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Transition and Authority

Transwomen and Religious Leadership in the Netherlands

Lieke L. Schrijvers
Utrecht University
l.l.schrijvers@uu.nl

Abstract

The article presents two case studies of two women who were confronted with a loss of religious authority as they were asked to resign from their lay leading positions after their coming-out as transwomen in the Roman Catholic Church and the Protestant Church in the Netherlands. By focusing on these stories, this article provides further insight into queer lives in Europe starting from the intersections of gender, sexuality and religion. The cases show how the position of transwomen is negotiated by both religious structures as well as by transwomen themselves. The analysis focuses particularly on the interactions between the women and their community and church authorities and examines the use of gender/sexuality terminology, the role of the body, and the individualization of faith. This article brings together insights from religious studies, gender, trans* and queer studies, which allows for a multi-layered understanding of trans* and religion in a European context.

Keywords

transgender – religious authority – Christianity – the Netherlands – women in religion

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> I've been humiliated in every possible way, but not in my faith. My faith is something else than the Catholic Church. One is the institute, and the other is warmth and community.
>
> RHIANNA GRALIKE[1]

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As interdisciplinary researchers in the field of religion and gender studies, we should acknowledge transgender experiences through an intersectional perspective. However, one of the elements that is often obscured in research about trans* experiences[2] is religion, even though this is an important source in many people's lives worldwide. In this article, I argue for an inclusion of religion as a field of analysis in trans*studies in a way that recognizes both potential institutional obstacles as well as the agency of religious trans*people. In July 2015, Rhianna Gralike was asked to resign from her position as treasurer of a Roman-Catholic parish in a small town in the Netherlands. The priest of Rhianna's parish was urged by Dutch Cardinal Wim Eijk, archbishop of Utrecht, to ask for her resignation. Since the Catholic church operates within a clear hierarchical structure, Rhianna's priest followed the cardinal's request. The reason for this demand was Rhianna's open identification as a transgender woman, which according to Cardinal Eijk made her unfit for a place in the church administration. Rhianna refused to resign and her story was taken up by Dutch media as a case of transphobic discrimination from the Roman-Catholic Church.

One year earlier, during Spring 2014, I interviewed Monique as part of a broader research project[3] (Schrijvers 2015). Monique identifies as transgender

1 All quotations have been translated from Dutch by myself. Excerpt from a phone interview between Rhianna and me in Dec. 2018.

2 The trans* asterisk signifies an inclusive approach to people with a non-normative (or *cis*) gender identity. This means that trans* includes transgender, -queer, -sexual, -men, -women, non-binary people and is open ended. The use of this asterisk has not been undisputed, but is common among scholars within trans*theory such as Susan Stryker and Jack Halberstam, and important journals of trans*studies. Therefore I will use trans with an asterisk when writing about broader discussions in media and politics. When referring to Monique or Rhianna's self-identification, I will stay as close as possible to their own terminology, translated to English. For further information about the use of the asterisk, see: Garvin 2019, Steinmetz 2018.

3 Monique is a pseudonym to ensure her anonymity as requested. Because of the public avail-

woman too, and is a member of a reformed congregation in the Protestant Church in the Netherlands (PCN). She was part of the church lay leadership in the function of deacon when she decided to continue her life as a woman. Similar to Rhianna, Monique was asked to resign from this position because she identified as a trans woman. Not directly because she was transgender, but because her church did not allow women in positions of authority. Being fully recognized as a woman, Monique's role in church changed. For both Rhianna and Monique, their identification as trans women directly influenced their position and authority in their religious institutions as their leading position in the church administration was questioned. At the same time, neither women express a loss of personal faith, which continues to be an important element in their daily lives. Both Monique and Rhianna were active in the lay leadership of their church, rather than the more strictly regulated ordained leadership. This enables some flexibility to renegotiate their position in church, which would most likely not be possible in a position of clergy leadership. Whereas Rhianna chose to fight the decision partly via the media, Monique did not. In this article, these two stories are the starting point to think through the complicated interactions of religion, transgender experiences and authority structures against the background of secularization processes in the Netherlands. This focus on transgender people in relation to religious leadership allows for an in-depth understanding of the ways in which gender and embodiment function within mainstream, religious institutions such as PCN churches in the Netherlands.

1 Secularization and Transgender Emancipation in the Netherlands

The Netherlands is a nation-state that often presents itself as LGBT-positive,[4] and has many times been profiled as a nation where gay rights are protected. Issues of 'gay tolerance', gender equality and sexual diversity have come to function as central tropes around which Dutch national identity is shaped.

ability of her story, which is also part of the research material, the name Rhianna has not been changed. I have her permission to use her real name as she finds it important for her story to be told.

