BECOMING QUEER CHRISTIANS IN INDECENCY

EXPLORING QUEER THEOLOGIES OF PERIPHERIES

Thesis submitted for the PhD. Degree

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1.0 Introduction

In the late spring of 2015, I sat in front of my computer at my office in the city of Tromsø, in northern Norway. I worked as a minister in the Cathedral of Tromsø at the time. One day, I watched the music video of the 2015 Oslo Pride The Father Project (Keshtkar 2015). I had not paid the song much attention as Pride was a month away and I had other more pressing matters to attend to in the congregation – such as writing Sunday's sermon – than listening to a pop anthem for Pride. However, Oslo Bishop Ole Christian Kvarme's public announcement made me stop my sermon writing and navigate to YouTube to watch the video. The bishop denounced the video, claiming it inappropriate in a church room, as an explicit sex scene between two men was filmed in front of the altar in Frogner Church in Oslo. Bishop Kvarme, who stood amongst the 'traditional; marriage fraction in The Church of Norway, and against same-sex marriage, explained that 'any sexual conduct, even between a man and a woman, is not fitting in front of the altar' (Kvarme 2015). I do not really remember what I thought of the comment, but one thing was for sure: the Bishop's announcement made me and many others fall for the inadvertent clickbait, which Tooji Keshtkar and his management in Oslo Pride likely hoped would occur.

The introduction above is a beginning of an autobiographical reflection that continues below. The reader will recognise three other reflections as two interludes and one epilogue throughout this thesis, and they are reflections wherein I situate myself in relation to the material that I present. I present these reflections as a way of positioning myself that can represent positions that are relevant in the theological framework that I introduce in this thesis. For now, however, let us continue, returning to Tromsø, Oslo Pride, and The Father Project.

After clicking on the video, I recognised the magnitude of Christian religious symbolism that Frogner Church has – the stained glass paintings of Jesus on the Cross, the resurrected and the victorious Christ greeting us above the altar – all of which blended together with the story of Keshtkar, who, in love with the handsome male minister, does not turn away even though he is shunned by the same pastor at the church entrance. The experience of being rejected by religious communities is a story many queer Christians know, but Keshtkar is not frightened, nor is he

silenced, as he enters the service and demands to be loved by the minister, and, there and then, they undress each other and make love at the altar, in front of the whole congregation and in front of God. I must admit that the perfect male bodies undressing in front of me made me reminisce back to my first memory of sexual shame. It was the mid-90s, and I believe I was somewhere between 11 and 12 years old. I sat in front the television watching a dating show where women had full control over their muscular male dates. The male participants had to remove one garment after the other following the orders of the "dominatrix" of the show. I was totally mesmerised by the male beauty in front of me after the men removed – on command – the shirt, the t-shirt, the trousers, and so on, unveiling the muscular bodies underneath the clothes. Finally the socks came off, and they all were left in their underwear. The female cast and audience all screamed in excitement, I was just as excited but squealed on the inside, and I studied the bodies and wondered, 'Who would I choose if I were the dominatrix?' As I dreamt myself through the television screen on to the set, I chose the man in front of me – a ginger of course – when my mum suddenly interrupted, 'What are you watching?' Engrossed in the show, I had not noticed my mother who had entered the room, and suddenly I was ripped out of my dominatrix fantasy and realised I was in my families living room. "Nothing" I answered her shamefully. 'You should stop watching shows like this,' she said. At that moment I realised that my mum did not see the muscular ginger Adonis on the screen, but the low budget production that presented women as headless chickens screaming over a good for nothing womaniser. Even though she probably did not see my sexual desire, I was ashamed as I had learnt in school, as well as in Church, that finding men attractive was shameful and perhaps even sinful. My desire was, in some way, indecent and something to hide. Sitting at the office in Tromsø, the same shame hit me. I was afraid of being caught watching these perfect men in a softcore porn interaction in front of an altar. This, of course, led me to feel embarrassed about feeling shame because I knew that this shame came from my internalised homophobia. Yet, somewhere at the back of my mind, I knew that I felt a sort of desire towards not only the men, but also the sexual freedom the video portrayed.

Apparently, I was not the only one who reacted to the softcore sex re-enactment in Frogner Church, but my conflicting feelings of homophobia were not up for debate. The sexual expression started a heated debate, not based on whether the Church should open up for same-sex marriage; rather, it was a question of proper conduct in a religious church space. The journalist Alf Gjøsund, for instance, described this music video in the Christian newspaper *Vårt Land* – 'Our Country' in English – as a lack of understanding of a 'universal liturgical language'

of the sacred space (Gjøsund 2015). Keshtkar had simply misunderstood the language of the church space, Gjøsund claimed, as he explained how the rite of the communion unifies every Christian believer, without differentiating between sexual identity and the discussion of lesbian, gay, bi, and trans (LGBT) rights within the Church. His argument emphasised that explicit expressions of sexuality within the space of the Church ruin a delicate unity of believers, and that Keshtkar had focused on himself instead of God. When I read Gjøsund's comment on the video, I wondered what kind of universal language he was highlighting. Would this universal understanding of communion resonate with the Catholics or orthodox, or was it simply a Protestant universality? Even in this category, would the Baptists, Methodists, and Pentecostal congregations agree? Or was this perhaps a question of universality within The Church of Norway? In Gjøsund's defence, however, the comment was a response to the sexual expression in the video, so this could be a certain claim of a universal Christian sexual ethic. Nevertheless, that did not resonate with me at the time as I identified as a queer Christian, who presented as a cis-man at the time; and it resonates even less today as non-binary trans femme and pansexual Christian. Would a Christian exhibitionist, a Christian fetishist, a Christian dom top fairy queen, or a Christian sub bottom leather daddy understand this 'universal' language? Too many questions arose in my mind as I wondered about Michel Foucault's history of sexuality (1990), Judith Butler's gender performativity (1990), and, not to forget, Marcella Althaus-Reid's claim on heterosexual colonialization of the religious body (2000), all of which I introduce later in this thesis. What my question carousel reflects, though, is that Gjøsund's claim did not directly resonate with me and my own experiences of taking part in the liturgy of communion, nor my experiences as a member of the Church.

Pastor and PhD Gyrid Gunnes challenged Gjøsund's claim of universality as she emphasised how Tooji deliberately defied the liturgical langue of the Church, comparing the expression to the 'Prayer to the Virgin Mary' (Gunnes 2015). This was feminist activism performed by the Russian feminist punk band Pussy Riot. Back in 2012 they occupied the soleas of the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour, where they performed a punk prayer to Mary. They asked her to join their protest against President Putin and the patriarchy as a feminist uprising. Gunnes's argument built on comparing The Father Project to this prayer, and she claimed that Keshtkar reviled religious homophobia the same way that Pussy Riot reviled religious misogyny. She challenged the notion of Christian religious spaces as neutral and free from the politics of heteronormativity as she emphasised how Christian religious spaces are typically dedicated to heterosexual love within a patriarchal frame. With this, Gunnes was noticeably one of the few voices who

unconditionally supported Keshtkar without questioning whether this expression would backfire in the politics of queer inclusion in the Church of Norway. She stood in contrast to the majority of debaters – advocates and opponents of same-sex marriage alike – who overall saw this as a sexualised expression unfitting of religious Christian space.

Looking back on the debate, I cannot but wonder if a form of homophobia appeared in it as I felt that the debate involved an irrational fear that gay men all of a sudden had the power to change the proper religious conduct in a church space. For me, it all was angst about sexuality, and perhaps other people had experienced internalised shame, like I had, while watching the video. This is, of course, a supposition I cannot prove, other than with my own experience, but it makes sense with Elizabeth Stuart's analogy of the theological football match. In her book *Just Good Friends: Towards a Lesbian and Gay Theology of Relationships* (1995), Stuart compares the theological debate about lesbian and gay inclusion in the Church of England to a football match between straight theologians – conservatives vs. radicals – who fight for or against lesbian and gay inclusion. In this match, the lesbians and gays must take the passive role of watching from the sideline, not interfering with the radicals' fight 'on our behalf'. Keshtkar's claim of religious discrimination towards queer people totally disappeared as straight identifying professionals of the Church discussed general sexual conduct rather than same-sex marriage liturgy. The point is, even though the debate might have taken the same turn with predominantly queer-identifying debaters, we will never know because LGBTQ+ people usually – deliberately or not – watch from the sideline when matters of queer inclusion are discussed. Thus, in this thesis, I begin with an exploratory case study, wherein four queer Christians discuss The Father Project amongst themselves. This material provides a starting point for discussing queer theologies, where I introduce and discuss different strategies of starting from queer sexual and gender experiences to form queer theologies.

1.1 Beyond Sexual decency

Elizabeth Stuart's (critically ironic) observation and the debate's claim of Christianity as a neutral space that is free of sexuality is one starting point of this thesis. One other is my own embodied emotions being confronted with that same observation. I knew the observation to be somehow untrue and began reflecting on how to address and rethink what queer means in the context of faith. There are actually heated debates on these issues going on, many of them with strong relevance to the video-event presented above. There is, however, no *one* consensus on how queer lives and faith connect. There is also no clear interpretation of how these issues might come out differently in different contexts.

In another international setting, Althaus-Reid's ground breaking book *Indecent Theology* (2000) shows that "heterosexuality is an economy, an administrative pattern which is sacralised in our churches" (114), and her alternative position is to embrace 'indecency' as theological reflection to exceed theology's dominant heteronormativity. Starting from the indecent sexualities, Althaus-Reid's (2000) book is a site of theological reflection in which sexual stories and experiences of queer people can form theologies. Therefore, this thesis starts with an exploratory case study with four queer Christians and their discussion of The Father Project. As the participants are part of the Christian community of the Church of Norway, it is interesting to see how their experiences can be read in relation to the sexual indecency Althaus-Reid starts with in her theology. In many ways she problematises the central theological power of Christian churches. As fruitful as such reflections are, it is interesting to see how some queer Christians navigate their affiliation with a Christian community with the transgressing power of indecent sexuality that Althaus-Reid postulates. Considering the background of the context and the experiences presented above, I find this to be an important and fruitful opening to rethink, critically and radically, how faith and queerness connect. Thus, the basic research question that forms this thesis is the following:

> *Given the concept of Althaus-Reid's indecent theology, how can we understand a becoming of queer Christians in indecency?*

Throughout this thesis I do not seek one coherent answer to this question. Nevertheless, one fundamental approach in this thesis is to discuss and develop a response to the project question while I explore some *stories and voices* of lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, intersex, queer/questioning people (LGBTQ+). This is where this thesis is novel in its approach as it starts with an exploratory case study that gathered data from four queer Christians. In my perspective, queer theologies can grow from queer lives, their bodies, their stories, and perhaps even their Christian communities. Research by various scholars is also presented and discussed in the following chapters. These researchers have contributed different responses to the question that I selected for this thesis. I do think, however, that the specific contribution of this thesis is to relate faith, queer stories/voices, and the challenge of belonging in Christian communities. This contribution also engages discussions on how one can conceive decentralised theological positions and still be part of Christian communities. This argument is developed in the last chapters of the thesis.

Some of the stories were found in contributions from other scholars, and some came from four informants in an exploratory case study I set up to reflect on the Father Project presented above.

The thesis discusses and interprets how such stories and voices from queer people can challenge and go beyond dominant heteronormative discourse in theology, thereby constructing queer theologies. I also do that, however, with a critical view on the contexts of Christian communities, where many LGBTQ+ people live and act. In my view, there is still a need to reflect on what it means that queer Christians live their lives inside churches. Questions such as 'How can specific communities or contexts influence what it means of becoming queer Christians in indecency?' are introduced during the last sections of the thesis, with an exploratory lens. First, however, it is necessary to spell out some theoretical backgrounds.

Althaus-Reid's claim of 'indecency' as one starting point of queer theologies builds on theories such as those by Michel Foucault and Judith Butler. Foucault's principles of power expose how we navigate and position ourselves and others in relation to a grand narrative of meaning. His work in *The History of Sexuality* (1990) is the basis for queer theory, and Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* (1990) continued questioning not only how we form sexuality but also how understandings of sexuality are deeply connected with constructions of a grand narrative of gender. While Foucault demonstrates how sexualities are public discourses, Butler shows how gender forms public discourses of bodily essentialism. For Butler, gender is a discourse that forms the ways in which we perform gender as if it is essential for our nature; this discourse precedes any notion of bodies and forms specific behaviour patterns in how gender and sexuality are expressed. Both Butler and Foucault deconstruct the grand narrative of heteronormativity, exposing how sexuality forms narratives of meaning in our society. Further, they show how these narratives have been (and are) fluently adapted throughout history and in different social settings.

Althaus-Reid begins with this fluidity with her indecent theology as she challenges a grand theological narrative of theology's 'inherent' heterosexuality. Her position is to embrace 'sexual indecency' as a theological reflection to address, challenge, and move beyond dominant heteronormative structures in theology. For Althaus-Reid, it is important to start from queer life stories when creating queer theologies:

> At the bottom line of queer theologies, there are biographies of sexual migrants, testimonies of real lives in rebellions of love, pleasure and suffering. (Althaus-Reid 2003, 8).

This statement demonstrates that the queer body stands central in her indecent theology; and not only is the body important, but so are the life stories of LGBTQ+ people. For Althaus-Reid, the narratives of queer people form the indecency that she calls for.

Althaus-Reid is, however, far from the only one who starts with queer people's narratives and life stories. Queer theologies have been advanced by great scholars in theology, such as Gavin D'Costa, Mark D. Jordan, Pamela R. Lightsey, Gerard Loughlin, and Elizabeth Stuart, to name a few. These scholars have deconstructed classic heteropatriarchal dogmas to reshape and emancipate LGBTQ+ Christians in theological discourses. One such work is Patrick Cheng's (2011) *Radical Love*, in which he uses queer sexualities to claim a radical love that transgresses the dichotomy of right and wrong sexualities. Cheng argues for the same radical love in Christianity as Jesus breaks the dichotomy of life and death through his resurrection.

Linn Marie Tonstad is another theologian who begins from queer theory when she analyses theology. She critically reflects upon the desire for inclusion when she deconstructs theology as a heteropatriarchal discourse. In doing this, she builds on Althaus-Reid's claim about the heterosexual economy of theology, and she uses queer theory to criticise the heteropatriarchal grand narrative of theology. For instance, in her book *God and Difference* (2016), Tonstad deconstructs the discourse of Trinitarian theology and demonstrates how it is a reproduction of heterosexual dominance. This underlines Althaus-Reid's notion of decent theology as a heterosexual colonial structure which uses religious bodies to form, identify, and hegemonise heterosexuality as intrinsically Christian. Tonstad's critique of heterosexual dominance exerts consequences for the desire of queer inclusion since this goal only reproduces structures of heteropatriarchy. According to Tonstad, the reproduction of theological truths will only represent one hegemony, which leads her to argue for an apocalyptic ecclesiology that builds on Lee Edelman's concept of 'sinthomosexual' (2004). As the sinthomosexual is destructive and non-reproductive, a force of death, Tonstad calls for an apophatic church, whose goal is 'the abortion of the Church, or aspiring to be a church that chooses abortion over reproduction' (2016, 269). This point of view is a result of how she understands church as a means to its own end, wherein no one can claim to reproduce God.

However, both Cheng and Tonstad talk about 'queer bodies' but have not completed empirical work in doing so, which is a critique that other theologians also have pointed at Althaus-Reid. One theologian who has addressed this is Chris Greenough, who uses empirical methods as he interviews people who Althaus-Reid considers sexual migrants: queer people and other straight-

identifying Christians who engage in forming queer theologies based on their sexual life stories. This forms queer theologies that start from the magnitude of experiences queer Christians have:

> It is important that non-normative Christians use their own voice to tell of the damage done by Christianity and its policing of gender and sexuality, but also to preserve what is good in Christianity within their lives. (greenough 2020, 133)

For Greenough, Christianity is more than policing gender and sexuality as, starting with interviews with this group, he wants to preserve what queer Christians find good about Christianity in their lives. By doing so, Greenough not only challenges the Christian exclusion of LGBTQ+ people, but he reflects the messiness of life stories that makes it possible to go beyond expectations of how norm categories form distinct identities. This means that even though Christian theology might be suppressive through heteronormative structures, the life stories of queer Christians can challenge not only the narratives of total exclusion, but also the hegemonic structures of heteronormative theology itself.

1.2 The Messiness of this Thesis

Greenough's embracing of messiness builds on a well-known approach within queer theologies, and he points to theologians such as Elizabeth Stuart, Stephen Pattison, and Susannah Cornwall (Greenough 2018) to show this. Greenough's reference to Stuart is relevant to reflect upon in this thesis as well and is worth presenting as a block quote:

> Doing theology on the basis of our experience is not easy, it will often be painful, messy and dangerous. (Stuart 1997, 27)

This thesis is also messy because the different stories that are told and the different methods and theories that are used to analyse them do not always go hand in hand. However, such messiness reflects how theological thinking starts from experience, and a specific coherent system is not the goal of such theologies. An exploratory case study from Norway is included in the reflections in this thesis. The voices of queer people telling stories of being Christians and, nevertheless, expecting and claiming to be recognised as non-controversial members of the dominant (Lutheran) Church of Norway, are also considered in my reflections. These queer Norwegians seem to position their own queer Christian identities in dialogue and connection with the larger community, the church and its congregations. This leads me to comment on a theoretically messy approach to the theological reflections that the exploratory case study starts. Beginning from Althaus-Reid and her indecent theology, an inescapable binary between 'centre' and 'periphery' seems apparent. I therefore want the reader to know that I am fully

aware of this binary; nonetheless, I understand the periphery that Althaus-Reid presents as a theological epistemology rather than as a site of experience. Althaus-Reid's use of the periphery is not a means of division, rather it reflects a discourse that already positions religious bodies as representations of inclusion and exclusion in dominant theological discourse. In this regard, being in the periphery is a theological tool that subverts the centre of theological thinking, thusly making it a queering of theology rather than a confirmation of such dichotomies.

