, the Somali Dutch legal scholar Nawal Mustafa, quoted some of the comments made on the event's Facebook page.

"Religion as a source for inspiration for civil rights movement against racism and sexism. Complete nonsense, but let's give it platform".

"Horrible".

"What an absurd nonsense, go ask what the position of black women in a Muslim country such as Morocco is and ask the question to what extent Islam positively changed something there".

"Really? Complete madness".

These comments were mostly made by white men, and illustrated clearly the complicated bind Mustafa as a black Muslim woman finds herself in. In her words: 'Seemingly they [white men] know what it is to be a black female Muslim. I wonder who gets to decide what inspires me? Me or white men who apparently know my religion better than I do? Who looks down upon me? I wondered whatever happened to agency?' Ironically, while Mustafa sought to advocate gender, sexual, and racial equality, white men prohibited her from doing so. Throughout her talk, Mustafa explained this strange paradox by referring to the framing of Muslims in the Dutch media.

Muslims in the media are portrayed as either the barbaric, not integrated other, or as the assimilated role model whose similarities with the white majority is astonishing, or as the former Muslim, who is here to enlighten us and to warn us against the evils of Islam. It might surprise you, but neither of the three aforementioned groups/stereotypes represent me.

In sum, the three options available to Dutch Muslims are thus: being a potentially dangerous Muslim that has yet to be tamed, a frustrated ex-Muslim who dresses accordingly, or an assimilated (liberal) Muslim, who comforts her white fellow countrymen and countrywomen. By refusing these limited choices; by refusing to inhabit the space of an 'assimilated' or a 'progressive' Muslim; by refusing to apologize for terrorism when asked; by addressing racism and sexism against black Muslim Women, instead of 'the dangers of Islam', Mustafa found herself in an unacceptable, and 'indecent' position. Consequently, while in the Dutch context 'Muslimness' of women, is often framed and problematized in terms of decency (being 'too decent', not inhabiting the proper visibility and sexuality), from the perspective of Althaus-Reid's concept of 'indecentness' (concerned with colonized indecent bodies), this event illustrates how 'in/decency' in

the Dutch context is reversed, rendering the too decent racialized Muslim women 'indecent'.

In addition to this in/decency reversal the event illustrates how the orthodox-liberalism binary might be interpreted in the face of in/decency. For the audience it seemed especially difficult to resist the pairing of Islamic feminism with Liberalism: questions were being asked whether Mustafa did not in any way need Western liberal feminism. She replied that for her, Western Feminism was problematic because of its racial and cultural hierarchies: her struggle was more informed by and grounded in Womanist Movements of black women. More importantly, Mustafa argued that the opposition between orthodox and liberal/progressive Islam is a false one and often politically exploited: progressive Islam is not necessarily good for women, and orthodox or pious Muslims are not necessarily anti-feminists. This argument is of particular interest for us because on the one hand we ask ourselves how we as white Calvinist women can indecent and pervert our own traditions, in a context in which especially non-white Muslim bodies are considered to be indecent, while on the other hand, we find common ground in Mustafa's resistance against the hierarchical labels of liberal and progressive traditions versus orthodox and pious ones. Consequently, while our position as white Calvinists differs greatly vis-à-vis racialized Muslim women, we might find common ground in the disruption of hierarchical labels such as liberal and accepted religious practices and discourses, versus orthodox and unaccepted ones. The challenge for us as Calvinists however, is to re-engage with the indecent, messy archives of Calvinism, without reproducing colonial hierarchies, and acknowledge Calvinism itself has been entangled with the indecenting of its colonial others, including Muslims.