4 In the last decade, the Dutch translation of LGBT, LHBT, has come to replace to previous *holebi* in social movements and politics. Similar to the English term, *LHBT* refers to lesbian, homosexual (gay), bisexual and transgender. *Holebi*, a term used in the 1990s in the Netherlands and Flanders is an abbreviation for homosexual, lesbian and bisexual, and thus excludes transgender people. In some social movements *queer* is added (*LHBTQ*), but this is not implemented in general public discourse and politics, which is why I will continue to use LGBT when referring to Dutch policies. (see also van den Berg 2017).

The Netherlands' opening up of civil marriage to include same-sex couples in 2001 (the first country worldwide) is often celebrated as a central milestone in the acceptance and emancipation of LGBTs. In the Netherlands this 'gay marriage', as it is commonly called, is one of the most important markers by which the country has come to be regarded as LGBT-friendly and sexually liberated in public and political discourse (Balkenhol 2016; Buijs 2011; Derks 2018). Arguably, a downside of the emphasis on marriage equality is that marriage equality becomes considered an endpoint for political struggles since it supposedly grants complete legal equality between couples. Trans* rights and inclusion have not been up the forefront until recently, as the LGBT movement does not always benefit trans* people due to a continuing focus on rights for same-sex relationships (van den Berg 2017). Renowned Dutch scholar Gert Hekma pointed in 2011 to a shift in the terrain of the struggle for LGBT movements, moving from the legal field to a focus on the social acceptance of homosexuality and gender diversity (Hekma 2011). Since 2001, many projects and policies have been instigated that aim at increasing the acceptance of people who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or queer.[5] One of the most important political initiatives has been the Pink Agreement (*roze stembusakkoord*) which was signed by all Dutch political parties—except for the Christian ones—just prior to the elections of the House of Representatives in 2012. This agreement consisted of five goals concerning LGBT rights that the signing parties together would fulfill. One of the five aims was to make it easier for transgender people to change their sex-status in legal documents.[6] The now dubbed 'transgenderlaw' was instigated in 2013 and since then Dutch citizens are allowed to change their sex in official documents on the basis of a letter from an expert, psychologist or doctor (COC Nederland 2013). Until then transgender people had to undergo sterilization and sex change operations, and this had to be approved in court. This was one of the first instances when transgender rights had been explicitly foregrounded in sexual and gender emancipatory politics. Although these steps have paved the way for more

5 Examples are the Gay/Straight Alliance project (GSA): www.gsanetwerk.nl/, several working groups of the COC, which is the largest LGBT organization of the country: www.coc.nl/; and the International Day Against Homophobia, Transphobia and Biphobia (IDAHOT) in the Netherlands: http://idahot.nl/.

6 The other five goals were: to end the possibility for civil servants to refuse to wed a same-sex couple; to make education about homosexuality obligatory in high schools; to end the 'one-fact rule' by which students and teachers in high schools could be expelled because of homosexual behavior; and lastly, to grant both biological and non-biological mothers in a lesbian marriages equal parental rights. In 2015, all these five legal changes had been approved by the Dutch Parliament (De Valk 2015).

specific political and legal attention to people who identify as trans*, they are very recent developments. Multiple organizations have pointed to a gap in the acceptance of trans* people in the Netherlands. In the rhetoric of LGBT acceptance, transgender people's experiences and desires have been, and continue to be, collapsed in the generic LGBT identity category. Organizations such as Transgender Network Netherlands call for a specific understanding and recognition of (trans)gender diversity besides the large attention to sexual diversity.[7]

For the purpose of this article, I wish to point to another central, but often surpassed, element in LGBT rhetoric in the Netherlands. Debates about gender and sexual diversity in the Netherlands are often shaped by a secular undercurrent (Derks 2018). Note that the Pink Agreement was signed by all political parties except for the Christian ones. In many instances, the term 'religion' is coined—which in practice mostly means Christianity or Islam—as the most considerable challenge to ideals of sexual freedom.[8] The narrative of sexual freedom and emancipation as it circulates inside and outside of the Netherlands, has therefore been considered a secularizing narrative (Buijs 2011; Lechner 1996). According to Gert Hekma, the particular Dutch process of secularization (*ontzuiling*) even made it possible for gay rights to be installed in the Netherlands (Hekma 2011). However, secularization has shown to be a non-unilinear process, and the dominant secularization thesis—which argued that modernity would eventually lead to a disappearance of religion—has been widely criticized (Asad 2003; Casanova 2009). Instead of disappearing, the public and political role of religion changes in relation to secular politics and ideologies. In this emerging field of the study of the secular, gender and sexuality have been recognized as central areas where secular discourse is shaped in relation to a religious other (cf. Braidotti 2008; Scott 2018; Göle 2010). In the Netherlands, the public visibility of Christianity has declined, and more and more people are leaving church. At the same time, Islam has become a major topic of debate in media and politics. Christians and Muslims are often presented as rejecting secularism and as a consequence a potential threat to