My thesis analyses different positions and strategic ways of doing queer Christianity through sharing queer experiences, one being the exploratory case study of a group of four Christian, queer-identifying people in Oslo, Norway. I was interested in the ways the participants might respond to the controversial Keshtkar video mentioned in the opening pages. Did they find it as provoking with regard to the need to neutralise sexuality as proclaimed by the bishop? Which voices and narratives would they come up with as a response to *The Father Project*? Other positions are based on my reading of works that build on empirical research that shows how different queer Christians claim religious identities. I already introduced Greenough as one theologian who starts with life stories to address queer Christian identity formations, and he is one amongst several who have done extensive work in this field. For instance, Andrew Yip explains, using theories of neo-secularisation, how lesbian, gay, and bisexual Christians form their religious identity by building on personal sexual experiences rather than Christian affiliation and dogma (Yip 2003b, 2002, 1999). Melissa Wilcox further shows, through the concept of 'sifting', that queer Christians 'sift' or choose religious truths that combine with their sexual and gender identity. She claims, 'For many LGBT Christians, such individualism is a necessity without which they would remain trapped in doctrinally-ordained closets' (2002, 511). These exciting works on queer Christians' navigation of religious authority on sexual ethics suggest that religious individualism plays part in forming queer Christian identities. The religious individualism is not, however, in contrast to religious affiliation as Wilcox explains that sifting religious authorities answers 'the puzzle of LGBT people who remain in conservative religious traditions … and yet retain a positive self-image' (512). The participants in the exploratory case study are not part of a conservative religious tradition Wilcox references; all the participants are members of The Church of Norway, the predominant Lutheran national Church, which publicly acknowledges LGBT (sic) Christians as fully pledged members of the denomination. However, in the exploratory case studies, there was discussion of negative experiences with religious authorities in the Church of Norway, such as scolding. The participants navigated this in much the same way as Yip explains: they maintained positive self-

worth as queer Christians in their denomination. In the exploratory case study in this thesis, Christian affiliation seems to play a part as the participants were presented with The Father Project (the stimulus), which publicly critiqued all religions as homophobic, using a queer-friendly Christian church to do so. This is also where my material differs from that of both Greenough and Yip. Yip, for instance, investigated how his participants – lesbian, gay, and bisexual Christians – related to specific theological and sexual ethic claims. Greenough started with sexual stories, from which he constructed theology. The exploratory case study of this thesis reflects on the reactions to the stimulus The Father Project. It does not address specific theological claims or personal sexual stories; rather, I was interested in figuring out how the participants of the exploratory case study would react to the sexual ethics of the video. Instead of starting from a personal sexual space, I was interested in determining how the participants discuss sexual ethics when it deviates from standards of sexual conduct in a public religious space. This, of course, spurs a different discussion on sexual ethics than those of Greenough and Yip, because The Father Project was created for the purpose of activism – to provoke – in contrast to Yip's questionnaire and Greenough's method of listening as he 'walked alongside' his informants.

The exploratory case study does not, of course, say anything significant or general about how queer Christians in Norway react to this stimulus; rather, it is a specific conversation that reflects on how these four participants discussed this with each other. The exploratory case study is, however, relevant as a starting point on reflecting on queer theologies because The Father Project expresses one form of sexual indecency that Althaus-Reid calls for as a decolonialization of the religious body. The exploratory case study therefore helps to formulate relevant questions and critiques of theoretical positions. These are thusly experiences that are interesting and relevant to discuss theologically because they have created turmoil not only in the Church but also in queer communities. Therefore, I dialogue with Greenough, Wilcox, and Yip, as well as Susannah Cornwall and Adrian van Klinken. Cornwall's study on intersex Christians in the UK and van Klinken's study on queer Christians in Kenya, along with other research, will give background that can help us understand the participants' experiences in the exploratory case study. In the concluding chapters, I also establish a lengthier dialogue with Linn Tonstad, which follows a more classical discourse style within systematic theology. All these researchers help answer the question of how we can understand a becoming of queer Christians with Althaus-Reid's concept of sexual indecency.

1.3 Notes on Method

Both the Norwegian Social Science Data Service (NSD) and the University of Oslo approved this project. It follows the procedures of research ethics these institutions require (appendix 1). In this sub-chapter I present a short reflection on the method of this thesis.

On a general level, this thesis aims at contributing to the discipline of queer theology. The last chapters (7 and 8) explicitly discuss aspects of queer theologies in dialogue with several other authors in the field. Nevertheless, this present thesis moves in this context in what we might explain as a queer methodological way. This thesis is a mix of sources from scholars' work equipped with strong inputs from empirical studies, other sources are more theoretical and less empirical queer studies and finally there is in this thesis a specific exploratory case study as one important part of the sources to be discussed. In this way, the thesis aims at formulating some important aspects of queer theology, giving priority to theoretical theologies as well as empirical studies. This is why this thesis, by intention, uses empirical studies and creates an exploratory case study to discuss theology, together with a broader corpus of work from both empirical and more 'classic' theological traditions. Because of this, a simple genre definition of this thesis is not easy and not even fruitful. The thesis is therefore embracing the notion that embodied voices of real people are relevant in theological reflections as well as theology's significance to formulate 'normative' positions where empirical studies would be hesitant.

There are, of course, other contributions to queer theologies that move in the same landscape of queerness. Chris Greenough calls for an undoing of methodology in his work (2017, 2018), wherein he 'broke free from traditional research paradigms' (2017, 9). Linn Tonstad also discusses how queer theologies is a discipline of 'both/and' wherein queer theologies and the 'disagreement about its capacities to be queered or repaired are both means of reflection of its disciplinarity' (2017, 483). The theological claim of this thesis being in a sort of queered relationship in a tradition of both/and, brings the methodology of this thesis in a kind of kinship relation to important tendencies in other disciplines like theological disability studies. Established scholars such as Koos Sieger Tamminga, Hans Schaeffer, and John Swinton (2020) to scholars of African theological disability studies like Sinenhlanhla S. Chisale (2018, 2020) seem to share the same mix of sources like in this present thesis. There are obvious differences, of course: Swinton is much more occupied with classical theology than what is the case in this thesis, he, and colleagues, however, uses narratives and cases to argue theologically, which makes these studies interesting in a methodological perspective. I do, of course, not intend queer to be any kind of disability. That would be a hopeless interpretation. Still, the methodological

similarities are interesting. They are worth mentioning in order to locate the present thesis within disciplines that pursue parallel aims and interests.

Finding inspiration in Greenough's queering methodology, I include myself and my voice as an active part of this thesis. Greenough explains that researchers should include their own voice 'which allows for a deeper understanding of the researcher's involvement in the research process' (2017, 9) This thesis echoes this as it started from my own reflections in an autobiographical introduction on the impact of Keshtkar's The Father Project, and I introduce three other such reflections as two interludes and one epilogue throughout this thesis. Other important voices in this thesis is four queer Christians I will introduce in chapter 3, and their discussion over The Father Project as a stimulus. During the conversations, it became apparent that this stimulus generated experiences that touched questions of queer visibility in The Church of Norway.

Throughout this text I analyse and make use of both the material from the exploratory case study and the empirical work from other researchers in conversations with different theologians. Some of these, like Greenough, starts from empirical material in constructing theology, others, such as Tonstad, does not. As most theologians will agree that theology is a normative discourse, I am emphasising that this thesis has a specific normative project within queer theologies. As mentioned above (p 11) the specific contribution from this thesis is to relate faith, queer stories/voices and the challenge of belonging to Christian communities. How can such contexts contribute to how we can understand a becoming of queer Christians in indecency?

In order to examine the project question, I am, among other sources, informed by one specific exploratory case study related to the field. An exploratory case study is probably one of the freest approaches in case study collection of data (Yin 2012, 2009).This investigation has its limits, however, as exploratory case studies are traditionally used as ways of discovering 'pertinent hypotheses and propositions for further inquiry' (2009, 9).This is, however, sufficient for this thesis, as the exploratory case study is a starting position on further reflections in conversation with other empirical and theological work.

The exploratory case study investigates three questions throughout this thesis. Firstly, I examine how the participants relate to the stimulus at a whole that is I am investigating how the participants react to The Father Project as an activism that claims to address religious homophobia. Secondly, I wonder what alternatives they present to this stimulus, and how these

alternatives relate to their Christian community of the Church of Norway. Thirdly, I examine how they relate to the sexual indecency in the video. Inspired by Yin`s position that exploratory case studies are useful to develop and open future research questions and hypothesis, this thesis uses the outcome of the exploratory case study as interesting sources that should be considered in the theological responses to the research question.

Although the exploratory case study only presents one specific conversation amongst a limited group of four queer Christians in Norway, the conversations are relevant, albeit not general. I therefore stress that the material I present from this case is meant as a starting reflection to discuss in conjunction with other more thorough empirical material on queer Christians. However, despite the limited scope of this material, it did highlight some similarities people experience when navigating sexuality and Christian religious authorities. With the material, I investigate how the group discussed the stimulus and the experiences and reflection that this stimulus generated. Further, the participants in the group also brought up another activism in the Cathedral of Oslo, called the Rainbow Action. I introduce this event with the voices of the participants in Chapter 3, but for now it is worth mentioning that this is an act of activism that, to my knowledge, has not officially been recorded anywhere other than this thesis. Even though I stress that this exploratory case study cannot say anything general about becoming queer Christians in indecency, I believe the stories provide shape to reflections found in queer theologies. These are based on both 'classical' theological hermeneutics and empirical theological research.

As a queer Christian myself, I am aware of my own personal involvement. This involvement is visible through my autobiographical reflections, where I situate myself in relation to the material that I present. I thusly know that my own situating forms this thesis just as much as the participants in the exploratory case study do. Further, the exploratory case study, the presentation of other empirical and theological works, and my own situating as a queer-identifying Christian theologian engage in the normative discourses of theologies in general and queer theologies in particular. This discourse is the queer body of this thesis as it starts from voices of different queer-identifying Christians which I engage in theological reflections.

Further, I reflect along with different researchers who make use of different methods – some empirical, others hermeneutical. They are, however, all within the field of queer theologies. Tonstad, for instance, is one theologian I rely heavily upon. She also starts with queer bodies and experiences, albeit without empirical methods. She follows Althaus-Reid's hermeneutical methods addressing structures of theological power to deconstruct heteropatriarchal theology.

With this, she uses queer theories to construct one possible queer theology based on classical theological reflections, a point I return to in Chapter 4, 'Queer theologies'. Greenough, who also begins with Althaus-Reid's claim of sexual stories as the starting point of theology, has approached the same task as Tonstad with empirical work. He interviews people – queer and straight-identifying – to hear their sexual stories, which lay the foundation for the queer theologies he presents. These two perspectives are important throughout this thesis as the queer body in both Tonstad's and Greenough' works provide different perspectives of how queer theologies can be constructed. In this thesis, the methodological approach is a presentation of one conversation between four queer Christians in an exploratory case study that I use in conversation with other empirical work. Further, I discuss the outlines of the material with queer theoretical and queer theological reflections in hermeneutical traditions. I believe this approach is fruitful because even though sexual stories are important in themselves, queer theories have indicated that narratives, identity, and even the construction of the gendered and sexual body are discourses concerning norms which people always relate to in one way or another (Ahmed 2010, Butler 1990, 2005, Foucault 1990). This means that we never escape norms when discussing identity, not even when we start from our own sexual stories because they, in one way or another, construct different sexual truths that relate to heteronormative discussions on the topic of sexuality.

As I have presented the fluidity of the methods involved in this thesis, wherein I move between empirical material and hermeneutics, I must also address the fluidity of identity. Since I present the four queer Christian participants in Chapter 3, I want to shortly address the identity categories that I use throughout this thesis. My use of 'queer' is an umbrella category that includes, but not exclusively, sexual and gender categories such as lesbian, gay, bi, trans, intersex, queer/questioning, and other non-conforming expressions of heteronormativity (LGBTQ+). Whenever I use the term 'queer' I refer, in a broader sense, to the umbrella category of LGBTQ+, however, I do not claim that these categories are fixed as a static 'essence' because gender and sexualities are connected to bodies that change over the course of a lifespan. Personally, I can attest to this as I, at the beginning of this project, presented as a gay cis man. I have, however, over many years, gradually realised that I feel more at home outside this category. And in the late stages of this thesis, I found a home in identifying as non-binary trans femme and pansexual. Even though the irony of this identity is yet another category of norms, it shows that my own identity in gender and sexuality does not have to remain static throughout life.

To find participants for the exploratory case study, I relied upon gatekeepers in various queer NGOs, 'secular' and 'religious' alike. I also used snowballing as a method and reached out to people I knew in the queer communities, encouraging them to spread the word around about the project. The gatekeeper and snowball methods resulted in a small and somewhat homogenous group of four participants. This was, however, satisfactory for the purpose of this thesis as I am examining one specific discussion about sexual indecency and not trying to provide a general understanding of queer Christian identities in Norway. The four participants all live in Norway and are Norwegian citizens, White, between 20 and 40 years old, members of the Church of Norway. Additionally, they all identify within the LGBTQ+ spectrum.

Throughout this thesis, I provide space for the stories and experiences that the participants shared in conversations with each other. I analyse these conversations along with other empirical theologies, as well as with theologians who start with a more 'classic' hermeneutical method. My presence is visible both in my autobiographical reflections and in my analysis, discussions, and reflections on queer theologies in conversations with the material I present in this thesis. As pointed out in the subchapter 1.2, the undoing of methodology also reflects the messiness of writing a thesis in a queer research field, as positioning is never static nor neutral in research. Ironically, in the next subchapter, I add structure to the messiness of this thesis, guiding us through this text as diligently and queerly as possible.

1.4 Structuring Messiness

The project question of this thesis was presented in subchapter 1.1 above. The focus concerns queer Christians' navigation of sexual indecency. The intention, however, is not to discuss this issue in abstract and in general. I pay attention to the voices in the exploratory case study in Chapter 3 which show that church affiliation and embodied experiences are important aspects of navigating sexual ethics in a religious space. This makes these voices interesting for the profile of the discussion on queer Christian identities. The participants in the exploratory study reflected positions that seem to connect issues of (sexual) identity with both church participation and embodied awareness and reflection. How do these voices reflect positions of queer Christian identities in relation to some influential and contemporary positions in queer theologies? This is the background context from which I construct this thesis.

Chapter 2 'Introducing the Stimulus: The Father Project' introduces the stimulus, the Father Project. To grasp the context of this stimulus, one must first view the Father Project. I show how The Father Project navigates and makes use of Christian religious imagery in a

church to communicate a theology of inclusive love. In the following discussions with the informants in the exploratory case study, one interesting perspective concerns how their own voices and comments about the video show how the participants navigated and found their own interpretations of what it means to be a queer Christian.

To discuss the significant positions in the exploratory case study, and in dialogue with established queer theory and theology, **Chapter 3, 'Presenting the Material from the Exploratory Case Study'**, examines how the participants in the case study reacted to the stimulus. Here we see that the participants questioned the Father Project as a form of critique by someone who was unfamiliar with questions of queer inclusion in the Church of Norway. The participants mentioned having other experiences of being part of the Church that were not reflected in the video, which led them to call for a more nuanced depiction of queer Christian representation in the stimulus. As a solution, they presented the Rainbow Action, which was another act of activism to promote queer visibility and demand same-sex wedding liturgy in the Church. This took place during a service before the Synod of Bishops in 2013 which was held by the bishops, who gathered to discuss the issue. In this retelling, the participants expressed worry over a lack of understanding from religious authorities in questions of LGBTQ+. They also shared experiences of scolding and reprimanding when they had addressed such problems with religious authorities. At the end of the chapter, I present a discussion, wherein the participants discussed sexual ethics and expectations of adapting to heteronormativity. This discussion shows that, even in a small group, like in this exploratory case study, different tactics of navigation and adapting to sexual ethics were present.

Chapter 4, 'Queer Theologies', is a brief presentation of different researchers and their contributions to queer theologies. This leads me to introduce indecent theology and how Althaus-Reid's (2000) concept of *indecency* forms the theoretical framework of this thesis.

This chapter is followed by an **Interlude 1,** which is a short autobiographical reflection on the exploratory case study introducing Althaus-Reid. I reflect on this using my own experience of being part of the Church of Norway. In this reflection I find help in understanding the expectations of gratitude with Sarah Ahmed's distinction between 'happy queer' and 'happily queer'. The former is a model of happiness that conforms to heteronormativity, and the latter builds on happiness that starts from queer narratives of opposition.

In **Chapter 5, 'Navigating Christian Religious Spaces'**, I present an analysis of the material from the exploratory case study. I do this in conversation with other researchers in the field of

empirical queer theologies. This section shows that the participants' reaction to the Father Project as an example of unfamiliarity with religion, is a common experience, on which Adriaan van Klinken (2019) and Melissa Wilcox (2006) have also commented. In a worldview wherein we divide the secular and the religious, the latter is seen as antiquated and homophobic, and the former is understood as progressive and queer inclusive. However, as both the material of this thesis and other research show, such a dichotomy does not seriously consider that many queer-identifying people are religious and Christian and that homophobia exists in 'secular' as well as 'religious' environments. Thus, this chapter shows how the participants find space as part of the Church of Norway and navigate, as queer Christians, within this space. I continue analysing the Rainbow Action using ritual theories of Catherine Bell (2009). I assert that this Rainbow Action was a reclaiming of the communion ritual in which they were empowered as queer Christians, fighting what Sharon Fennema (2011) explains as the heterosexism in communion rituals. I compare the Rainbow Action to Fennema's findings and a communion ritual that took place during the Oslo Pride parade in the late 1990s. These three events can be explained with Wilcox's (2018) terminology of queer sacrilege and queer sacralisation of the queer body. I continue by discussing how the participants' experience of scolding also can be found in Susannah Cornwall's (2013) study on intersex Christians in the UK. Further, I see such instances of scolding as examples of microaggression, and I explain navigating this with Andrew Yip's (1997a) concept of 'attacking the attacker'. Finally, I discuss the participants' navigation of sexual ethics and compare this material with van Klinken (2019) and Chris Greenough's (2018) work. Here, I find that the participants' navigation fits with van Klinken and Greenough's findings that a magnitude of difference can take centre stage when queer Christians can start from their own experience when becoming queer Christians. In such discussions it becomes apparent that finding identities as queer Christians is more than a question of adapting to heteronormativity.