## **Indecenting Our Own Traditions: Calvinist Kitchen Tables**

The position and influence of the Dutch Calvinist tradition on society is complex: religion is largely seen as irrelevant, with Dutch society turning a blind eye to the continuing influence of Christian and theological ideas on society. For instance, Calvinist Christianity's role in colonial and racializing discourses and practices is largely absent from the current debate on the Dutch colonial past. This obscures how the racialization of Muslims is dependent on theological ideas. Contemporary orthodox Calvinist communities are moreover placed in complex positions with respect to (in)decency. Their perceived surplus of decency renders them indecent in the public eye: their perspective on and praxis of sexuality is too prudent and restrictive. They are regarded as overly decent and therefore indecent because of their supposed anti-Lesbian, Gay, Transgender, Bisexual, Questioning, and Intersex (LGTBQI) attitude and in general because of their un-Enlightened positions in a country that prides itself on being tolerant. Liberal Protestantism, the (post)modern product of and response to Dutch Calvinism and as such its 'decent great-grandchild', on the contrary, hardly disturbs or challenges vanilla-secularism's discourse on bodies and sexualities. Unlike orthodox Calvinism, it does not focus on sexual norms. It is tolerant, politically correct and intellectual. Liberal Protestantism may be even less aware of the colonial aspects of its heritage.

Here we aim to rediscover the potential for 'indecentification' present in our traditions, while acknowledging its problematic aspects. Specifically, we want to engage with



Dutch orthodox Calvinist Protestantism, characterized on the one hand by its staunch dogmatic views and restrictive sexual ethics, but on the other hand by its lively engagement with the traditions of the Old Testament, including those narratives that are disturbing from a vanilla-theological and vanilla-secular perspective. We would like to redefine orthodoxy as a way of taking sources and traditions seriously, including complex and problematic aspects. This would be an orthodoxy capable of taking seriously the paradoxes and messiness of biblical literature and the paradoxes and problematic aspects of Calvinist tradition. In this section, we attempt to re-shuffle what is considered 'liberal' and what is considered 'orthodox'. As it turns out, the liberal-orthodox binary mirrors the decent-indecent binary.

My<sup>2</sup> starting point is my grandparents' kitchen table. The setting is a farm in a small hamlet in Salland, in the Eastern (rural) part of the Netherlands. The language spoken is a German-Dutch dialect – we find ourselves close to the German border. My mother was born on this farm. The kitchen is where daily life takes place. It is a few steps away from the stable; there is always a hint of the strong odour of cows. Next to the kitchen is a 'beautiful room': it is the decent space, with nice furniture, used on special occasions and for special guests only. The kitchen is a little less decent, it is a more open, smelly, messy space. People stopping by simply yell 'volk!' in the hallway and open the kitchen door, after taking off their clogs. Etiquette is very simple: there is no need for 'how do you do' or other pseudo-social pleasantries.

After supper – eaten around noon – the Bible is opened. This is common practice in most Calvinist families. The Bible is read in its entirety, systematically, chapter by chapter, verse by verse, including the difficult, boring and indecent passages. Can we say these sessions at my grandparents' kitchen table, and Calvinist kitchen tables in general, provided at least some space for the indecent? Althaus-Reid writes that 'every discourse of religious and political knowledge hides under its skirts suppressed knowledge in exile, which is marginal and indirect speech'. In a sense, reading from the biblical books, is a form of 'indirect speech', full of 'religious and political counter symbols and mythological contradictions' that challenge and enrich Calvinism. That is what Indecent Theology is made of, Althaus-Reid asserts:

these mythological contradictums, and a transgression which is a regression, a going backwards to some struggle or primary resistance to the discourses of religious power, not to a beginning of sexual resistance fixed in time, but to the several openings which were suppressed or calmed down in the process of the hegemonisation of meaning (2000: 20).

Dutch Calvinism is rather unique within Christianity in its active engagement with the Old Testament, or Tenach. The movement of the Reformation transformed not only the notion of laity, but also the relation between the faithful and Scriptures and the approach of scripture. This led to a more linear, 'historical' practice of reading that gave space for an appropriation of the text as 'our' book (Smith, 2014). Luther's linear interpretation produced one view on history, with European Christians in the centre, and Jews, Muslims and Catholics as the antagonists. Reformation coincided with and stimulated the

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2. Stegeman's perspective.

formation of nation states and national identity (Cavanaugh, 2009). In European Christian imagination the Israelites became a nation, and European nations like the Dutch identified with them. Calvinist theologians understood the Netherlands as a Christian nation. In this imagery, the Old Testament especially was important: the Netherlands was the 'new Canaan' (Duke and Tamse, 1981: 125).