7 See statements by the LGBT organization COC (2016) Transgender Network Netherlands (TNN) 2017 and Transvisie (2018).

8 There have been quite some recent controversial cases in which opinions of Christian actors about LGBT people have been discussed widely in the political and public arena. One of the examples is the recent controversy and debate about civil marriage registrars who refused to conduct marriage ceremonies for same-sex couples. The registrars involved claimed that their refusal is based on religious grounds, and they should therefore be allowed to reject some kinds of marriage ceremonies—even though their role and employment does not allow them to discriminate couples. In 2014, the senate agreed with a proposed law that ends the possibility for 'conscentious objectors' among marriage officiants (cf. Derks 2017).

ideals of women's emancipation, sexual freedom and gender diversity because of their supposedly conservative and heteronormative ideas about gender and sexuality (van den Berg 2014; Jivraj 2011).

Scholars from various disciplines have problematized the ways gender and sexuality are employed in identity politics concerning the relation between religion and secularity (Scott 2018, Mahmood 2005, Butler 2008). Approaching religion merely as oppressive implicitly positions 'religion' and 'the secular' as oppositional. In such a framing, secularism is often conceived as necessary in the project of sexual liberation. This oppositional pairing of religion and sexual freedom has motivated many scholars to study experiences of religious queers. Existing research is often limited to discussions of sexuality among lesbian, gay and bisexual identified people as opposed to heterosexuality (cf. Ganzevoort 2010; Jakobsen 2004; Wilcox 2009). Recently, questions of gender diversity and lives of trans* people have been taken up. Interestingly, in the field of theology, transgender seems to be taken up more often than in religious studies (cf. Cornwall 2011; Isherwood 2009; Loughlin 2007; Tanis 2003). Important studies were undertaken in practical, or empirical based, theology (cf. Beardsley 2017; Savage 2006), and in relation to pastoral work (cf. Dowd 2018). Such studies are often motivated by a theological or pastoral motivation, such as the desire to make churches more sensitive to gender diversity, and more inclusive toward transgender people.[9] These theological discussions, albeit relevant, are not the main focus of my research, which is located in religious studies and anthropology. Up until now, little research exists in this field on the intersections of religion, gender and sexuality in the lives of religious trans* people. Furthermore, much academic research continues to focus on the supposed incommensurability of religious, gender and sexual identities among LGBT people, in which sexual freedom is considered to be limited by religious institutions. Up until now there seems hardly any analysis of lived experiences of religious trans* people outside of theology that critically deconstructs the religion/secularism binary in LGBT discourse.

As such, the aim of this article is to further understand the construction of the religion/secular binary in debates about the rights, freedom and protection of trans* people in the West-European context of the Netherlands, but with-

9 In the past years, there have been initiatives toward more inclusivity for trans* people. Most significant is the collaboration between the Protestant Theological University (PThU) with the LKP, the Nationwide Coordinator of Christian LGBT organizations, Transgender Network Netherlands and individual trans*people. One of the outcomes of this project is the recent publication of a Dutch handbook for religious trans* people and church workers about transgender and faith (Zorgdrager et al. 2019).

out becoming apologetic of institutional discrimination toward transwomen. Although feminist and queer studies scholars' hesitance to engage with what they perceive to be conservative religious people and communities is understandable, this should not lead to a rejection of certain queer religious experiences in favor of secular ones as sites of research. Instead, these voices should be recognized as agents who form their community as much as they are formed by their religious surroundings.[10] Religion needs to be considered a space of potential empowerment as well as restriction for the research participants involved, and an intersectional approach which includes both gender and religion can point to these different relations. Including religion in the study of gender and sexuality then, in my view, becomes a twofold task for queer scholars in religious studies. On the one hand it is important to account for multiplicity and diversity, and continue to criticize, and to 'queer' processes of normalization and homogenization. Therefore, focusing on trans* instead of collapsing this in a general use of LGBT is an important empirical task, in which we should strive to give as much space possible for personal narratives (cf. Dzmura 2010; Green 2003; Wilcox 2000). On a theoretical level, the recognition of trans* narratives enables a starting point to think through the relationship between traditional religious communities and ideas of gender- and sexual diversity (cf. Isherwood 2009; Tanis 2003). In this process, the constructed narratives of several binaries are made visible, most importantly the connection of individuality, autonomy, sexual freedom and secularism on the one hand, and collectivity, subjection, gender-conservatism and religion on the other.