In **Chapter 6, 'Decentralising Theological Discourse'**, I return to Althaus-Reid's explanation of theology as a heteronormative economy. This economy controls the religious belief in sexual decency in an economy of salvation. I then explain Yip's 'Personal and Social Collective Experience'(2003b), Greenough's *Undoing Theology* (2018), and Wilcox's 'Serious Parody' (2018) as ways of challenging a dominant theological discourse. In this discourse, the economy of salvation is a question of either/or; however, with Greenough, Wilcox, and Yip, we can see a decentralisation of the theological discourse that Althaus-Reid calls for. This form of decentralisation can challenge an economy of salvation, wherein Christians must adhere to a

control of sexual decency. I end the chapter by returning to the different materials that appear earlier in the thesis and reflect how different personal and social collective experiences can be the undoing of theology to do queer theologies. Such an undoing can disrupt the economy of salvation, wherein decentralisations of theological discourse stand central.

In **Chapter 7, 'Decentralising Church'**, I again start from Althaus-Reid (2000) and her warning of empowerment as a positive reproduction of heteropatriarchal theology. I therefore investigate W.C. Harris (2014) and his critical view on theology, and I examine if this results in an abandonment of theology altogether. Even though his somewhat polemic critique might be relevant as a critique of heteropatriarchal power, Harris seems to forget that Althaus-Reid's position of indecent theology is one that does not want to be accountable to a dominant theological discourse. I therefore wonder if Harris's goal of 'gaytheism' might be closer to Althaus-Reid than it seems at first glance. In connection with Harris's critique of religious heteronormativity I explore Lee Edelman (2004) and his claim of queering as a destructive site. He calls for a non-productive position of heteronormativity. Then, I explore how Linn Tonstad's (2016) theology on the apophatic church starts from a position of destruction. Tonstad postulates that instead of claiming ownership over God through a reproduction of positive finitude, there should be an apophatic church wherein a heteropatriarchal theology is not reproduced.

In **Interlude 2** I share my own experience of 'Easter in the Park', an Easter celebration held by the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence in Golden Gate Park in San Francisco 2018. I investigate my experience of this celebration as an undoing of Easter, a queering of this holiday. With Wilcox's serious parody, I examine how this camp expression represents a religious community that does not demand religious affiliation.

Chapter 8 'Conclusion' is the final chapter of this thesis. I connect the threads of this thesis, wherein I explain that the different material I have presented throughout this thesis, are examples of decentralised theological discourses. This is that Greenough (2018) explains as undoing theology, which can give agency, wherein the sexual 'other' is not an object in dominant theological discourse. In this the positive subversive term of 'indecency' is deconstructing a dominant theological discourse that starts from heteronormativity. Even though this thesis started from an exploratory case study, and not sexual life stories, we can see some concepts of undoing theology from the four participants' conversations. This might especially be visible in the way that they queer the dichotomy of private and public, conservative and liberal. We can also see that with Bell's (2009) ritual theory that different

ritual praxis can be sites of undoing theology. The Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence, and the Rainbow Action can be some such sites, wherein the 'ritual essence' of the communion are rennarrated as queer sites of theology, fighting heterosexism. Such renarrations of the ritual, are further examples of the fluidity of the body and how these bodies challenge a deterministic system of theology. Bodies in the margins of dominant theological discourse can challenge such discourse through visibility. Starting from such bodily visibility does not demand one coherent essence of theology. Queer Christians can therefore form queer theologies that starts from their bodies and their experience, which does not have to stand responsible to a heteronormative theology. Such constructions does not mean, however that queer Christians have to leave Christian communities in a privatisation of their beliefs, because, with Tonstad's (2016) concept of an apophatic church, we can understand such undoing as navigations inside, outside, and in between, attachment to Christian communities. They can find God outside of the control of the churches, wherein the churches does not control salvation. This can also be done within liturgical structures of the church, such as in the communion. Also with the apophatic church in mind, we are all in the margins of salvation, in a state of uncertainty and left in an interminable state of undoing. This is a queering position where we do not need to seek theological affirmation as ways of queer emancipation in theology. In light of this, I therefore argue that becoming queer Christians in indecency is a decentralised position, a queering of dominant theological discourse, of which Greenough explains as undoing theology. I end the chapter calling for further extensive work on queer Christians in Norway, as more than a reproduction of dominant theology of inclusion. Especially is the lack of stories from trans and intersex people as part of the Church of Norway, urgently in need of visibility. We should bring into the light, the sexual life stories of queer people as theological discourses that starts from the margins. Such rsearch woul not only be relevant in a Norwegian context, but it would join the corpus of international research that constructs theologies from sexual life stories.

I end this thesis with an **epilogue**, in which I present an autobiographical reflection as one decentralised theological site. In addition, I explain how doing drag is an undoing of myself as a minister so I can perform a form of queer ministry amongst LGBTQ+ people. This is one example amongst many, which shows that becoming queer Christians in indecency takes many different forms in decentralised theological discourses.

2.0 Introducing the Stimulus: The Father Project

This chapter discusses the music video for the Father Project. I presented this as a stimulus for the participants in exploratory case study to discuss. As I stated in the first chapter, I was interested in figuring out how they related to and navigated this controversial video. Before I introduce the material, I believe it is beneficial to view the video through a theological lens. I do this because the video deliberately plays on Christian religious imagery to convey its message of same-sex love, a message that seems to have gotten lost in the heat of the debate surrounding the video. The material I present in Chapter 3 also shows that the participants in the exploratory case study discussed the consequences of the video rather than its storyline. This is, of course, understandable as the controversy stood in the aftermath of the premiere, when the question of a wedding liturgy for same-sex couples still was in debate in the Church of Norway. Inclusion, through same-sex weddings in the Church, was in a precarious state at the time, and much political lobbying had occurred to try to change this, before the measure failed in 2014 and when it finally passed in 2016. I therefore want the reader to 'see' the video and its message through a theological lens, without commenting on the Church's political aftermath. My presentation is an intuitive reading of the video that connects to different religious imagery, such as paintings and biblical characters. Within the space of Frogner Church, we find Christian religious symbolism in an interplay with suppression and liberation, where the same symbols can depict different meanings in different contexts. The presentation explains these meanings to convey the message of religious sexual liberation, wherein Christianity and homosexuality can claim space in front of the world and in front of God. I conclude that this video is one sexual story that can be part of Althaus-Reid's sexual theologies.

To do this presentation, I find inspiration from Adriaan van Klinken's methodological approach in his book *Kenyan, Christian, Queer* (2019). In this book, Klinken provides a political and theological reading of the music video 'Same Love' (2016), by the Nairobi-based artist collective Art Attack. He argues that the musical form and the lyrical content give space for a theological reading as 'the song's lyrics touch on religious themes and even include a quotation from the Bible and a statement about God. One might argue, for that reason, that "Same Love" is a gospel song' (Van Klinken 2019, 66). I will not argue that the Father Project is a gospel

song, but the use of Christian religious imagery in the music video and, to a certain extent, in the lyrics, makes it relevant to read from a theological perspective. Therefore, in the following chapter, I present a theological reading of Keshtkar's Father Project. This expression is obviously one position that uses two men in sexual embrace in front of the altar in Frogner Church to address discrimination against same-sex couples in the Church.

2.1 Reading 'The Father Project' with a Theological Lens

The Father Project was the official anthem of Oslo Pride in 2015 and was performed by the artist Tooji Keshtkar. In the Norwegian newspaper *VG*, Keshtkar explained that both the lyrics and the video expressed how we 'run from ourselves, denies ourselves, and yes, if God is one in all and everything, it's about denying God' (Pettersen 2015, My translation). He continued, asserting that all religion is oppressive of same-sex sexual acts, a history that he explained even the Church of Norway was responsible for. Without commenting on the polemics of his claim, it is worth mentioning that the Church Synod had, the previous year, voted down a proposal on same-sex wedding liturgy, so Keshtkar's accusations were not unreasonable. It is also this debate that sets the frame of this video as the Father Project is an act of activism supporting same-sex love in a Christian religious space. In the following subchapters, I present a theological reading of the video, examining its use of religious imagery and symbolism.

2.1.1 The Forsaken One

The church bells are ringing as we follow the back of a black hooded cloak through the cemetery. The black and white 'colour' scheme is like a renaissance painting as the shadow grading of the film enhances the dramatic effects of light and darkness. Where is this person going? And perhaps even more important, who is this person? Soon we hear a Gregorian chant. Perhaps it is a monk on his way to mass, but his stride seems more agitated, more resolute than a friar running to Holy Communion. The darkness and seriousness of the opening gives the impression of a person who is on a mission. He is like St. Paul, walking to reach out to the world with the gospel, the gospel which, according to the Acts, blinded Saul – before he became Paul – and God revealed for him the true light. Caravaggio's dramatic renaissance painting 'The Conversion of Saul' comes to mind. In this painting, Saul lies helpless on the ground beneath his horse, surrounded by darkness, but he is bathed in light and reaches for the heavens. Blinded by the interaction with God, Saul lies helpless on the ground, but this meeting turns Saul into Paul, and so his mission – revealing the light of God to the world – begins. Our black-hooded protagonist is on a mission; he might even be an inquisitor rushing to purge clean the Church

of blasphemous believers. In the intended and unintended symbolism, we feel the grave importance of the situation, and we are anxious to see where they lead us.

In the frame, we see a church tower followed by a congregation entering the building, greeting a young handsome minister as they pass by him. Outside of the Church, our protagonist stands, looking at the cross on the building. The Gregorian chant intensifies, but a distorted voice – as if a distant cry – appears and overtakes any other sound. A single clang of the bell silences everything as we now look at the west entrance of the church building. A mounted statue of Jesus looks over us, and the title of the music video, 'Father', appears with a cross, perhaps to confirm the Christian religious connotations we might already have recognised.

The beat of a modern pop tune begins, and we immediately hear Keshtkar singing. The congregation prepares for mass, greeting the pastor as they sit down, and some open their hymnbook, everything with a comforting solace, an ordinary Sunday in Frogner Church.

> You head so deep in the box
> So you cannot rise up from it
> The world is getting cold
> You got so numb while you play with it
>
> Forgot your heart on the road
> How you filling up the empty seats?
> Your hands are getting cold
> Why you looking for another treat a glimpse of heat?

The lyrics, on the other hand, tell a different story than that of a common preparation for this Sunday's mass. Someone is hiding from life, sticking their head in the box or in the sand, in a world that becomes cold and numb even though they are part of it. In the music video, a frame of the stained glass depicting Jesus on the cross meets us. It is as if Jesus is stretching out his arms in pain, telling us he knows our ordeal. Or perhaps this is a critique of Christianity, where Jesus represents a religion that for so many is oppressive; perhaps he is the reason for this coldness. We do not know because as we look at the people sitting on their benches, they do not seem to be evil persons; on the contrary, they are quite content and at peace with themselves and the world around them. They are waiting for the young handsome minister to begin the service. He, as a father, stands tall in front of the congregation; he could even proclaim a gospel of love as his words reach them. Nothing seems to be wrong on this Sunday. Yet, we hear Keshtkar singing – yes, proclaiming as if a voice from heaven – telling us that someone has

forgotten their heart as their hands are becoming cold trying to find another source of love, where they again can experience the passion and the heat they now lack.

> And I'll be running from you
> Father if you could just give me
> I'm tired of running
> I'm tired of running.

From the outside, we follow our hooded protagonist, as they climb the steps of the church. The stone building towers over us as if an impossible climb awaits, but at the top Agnus Dei, Lamb of God, awaits our welcome in a stone carving over the church doors. Another stained-glass portrait shows the apostle on Pentecost as the Holy Spirit descends in flaming tongues, another resurrected Christ holding his arms out in embrace – all those reminding us that even from afar, God never abandoned us, yet They will come again. Salvation awaits! Perhaps the hooded person is the new Messiah.

As the voice proclaims, 'I'm tired of running', we see, for the first time, our hooded protagonist's face. As he opens the doors and slowly peers into the church, we realise the protagonist is Keshtkar, the same voice that has commented on every scene we have seen so far. Perhaps he seeks a glimpse of heat; perhaps it is about his own salvation. Looking into the church, we notice Keshtkar and the pastor catch each other's eye, expecting that this handsome father figure in front of the congregation will greet Keshtkar as warmly and kindly as he has everyone else. 'Come in, child of God', he might say 'Take a seat here next to your friends in Christ'. We expect Keshtkar to be welcomed into the arms of God, but something is wrong. Our father, the handsome young minister, meets Keshtkar's sorrowful eye with suspicion, and the warm pastor turns into a stern man who aborts the service and walks down the nave towards Keshtkar. As he walks, the reflections from the stained glass hit him, the history of the Church, with Jesus and his apostles, reflects down upon him, hitting our eyes. The music intensifies, and flashes of memories hits the screen, but because they hit as bright light, we are not able to decipher them, yet we know that these intense memories will burst out into the light.

> Father

Observing the meeting between the minister and Keshtkar at the entrance, the repeating 'father' rings in our ears, a constant reminder of *our* father, the pastor, who now reprimands a distorted Keshtkar. A flash of a Martin Luther statue holding the bible for the world to see turns this

iconography of Protestant freedom into an act of suppression, as Luther now represents the authority, the scribes, who look judgingly down upon us. We see another stained-glass painting of Christ holding his recognisable pierced hand in 'dixit'. He said, 'Love each other as I have loved you; (John 15:12), but he also told us, 'Unless you repent, you too will perish' (Luk 13:3). What kind of love? What kind of repentance? Is it a repentance of the love these two in front of us have shared?

Father

With every repetition of 'father', flashbacks of a past rush before our eyes. An image of two masculine bodies embracing and kissing explains the cause of this argument. It is love between the pastor and Keshtkar, and during the intense quarrel, we hope that they will, yet again, embrace each other. However, the handsome pastor points towards the door, and Keshtkar is not welcomed into our father's arms. The lover, the pastor, and consequently, the Church, shuns Keshtkar and their homosexual relationship.

2.1.2 The Resurrected.

Another glimpse of St. John embracing the holy mother Mary by the cross underlines the betrayal of our protagonist, our saviour, as we stand under the cross and weep as we can do nothing but watch the injustice that happens in front of our eyes. Just as in the Passion of Christ, Keshtkar is judged and ousted by the scribe; the man of power does not want to embrace our saviour. This might be due to religious convictions, internalised homophobia, or perhaps even both. As the music intensifies, we see a flashback of the pastor's kind and warm greetings, along with pictures of the two naked men embracing each other in heated sexual action. Christ, the warrior on his white stallion, flashes before our eyes, and the congregation sings as if joining in on the excommunication of Keshtkar. The bible passage on the altar shines towards us 'I will give you rest' (Mat 11:28), followed with pictures of hearts covered in chicken wire. Resting in the arms of God apparently comes with the price of imprisoned love. Keshtkar is left behind as the music fades out, and the picture frame turns black.

You're so obsessed with your high cloud
And I didn't make your needs
And I can see your old
Loud sound by the end of it

I feel so bad for you now
When you're cleaning up your wounds to heal

Tell me what so cold
When you're looking for that outer need to make it bleed.

When everything is dark and it seems like all hope is gone, the silence is broken with the rhythmic beat of the piano, and Keshtkar's voice starts again. Now, we sit as part of the congregation, watching our pastor standing in front of us. Above him Mathew 11:28 reads, and hovering over that, the resurrected Christ shines through the stained glass, embracing us with open arms: 'I will give you rest'. Was it all bad dream? The fight between the minister and Keshtkar does not seem to be present in the congregation's mind. It might even be that this very moment, sitting on the benches, is a dream. We do not know, but it does not matter as this is a fresh start, away from ousting and excommunication. The lyrics still highlight distance and tell the story of the minister holding unattainable standards that alienate his sexuality from himself and from Keshtkar, but everything in the frame is peaceful, a stark contrast to the intense argument we just witnessed. We read the lips of our father as he proclaims, 'Let us pray', and everyone lowers their heads and closes their eyes in prayer. In the darkness of our closed eyes, a white dove wings towards us, reminding us of the Holy Spirit that came from the heavens and blessed Jesus after his baptism: 'You are my Son, whom I love' (Luk 3:22). Out of the dove, Keshtkar appear; he has returned (or perhaps he never left), and now it is him walking up the nave towards the pastor, who stands with his eyes closed. 'I feel so bad for you now', Keshtkar proclaims as we see him closing in on the minister. Aware of the love between the two, we hope that this care will overpower the internalised sexual shame of our father.

And I'll be, running from you
Father if you could just give me
I'm tired of running
I'm tired of running.

Again, we hear the refrain, but this time, Keshtkar caressingly touches the pastor's neck. In front of everyone, the two kiss passionately, and Keshtkar starts to undress the pastor, freeing him from his stole that weigh heavily on his shoulders.

Father

Embracing each other, naked on the floor in front of the altar, in front of the congregation, the white dove appears for moment as it bursts out of the embrace of the men. God blesses this love the same way God blessed Jesus by the rivers of Jordan. Keshtkar brought with him salvation, and the minister's internalised homophobia is gone. In their sexual embrace, yet again the text

above them reads ‘I will give you rest’. This bears a new meaning now: they can now rest in the arms of God. The congregation witness everything with loving eyes; they do not condemn the intercourse that they see before them. A woman crosses herself with a joyful smile, as if blessing the couple in front of her. As viewers, we understand that this is more than sexual desire, this can be *eros*; it is not an empty illusion because this has been a fight to love each other openly in front of everyone.

When the camera pans out, we are yet again seated as part of the congregation, looking at the couple standing in front of the altar, nakedly embracing each other. Through the stained glass of the resurrected Christ, the light shines upon the couple, and the love of God embraces them. As we see two wings growing out of them, we realise that they are beyond blessed by God’s love; as angels and the doves, they are now the messenger of God’s love for human beings.