This changed position of the Bible cannot be separated from colonial practices: European Christians identified as the chosen people. In Calvinism especially, the Hebrew Bible was held in high regard. In the tradition in which our parents grew up, a focus on books and the Book certainly had an emancipatory effect. The Book had to be read, discussed, understood – this was vital for salvation. This attitude produced generations of readers and intellectuals, reading the Bible and discussing these texts and their implications on Sunday evenings in youth clubs. An aspect of orthodoxy in our tradition is this intimate engagement with the texts. As a result of strict sexual ethics, there were not many other books available for reading that contained passages as disturbing and indecent as the Bible. This results in the slightly paradoxical situation that in Dutch Calvinism, with its strict authority and sexual ethics, the Bible itself, a possible source of rebellion and indecency, was continually read and reread. The Calvinist Bible as a tool and source of colonial ideology, was not absent from the kitchen table: I remember casual but implicitly racist remarks on black people at the same kitchen table. Although 'whiteness' was not a word known to my grandparents, they did understand themselves as part of the decent, civilized, Christian people.

The question is: is this orthodox Calvinist reading ritual capable of introducing the odours of indecent theology in a Calvinist kitchen already smelling slightly of dung? Is it a dead practice, or does it have the power to destabilize and undress? Maybe the listeners are tired after a morning of hard work and the heavy food made them drowsy. More importantly, the force of dogma and colonial hermeneutics obscures the destabilizing power of the very narratives that shape it and that it lives off. Can the self-understanding of Calvinists be indecentized by its Others – those who became 'semites', 'black' and represent the very binaries and categories enforced and contributed to?

What if, during the after-supper reading session, the kitchen door opened, and Tamar joined the table, as the first Semite and the first brown woman to sit at that round table. In this rural setting Tamar might have headed to the farm right after her encounter with Judah, still smelling of sex. And what if Ham joined the table, right in the middle of the reading of Genesis 9? Ham, if indeed this Ham would be as black as he became in the Calvinist imagination, might have been the first black person at that table. Noah's sons Sem, Ham and Japhet were figures that positioned my grandparents in the grand Calvinist narrative of salvation. The story of Sem, Ham and Japhet established a colonial, racialized hierarchy with the descendants of Japhet (Europeans) at the top, followed by the descendants of Sem (Semites) and, at the bottom of the hierarchy, the descendants of Ham (black people). This hierarchy is based on a reading of Gen. 9: 20–27 where the descendants of Ham are cursed. The Dutch theologian, politician and founder of my grandparent's specific Calvinist denomination Abraham Kuyper for instance wrote that the sons of Ham never aimed for a 'hogere levensbezieling' (a higher purpose in life). Indeed, Kuyper viewed black people as a lower form of life (Saleminck and Van Dijk, 1989: 11). Let us say Hagar too joined this kitchen table. For this occasion she would accept her Calvinist role

as an 'Ishmaelite' woman and wear the hijab. In the colonial hierarchy, Hagar symbolizes the Semite. It might be that her female presence was easier to digest than Tamar's smelly sexual presence. However, the two women might understand they both represent the other at this table and unite their destabilizing forces. Hagar comes first and asks why while she was present, active, strong in the story, she became a submissive Other. Hagar embodies the complex subversiveness of biblical texts: the story could have been so much more simple: a nameless woman, enslaved, gave birth to a son, and then had to disappear. But Hagar has a name. Hagar is a dangerous memory, a provocation of the 'official story' (Sherwood, 2014). Tamar's mere presence makes everyone uncomfortable, causing a clash between staunch ethics, the alienating schematism of salvation history and the messiness of real life. In the more practical realm of life on a farm, everybody knew stories about maidservants marrying a son of the family after conceiving a child. To our grandparents, the grand scheme of Calvinist salvation history must have felt almost as intimate as their own family history. In this scheme, Tamar's inventive trick was necessary to 'produce' Jesus further along the line. But in the rather clear-cut schemes of normative Calvinist ethics, Tamar is also a fallen woman: she had sex outside of wedlock, on her initiative. And here she is, smelling of sex, representing the sexual subversiveness that disturbs. Tamar embodies 'the disorderly core of abnormal sexual narratives where virgins give birth and male trinities may signify the incoherence of one male definition only, in the tension between patriarchal identity and difference'. She uncovers the indecency that was always there on the table, but was not able to destabilize Calvinism. This undressing is a 'starting point for gross indecency in theology' (Althaus-Reid, 2000: 18), as is Hagar's indecently decent hijab: she looks a lot like my grandmother when she would go to the village wearing a veil.