The following paragraphs of this article are an example of such an attempt to understand the lived experiences and negotiations of Christian trans* women in the Netherlands. I take a narrative approach, which foregrounds particular life narratives. Not as a window into a historical truth, but rather as formed in relation to social surroundings. Therefore, a focus on specific life stories can open up broader questions and debates. Albeit limited to individual cases, this approach 'has high potential to uncover the processes of giving meaning to life experiences through life stories' (Ganzevoort 2011, 219). Lila Abu-Lughod—perhaps one of the most influential advocates for 'ethnography of the particular'—argued that a concern with the particulars of individual's lives:

10 See the article of Orit Avishai, Lynne Gerber and Jennifer Randles for an excellent reflection on what they call 'the Feminist Ethnographer's Dilemma' (Avishai 2012).

> [does not] imply a disregard for forces and dynamics that are not locally based. On the contrary, the effects of extra-local and long-term processes are only manifested locally and specifically, produced in the actions of individuals living their particular lives, inscribed in their bodies and their words.
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> 1991, 150

In this article, I focus on two of such particular life stories, in order to indicate how broader processes impact day-to-day experiences of trans* people, and to unravel some of the complicated themes that come up in such an in-depth close reading. The first case study about Monique is based on a long in-depth interview conducted as part of a broader research project about Protestant lesbian, bisexual and transgender women in the Netherlands. In this study, there was unfortunately not enough space to delve into the details of Monique's life narrative (Schrijvers 2015, 2018). The second case study is initially derived from a discourse analysis of a controversy in media and politics about Rhianna Gralike. The material of this part consists of news articles from July to December 2015. I additionally interviewed Rhianna over the phone in December 2018 to reflect on these hectic months and to confirm (and adapt, when needed) my analysis. Even though the material is somewhat differently obtained, I write both cases as life stories with a focus on their personal narratives.

2 Case Study 1: Monique

Monique[11] is a lesbian woman in her sixties who lives in a small town in the Netherlands, and is a member of a reformed church within the Protestant Church in the Netherlands (PCN). In the early 2000s, she came out as a transgender woman[12] to her wife and children. Quickly after this, she decided to live fulltime as a woman and discussed this in her church community. This took place after a long period of depression, during which she 'struggled greatly' with her personal religious beliefs. After coming-out as a lesbian transgender woman,[13] her initial feeling of relieve and safety was replaced by a sense of loss.

11 All of the empirical material about Monique is based on a three-hour long in-depth, semi-structured interview conducted by Schrijvers at Monique's home in the Spring of 2014. Translation made by the author.

12 Monique used the terminology of 'coming-out' when referring to the moment she decided to present as a woman fulltime.

13 Monique expresses that she always knew she was a girl, and cross-dressed in secret for

Monique moved to another province, she and her wife got divorced and she lost her job. Even though there were many social difficulties which might result in an abandonment of religion, her faith grew: '*But*', she told me, 'I never lost God'. During this difficult period of her life, she found comfort and support in her belief in God. She also felt a lot of support from her church community. When she still presented as a man, Monique was an active member of her reformed congregation. She was head of the deaconry and a member of the church board. The Protestant Church in the Netherlands does not give specific directions about women in church leadership, which is why some churches do, and others do not allow women in positions of authority. In the case of the PCN these are the deaconry, church board and church elders (PCN 2018). Monique's church at the time did not allow women to be active as deacon, minister or elder. When Monique began her gender reassignment treatment and started presenting herself full time as a woman, she and her minister engaged in many discussions about her position in church. Together they decided that Monique would resign as deacon and board member. This was in line with church regulations that limited women's authority in church. She looks back on these conversations with a sense of gratitude: 'He guided and supported me and my wife very well. He also organized evenings at our community to explain what was going on.' With the help of her minister, Monique felt accepted and supported by the broader congregation. She enjoyed her work as a deacon greatly, so she responded to her resignation with mixed emotions. On the one hand, she missed working for the church, which used to be an important part of her religious life. At the same time, she considered her resignation to be a sensible outcome of her identification as a woman. She considered this to be unrelated to her being transgender, but simply because no women at all were allowed in these type of positions. What especially struck me in the story of Monique, is that the impossibility to continue this work in this position became an important milestone in the affirmation of her identity as a woman. In that way, giving up her authority in church empowered Monique. She felt recognized and accepted as a woman by her minister, in the broader community, but very importantly by God as well. Through her changing place in church, Monique was asked to rethink her position as a religious person, and the acceptance from the community enabled her to reconcile her religious beliefs with her gender identity.

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many years. She uses the term 'coming-out' herself when referring to the moment she told her wife, family and minister about her transgender experiences.