2.2 Summary

This presentation of the Father Project is an attempt to understand the video as activism that concisely makes use of religious imagery in Frogner Church. This video critically made use of a religious Christian space and played on magnitudes of the religious symbolism found there. The embodiment of this space challenges religious authority on same-sex relationships, and the explicit sexuality fills the role of freedom and resurrection. With this background, the video could be interpreted, with Althaus-Reid’s work, as a sexual story that represents sexual theologies – that is, theologies that are materialistic, ‘which have their starting points in people’s actions, or sexual acts without polarising the social from the symbolic’ (2000, 146). From the lens of Althaus-Reid, the video shows religious and sexual symbolism as one act of religious sexuality, wherein a polemics between the religious and sexual body transforms into one social symbol. This symbolism is at the crossroads of desire which Althaus-Reid explains:

> An encounter to be found at the crossroads of desire, when one dares to leave the ideological order of the heterosexual pervasive normative. This is an encounter with indecency, and with the indecency of God and Christianity. (2000, 200)

Starting with gay male sexuality, the Father Project displays gay male sex in front of an altar, using the symbolic and aesthetic language of Christianity and connecting the indecency of sex to the material body to God.

Now that I have presented a theological reading of the Father Project, in the next chapter, I present the material from the exploratory case study. The four participants – Markus, Cecilie, Thomas, and Sophia – were presented with the Father Project (the stimulus) to discuss. The

material shows that the participants recognised and acknowledged the goal of the video, but they were critical nonetheless. One aspect of the critique concerned the video's use of Frogner Church. The participants rather favoured an alternative form of activism: the Rainbow Action. This activism took place during a service held by the bishops in the Church of Norway, wherein two men asked for intercession during communion while holding hands. This spurred negative reactions from some of the bishops, which the participants explained as unnecessary and problematic.

3.0 Presenting the Material from the Exploratory Case Study

So far, I have presented a theological reading of the Father Project. In this reading, the main focus concerned how the video used Christian religious imagery and symbols to convey a message of same-sex love as an act of religious sexuality. In this way, the video itself is a contribution to the question of what it means to be a queer Christian in indecency. In this chapter I present, however, four queer-identifying Christians' discussion of the Father Project in an exploratory case study from 2016. I present this material as I believe it may open discussions about issues of faith and queerness, a discourse I continue in Chapters 5, 6, 7, and 8. In this chapter, the participants' reflection on the Father Project starts from their own positions as queer Christian members of the Church of Norway, wherein their own connection to this religious institution is important in how they relate to the stimulus. This does not mean that they are unsympathetic towards the Father Project, rather they are critical of the sexual, religious position in it, which I presented in Chapter 2. I will return to a more detailed outline of this later, but for now it is worth mentioning that the participants do not see their church as being permeated with homophobia. That was one of the obvious differences between the video message and the informants' reception of it.

In choosing the controversial stimulus of the Father Project, I hoped to engage the participants in a conversation about the video to determine how they positioned themselves in relation to it and to further see how they navigated the explicit sexual expression in a church space. The latter inquiry resulted from the public debate as I wondered whether these four participants could add nuance to the polemic discourse of 'sex vs. anti-sex' in the church building. After all, they themselves represent the stigmatised sexualities that both the Father Project and the debate concerned. Yet, I stress that this material only says something specific about how these four participants discussed this topic amongst themselves within the given framework of the exploratory case study; therefore, the excerpts and the analysis in Chapter 5 do not necessarily reflect a general tendency. This material is nonetheless relevant as it presents the stories and voices of four queer Christians in Norway and how these participants understood and related to the controversial video. I provide the main results from this exploratory case study with empirical material from relevant contemporary research in Chapters 5, 6, 7, and 8. This

presentation reveals voices from Norwegian queer Christian contemporaries that have not been cited in any records I have encountered.

3.0.1 The Participants

Before I discuss the structure of this chapter, I introduce the case study participants. For the sake of confidentiality, the participants chose their own pseudonyms through conversations with me. The four participants all live in Norway and are Norwegian citizens, are White, are between 20 and 40 years old, are members of the Church of Norway, and identify within the LGBTQ+ spectrum. I also asked them to identify their religious affiliation, personal pronouns, relationship status, and sexual and gender identity, which I present here:

Cecilie: Pronouns: She, her, and hers

> Cecilie is in her late twenties and identifies as a queer gay cis woman. She is from southeast Norway but now lives in Oslo. She is married to a woman. She identifies as a believer, Christian, and Lutheran and is a member of the Church of Norway.

Markus: Pronouns: He, him, and his

> Markus is in his early forties, identifies as a gay cis man, and was born and raised on the southwestern coast of Norway but now lives in Oslo. He is an active member of *Åpen Kirkegruppe*, a national community of queer Christians, mostly affiliated with the Church of Norway. He is single. He identifies as a Christian and is a member of the Church of Norway.

Thomas: Pronouns: He, him, and his

> Thomas is in his late twenties, identifies as a gay cis man, and is from the midwestern part of Norway but now lives in Oslo. He is single. He identifies as Christian and is a member of the Church of Norway.

Sophia: Pronouns: He, him, and his

> Sophia is in his early twenties, identifies as a bisexual transgender queer, and was assigned a female gender at birth. He is from southeast Norway but now lives near Oslo. He is married to a woman. He identifies as Christian and is a member of the Church of Norway.

3.0.2 Structure of the rest of this Chapter

In subchapter 3.1 I highlight the ways in which the participants in this exploratory case study questioned the Father Project's critique of religion as homophobic. Even though Keshtkar expressed in the debates that this critique was addressed to every institutionalised religion, including the Church of Norway, the participants understood the music video as specifically targeting the Church of Norway in general and the Frogner congregation in particular. They disagreed with the polemics against a homophobic church that they saw in the video, especially because Frogner Church houses the LGBTQ+ Christian community *Åpen Kirkegruppe.* In addition, they experience the Church of Norway as a safe, inclusive religious space for queers. Even so, the participants acknowledged homophobia in the Church, but called for a nuancing of the Father Project's critique because it seems outdated in the political climate of inclusion that exists in the Church. In general, this points towards their feeling that that the Father Project is a critique from someone outside of the Church because the video does not portray the diversity that they experience within the Church.

In subchapter 3.2 I present changes to the Father Project's storyline that the participants suggested. They did not reject the seriousness nor deny the presence of homophobia in the Church, but they asked for a more realistic depiction of their religious reality – one that they can recognise. In this discussion, the commercial format of the Father Project as a music video is critiqued. This format stood in the way of participants embracing what they saw as an important political statement of inclusion in the Church.

In 3.3 Sophia introduces the Rainbow Action in relation to the activism of the Father Project. The Rainbow Action was an activism that took place in 2013 during the Bishops' Synod when the bishops discussed same-sex marriage. When the bishops held a service, several queer Christians attended with rainbow wristbands to increase visibility, and two men holding hands asked for intercession during communion. The proximity to the ritual praxis of wedding made the bishops react negatively to the incident. The participants argued that the bishops overreacted because the ritual legitimacy outweighs the political statement. Further, they argued that the bishops' position on matters of same-sex marriage is fragile as their theological arguments reflect an agreement amongst the bishops, rather than the interests of queer Christians. One such example that they highlighted was the bishops' theological recommendation from the same Bishops' Synod. Instead of being a support to the queer community, the participants uttered disappointment of the bishops' recommendation. Sophia even explained that discussing this disappointment with the bishops resulted in scolding.

Finally, in subchapter 3.4, I present a discussion between Cecilie and Sophia. Regarding the Father Project's explicit sexual display, they began discussing expectations of sexual control in the Church. This conversation highlighted different expectations about sexual conduct, and it became apparent that Cecilie and Sophia disagree on sexual ethics. Both do, however, agree that the norm they adhere to is heteronormativity, and Sophia seeks to challenge this norm explicitly. This goes to show that even within a small homogenous group, beliefs on sexual ethics and how to adapt to heteronormativity may be diverse.

3.1 'This Hits Me Like a Critique by Someone Who Is Not Really a Part of the Church': Addressing Polemics of The Father Project

The material that I present in this chapter, was gathered in a conversation amongst four queer Christians. This conversation was the second time Markus, Cecile, and Thomas had met, and Sophia had joined for the first time. We all sat together watching the Father Project, a year after its release. As the video ended, I opened up the table for discussion. After a moment of silence, Sophia uttered a concern about the Frogner congregation who had rented their church out for the filming of the music video. The public debate critiqued the Father Project's misuse of the trust they had received from the Frogner congregation, and this was a point that Sophia picked up:

> I'm thinking that this congregation didn't know what they rented it to. They wanted, in a way, to please, like [they're] liberal and nice and had very good intentions, so they rented [the church] out. Then one is supposed to do a foolhardy project, which tries to achieve something, and then it all just ends up, in a way, destroying a lot of trust. That's my thoughts at least. (Sophia) **#1**

According to him, because the Frogner congregation was queer friendly – a well-intentioned and liberal community. They opened their church to film the music video, but they did so without knowing the final product of the Father Project. This first comment referenced one of the debates in the aftermath of the video's premier, in which the congregation claimed the production process had been misleading. According to the congregation, they had asked the production team to remove the explicit sex scenes, a demand production denied as part of their contract. Instead of achieving same-sex marriage rights in the Church, according to Sophia, this foolhardy project ruined a trusted relationship, rather than allowing for discussion of the topic.

Cecilie expressed the same concern and connected it to her experience of practical solutions to intercessions of same-sex couples in the Church of Norway:

> I believe this music video perhaps tried to provoke the Church because gays should be able to get married and all that, but in many instances, this is not really the case. Therefore, this is a miss when they target it so strongly because many people receive intercession in the Church over their marriage and have received so over a period of time. Many pastors have done it for years without … Well, … so in this regard, I believe the critique or the provocation they might [have] wanted with this video backfired. (Cecilie) **#2**

Cecilie's reflection emphasised that even though same-sex couples had not been able to marry in the Church, such couples had found practical liturgical solutions to overcome this obstacle. She explained that the video had backfired because Keshtkar's claim of discrimination did not fit her experience as a member of the Church. She did not, however, claim that the practical liturgical solution of intercession is equal to a wedding liturgy, rather that the Father Project's polemic display of total exclusion of same-sex couples did not resonate.

Markus continued as he explicitly commented on this specific storyline of exclusion:

> I believe this was a showdown with the history of the Church. How they have treated those who are different, those who are not heterosexual. I believe it was some sort of showdown. (Markus) **#3**

Markus acknowledged that the Church has a history of treating people who are not heterosexual as an issue. Thusly, he was aware of the historical difficulties in queer Christian representation in the Church. Markus's reflection acknowledges the precariousness of being queer in the Church of Norway, and he even acknowledged that the Father Projected wanted to address this history.

Even though the participants saw the video as a sort of showdown with the Church's treatment of queer people throughout history, the group was reluctant to acknowledge the necessity of such a showdown. Markus, for instance, commented on the impact of the video:

> One could ask if other denominations, such as the chapeau movement from the conservative areas [would have been better targets]. (Thomas) **#4**

Thomas addressed the chapeau movement, which often publicly denounces homosexuality today. The chapeau movement is a movement from the mid-19th century, which consists of individual chapeaus. These chapeaus are Christian gathering sites, with religious and social activities, where one can listen to different preachers and partake in various meetings. Thomas's

comment targeted the general experience of these individual chapeaus as more conservative than the Church of Norway. In expressing – in his opinion – other more justifiable targets for Keshtkar's critique, Thomas also explained that the Christian communities are more complex than one unified conservative voice. The comment therefore expressed an awareness of differences in the Christian religious communities of Norway, as well as a critique of the video's seemingly one-sided attack on the Church of Norway. Although Keshtkar explained that his criticism was not explicitly directed at the Church of Norway, the use of Frogner Church connected this critique to this specific denomination.

This lack of understanding of the complexity of the Christian religious communities in Norway further led the participants to express worry over how this activism lacked a nuanced understanding of the debate on same-sex marriage in the Church. Keshtkar's activism encouraged alienation as it attacked the Church of Norway without showing voices from within the Church that support same-sex marriage. Sophia stated,

> One took for granted that the Church is a bunch of homonegative people. This is not at all true because probably a large majority of the Church of Norway is not a bunch of homonegative people. So, this critique is kind of out of place, a bit peculiar in a way. I do not know anything about Tooji's personal beliefs and activities, but this hits me like a critique from someone who is not really a part of the Church. (Sophia) **#5**

Sophia's reflection highlighted how people usually understand his religious community as a hostile space for LGBTQ+ people. However, his experience is that homophobia and homophobic people are a minority in the Church. During the debate, Keshtkar openly accused the Church of homophobia. Sophia's point, however, is the opposite as the body of the Church, with its members, represents a majority different from that of Keshtkar's argument. It is important to stress that Sophia did not exclude Keshtkar from the religious community of the Church as he emphasised that he did not know anything of his beliefs. However, Sophia found this sort of critique to reflect a typical criticism of the Church from someone who is unfamiliar with the Church. For him, this exemplified the distance between the activism and the reality that he experienced as a member of the Church.

The distance between the accused homophobia and the social experience of Sophia, was something Markus also recognised. He expressed that the Frogner congregation was an inclusive and welcoming community, something that stood in contrast to how they understood the Father Project's critique of the Church:

> Åpen Kirkegruppe ehm … rents Frogner Church once a month circa. We are in the chapel, not the church room itself, which one can see there, but it's a welcoming congregation, really. (Markus) **#6**

This tells of a congregation that politically advocates for and supports queer Christians through housing the LGBT Christian community of *Åpen Kirkegruppe*, an inter-denominational community that has existed since 1976. They have since held services in many different spaces: starting in living rooms and offices, and moving to chapels and cathedrals as the year passed and society progressed for the inclusion of lesbians and gays. This community has also been active in Church politics throughout the years, and early on they openly demanded to be accepted as Christians both in the Church of Norway and in the Catholic Church. There is no denying that their work has been essential for the inclusion of queer Christians, especially in the Church of Norway. Therefore housing such a historically important community is a clear statement of queer inclusion from the Frogner congregation. Ironically, it was the congregation's support of LGBTQ+ which made it possible to film the Father Project in the church in the first place. Using the willingness of the congregation to help felt like exploitation of advocates of the queer Christian community. For Markus, Frogner Church represented a safe space for queer Christians, which stands in contrast to the video's narrative of that specific church as homophobic and exclusive.

The video's failure to recognise Frogner Church as a queer-friendly space likely strengthened the feeling of Keshtkar as an outsider entering a discussion of queer inclusion in the Church of Norway. He not only targeted discrimination of same-sex couples, but also a religious space that was already in use by queer Christians. Thomas, for instance, said,

> I think it might be clarifying to know the reason of the conflict – to understand if it is the Church or that specific minister that is the problem. Is the minister a private person outside of his profession? (Thomas) **#7**

The distinction Thomas expressed is the difference between the minster in the video as a private person and a representation of the Church, a Church he is part of. It is understandable that Thomas wondered where the focus of the Father Project lay because even though the storyline focuses on a love story between two men, it all takes place in Frogner Church with the minster in full liturgical vestments shunning Keshtkar from the church. The symbolical excommunication, the construction of a hostile religious space for queers, did not resonate

because the participants knew that both the Frogner congregation and the Church of Norway could be a safe space for them.

In sum, it is clear that the participants of this exploratory case study did not recognise the narrative of a hostile religious environment in the Father Project, especially since Frogner Church is one space where queer Christians are welcome to express their Christian religious beliefs. However, even when discussing discrimination in the Church of Norway in a broader sense, the participants disagreed with the polemics that the Father Project portrayed. They had experienced both the Frogner congregation and the Church of Norway as welcoming and safe spaces to be queer Christians. They therefore saw the video and Keshtkar's critique as lacking nuance and understanding of the debate on same-sex marriage in the Church. Additionally, they suggested that, instead of taking advantage of an already welcoming congregation, other Christian communities – such as some of the chapeau movement's spaces – should be addressed. However, they understood the intent of the video, as Cecilie and Markus both commented on the history of the Church of Norway and its treatment of LGBTQ+ people throughout history. Nonetheless, such critique seemed a bit outdated as they perceived the Church of Norway as more inclusive than other Christian religious communities. The general feeling was that the Father Project was a critique by someone from the outside of the religious community, who took advantage of an already open and inclusive congregation to make a political statement. This statement did not resonate with the participants as they found it too polemic as the debate on same-sex marriage and queer inclusion is more nuanced than what the video managed to portray.

3.2 'I Would Appreciate More Comparing': Nuancing the Father Project

Even though the participants in the focus group critiqued the Father Project, they were not without concern about the issue of queer inclusion in the Church, and they even understood the means of the video itself. Sophia reflected,

> I, in a way, can understand that one has a need to express this, and I believe that might be a cause of conflict. Because one needs to be a bit visible and clear and be a bit explicit, and still demand inclusion. As the Church usually [says], 'But if you only behave controlled and quietly, then we'll fix this'. (Sophia) **#8**

Sophia explained that he endorses and understood the Father Project's method. In his experience, the Church usually expects him to have a quiet demeanour as he is being discussed by the Church leaders. Thusly, the leaders discussed and sorted out the issues of queer inclusion

and visibility without him. The rest of the group nodded and verbally validated this experience. This shows that even though they criticised the Father Project as a critique from someone outside of the Church, the participants also understood where it came from and related to it, especially when Sophia mentioned the need for visibility.

Cecilie also recognised such need for visibility. She even presented an alternative to the sex scene in the Father Project:

> I would appreciate more comparing. I would like to have some shots of gays not being able to get married or see that it is possible for gays to get married in church. (Cecilie) **#9**

This proposal incorporated a more nuanced position that reflected Cecilie's experiences of discussing same-sex marriage in the Church, and it might even reflect her knowledge of how complicated it is to express non-heteronormative sexualities in the Church, as Sophia jokingly expressed:

> You don't have to go very far in hinting of homoerotic love to provoke the Church. … Making out inside the altar rail, I believe, would have had the same effect. **#10**

Sophia's alternative points to a fairly common action: kissing during the wedding liturgy. Even this somewhat harmless action, Sophia understood as provocative in a church political setting.