We argue that a different, in fact more 'original' understanding of Calvinist orthodoxy allows for a more unruly and vital interaction with Scriptures. It was only as a response to the Enlightenment-approach of religion that – once again – the position of the biblical texts changed. It now had to be factual, precise, clean. The distinction between liberal and orthodox Christianity is based not for a small degree on this distinction. Such 'enlightened' expectations of the text leads to trouble: the text is far more violent, irrational and indecent than liberal readers would hope for. Today, (Calvinist) Protestantism is decentized as a source of 'national identity'. Even when 'overly decent' orthodox Calvinist are othered, the hierarchies are still intact: the Calvinists' 'Dutchness' is never doubted, they are never told to 'go back to where they came from'. A Calvinism that recognizes its indecent archives and unsettling potential can resist this decentizing and criticize these hierarchies. It is in this sense that we want to reclaim Calvinist orthodoxy. It is a Calvinist orthodoxy that explicitly includes not only all texts but also all of our narratives and approaches the texts with a decolonial hermeneutics of suspicion. In short: we both reclaim and reshape the Calvinist kitchen table as a space of indecency.

## **Conclusion**

In this article we have explored how in present-day Dutch society the lines between the decent and the indecent are being drawn. In doing so we aimed at disentangling the complicated ways in which Calvinism, secularism and Islam are connected in the Dutch

discourse of the ‘return to the decent’. Secularism seems to have turned the tables of decency and indecency: Calvinist Protestantism, once the decent starting point for Dutch social structures, became the indecent Other. While secularism is continually vanillifying its own legacy and present of violence, sexism and intolerance, it appears to attribute everything it considers inappropriate – again: violence, sexism and intolerance – to its Christian/Catholic past, or its Muslim Other. At the same time, contemporary orthodox Calvinism constructs its own secular-religious binary by marking its own traditions as decent and secularism and Islam as indecent. We have analysed these relations against the background of Calvinism’s and secularism’s investment in indecenting and sexualizing its colonial Others, including Muslim subjects.

Due to secularism’s incorporation of particular ‘indecent’ persons and practices, resulting in the creation of renewed unacceptable others, we argued that instead of engaging in a project that necessarily aims at the ‘indecenting’ of theology and society, it would be more productive to develop a critical perspective on how the lines between the decent and the indecent are being drawn. We have analysed how in/decenting in Dutch attitudes and discourses on Islam is reversed, rendering Muslim women, for example, too decent, and discussed the relation between this in/decenting to the hierarchical ordering of orthodox and liberal religious practices. We explored ways in which to engage with our own ‘orthodox’ Calvinist tradition to disrupt these hierarchical relations. In doing so, the challenge for us as Calvinists was to re-engage with the indecent, messy archives of orthodox Calvinism, without reproducing its colonial and racial hierarchies. We took the Calvinist kitchen table with its smells of food, excrement and lively engagement with the texts of the Old Testament as a starting point for an exploration of the possibility of reading our Calvinist tradition against its own history of racism and dogmatism via the figures of Ham, Tamar and Hagar. Instead of Enlightenment’s clean approach to Scripture, repressing its violent and indecent archive, we have argued that engaging with these indecent texts might help us to re-member both the violent character of Calvinist hermeneutics, as well as its potential for indecent readings.

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