3 Case Study 2: Rhianna

The experiences of Monique and Rhianna show many similarities but also many differences. Rhianna's story received national media attention in 2015. Rhianna is a Roman-Catholic transgender woman in her early sixties, also living in a small town in the Netherlands. She had decided to 'continue life as a woman'[14] seven years prior to becoming the church's treasurer in the end of 2014. A few years after the commotion in 2018, she told me how she had always been open about her transgender past in her religious community. When she was invited to become the treasurer, Priest Hans Boogers did not report to higher church authorities the fact that she had undergone gender reassignment surgery, because he did not think it would be of relevance (Kleinjan 2015a, 2015b). In April 2015, however, Cardinal Wim Eijk[15] found out about Rhianna's past and stated that she should never have been appointed treasurer because of it. Pressured by the cardinal, Priest Boogers asked Rhianna to resign voluntarily, or she would be honorably discharged (Tubantia 2015). The main reason given by Cardinal Eijk was that being transgender was not in line with Roman-Catholic doctrine. In most reports, the cardinal vaguely refers to transgender as an unvirtuous lifestyle that simply does not fit ideals of the Church, I will elaborate on this in the following paragraphs. Rhianna refused to resign and contacted several local reporters about this, according to her, act of discrimination. She told me that: 'The church's strategy was to shut me—this innocent Catholic—up with power and an angry letter. But that didn't happen. I, this kind Catholic, still belief and chose to attack. I decided long ago that I wouldn't let them walk all over me.' Her story was quickly taken up by national newspapers and caused some upheaval in the media and among LGBT organizations. Rhianna waited for the cardinal's official discharge letter, and stated that she would report the letter to the police as evidence of discrimination. In the weeks thereafter, Rhianna said that she felt supported by her congregation, and her fellow church members even filed an online petition to ask Cardinal Eijk to change his perspectives.[16] Another joint statement was published by the

14 This is Rhianna's own language, translated by the author from a report in the nationwide newspaper *De Volkskrant* (Geuze 2015).

15 In the Roman-Catholic hierarchy, the cardinal is the highest authority of the Netherlands, followed by archbishops, bishops, priests and deacons. Since his appointment as archbishop of Utrecht in 2007, and cardinal in 2012, Eijk has come to be known as rather conservative in his teachings (Trouw 2012).

16 The petition has since been closed and is no longer accessible: http://www.parochienorbertus.nl/rhianna-petitie.

Nation-wide Coordinator of Christian LGBT Organizations (LKP) and the Working Group of Catholic Gay Pastors in the Netherlands (WKHP). These are the two most important civil society organizations devoted to the rights and social acceptance of Christian LGBT individuals, and they strive for more inclusivity in churches. In this statement, the LKP and WKHP asked Cardinal Eijk to revisit the Roman-Catholic teachings, and to explore if there would be a possibility for Rhianna to continue her work at her parish (LKP 2015). In addition, Rhianna received a lot of letters of support, which were not published in the media, ranging from clergy and nuns, to fellow lay Catholics. When Rhianna eventually met the cardinal at the Utrecht diocese, it became clear that he would not change his view as he continued to insist on Rhianna's resignation. Still waiting for her official letter, the media attention quickly dropped. At the time, it seemed as if Rhianna, Priest Boogers, the church board, and the parish joined hands to defend Rhianna's place in church. Yet six months after the initial outburst in Dutch media, reports came out stating that the church board itself asked Cardinal Eijk to dismiss Rhianna—not because of her 'deviant lifestyle', but because of a financial conflict with the church council[17] (Trouw 2015). Rhianna finally decided not to wait any longer for a resignation letter from the cardinal, but to step back as a treasurer herself.

I asked her about this in 2018, and Rhianna described the situation as a 'political game that got out of hand'. According to her, authority figures, who should be devoted to the wellbeing of their congregations, were mainly concerned with their own status and potential promotions. At the time, Rhianna did not see any hope for change within the church system. She still filed a report at the institute for equal treatment in the Netherlands, to see if she had a case for discrimination (Omroep Flevoland 2015). The bureau responded that they didn't see much potential in a case, because of art. 1 of the constitution, which grants religious groups their freedom. In 2018, she told me that she is currently not 'on the barricades, but keeps an eye out', were something similar to happen. She still participates in church whenever possible and continues to be a 'strong believer', but chose to remove herself from the public because of the impact of the events on her family.