The participants further expressed concerns about the format of the music video. They had, for instance, a feeling of the video being a commercial product. Again, Sophia's reflection is relevant:

> I'm thinking it would be a much stronger symbol if a pastor had joined and been like, 'I want to sit in the church, a building that means so much to me in my own professional practice, everything spiritual I'm doing and all that'. I mean, this was a totally random dude, which I don't believe has anything to do with … It was just acting in a way. Yes! I'm thinking it would all of a sudden be more of a statement, a performance art, yes, or … something real, but this is simply just a play taking place with … with [Frogner Church] as a tableau. (Sophia) **#11**

This reflection points at the absence of religious presence in the video. However, the importance of this statement is not of what Sophia saw as lacking in the Father Project, but rather what he would like to see. Commenting on Frogner Church as a backdrop for the video and using an actor devalued the impact of the video's message. Sophia did not see the video as grounded in

experience or in something real, and to make his point, he juxtaposed the video with performance art. Performance art is difficult to define because it best can be described as 'a grab bag category of works that do not fit neatly into theatre, dance, music, or visual art' (Schechner 2002, 137). Sophia's comment also highlights this art form's potential to be a political comment starting from body and identity, wherein the artist's use of their own body becomes a political art form in itself. Using an actor instead of an ordained minister underlined the commercial aspect of the music video, and the potential that lay in political statement got lost in the statement's format. If the minister who struggled with his internalised homophobia had been queer and ordained, the political statement would be more believable because it would reflect a reality that has real consequences for those involved in the video. However, the Father Project's commercialised expression did not connect to the political statement that it intended to convey. The format simply undermined the impact the project could have had if it had used an ordained minister instead of an actor.

This subchapter provided insight into the participants' different perspectives of the Father Project. They did not reject the intent of the video. Rather, building on their knowledge and experiences of how the Church debates same-sex marriage and non-heteronormative sexualities, they envisioned different approaches that, to them, would be more sensitive to the debate of queer Christian inclusion. These approaches called for a more realistic presentation of queer Christians in the Church, wherein some could get married and others could not. The Father Project's format also created a distance between itself and its political statement. Sophia saw this music video as a commercial product that missed an opportunity to convey an important message about homophobia and exclusion. He called for an ordained minister instead of an actor in the role of the minister, which could connect to the reality of being queer Christian instead of simply portraying it.

3.3 The Rainbow Action: Alternative to The Father Project

In this subchapter, I present another act of activism that the group discussed in conjunction with the Father Project: the Rainbow Action. This discussion shows how the participants have navigated queer visibility in the Church of Norway, especially when they have encountered scolding by religious authorities. Their reaction to such reprimanding shows a complex understanding of the debate on LGBTQ+ inclusion in the Church, especially when it comes to questions of same-sex marriage.

3.3.1 'It Created this Huge Commotion'

In addition to alternative versions of the Father Project, we can take a closer look at Sophia's retelling of activism that occurred during a service held by the bishops of the Church of Norway:

> We planned to have this, we planned in a way, to meet. … It was this service in Oslo Cathedral, and we planned to just participate with rainbow wristbands and nothing else. We just planned to be a whole bunch of people with rainbow wristbands in a way and nothing more. And then two of these guys figure out that they, during communion, walk up, and they kneel like everyone else and ask for intercession. Like … 'Just pray for us'. So they kneel at the altar rail, together, hand in hand, with … rainbow articles and what not. And it created this huge commotion of the kind … 'Well, this was completely unnecessary'… and "It was unnecessary to provoke in such a way where one could like just had a solemn dignified event' and … yes. (Sophia) **#12**

Sophia explained that Rainbow Action took place during a service of one of the Bishops' Synods in 2013. It was not a specific queer Christian service, but different people gathered wearing rainbow articles to show the presence of queer Christians in the Church of Norway participating in the liturgy of communion. Visibility became particularly important in this context since the bishops were gathered to discuss questions of same-sex wedding liturgy. Hence, the rainbow articles served as a reminder to the Bishops' Synod to not forget the bodies who faced the consequences of their decision. In other words, the activists spoke out through being present and simply participating in the same liturgical space as the bishops. By wearing rainbow wristbands and clothing articles, the Rainbow Action was a form of activism in which the participants revealed themselves as queer in a church space.

Sophia continued, recollecting how two men, in the spur of the moment, had decided to hold hands as they asked for intercession during communion, thus connecting the activism directly to the upcoming discussions of same-sex marriage. By kneeling at the altar, they played on known religious rites of intercession, an action that is found in both the communion rite and the wedding rite, and the rainbow articles connected this ritual to the upcoming discussion. The visibility of queer bodies in the religious space created what Sophia described as a huge commotion, and Sophia remembered the negative reactions from some of the bishops who officiated the service. The plan of simply taking part in a service created turmoil in the liturgy, and Sophia did not understand why. For him, asking for intercession was a normal and justifiable action, and some of the bishops had overreacted.

3.3.2 Positive Experiences With the Bishops

Even though the participants shared negative experiences from the Rainbow Action and the press conference, Sophia added nuance to this perspective. He also explained that the bishops who were pro-same-sex-marriage had a different reaction than those who stood in the middle and those who were negative. The head of the bishops, Preses Byfuglien, stood at the altar when the two men and the rest of the activists kneeled to receive communion:

> First, she looked at us, and then it took at second before she understood what this was about, and then she just prayed over them, as I understand just a regular intercession, like, 'Have good time' [laughs]. It was completely unproblematic and lovely in a way, but I believe if someone else had stood there they might have … Well, I don't know if they would have shunned them because that would probably be a catastrophe. (Sophia) **#13**

The point of Sophia's retelling is that even though they experienced negative reactions and scolding after the Rainbow Action, they were greeted by the Preses in the ritual exercise and not turned away. She and other bishops in the Church who were pro-same-sex marriage seemed to support the activism. Preses Byfuglien at least understood, as Sophia reflected, that she could not turn them away without creating an even bigger scandal. They got a seat at the communion table, but, as Sophia reflected, this was by the blessings of whomever stood at the altar. The action was still in a precarious state as it depended on which religious leader officiated the communion.

3.3.3 'The Bishops Aren't Able to See the Difference Between the Issue and the Person'

Sophia understood why some of the Bishops had become provoked by the Rainbow Action, but his retelling highlights how seemingly harmless participation in a ritual sparked scolding:

> What I've seen in services before [is] that people, during the communion, ask for a short intercession. … So, I think there's nothing really provoking, but I'm thinking that it becomes provoking for people in this context. (Sophia) **#14**

The activism was not personally provoking for Sophia as he knew the context. He further problematised people's negative reactions towards two friends holding hands, especially since the communion ritual is a place for intercessions. However, he explained that he understood that this might provoke others in the context of same-sex marriage debate, even though this was not the case for him. While Sophia did not address this, the Rainbow Action was a religious act

of political activism in which they hoped to achieve awareness around same-sex marriage and LGBTQ+ visibility in general. The service filled a specific role of religious preparations for the Bishops' Synod, so the same action might have resulted in a more conventional reaction in a regular Sunday service. The action might not have been as un-politicised as Sophia claimed it to be. This does not mean, however, that Sophia was unaware of a politicisation as he stated that he understood that this could be provoking. Nonetheless, his argument builds on the understanding of this action as commonly accepted in another church/political environment.

Cecilie's reaction also adhered to a similar understanding of the intent and meaning of the intercession as that of Sophia. She also commented on the bishop's scolding:

> Cecilie: It's two people who asks intercession and that's like …
>
> Sophia: (*interrupts*) And it was not planned.
>
> Cecilie: Yes … yes, and in a way, that's not more provoking than seeing two people asking for intercession. You've probably seen people ask for intercessions a thousand times before, and that's provoking you?! Holding hands or having some rainbow flags. **#15**

As Cecilie saw it, the bishops' reactions were unnecessary because the intersessions are common within the church and are closely connected to the communion ritual. She did not understand why the bishops would react so strongly just because the two men held hands and asked for intercession. She did not consider the two men holding hands a provocative action. Even though the two men holding hands may have done so to provoke people, Cecilie questioned the bishops' overreacting to an action that, for her, was a proper use of a religious space.

Markus called what he saw an overreaction to a legitimate ritual practice. He even connected the intercession to other liturgies and pastoral responsibilities of the minster as he reflected on Cecilie's statement:

> Markus: Well, if I would've been ill and asked for intercession, then no one would have been provoked.
>
> Cecilie: (*simultaneously*) Yes, that's true.

Markus: But if I would have come with a rainbow wristband and … (*sighs*) and asked for a blessing over my relationship to another human, then it's provoking?! **#16**

Markus took the argument a step further, as he explained the irony of how the intercession changed when the two men took part in it and how the blessing of a same-sex relationship created problems for the bishops.

Cecilie attributed these reactions to politics, wherein same-sex relationships and queer inclusion were a sensitive matter for the bishops.

> I have an impression that they, I was about to say, together are very divided, but very sensitive about this issue, or like … because this has become an issue for them, which like … 'Oh yes, it's the gay issue' or like approaches it. … Yes … ehm … And I totally understand people's need of provoking and to poke a bit on that issue. And I understand inasmuch that they become annoyed, but I think they … Yes, that might be the problem: [the Bishops] aren't able to see the difference between the issue and the person. So this becomes almost like a personal thing for them, (Cecilie) **#17**

Cecilie explained that the Bishops were divided on the question of marriage, and, according to her, this made them act carefully around this issue. This led her to argue that the question of marriage had become a gay issue, a problem that could be discussed and solved amongst the bishops. The bishops' lack of queer representation was a problem for Cecilie as they did not see past their own experience and were therefore not able to address questions of same-sex marriage without it becoming personal.

Others within the group recognised the political perspective that Cecilie presented. Markus, for instance, commented on the precariousness of these politics:

Markus: The issue is delicate for them, and they have concluded all of these fragile compromises, and if anyone touches it, it falls apart.

Someone: mhm.

Markus: And I believe they freak out (*chuckles*). **#18**

The fragile and delicate compromise reflected the atmosphere at the time. Before the Church of Norway Synod passed a gender-neutral wedding liturgy in 2016, the bishops took great care in standing united in public about matters of same-sex marriage. This does not mean that their

opinions on the matter were unknown. Rather, when publicyl discussing same-sex marriage in theological reflections, a careful tone was adopted. This is one of the compromises that Markus referenced. One such compromise was the theological recommendation that the bishops presented to the Church Synod in 2014. They recommended a liturgical blessing of civilly married same-sex couples. In the next part we therefore take a closer look at the participants' reactions to this recommendation.

3.3.4 'One Doesn't understand what it is all about': Addressing Benevolence

As the conversation developed, Sophia told his story of a press conference where the bishops announced their theological proposal on same-sex wedding liturgy. The bishops had discussed their joint theological statement in the bishops meeting, and knowing that several of the bishops were pro-same-sex marriage, many church members hoped the bishops would suggest such a wedding liturgy be formed. Instead, at the press conference, the Bishops announced at that they had found theological reasons to support intercessions of civilly married same-sex couples. With this, they did not advocate for a same-sex wedding liturgy, which was a disappointment for the queer Christian community at the time. Instead of being a clear recommendation that supported same-sex couples, it was a compromise that took the middle ground on the question. Many felt betrayed by the 'pro-queer' bishops, a feeling that Sophia reflected upon as he talked about the press conference:

> I remember being there at the press conference and when they got this, and it was a temperature out of this world by some of the … Well, not at the press conference, but someone was really disappointed about the bishops and tried to discuss this with the bishops. [One of the bishops] was on the brink, and she, like, didn't want to hurt anybody, but at the same time, it was difficult [for her] to go for [same-sex marriage liturgy]. And she, like, got scolded for it: 'But you have to stand for something'. But she was like … 'but … but now you'll get in a way' because they went for intercession or something like that, I believe – 'Now you have to stop complaining because now you've got a breakthrough!' … One doesn't understand what it is all about. Don't understand the need of why … not just be allowed to be a bit oneself? But it's like … be oneself, and, in a way, maybe even an extreme version of oneself, and still be allowed to be good enough. (Sophia) **#19**

He recalled that several people were extremely upset about the recommendation from the bishops and the lack of understanding of why the question of marriage was important. He exemplified the experience with a conversation with one of the bishops, who had moved from

opposing same-sex marriage to allowing intercession, a point of view that was provoking as it was understood as an intermediate position, which, in reality, did not change anything. Even though Sophia did not mention this, it had been customary for different ministers within the church to perform such intercessions, and such support from the bishops would, in reality, change little or nothing. When Sophia demanded an answer, he was scolded by the bishop, who explained he should be glad that the bishops had now moved one step in the direction of a wedding liturgy. Sophia also stated that the answer from the Bishop made him understand how little those who made decisions about his inclusion understood the dire need for a clear and concise position on the question of marriage.

Sophia quite agitatedly recounted his conversation with the Bishop and stressed a feeling of not being understood. The benevolence granted by the bishops did not reflect Sophia's needs as he asked for a clear understanding of the importance of the bishops acknowledging same-sex marriage. As Sophia told the story, he sighed when the bishop reprimanded the people who questioned her position because she did not 'understand what it all is about'. He also sighed when he concluded that the bishop had not understood the importance of the issue.

So far, this subchapter has provided insight into the participants' reactions to activism that occurred during a service held by the bishops before their 2013 Bishops Synod. This activism was called the Rainbow Action. During this meeting, the bishops were to discuss their theological statement on same-sex marriage, and several queer Christians gathered wearing rainbow wristbands to show queer visibility. During the communion, two men holding hands kneeled and asked for intercession, which, according to Sophia, created a huge commotion. Through comparing this intercession with other contexts, the participants found the bishops' reaction unreasonable. Even though this action could have been a political statement, the ritual legitimacy of the intercession outweighed the politics of the action itself, and the bishops' reaction underlined the precariousness of their theological agreements. However, although the participants experienced negative reactions from some of the bishops, Sophia also recollected that the activists involved in the Rainbow Action received intercession by the Preses Byfuglien, and they were given a spot at the communion table. However, he stressed that this intercession could have been denied by another bishop, a realisation that underlines the precariousness of the ritual participation of the activists. One example of fragile agreements between the bishops, however, was the Bishops Synod's theological recommendation of a liturgy of same-sex intercession instead of marriage. This, however reflected, for Sophia, the bishops' lack of understanding on the matter of same-sex marriage. When Sophia and others questioned the

bishops' decision, they were met with reprimanding from one of the bishops, which, to Sophia, emphasised that the Bishops did not understand the importance of same-sex marriage.

3.4 'It's the Sexual Act That Becomes Synonymous With Being Gay' Discussing Expectations of Sexual Decency

So far, the participants have discussed the Father Project, which led them to introduce the Rainbow Action in relation to Keshtkar's activism. This chapter demonstrates that the stimulus the Father Project also prompted the participants to discuss sexual ethics and expectations on sexual decency in the Church of Norway. Despite this being a small group, a disagreement occurred, a situation I analyse in Chapter 5. For now, I introduce the participants' conversation and their arguments to show that they relate to the Christian community and society when they address questions of sexual ethics.

As the Father Project shocked with its display of gay male sex in front of the altar at Frogner Church, the participants began commenting on this expression. It became apparent that not everyone agreed with the sexually explicit expression of the video as a representation of queer communities. Cecilie, for instance, questioned the consequences of the sexual display in the video:

> If [a sexual act in front of an altar] is sexuality, then one abandons the notion that being gay is more than sex. (Cecilie) #**20**

Her comment suggests that she did not agree with the video's display of sexuality. For Cecilie, this specific form of sexuality in front of the altar emphasised 'sex' as being gay, a reflection on which she elaborated:

> It's the sexual act that becomes synonymous with being gay, and I would claim that as wrong. (Cecilie) **#21**

Thus, Cecilie disagreed with the video's focus on sex because it only focused on that. Other aspects of being gay were lacking this presentation for Cecilie. For her, the relational aspect is central to her identity:

> Because it's the relation to another human being. … I think being queer or gay does not necessary only entail a longing for sex with a person of the same gender as yourself, which, for me, is girls. That's not what it's about. It's about … me having a love relation to another human of the same gender. Of course, all humans have sex in a way, or most of us at least, but it's not only that the relation is built only on the sexual act, or like, it

> is, but that's what's been criticised because one has been saying, 'Oh yes, that's because you have had sex with a man or because you have sex!' No, it's not what it's about. It's about me falling in love, what I like, have a … like, a certain type of relation to a human being of the same gender. (Cecilie) **#22**

The relations that Cecilie talked about are relations that build on feelings of love for another human being. For her, this removes the focus on sex as the significant identity marker of her own inclusion. Further, this nuancing of her sexuality counters arguments that she has encountered, in which her queer identity has been defined based on whomever she has sex with. The focus on sex does not embody her understanding of her sexual identity because, even though sex is a part of it, sexuality is more than that. Cecilie wanted to focus on love as an emotional connection between two human beings because, according to her, the general public often only sees sex between two persons of the same gender and not the emotional connection between two people in love. The emotional aspect of a queer identity formed Cecilie's argument. This stands in contrast to her understanding of a public opinion of 'gay' as being purely about sexual acts. She, however, argues for a broader emotional bond of 'love' between people who happen to be of the same gender.

Although one can agree with Cecilie's claim of love as a universal feeling that focus on more than sex as it signifies emotional connections between people, the argument was questioned by others in the group. Sophia, for instance, commented on Cecilie's argument in relation to inclusion in The Church of Norway:

> Ethically speaking, I think the Church has … the pillar argument has been, 'It must be OK to be gay because one has just as binding, just as amazing, and totally the same standards of relationships, as straights, but [the only difference] is that it's a person of the same gender'. (Sophia) **#23**

Sophia pointed to the expectations for gay people to adapt to the ethical relational frameworks that the church already acknowledges as binding and good. With this reflection, he started questioning the ethical standards of relationships in the Church:

> An important part of being queer is that I belong to a community. I belong to a culture. And I meet many challenges that I know others who are not queer does not meet, and that creates a common experience with many other queers. A part of that queer package, or the queer culture, I experience being a part of is [how we] generally challenge society, concerning norms and structures of gender and sexuality and many other things, which

> I know creates that kind of conflict, … in a way, from the inside, especially within the Church of queer and religious communities. I feel there's, like, this divide. One can seek homo tolerance – like, 'gays are entitled the same, just the same as straights'– but going beyond that is impossible. If one wish, in lack of a better word, a reformation of the concept of gender and sexuality, not just swapping gender with that other partner, but more like … I mean, we really need to discuss questions of cohabitation because the rest of society is ahead of us on that question. Well, I believe it's a very interesting question, had homosexuality (homofili) been less acceptable for many liberals within the Church if it all was a question of sex? Is a relationship only focusing on sex of less worth? Or any other forms of relationships that's not normative? And I believe that's one of the most important [parts] of my queer identity: to ask questions to all of that. **#24**

Sophia began by expressing how his own identity is based on a community that is constructed around the experiences of sexual and gender difference. The ways these experiences can challenge norms can be conflicting when it comes to inclusion of queer people in the Church of Norway and other religious communities, he claimed. In addition, he expressed feeling like this conflict creates a divide in the Church, where one side accepts queer people as long as they adjust to a tolerance that is based on conforming to heteronormativity. Although he believed it would be impossible to go beyond such conforming, Sophia called for a sexual and gender reformation in the Church of Norway. This also led him to reflect on the question of cohabitation, a judicial form of relationship – other than marriage – that the church does not officially endorse. This led him to reflect on whether liberals within the Church of Norway would accept queer people if one were to discuss sex rather than love. Being able to question the norms that the Church sets as a premise for ethics in sexuality is one of the most important aspect of his own queer identity.

Cecile did not disagree with Sophia's statement, and she even responded to his comments on the norms of sexuality:

> It is implicitly said that the normal, or the norm, is a heteronormative relationship. And I understand the question, but I think, maybe, as it challenges the Church, it also challenges society on how we live together. (Cecilie) **#25**

Cecilie understood Sophia's reflection and concerns about heteronormativity, but she explained this issue as part of larger, systemic issues, instead of an issue in the Church alone. Questioning heteronormativity challenges the Church as much as it challenges society in general. So, by

nuancing Sophia's problematising, Sophia showed that questions of queer inclusion in the Church can challenge society at a whole. Therefore, the question of heteronormativity is a larger societal undertaking, which cannot be put on the Church alone.

Cecilie's and Sophia's reflections demonstrate that even within a small group, questions about inclusion in the Church of Norway are complex. They addressed different interests and experiences of their own sexuality and gender. Cecilie understood her own identity based on emotions of love. Sophia did not question this position; however, he questioned how queer people's experiences of sexuality and gender have had to adapt to heteronormativity in the Church. Cecilie agreed with Sophia, but she also argued that society in general is formed within heteronormativity.

3.5 Summary

This chapter presented the discussion amongst participants of the exploratory case study, who perceived the Father Project as a critique from someone who was unfamiliar with the religious community of the Church of Norway. Even though Keshtkar generalised his critique to every institutionalised religion, the participants saw the critique as targeted towards the Church of Norway specifically. This is likely because the location of the video – Frogner Church, a congregation denominational to the Church of Norway – was recognisable to them. Such connections might have strengthened the understanding of the video as too polemic in its portrayal of religious homophobia. Accordingly, the participants called for a more nuanced representation of queer Christians in the Church of Norway, especially since the Frogner congregation hosts *Åpen Kirkegruppe*, which suggests that neither this congregation nor the Church are as homophobic as the Father Project insinuated. Even so, the participants acknowledged homophobia in the Church of Norway. As the Church's political climate was changing in favour of same-sex marriage, the Father Project's critique seemed outdated, especially since the participants argued that other Christian religious communities were more conservative. For the participants, the video did not manage to portray the diversity they knew in the Church of Norway. Therefore, the participants saw the Father Project as a critique of the Church as it did not reflect the complex structures of the debate within the Church of Norway.

However, even though the Father Project felt alien in its critique, this did not prevent the participants from relating to the critique of homophobia in the Church. The problem with the video seemed to lie in its commercialised format. This format stood in the way of the important political message that the project wanted to convey. Sophia, for instance, called for realism as

he would have preferred an ordained minister in the video, or another artistic format, such as performance art. In relation to the Father Project, the participants brought up other activism that they compared with the video: The Rainbow Action occurred 2013 when queer Christians – wearing rainbow wristbands and other clothing items – attended a service held by the bishops in the Church of Norway. The bishops were gathered to discuss their theological agreement on same-sex marriage. During the service, two men holding hands asked for intercession instead of communion. The proximity between ritual praxis of intercession in the communion and the wedding liturgy prompted negative reactions from some of the bishops. Although the participants could understand such reactions, they found them irrational. For them, the ritual legitimacy outweighed the political statement that such actions had. Further, these reactions also underlined their understanding of the bishops' theological arguments on same-sex marriage as an interest that did not support queer Christians as much as it supported the bishops' own theological position. One example of this was the theological recommendation of the bishops regarding blessings for same-sex couples, wherein they recommended an intercessions liturgy instead of a wedding liturgy, which Sophia felt betrayed by. When Sophia expressed his disappointment to one of the bishops, he was scolded, which made him realise that the bishops did not understand the situation of queer Christians in the Church.

Even though the participants did agree that the Father Project's format obscured its important critique, they had different views on the sexually explicit conduct in the video. Cecilie and Sophia differed in their understanding of the need to show sexuality. Cecilie saw this display as oversexualising the queer body, and she called for a more holistic argument of love rather than sexual activity. Sophia, on the other hand, accepted the sexually explicit expression, because he believed it necessary to challenge inclusion in the Church of Norway that is based on heteronormativity. Cecilie acknowledged Sophia's concern, but she also stated that structures of heteronormativity are societal and not in the Church alone. This shows that even in a small, fairly homogenous group, beliefs about sexual ethics can vary.

So far, I have presented a reading of how the Father Project conveyed its message of same-sex love and how four queer Christians in Norway discussed this video in an exploratory case study. In Chapter 5, I return to these voices and how they often seem to contrast with the Father Project's own depiction. The informants often argue from embodied perspectives, and they also often underline their own denominational context. In this way, they signal some responses to the project's question about what it means to be queer Christians in indecency. To discuss these positions more substantially, it is key to relate the positions from the exploratory case study to

relevant contributions from theological queer studies scholars. Thus, the following chapter introduces some of these contributions.

4.0 Queer Theologies

In this chapter, I present various reflections around queer theologies. As this thesis uses an exploratory case study with four queer Christians and works from other researchers who have performed empirical research, I specifically examine how 'body' forms different queer theological reflections. The significance of 'body' as a critical term for responding to the project questions has already been signalled in the previous chapters. I find it important and relevant to acknowledge the body as a site of theology. Together with queer voices and participation in Christian communities, 'body' is a central term, both in the analysis of queer theory and in the critical interpretations in the last chapters of this thesis. With this background, the present chapter presents and assesses significant positions in queer theology.

4.1 Genealogy of Queer Theologies

The notion of 'queer' is not clear-cut; it has a multitude of definitions. The magnitude of what the term incorporates also reflects how it can form theological thinking. In this subchapter, I present two main lines of queer theological reflections. In doing so, I establish relevant reflections for this thesis; however, I do not claim that these two are the sole perspectives that queer theologies encompass.

4.1.1 Queer Theologies Starting from Identities

As the lesbian and gay movements in North America and Europe have become increasingly visible in the public since the mid-20th century, so too has the focus on theological reflections in the US. The foundation of Metropolitan Community Church in 1968, along with works such as *Loving Women/Loving Men* by Sally Miller Gearhart and William R. Johnson (1974) and *The Church and the Homosexual* by John J. McNeill (1977), revealed the growing lesbian and gay Christian awareness in the US. This awareness can be seen as pastoral responsibility, as, for instance, McNeill concludes:

> I have posed the thesis that there is the possibility of morally good homosexual relationships and the love which unites the partners in such a relationship, rather than alienating them from God, can be judged as uniting them more closely with God, and mediating God's presence in our world'. (198)

This pastoral care shows concern about the inclusion of lesbian and gay sexualities in a theological discourse, with a primary focus on identifying lesbians and gays as fully pledged members of God's creation.

The stress on inclusion stems from a theology that examines the experiences of lesbian and gay lives. Hence, the 'queer body' is a starting point that directs attention towards a theology that breaks with heteronormativity, or, as Lisa Isherwood and Elisabeth Stuart state in *Introducing Body Theology* (1998), 'One of the themes that runs through both lesbian and gay theology is bodily knowledge whose "voice" can break through the epistemology of oppression' (96). This phrase does more than merely emphasise the body as a point of departure as these bodily experiences not only challenge theology but can also break with oppressive structures within it. This connection to bodily experience as a 'voice' breaking away from heteronormativity is relevant when lesbian and gay theology develops into queer theology.

In the 2000s, the term 'queer theology' began to appear. This represented movement away from a theology built on an exclusive lesbian and gay identity and towards a more encompassed theology that attempted to include an LGBTQ+ perspective, wherein the questioning of heteronormative structures within theology itself became central. The shift also meant that more queer theoretical perspectives manifested; although, as I demonstrate, the degree of queer critical thinking has sometimes been limited to the degree of inclusive LGBTQ+ theology. Grace Jantzen's article 'Contours of a Queer Theology' (2001) is a prime example of how queer theology now starts from perspectives of queering theology itself, and she questions 'how queer thinking can be theologically creative' (276). She suggests using the 'lesbian rule', an architectural measuring instrument that '[…] is a flexible strip of metal, a device used for measuring curved or oddly shaped parts of structure, where a straight, rigid rule, would be clumsy or useless' (277). Jantzen's method shows a popular development in queer theology as the lesbian rule can challenge the straight narrative of theology itself; instead of asking how lesbians and gays *are* Christian, some theologians have begun reflecting on *how* Christian theology is queer.

A good introduction to the method of the lesbian rule is found in *Queer Theology: Rethinking the Western Body* (Loughlin 2007), a co-work of various scholars who reflect queerly on theology, religious studies, and gender studies. Gerard Loughlin edited the book, which he saw the need for because 'Theology is a queer thing. It has always been a queer thing. It is a very strange thing indeed, especially for anyone living in the modern West of the twenty-first century' (7). To emphasise the queerness of Christian theology, Loughlin continues by

deconstructing the understanding of marriage, using religious imagery from the late Middle Ages. By highlighting widespread examples of devotion towards a symbolic marriage between Jesus and John the disciple, he claims that marriage as a childbearing institution, as advocated by the churches, does not necessarily have the same symbolic roots throughout history. He deconstructs the idea of the modern marriage as natural in itself and instead explains it as a social organisation constituted in time and space. He states that he finds it peculiar that advocates for heterosexual marriage do not see the benefits of including same-sex couples in it, since this would strengthen the notion of marriage as a climax of romantic love. Loughlin continues by stressing that the construction of marriage today is '[t]he meeting of human and divine that is given in the joining of bodies' (6). It is this statement that claims theology as queer because if marriage is a meeting between the human and the divine, gender is irrelevant. The imagery of Christ's marriage is a meeting beyond heterosexuality as the male Christ is married to both men and women, and therefore, it is impossible to place gay people outside 'Christ's eucharistic embrace' (7). For Loughlin, this argument, as well as the various imagery of marriage and matrimony throughout history, emphasises the queerness of theology itself.

In the same edited volume, David Matzko McCarthy continues the deconstruction of marriage as a social institution, in the book chapter 'Fecundity: Sex and Social Reproduction' (2007). However, rather than ignoring the notion of reproduction, as Loughlin does, McCarthy upholds it as a social institution of fecundity. He follows the teaching of the Catholic Church as he deconstructs the notion of fecundity as an economy of the household, rather than of sex. In doing so, he allows for childless marriages, including same-sex couples as possible subjects, as fecundity is, in itself, a social reproduction.

A perhaps more challenging position than the adaption to constructions of marriage is Virginia Burrus's (2007) argument that we all are God's bottoms. Burrus begins from Gregory of Nyssa to show how her argument forms a theology of submission to God; and, using gay sexual language, Burrus explains this submission as the passive receipt of God's grace; in other words, we are God's bottoms. In addition, Paul Fletcher (2007) criticises the Church's bargaining of sex as a marketed product under the control of late capitalism, answering with morals within the frame of marriage. His solution is to embrace *'eros*' as a form of true pleasure, and he notes, '[It] does not pursue, at any cost, the empty illusion of a righteous economy of sexual desire' (265). Through deconstructing classical Christian theology and doctrine, the book demonstrates that theology is a politics of sexuality and claims LGBT – although mostly lesbian and gay – as part of this discourse.

The movement from a lesbian and gay theology towards queer theology shows an awareness and wish to recognise the larger scale of a Christian LGBTQ+ community. It is this interest in constructing theology from queer bodies that is relevant for this thesis. I therefore present Pamela R. Lightsey's work *Our Lives Matter* (2015) to provide a closer examination of her argument that theology is an queer enterprise, with the queer body as site of theology.

4.1.2 LGBTQ+ as Imago Dei

In her book *Our Lives Matter: A Womanist Queer Theology* (2015), Pamela R. Lightsey addresses theology as a Black queer woman. She points out how Christian theologians seldom address the intersectionality of race, gender, sexuality, and Christianity. Her solution is the queering of theology, which addresses notions of binary oppositions, dichotomies, and deconstructions, which she claims are critical to an essential understanding of identity. This is especially prominent in the way she critiques Rev. Al Sharpton as a leader of an identity-based liberation movement. She claims that such movements 'point to group ideals using flawed commonalities' (2015, 22) that lack intersectional approaches in campaigns for justice. Identities such as 'the Black Church' do not exist as one entity and usually forget other marginalised groups and identities within this category, for instance, LGBTQ+ persons.

As much as Lightsey critiques essentialist constructions of identity, she acknowledges how the subjectivity of categories forms a language of how we are perceived by society, which objectively impacts our social location. This acknowledgement leads Lightsey to underline self-identification as a legitimate as a way of constructing 'modes of experiential consequences of these categories' (2015, 23), suggesting that embodiment is imperative for identity constructs. It is only through this, according to Lightsey, that we can challenge discriminatory constructions of identity because groups of marginalised people can address intersectionality in a specific chosen identity, thus challenging stereotypes without undermining the impact of identity in society. This subversion of identity politics deconstructs and queers these categories, facilitating a chosen identity, emphasising the multitude of voices, and challenging an essentialist understanding and impact without cutting the historic reception of the various groups.

Lightsey's project is a project of inclusion, but it is just as much a critical method applied to theology: 'Queering, as a theological methodology, is a deconstruction and re-evaluation of gender perspectives that uses as its framework queer theory and as its resources, scripture, reason, tradition, and experience' (2015, 27). She addresses the dangers of heteronormativity,

but instead of questioning whether theology is essentially heteronormative, she instead regards this heteronormativity as a structure of the Church itself. Her solution is to challenge the churches and dogma that find justification through tradition. This leads her to deconstruct the concept of Imago Dei, a doctrine widely used within womanist theology that encompasses a universal church:

> It is particularly relevant to queer womanist theology that contains as its fundamental tenet the idea of fluid relationality between humanity, God and Creation. We suggest it is fluid because of the imagery of interconnected and unconstrained relationships with one another, God and Creation. (80)

Lightsey understands the fluidity of Imago Dei within womanist theology as relevant to addressing intersectionality within the group of queer Christians and allowing the bodily experiences of relationships. The relational aspect is an innate component of Imago Dei. It does more than connect God to humankind; it also connects God to the whole of creation. For Lightsey, this indicates a fluidity like that of queer theory.

According to Lightsey, the concept of Imago Dei 'marks the journey of origin' (81) (i.e. the creation from beginning before the introduction of sin to the world, or temptation, as Lightsey calls it). The sin results from the distance between the creation and God after the fall of humans and manifests itself in inordinate self-love, which is the temptation of not loving what God has called 'good' and focusing on oneself instead of God. Lightsey challenges this notion as queer and Black women's bodies have been victims of abuse. So, her concept of Imago Dei embraces a self-love that emancipates people because self-loathing is also a sin that distances us from God.

Lightsey's solution is to embrace a holistic concept of love. Seeking tradition, she examines Reinhold Niebuhr's theological analysis of pride and sin, focusing particularly on sex and sensuality, as LGBTQ+ persons are targets of such discussions of sin. She underlines that Niebuhr's project primarily attacks not sexuality, but sensuality in its essence because of the primal love of self, which disconnects us from God and the love of God. Sex only reveals sensuality, but it is not the cause of it as an effect of inordinate self-love. Reconstructing sensuality as sin does not, on the other hand, solve the problems of heteropatriarchal sexual control. Augustine elaborately argues for sexual rules to control 'the satisfying of lust' (1996), and unquestionably, both his and Niebuhr's understandings of sex might disconnect inordinate love from sexuality. Lightsey, on the other hand, questions this division as 'theologies of our

faith traditions so rigidly [guard] against sensuality and by association sexuality that it results in deprecating language and hostile situations' (2015, 83). Thus, Lightsey abandons Niebuhr's understanding of sensuality as inordinate self-love but upholds the key arguments of it, as she quotes him: '(1) an extension of self-love to the point where it defeats its own ends; (2) an effort to escape the prison house of self by finding a god in process or person outside the self; and (3) finally an effort to escape from the confusion: which sin has created into some form of subconscious existence' (Lightsey 2015, 83, Niebuhr 1996, 240).

As inordinate love is tightly connected to bodily experience, Lightsey asks whether it is possible to follow the doctrine of Imago Dei without falling into innate self-love. Her answer is 'Yes': 'We must remember that flesh is not essentially evil but became/becomes sinful as it yields to the temptation to place its desires above the Creator' (83). Thus, Lightsey underlines how our bodies need a self-love that is healthy without becoming idolatrous, something Imago Dei reminds us through the concept of love. Our sexual bodies are not sinful, and our bodies are not evil in themselves, but after the fall of humans, inordinate self-love can be an act of escapism.