There are similarities in the stories of Monique and Rhianna. Both Dutch women are around sixty years old, and though they felt a woman since their childhood, they only made this known to their family, friends and religious community in their fifties. Monique and Rhianna had also been married to

17 Supposedly, Rhianna had asked to declare the costs of her attorney at her church, which was reason for arguments and discussions that eventually made her functioning unfit (Trouw 2015).

a woman and became parents quite some time before deciding to live as a woman full time. Both did not decide to leave the church, and their Christian faith has been a central source for inspiration and support in different phases of their lives. Their identification as trans* has also led to many conflicts, both with their religious community, but also in their personal relation to God. Monique's minister was supportive, while Cardinal Eijk dismissed Rhianna regardless of the initial support by her local priest. Moreover, the priest eventually chose the side of Cardinal Eijk as not to endanger his own position in the church. Although the outcomes are similar—the women were considered unfit for a position in church leadership—the course of events and their experiences were very different. In what follows, I analyze these cases by pointing to three different themes that came up in the negotiations of Rhianna and Monique as religious women in relation to religious authority.

4 Gender, Sexuality and Lesbian Transwomen

In the case of Monique, identifying as transgender was not considered the main reason she was asked to give up her position of authority in church. Precisely because she was now fully recognized as a woman, she could no longer fulfil her duties as church deacon, and did not feel rejected for being transgender. Because Monique was now also legally registered as a woman, her marriage became a same-sex union and Monique describes herself as an 'out and proud lesbian transgender woman'. The status of her marriage was never a topic for debate within her religious community, even though same-sex couples were not allowed to have a marriage ceremony in her church. Eventually Monique divorced from her partner and joined a different church after moving to another part of the country. She told me that she felt more insecure about her sexual identity as lesbian in this new community, than about her gender identification. Monique told me that she considers herself to be quite visibly trans: 'you hear it in my low voice and see it in my posture'. Because of this, she did not feel the need to be explicit about this, or to explain herself in her new church, as she would immediately know if someone would have a problem with this. Her sexual self-identification as a lesbian woman might have been a potential source for conflict, because this was less visible and required Monique to 'come out' in church. The Protestant Church in the Netherlands does not give any directions to the position of women in church authority, nor of the position of non-heterosexual congregates. In some churches, it is possible to get married as a same-sex couple, which is often an indicator for non-heterosexual Protestants of how welcoming a community is (Ganzevoort 2010). Monique did not

want to hide this aspect of herself. Therefore, it became important for her to talk about her non-heterosexuality in her new community. I noticed a separation of gender and sexual identity in the interactions with church authority and community—not her gender identity as *woman* was a problem for Monique, but her self-identification as a *lesbian* might have been. The latter needs to be considered as situated in gay-negative Christian discourses, while her identification as transgender woman is not questioned, since she felt she lived 'completely and undisputedly' as a woman full time. Being lesbian however, was something she felt she had to come out for and tell in her community to find out if there was implicit homophobia.

In the case of Rhianna, this separation of gender and sexual identity is far less evident. At no point in the media interviews describes Rhianna herself as lesbian and she does not refer to her relationship status as non-heterosexual. Yet one of the reasons given by Cardinal Eijk not to accept her as a transgender woman, was the status of her, now same-sex, marriage. When Rhianna would be fully recognized as a woman by the Roman-Catholic church, it would mean that a non-heterosexual marriage had taken place, which is not allowed according to the church's teachings. When I asked her about this in our 2019 interview, Rhianna replied:

> I think that's—pardon my language—utter bullshit. My marriage was blessed, we were married in church. No one can separate us, except for the pope. A lot of people go through difficult times after transitioning, and many divorce. Eijk wanted to call me a bad Catholic, how dare he! I'm baptized, confirmed, married with children … I didn't squander with any of my duties in life.

For Rhianna, the status of her marriage was non-negotiable and not invalid because of her transition. The Protestant Church leaves the decision whether to permit and/or bless same-sex marriages to individual churches. The Roman-Catholic church on the other hand has a clear structure that gives almost no space for individual congregations to make changes in these policies. One of the reasons is that marriage has a different theological meaning in the Protestant and Catholic church where it is one of the seven sacraments and divorce is nearly impossible. Being in a same-sex relationship was one of the reasons why Rhianna was 'not considered a good Catholic, living a life in line with church teachings and laws' (Dommerholt 2015). Cardinal Eijk did not make this distinction between lesbian and transgender consistently. Often he refers to her identification as transgender as a deviant 'lifestyle' aligned with LGB people. Coming-out as transgender was then considered a choice similar to