I perceive Lightsey's project on turning the tables and embracing the sexual body as inherently good. Instead of connecting sexuality to a question of sin, she consequently pushes the boundaries of sin and reframes it as an act of escapism. The act of escapism encompasses not necessarily sexual acts but any action that disconnects us from God and creation. It is this bodily approach which, according to Lightsey, is the solution for an inclusive queer womanist theology, wherein 'Queer theology is the Church's pièce de résistance of the twenty-first century in that [it] offers an opportunity to include rather than exclude more voices within our various communities' (27).

4.1.3 Queer Theologies as Norm Critique

Thus far, this thesis has shown how theologians have used queer bodies, experiences, and identities to deconstruct and construct theology. McCarthy, for instance, has stated that marriage, as a social reproduction through fecundity, includes same-sex couples. Lightsey stresses LGBTQ+ as part of God's image because 'exclusion and individualism separate us from one another and Divine Love' (Lightsey 2015, 88). Such approaches build on Christian theology's own tradition and praxis to validate their point within this discourse. In other words, they explain how queer-identifying people can represent and be part of Christian orthodoxy.

The method of queer-inclusive theology answers theological arguments of exclusion, but this approach has been critiqued by other scholars who also start from queer perspectives. Kent

Brintnall, for instance, questions how queer-inclusive theology in Patrick Cheng's *Radical Love* (Cheng 2011) and Susannah Cornwall's *Controversies in Queer Theology* (Cornwall 2011) predisposes the uncritical use of traditional Christian authority:

> [W]hat are the relevant sources for queer theology? Cheng lists the four typical candidates: scripture, tradition, reason and experience. He places the adjective 'queer' before each, but there is nothing particularly queer about his examples. Queer Scripture, for Cheng, is the Bible. Why not *The Well of Loneliness*, *Portrait of Dorian Grey*, *Rubyfruit Jungle*, *Giovanni's Room*, *Frisk*, *Stone Butch Blues*, *Angels in America*? (Brintnall 2012, 309)

In this comment, Brintnall identifies a critical argument regarding how we relate to the authority of 'Christian'. Without asking the critical question of *why* we start from this point, we assume that theology is queer in its essence. Brintnall thus critiques the desire to prove theology as queer and argues that it is in fact not because such methods devalue the queer perspective.

Linn Tonstad also critiques 'queer inclusion' as a blind spot of queer theology. In her article 'The Limits of Inclusion: Queer Theology and its Others' (2015), she argues that seeking theological inclusion builds on an exclusive other. Rather than queering, we stand in danger of solidifying the binaries that we so rigidly want to break because justifying queer inclusion with arguments such as tradition builds on theology's affective binary symbols. She shows how inclusive theology, rather than solving any of the issues of exclusion, instead forms new borders of inclusion by upholding otherness. Tonstad highlights three limitations concerning inclusive theology: first, such theologies include, by alienating others, creating exclusivism that upholds structures of anti-Semitic tropes; second, inclusive queer theology ignores the affective life of binaries; and third, such inclusions are presentist or legitimate recourse to origins (2). Tonstad's critique addresses the problems queer-inclusive theology tries to defeat, such as exclusion from religious communities, and she addresses the pitfalls of such an enterprise. She claims, 'Inclusivist Christian queer theologies sometimes emphasize their own inclusiveness in contrast to an exclusive other. […] The most worrisome versions make use of common anti-Semitic tropes' (3). Tonstad underlines how such tropes are infrequent but usually appear 'in discussions of Jesus as transgressive, gender fluid, and radically embracing of the economic, religious, sexual and social other' (3). The project of 'inclusive queers' does not, according to Tonstad, build on tropes of otherness, primarily addressing 'contemporary Christians who exclude queer people, but the explicit "other" of critique is Jewish, not Christian' (3). Another risk of a queer-inclusive project is the inherent tendency towards essentialism as, arguably,

Christianity is de facto queer in contrast to the 'failed practises of queer theorists' (4). To this discussion, I would further add the dangers of Christian imperialistic theology, wherein discussions of inclusion emphasise the structures of Christian supremacy, while lacking reflections on how Christianity constructs its own power structures. Tonstad's critique underlines the dangers of such an enterprise.

Tonstad continues to address the dangers of inclusive theology as blindly upholding heteropatriarchal structures within theology, as queer theologians '[i]n their desire to reclaim Christianity … ignore … affective life of binaries, particularly with respect to gender (5). Tonstad underlines the problems concerning theological reflection, arguing that gender is merely a medium of symbolic qualities encompassed in different roles, not the message itself. The problem is, as Tonstad asserts, 'The symbol is always more than a medium' (5). Ignoring the affective lives of binaries falsely assumes gender as a neutral construct, ignoring the binary relationship of male and female as structures of power, wherein 'male'– and all the 'qualities' affiliated with maleness – dominates 'female'. Through these arguments, the concepts of male/active and female/passive remain unquestioned, and this upholds essential arguments of genders as divine structures, for instance, through using arguments of God as 'ultra-feminine' and 'ultra-masculine' through the Trinity or, as D'Costa argues, by upholding patriarchal understandings of passivity and activity through gendered roles. Tonstad continues critiquing these stereotypes and how they become sexist in the process of queering theology as 'these arguments fail to see that the theological significance of bodied identifications primarily depends on their associative, symbolic-linguistic aspect' (9). This is especially dominant in relations between God and creation, as symbols of human beings – Church, nature, and so on – are 'brides of Christ', thus supporting Barth's understanding of the order of humans, in which women are subordinate to men, men are subordinate to Christ, and so on. Thus, inclusive queer theology is at risk of blindly upholding suppressive structures of gender and sexuality through ignoring the affective life of binaries.

Origin, legitimation, and presentism comprise the third problem usually represented in the argumentation of the two former strategies of inclusive queer theology. Tonstad claims, 'Reverence for origins, sometimes interpreted in presentist ways, and a correlative assumption that queer theologies need, or at least benefit from, legitimation via origin' (11). Even though Tonstad is critiquing queer adaptions to Christian history, she underlines the importance of using queer analytical tools in such an enterprise to demonstrate the inherent instability of symbolic systems and further exposes how this instability 'may not significantly shift their

affective and productive power' (13). Tonstad's critique is aimed at legitimising queer theological reflection through a specific 'queerness' (i.e. a theological reflection asking rhetorical questions about Jesus's sexuality, orgasms, etc.), or legitimation through origins claiming Christian orthodoxy as truly queer.

Her alternative critically deconstructs the ways in which queer inclusion builds on structures of exclusion of 'other', upholding the same structures of suppression that inclusive queer theologians seek to overcome. Tonstad's reminder is imperative: 'Queer theologians should not simply assume the triumph of good will' (15).

Returning to Lightsey (2015), clearly she is aware of the magnitude and fluidity of concepts such as 'womanist' and 'queer' as she draws on experiences of the intersectionality of these groups which traditionally do not include each other. Yet, when it comes to Christian theology, she is less critical of the construction of its authorities as she wants to 'investigate the narratives of Black queer women holding them under a theological analytical lens that draws from resources such as reason and scripture' (Lightsey 2015, xxi). As Lightsey builds towards a bodily theology encompassing 'flesh' as a narrative of Black queer love, the queer body is only valid within theology as long as she can justify it within classic theology. The dogma of Imago Dei becomes the answer. She can reach this conclusion because, even though Imago Dei has its problems, Lightsey sees it as part of theology's natural development:

> We come from a long history of the Church's doctrine and dogma being challenged. It has become better and its theology much healthier when it must explore its conceptualization of Christ as its head and the people who are its members. (2015, 27)

Lightsey wants to legitimise queering within Christian traditions, and I want to explore this further. To think of theology as a Hegelian dialectic method may cloud the intricate power structures of owning 'tradition'. Just because the church can be inclusive does not prove that theology has evolved (and continues to evolve) for the better; rather, it adapts to maintain hegemony. Instead of justifying Christian tradition to argue for queer inclusion, I question for whom theology has become much healthier, thus considering Brintnall's and Tonstad's critiques.

Even though queer-inclusive theologies can question some structures of theology, their primary focus has been to show how LGBTQ+ bodies *are* part of theology. This can make it difficult to question the power structures of the discourse itself. However, queer-inclusive theologies do, on the other hand, take seriously the queer body as a starting point in constructing the

theologies, which is relevant for this thesis. In the next subchapter I therefore introduce Marcella Althaus-Reid and her starting point, from queer bodies, as ways of deconstructing theology.

4.2 The Queer Body as a Site of Disturbance

Thus far, I have outlined inclusive queer theology and its complications. I now present Marcella Althaus-Reid's ground-breaking theory of indecent theology. Her use of the queer body critiques theology and the discourse it enters. Instead of including queer bodies as part of a theological discourse, she uses Foucault and queer theory to critique what she sees as the heterosexual imperialism of theology. The importance of this theory is that Althaus-Reid does not want the 'queer body' to adapt a heteronormative theology; rather, theology must adapt to the queer body. This approach differs from a queer-inclusive theology because it does not seek recognition but rather attempts to destabilise the hegemony that governs the discourse of theology.

4.2.1 Indecent Theology

Marcella Althaus-Reid's theory of indecent theology (Althaus-Reid 2000) claims that theology is a discourse of sexuality (i.e. theology is sexual theology). She explains,

> Based on sexual categories and heterosexual binary systems, obsessed with sexual behaviour and orders, every theological discourse is implicitly a sexual discourse, a decent one, an accepted one. (2000, 22)

Althaus-Reid explains this decency as a way of disciplining theology within a discourse of sexuality, where questions of God and religious belonging are questions of heterosexual conduct. Thus, theology is a place of hegemonic control over sexual bodies as the performativity of it must be disciplined within theological notions of decency. To do theology is basically to do decent heterosexuality.

To do heterosexuality is more than simply a question of sexual attraction; it involves specific rules (and norms) concerning how we discipline body within structures of governmentality. Heterosexuality is a specific way of sexuality that is formed within 'heteronormativity'; the term first occurs in the article *Introduction: Fear of a Queer Planet* (1991) by Michael Warner. He explains that heteronormativity forms a grand narrative of the heterosexual life as 'ground zero', a neutral and natural starting point for how we construct society; or, as he says, '[So] much of heterosexual privilege lies in heterosexual culture's exclusive ability to interpret itself

as society' (1991, 8). Therefore, heteronormativity is a structure that forms the hegemonic discourse of society, wherein heterosexuality and its culture interpret itself as the natural point of departure, the neutral point from which all sexuality is to be discussed. This heterosexual culture focuses on the ability to be productive citizens of society.

Furthermore, a heterosexual culture is a binary political system of absolute and exclusive terms, such as 'man' and 'woman', 'straight' and 'gay', which are beneficial to objectify bodies as relationally 'other'. Butler explains how gender and sexuality are such modes: 'As a mode of relation, neither gender nor sexuality is precisely a possession, but, rather, is a mode of being dispossessed, a way of being *for* another or *by virtue of* another' (Butler 2004, 24). Butler stresses that gender and sexuality are disciplining powers, from which we cannot constitute a substantial 'being'. Rather, gender is a political discourse that becomes an identity through an object, an 'other'. It is in the way that we perform gender and sexuality that we can be recognised as, for instance, a 'straight woman' through the eyes of the 'other'.

The theological grand narrative is one constructed through disciplining theology as heteronormative. Althaus-Reid builds on Foucault's power theories, since the grand narrative justifies itself as the point of knowledge production, where the theological justification occurs through affirming theology as decent heterosexuality. Theological production is legitimised through decent straight behaviour, which upholds the structure of heteropatriarchy. These structures are then bargained as a universally permeating language of systematic theology, from which all theological discourse must be built.

As a theologian from Argentina, Althaus-Reid addresses how the theological grand narrative forms the construction of liberation theology. She claims that the project of liberation theology romanticises 'the poor' as a project of decency, wherein women are fetishised as the quintessential symbol of apathetic sexuality. Through the symbol of the Virgin Mother, the poor woman is embodied as the devout, passive believer: 'Mariology creates a history of gender from an artefact: a supposed woman who does not have a recognisable sexual performance is made into a sexual code' (2000, 53). Althaus-Reid's point is that the picture of the Virgin Mother as the role model of female sexuality upholds the heteropatriarchal structure of the passive (a)sexual woman who was impregnated by the Father as a necessity of male reproduction. As theological arguments build to empower poor women, Althaus-Reid sees this as another structure wherein women are passive vessels of faith, in the same way Virgin Mother was an apathetic vessel for God's own reproduction on Earth.

Althaus-Reid sees the same structures of decent theological argumentation concerning sexualities deviating from a hegemonic theological discourse. In the same way that women are romanticised as asexual virgins, men are symbolised through God as the Father, the active heterosexual cis man. Althaus-Reid argues, 'A poor, honest, devoted Christian man, apparently, cannot be a transvestite, and lesbian women do not fit the mother oriented family pattern of Liberation Theology' (2000, 131). The symbolism in theological language is infused with heterosexual culture, in which deviating ways of doing gender and sexuality lie outside the discourse of theology itself.

Althaus-Reid's answer to theology's heteropatriarchal structure is indecent theology, a theology that breaks with heteronormativity as the grand narrative:

> Indecenting Mary: her virginity is the first thing that must go because poor women are seldom virgins. Theological virginity must go because it encourages hegemonic memories, false memories to be shared in the false environment of heterosexuality, while the real skeletons in the cupboard are excluded from sharing and learning as mature people in community. (2000, 75)

The theological discourse is a part of this heteronormativity such that the decency of theology is a direct result of disciplining sexuality as heterosexual.

> Theology is a sexual ideology performed in a sacralising pattern: it is a sexual divinised orthodoxy (right sexual dogma) and orthopraxy (right sexual behaviour); theology is a sexual action. (Althaus-Reid 2000, 87)

Since theology is a sexual action, 'per/verting' systematic theology becomes essential.

Bodies are neatly connected to different politics of power; thus, the same body is connected to politics of theology. Marcella Althaus-Reid addresses this in her theology of indecency as she retells stories of different forms of bodily control through religious argumentations. Althaus-Reid introduces a sermon which reflects on Coya women in Uruguay. To the preacher's astonishment, these women who know how to pray to the saints 'do their business' by squatting in the streets because they do not wear any underwear (1). According to Althaus-Reid, these women substantiate a wild and unruly female body who does not fit into structures of theology because theology is imperialistic in ways of demanding power through soteriology. While she uses the body as a way of approaching theology, Althaus-Reid discusses bodies as ways of deconstructing theology, exposing heteropatriarchal structures within it and revealing a

discourse of sexual bodies as the core of Christian identity politics. Consequently, she avoids an uncritical embracement of a queer body as inherently fitting within the classical discourse of theology and rather sees it as a means of challenging the structure of power with which the religious body is expected to comply.

Althaus-Reid's use of the body in her theological construction is a result of a postcolonial critique of Christian theology, which claims universality through imperialism. Her solution is to embrace the construction of indecency, not only exposing the Eurocentrism of Christianity but also constructing Christianity as a subversive force not built on the premises of a Western heteropatriarchy. She asks for an 'obscene (re-discovery) of God in Indecent Theology' (2000, 124), and through 'per/versions' of theology, she emphasises that theology itself needs the language of obscenity to be transcendent or be exhibitionistic, as she herself expresses it. Theology can, through obscenity, transcend and defy boundaries of binaries as embracing the per/version of Bi/Christ, resurrection of lust, resurrection from below, and other sexual stories; thus, she breaks away from the 'suppressed aesthetics of Christianity' (2000, 111). The sexual body within Christianity is a result of Western imperialism, even though it claims a heteropatriarchal theology as a neutral ground of explaining itself, giving it legitimacy through colonising each body as decently non-sexual (i.e. heterosexual) within a structure of sexualised theology.

According to Althaus-Reid, the obscenity transcends theology beyond the dichotomy of our bodies as right and wrong and, through that, acknowledges that the LGBTQ+ people's bodies are part of a discourse transcending identity politics. The queer body is just as much a body of theology as it is a body of experience, and queer sexual bodies represent a menace towards a dominant theological discourse; this is because this dominant discourse embodies sexual decency through specific heteronormative practices. The exposure of theology as a practice of sexuality shows that a queer body encompasses a postcolonial critique of theology, questioning the ways we discuss theology as inherently universal and claim God as a stable structure that transcends human discourse. Althaus-Reid's critique of decent theology illuminates a path towards a theology wherein queer bodies are not bodies striving for decency but rather bodies striving to make theology indecent. Thus, she understands the queer body as a tool for changing theology rather than understanding theology as way of changing the discourse around queer bodies. This challenges queer theology as merely a tool for inclusive theology and views the queer body as a subversive force to address the colonialism of theology. Such queerness is not an unruliness that must be tamed, but rather a force that changes how we think about theology;

however, for this to happen, we must abandon heteropatriarchal structures within theology itself rather than trying to comply with them.

Althaus-Reid's use of the body exposes the body as a theological tool of imperialism, which makes it possible to discuss the power in how we use the body to control Christian theology. It is this use of the body that is imperative if the 'queer' is to be part of queer theological discourse because we can understand and even challenge expectations involved in becoming queer Christians. This approach does not assume a universalism, not even in understandings of the body, nor of theology itself. Hence, queer bodies are part of an intricate discourse, wherein these bodies can both acknowledge and challenge any given system of thought.

4.3 Theoretical Summary

In this theoretical chapter, I presented the main theory of this thesis. As I interviewed a group of queer Christians, I took care to discuss how the notion of body can be used in a queer theological reflection. Starting from a theological point of view, I explained queer inclusive theology, with a specific focus on Lightsey's concept of Imago Dei. I questioned this approach, finding support from both Brintnall and Tonstad, who critique queer-inclusive theology's desire to prove queer bodies *as* consistent with heteronormative theology. However, starting from the body does not mean that Lightsey's theology is flawed; rather, I question the tendency to construct the queer body as a coherent theological concept, such as, for instance 'Imago Dei'. I therefore moved on to Marcella Althaus-Reid and her theory of indecent theology. She demonstrates the ways in which theology is a heteropatriarchal discourse, and she postulates that we must turn to sexual indecency as a theological language, rather than to decency. By doing so, we can break with the sexual imperialism of theology that controls the religious bodies. In other words, Althaus-Reid understands queer bodies as ways of changing theology rather than theology changing queer bodies.