living openly as a homosexual, lesbian or bisexual person. The head of the church council of Rhianna's church, Hans Teuben made a similar diffusion between sexual and gender identity. He initially stated that 'the sexual orientation of Rhianna is not at all an issue in the parish' (Dommerholt 2015), using the terminology of sexual orientation to refer to her transgender identity. In media reports, this confusion of sexual and gender identity is also present. *Tubantia* reports: 'The bishop cannot accept the fact that Gralike has undergone a sex change. […] *Furthermore*, her sexual orientation is unacceptable' (2015) [emphasis added]. According to this newspaper, it is not only her 'sexchange' that is considered to make her unsuitable for this position. *Additionally* her sexual orientation cannot be accepted, referring to her relationship with another woman. Many Dutch newspapers framed the conflict of Rhianna with the church authorities in the discourse of LGBT acceptance in Christian communities. This reflects a tendency of broader societal discourse which often collapses lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender under the heading of sexual diversity. What we see by close reading these cases, is how these different discourses and languages of gender identity and sexual orientation overlap and intersect. In the case of Monique, a separation is made between gender identity as woman and sexual orientation as lesbian. In Rhianna's case, the terms are often used interchangeably and without a clear distinctive meaning. Some reports refer to her lesbian identity as problematic, others consider her transgender identity the problem. They often considered the latter a sexual identity and as such refused to recognize her as a woman. Cardinal Eijk and council leader Teuben simply refer to sexual orientation or LGBT lifestyle that make her unfit for church leadership, without explaining further what this means and how it exactly motivated Cardinal Eijk's decision.

5 Bodies and Transphobic 'Mutilations'

Besides the distinction or conflation of sexual orientation and gender, a second element in the discussion about the position of Monique and Rhianna in church administration is the importance of the role of the body. In both cases, a conflict emerges about the role of the body and the decision of the women to undergo gender reassignment surgery that is expressed in theological reconsiderations about the body as given by God. In the case of Rhianna, Cardinal Eijk made an appeal to Roman-Catholic catechism to dismiss her: 'Except when performed for strictly therapeutic medical reasons, directly intended amputations, mutilations, and sterilizations performed on innocent persons are against the moral law.' (CCC 2297). Besides living a 'problematic lifestyle', the fact that

Rhianna had undergone gender reassignment surgery made her deviate from Catholic teachings. This surgery was not considered a medical necessity, and as such conflicted with the aforementioned catechism. The terminology used here is that of 'mutilations', a term that is characteristically used in transphobic discourse and language (Beardsley 2017; Tanis 2003). For Cardinal Eijk, the body at birth continues to determine the gender of Rhianna, he rejects her choice for surgery, and he continuously refers to Rhianna using male pronouns (de Stentor 2015). In their co-published statement the Dutch Christian LGBT organizations WKHP and LKP questioned these teachings which 'would state that God expects people to accept the body given at birth.' (LKP 2015). They especially invited Cardinal Eijk to have a theological discussion on the issue, but this was not taken up or debated any further. Rhianna herself disregards the argument against surgery by stating that there are many people that undergo surgery without medical necessity, not making her an exception (Kobessen 2015). Moreover, Rhianna told me in our interview that she was born 'double gendered', with her biological makeup consisting of both female and male characteristics, such as XXY chromosomes. There were, in her words 'already things different in me'. What went wrong, is that she was raised as a man. She merely chose to 'fully live in the female rendition of me', something which was necessary for her survival and happiness. The question of her body was not influenced by her religion to a large extent, it only became a question after she had already undergone gender treatments.

This was different for Monique, who initially doubted on a personal level whether she could undergo gender reassignment surgery. Her decisions did not really lead to conflicts with church authorities. She told me how she was unsure whether she was allowed to undergo surgery, since her body was 'given to her by God' and should be cherished and nurtured accordingly. This was less a question of permission from church authorities, but more about what God might allow her personally. The decision to seek treatment in the form of surgery posed a particular theological problem for Monique as she doubted whether her position to her faith and God would be distorted when she would make these alterations to her body. Initially, she framed such alterations as well as a 'mutilation', with all its negative connotations. This led to a deep depression and suicidal thoughts, which she has nowadays overcome. She discussed her questions with her minister, and they eventually came to the understanding that these surgeries would not be in conflict with religious guidelines and doctrines: 'Because this is an adaption, not a mutilation, and we [trans* people] are shaped in God's image too [...] I don't think that God considers this a problem.' For Rhianna and Monique, the decision to undergo treatment to their bodies caused theological conflicts. In the case of Monique, this was an internal ques-

tion and struggle, eventually answered in conversation with her minister. For Rhianna however, this was less of a personal issue, but became one of the main reasons she was deemed unqualified by Cardinal Eijk.

6 Personal Faith and 'the Institute'

The religious community of these women was and continues to be a very important factor in their lives as a space that enabled them to express and experience their Christian faith.[18] Many newspapers responded to the case of Rhianna as yet another instance of LGBT-phobia in the Roman-Catholic church. These reports typically fail to include the positive and supportive role that faith can potentially have in the lives of some transgender people. Both Rhianna and Monique point to this importance. Neither have even thought about leaving their religion because they were not allowed in a position of authority, or because they did not feel accepted as a woman. On the contrary: 'I've felt so supported by my religion, it gives me strength to finish my story', Rhianna told Annemiek Schrijver in an interview on national television. Rhianna makes the clearest separation with her personal, individual interpretation of Roman-Catholic faith, and the interpretation of what she calls 'the institute': 'I do not fight my religion or the church. I do challenge the institute, which is dominated by arbitrariness and power-hungry individuals', she told me. The conflict that Rhianna had with Cardinal Eijk and eventually with her own parish board too, was framed as a conflict of interpretation of church doctrine. The PCN leaves more space for individual congregations to form their own policies concerning LGBT people and the position of women. At the same time, these developments are not only top-down, but LGBT Christians throughout the Netherlands form their religious communities, and contribute to meaningful accessibility for trans* people. As I wrote before, Monique did not experience conflicts over her gender identification with her church as institute because of this space for negotiation. Rhianna was more depending on fixed church authority structures and doctrine in Roman-Catholicism. Even though her parish priest and congregation initially criticized the decision of Cardinal Eijk, there was no possibility to change these policies from within. Both women describe their current relation with faith as loving and supportive, and separate faith from churches that interpret Christian doctrine in a homophobic or transphobic

18 Secularist queer or feminist perspectives have often disregarded the importance of faith in the daily lives of these women, as they often give scant attention to personal desires and lived religion (cf. Green 2006; Schrijvers 2015; Willcox 2009).

way. By this individualization, Rhianna and Monique renegotiate their relation to God, their own community and the institutionalized 'official' religion of Roman-Catholicism and Dutch reformed Protestantism.

7 Conclusions

The analysis of these disputes over church authority in the lives of trans* women in the Netherlands points to the many levels and negotiations in experiences of Christian trans* people. Rhianna and Monique's case studies offer a small insight in such negotiations, and recognize the importance and complexity of religion in the lives of these two trans women. This is but one example which could be compared to larger sociological studies or likewise studies of trans* life narratives. Studying the experiences of trans* persons in relation to their position in church leadership enables an understanding of the construction of religious authority as a gendered and sexualized process, and shows what might happen when trans* becomes more visible in religious institutions. Both women were asked to resign from their lay function in the church board as deacon (Monique) and treasurer (Rhianna), because of their identification as woman. Their dismissal does not mean however that these women are merely oppressed, passive or discriminated upon by their religion. Instead, by paying attention to personal narratives constructed in interviews and public discourse, this article acknowledges the intersections of gender, sexuality and religion in the construction of subjectivity instead of considering these elements as inevitably conflicting. For Monique, her resignation was an implication of her identification as a *woman*, since no women were allowed in the deaconry. Rhianna on the other hand, was asked to resign because her identification as *trans* deemed her unfit. In both instances, church leadership was initially supportive of Rhianna and Monique, yet both were asked to resign regardless of this. Whereas Rhianna's same-sex marriage was a main issue against her, this was interestingly not raised by the minister of Monique's church.[19] Thus the question remains to what extend transphobia motivated the decisions in both instances, something one can only speculate on. An important difference between these two case studies is that Rhianna considers her dismissal an act of transphobic discrimination, and chose to fight against this. For Monique however, resigning as a deacon was a sign of recognition, of being acknowl-

19 Part of this might have to do with the different status and understanding of marriage as a sacrament in Roman Catholic and Protestant church teachings.

edged as a woman by her community. The way the women dealt themselves with these decisions and broader transphobia/homophobia in Christian communities is that they make a clear distinction between their own religious ideas and experiences; and those prescribed by church doctrine. What we see here is a discursive differentiation between 'faith' (personal) and 'religion' (institution) which has come to be a common thread in studies of everyday religious experiences (cf. McGuire 2008, Schielke 2012). Further research in similar cases could provide innovative views in the face of current understandings of gender and sexuality in relation to human bodies as both social and individual, and would look into the theological implications of transgender in the context of religious texts and practices (Isherwood 2009; Cornwall 2011). As such, it is possible to broaden the conceptualization of transgender as merely individual medical-biological, but instead recognize the complexity and interactions of social, discursive and religious 'materializations' of transgender. This would challenge the oppositional pairing of secularism, individual choice, and LGBT freedom on the one hand; and religion, subjection and regulated sex on the other. Transgender people within Christian communities might encounter conflicts, such as for Monique and Rhianna, but also demand church authority to rethink and reimagine the role of gender and the body from a theological and social perspective.

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