Althaus-Reid's indecent theology is therefore the theoretical framework of this thesis, as I start with the exploratory case study with queer bodies and experiences to discuss queer theologies. In Chapter 5 I analyse the material from the exploratory case study in conversation with other theologians to further explore the research question. Before moving on to this chapter, I provide a short autobiographical reflection, wherein I position myself in relation to the material.

Interlude 1

In this interlude I invite the reader into my own autobiographical reflection. With this I want to show my position in relation to the conversation that I presented in Chapter 3 and the theoretical Chapter 4. As I sat with the participants in the exploratory case study, I recognised my own story in their experience of navigating inclusion in the Church of Norway. Many times I have felt estranged because being an issue, as Cecilie commented, is sometimes the closest thing to tolerance. Countless discussions on my own presence in the Church have brought me to tears and anger, and I have found myself feeling fatigued because of the need to explain, yet again, that being queer is not a juxtaposition of being Christian, both in religious as well as 'secular' environments. Since the interviews in 2016, though, the Church synod have implemented a gender-neutral wedding liturgy; they did so in 2017. One could argue that this empowers queer Christians with agency in the debate of inclusion, and, as true this may be, I tend to feel this agency is built on benevolence of what Helle Mellingen describes as hegemonic homo tolerance (2013). According to Mellingen, hegemonic homo tolerance is, first and foremost, a tolerance that reflects the needs of a heteronormative society, wherein the inclusion of lesbians and gays in marriage becomes a symbol of straight benevolence. I cannot help but ask if being queer Christian boils down to this benevolence, as if I am an object for other people's happiness by conforming to heteronormative standards of sexual and gendered control.

Somewhere in the discussion of being 'queer Christian', I feel I have lost touch with the uncompromising 'feminist killjoys' that Sarah Ahmed (2010) describes: the lesbian women who break with heteronormative expectations of the 'unhappy' and 'happy queer' as they accept and form their own destiny as 'happily queer'. Brilliantly deconstructing the notion of happiness, Ahmed shows the concept of happiness as an object of straightness, whereas the performance of queerness is seen as enforcing unhappiness, not only for oneself but also for others within the proximity of queer bodies. She claims that stories of unhappy and happy queers are stories of failed or successful assimilation to straightness. Thus, happiness is primarily a narrative of heteronormative desire rather than a question of being openly queer or 'authentically oneself'.

As an alternative to the happiness narrative, Ahmed sees stories of queer bodies that embrace difference; she seeks stories not of being a happy queer, but of being happily queer:

> [Q]ueer archives are also full of more perverse desires, of bodies that desire 'in the wrong way' and are willing to give up access to the good life to follow their desire. Queers can be affectively alien by placing their hopes for happiness in the wrong objects, as well as being made unhappy by the conventional routes of happiness, an unhappiness which might be an effect of how your happiness makes others unhappy. … To be happily queer might mean being happy to be the cause of unhappiness (at least in the sense that one agrees to be the cause of unhappiness, even if one is not made happy by causing unhappiness), as well as to be happy with where we get to if we go beyond the straight lines of happiness scripts. (Ahmed 2010, 115)

Thus, 'happily queer' does not imply happiness as fitting an object of straightness and consequently acknowledges queer bodies as transgressing happy narratives of heteronormativity.

Even though being able to get married in the Church is an important acknowledgment of same-sex couples as part of the Church, other forms of expressing sexuality and gender are not incorporated into this inclusion. Theologically speaking, the only official form of sexual relationship that the Church of Norway acknowledges is marriage. Nonetheless, many of us, regardless of sexual preference, live our sexualities in other forms of relationship: one night stands, open relationships, cohabitation, and polyamorous relationships to mention a few. In one way or another, it is important to acknowledge Althaus-Reid's claim that 'Heterosexuality is an economy, an administrative pattern which is sacralised in our churches even in the way they organise themselves' (Althaus-Reid 2000, 114). However, economies change, and I also want to be part of her economic revolution.

As much as I have felt estranged from the community of the Church, it is also a place I call home. Growing up in the Church, working as a minister, and doing research in the field of theology, I have somehow navigated an affiliation with this community that goes far beyond negative experiences. As much as the Church can be a space where I often experience being questioned over my identity, I also carry with me experiences of unambiguous love and understanding from colleagues and others in the Church of Norway. In my process of understanding my own gender identity, I have been working as a minister in a local parish in Oslo and have been met with unconditional understanding and acceptance of my non-binary

identity. At times I feel I have had to defend myself more in ‘secular’ gay bars than in my Christian religious community.

My somewhat personal reflection on my own experience of being a queer Christian is one that starts the analysis that I present in the next chapter. Hopefully, my own starting point can demonstrate that even though theological structures within Christianity in general and the Church of Norway in particular might enforce heteronormativity, being part of a religious community reflects the nuanced shades of grey more than black and white contrasts. Navigating different norms, however, does not imply that we can escape them, but it is possible to re-narrate them as sites of empowerment.

5.0 Navigating Christian Religious Spaces

In this chapter, I start with the participants of the exploratory case study as I analyse different navigations of Christian religious spaces. I start from Marcella Althaus-Reid's claim:

> Binary thought can only be challenged in theology and capitalism alike by people whose bodies are living parables of transgression. (2000, 179)

In this chapter, I therefore look at how the exploratory case study can help us understand that people's experiences can be living parables. As this is an exploratory case study, however, I also include empirical work from other researchers and theologians. I do so in conversation with Cornwall, Fennema, Greenough, van Klinken, Taylor, Wilcox, and Yip, as they have done extensive work on different queer identities, genders, and sexualities and their stories in theological work.

The analysis in this chapter investigates four different situations. In 5.1, 'Contradicting Religious Homophobia', I analyse how the participants navigated the claim that religion is homophobic, a claim they problematised. Adriaan van Klinken also discusses such divisions in his book *Kenyan, Christian, Queer* (2019). He questions how queer theoretical studies divide between a secular progressiveness and religion as conservative, a position that is difficult to start from in an African context. He therefore claims,

> Religion should be taken into account not only as a site of discursive power that (re)produces heteronormativity and homophobia in contemporary African societies, but also as a sit of African queer subjectivity and agency. (15)

I investigate how such division is also difficult in a Norwegian setting as most Norwegians are members of a religious community. Returning to the participants of the exploratory case study, I find that such divisions are problematic when encountering the material. I find support for this from researchers such as Alex Toft (2009) who has demonstrated that, regarding faith, bisexual Christians can find positive self-worth in a privatisation of Christian beliefs. Andrew Yip (2002) also demonstrated such findings when he interviewed lesbian, gay, and bisexual Christians. However, these two studies seem to show that privatisation diminishes denominational

affiliation, which does not fit with the exploratory case study. The four participants – Markus, Cecilie, Thomas, and Sophia – are all highly invested in being part of the Church of Norway. I therefore return to van Klinken who critiques such privatisation as a Western polemic of faith, and I examine how he, throughout his book, breaks with such polemics in his work. In relation to the exploratory case study, I therefore claim that the participants disagreed with the Father Project's critique of religious homophobia because they saw this as a divide between religious conservatism and secular progressiveness. Such critiques can be answered with a privatisation of religious beliefs; however, the connection the four participants have to the Church of Norway seems to fit better with van Klinken's more holistic approach, wherein privatisation alone does not provide answers to the complex structures of religious expressions in society in general. My point with this reflection is to explain that theories of privatisation can give answers for how queer Christians navigate religious beliefs, but in connection with the exploratory case study, this theory alone does not seem to explain the navigation of the Father Project. Rather, with van Klinken, we can see that a blurred line between private and public can help, in the analysis ahead, explain some navigations of becoming queer Christians in indecency.

In 5.2, 'Ritual as a Site of Queering', I look at how the participants navigated the activism of the Rainbow Action. This was activism the participants brought up, in addition to the Father Project. I introduce the ritual theories of Catherine Bell to analyse the Rainbow Action. In her book *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* (2009), Bell explains that a ritual is a constant movement between religious symbolism and social bodies in a given space. This movement means that the meaning of the symbols and their function are constantly negotiated and renegotiation in ritual practice, wherein the symbols are more than a static representation of orthodoxy and dogmas. The ritual is therefore more than a question of religious control because the symbols of the ritual and the ritual itself must be acknowledged by social bodies that partake in the ritual. This leads Bell to explain that even a ritual that can be suppressive can have a flipside, and participants in the ritual can reclaim that same ritual through renegotiating the symbols in it. Such actions can give agency and be an act of emancipation through the ritual. I use Bell's ritual theory to analyse how the Rainbow Action created one space in which the participants reclaimed queer visibility in the communion ritual, thus achieving agency and empowerment. I compare this reclaiming to an act of empowerment, fighting against what Sharon Fennema calls the heterosexism in communion rituals. Her doctoral thesis, 'Falling All Around Me' (2011), shows that during the HIV/AIDS crisis in the 1980s and 1990s, the Metropolitan Community Church in San Francisco (MCCSF) reclaimed the Body of Christ through embracing the theodicy of AIDS. Fennema

calls this a queer theodicy, wherein MCCSF's ministry disrupted a dichotomy between inside and outside. She explains,

> By asserting the ecclesiological claim represented by the performance of the Body of Christ with AIDS, they disrupted the social theodicy that interpreted AIDS as God's punishment. (340)

One of these performances in the MCCSF was found in the communion ritual. I compare Fennema's findings with the Rainbow Action's use of the communion ritual, in which the activist claimed queer visibility. These two communion rituals lead me to recount the story of a communion ritual in the Oslo pride parade in the late 90s. I discuss these three events, in dialogue with Melissa Wilcox's term, as an act of queer sacrilege and queer sacralisation (2018). I explore these rituals as acts of empowerment which grant agency to their participants.

In Chapter 5.3, 'Talking Back: Answering Scolding', I analyse the scolding that the participants experienced from religious leaders in the Church. I compare these experiences with Susannah Cornwall's findings on intersex Christians and their experience of scolding. To explain the scolding that the participants of the exploratory case study have experienced, I use theories of microaggression. Microaggressions take many different forms, but they are usually 'invisible' acts that mark structures of subordination. They can be non-verbal acts, or they can be direct comments which marks social hierarchy, and the receiver is often left feeling degraded and marginalised (Gressgård 2014, Nadal et al. 2016, Sadika et al. 2020). Microaggression is a systematic incapacitation of people of colour as well as other minorities, such as LGBTQ+ people. With Sartre and Foucault's understanding of 'le regard', often called 'the gaze', I explain how the case study participants experienced such microaggressions as a specific kind of objectification. I also discuss how this objectification by religious leaders questioned the participants' experiences of being queer in the Church, which left the participants as objects in discussions on queer inclusion. Furthermore, I explore how the microaggression triggered active defence from the participants, in which they attacked the attacker, something that is also discussed by Andrew Yip in his studies on gay male Christians in the UK.

5.4, 'Reclaiming Sexual Ethics', is the final subchapter and returns to a specific discussion between the participants of the exploratory case study. The participants questioned the ways in which they are expected to integrate into the religious truths of the Church of Norway. I understand this discussion as a space in which Stuart's football match is a game between queer people. Instead of being a discussion between straight theologians, this can be an example of

reclaiming ‘the ball’, wherein the participants can discuss sexual ethics amongst themselves. Building on van Klinken, I explain how this space lifts the magnitude of difference both in expectations of inclusion and navigating heteronormativity. Thus, I investigate how the participants in the exploratory case study, van Klinken’s informants, and Chris Greenough’s sexual stories provide examples of spaces in which people can discuss their own identity amongst themselves. I explore how these discussions can create a space where people’s own narratives can take centre stage in becoming queer Christians. I further investigate how such narratives highlight diversity and how interests, longings, and experiences of becoming queer Christians can be more than adapting to heteronormative Christianity. Thus, such stories can be multifaceted ways of becoming queer Christians in indecency.

5.1 Contradicting Religious Homophobia

Chapter 3.1 presented a discussion amongst participants of the exploratory case study, who questioned Keshtkar’s display of the Christian space as homophobic. As the Father Project was set in a consecrated church of the Frogner congregation, the participants’ reflection shows that they found Keshtkar’s critique of religion as a specific critique of the Church of Norway. The critique that the video presented alienated the participants because they saw the expression as an outsider entering a debate in which they all felt they were involved. The participants did not question the legitimacy or the intent of the video; rather, they did not recognise the polemics of a homophobic Church.

The group’s critique of the Father Project’s polemics coincides with other criticisms of such experiences. In his book *Kenyan, Christian, Queer: Religion, LGBT Activism, and Arts of Resistance in Africa* (2019), Adriaan van Klinken refers to Melissa Wilcox’s critique of queer theory’s generally derogatory reference to religion (2006):

> In this context, the gay liberation movement, and its successors in the form of lgbt movements and queer activism, have, historically speaking, emerged largely in opposition to established religion; its successes have been enabled by processes of sociocultural change, such as secularisation and the privatisation of religion. (2019, 14)

Van Klinken’s argument is that the construction of a binary between a secular worldview and religion is antiquated or, at best, uninteresting to investigate. Van Klinken’s work is an investigation of queer Christians in Kenya and their navigation of their identities. With this perspective, he finds the way in which Western queer theories seem to divide between ‘secular’ and ‘religion’ as modern and anti-modern especially problematic. Such divisions are

problematic in a Kenyan context as this society does not construct separation between secular and religious worldviews. For van Klinken, queer theory thus stands at risk of being a colonial theory, and he therefore calls for a postcolonial intervention of 'Western secular epistemological assumptions underlying much of queer studies' (14). This intervention does not divide between modern and anti-modern, but rather understands religion as an intricate part of societal structures. Starting from narratives of queer Christians in Kenya, van Klinken seeks to break the colonial structure of knowledge production but not only theoretically and academically speaking as his fieldwork is located in Kenya and involves conversations with people who do not divide between sexual identity and religious identity.

The British researcher Yvette Taylor also picks up on this expected juxtaposition between a secular and religious. In her research, she interviewed queer religious youths, asking the question 'What and where are the space of, and for, queer religious youth?' (Taylor 2016, 2). Taylor's study highlights the complexity of religious queer youth, wherein many participants experienced an expectation of conforming to incomprehensible identities, both in queer and religious communities. In this expectation, queer identity is progressive and secular, and religious identity is conservative and non-queer, creating seemingly contradictory spaces of bodies. Taylor questions the assumption of divisions between 'queer' and 'religion' and, through her study, shows the intersectionality of religious queer youth when they navigate spaces of queer religiosity in different ways.

Taylor's point is that even though there is support for secularisation of Western countries as examples of religious anti-modernity (Brown 2006, Jakobsen and Pellegrini 2008, Rasmussen 2010), she questions such assumptions as they seem to lack an intersectional understanding of how religion and society interact in general. Norway, for instance, is a society that has formally incorporated rights for the queer community, such as civil partnership in 1993, marriage equality in 2009, and bureaucratic gender affirmation in 2016. Thus, following the thesis of the antimodern, Norway is a secularised country. Yet, in 2016, 71.5% of the Norwegian population were members of the Church of Norway (SSB 2017a), and 12% were members of other religious and non-religious ethic societies (SSB 2017b). However, these numbers conceal low participation rates in active religious life, supporting the claim that Norway is a secular society (Botvar and Schmidt 2010, Taule 2014) . Even Phil Zuckerman's study (2008) demonstrates the same tendencies of a strongly atheist Scandinavia, and his participants explained religion as being antimodern. Even though countries in the Global North might have beliefs about religion

being anti-modern, Taylor's study shows that people are both queer and religious, which challenges the dichotomy of modern and anti-modern.

Susannah Cornwall also addresses how intersex Christians navigate their intersex identity and Christian affiliation (2013). In her study, she found that an overwhelming proportion of her 10 participants, had more positive than negative church experiences, and a common theme was that they believed that God had intended them to be intersex. However, while the participants had positive self-worth in their intersex and Christian identity, they were not uncritical of Christian traditions, especially teachings on sex, gender, and sexuality. Especially important is her claim that the Church's lack of knowledge regarding intersex people reflects how this group is rarely discussed in theological reflections, and she therefore concludes, 'Further engagement with intersex experience will be crucial in formulating pastorally sensitive and theological robust accounts of human sex, gender and sexuality' (234) Cornwall realises that it can be challenging to find space and visibility within denominations in the UK; however, she found that 'most participants believed their churches were safe places to be intersex' (233). The participants in the exploratory case study in this thesis – for instance, Markus (nr.6/s.40) – also made such claims regarding their sexuality. They, like Cornwall's informants, had found safe spaces in the communities of their Churches. Andrew Yip explains such navigations as upholding a positive sexual self-worth in religious communities because 'positive personal identities resist the social labelling of the authority structures, as they remain within an environment officially managed by such structures' (2002, 204). In other words, even though different Christian communities might have a negative understanding of queer sexual and gender identities, queer Christians privatise their religious beliefs to fit their sexual and gender identities. By doing so, they do not need to bargain between sexuality/gender and Christian affiliations, but are able to incorporate both as part of their positive self-worth.

In addition, Alex Toft investigated privatisation of Christian faith amongst bisexual Christians (Toft 2009). His findings support a positive sexual self-worth in Christian identity through the privatisation of Christian beliefs. Toft explains that the privatisation of religion makes it possible to find a religious identity without rejecting Christian beliefs altogether. However, Toft's participants found it more difficult to be open about their sexualities in their denominations. Since Toft did not ask whether they had found safe space in their religious communities, Toft's research does not debunk Cornwall's, but Toft demonstrates that being open about their sexual identity in Christian communities can be difficult even if these communities can function as safe spaces. What Cornwall, Toft, and Yip explain, though, is that

the Christian community plays a part in how queer Christians position themselves in navigating a queer Christian identity. As, for instance, Toft explains, even bisexual Christians who do not attend Church 'still rely on Christian teachings, usually in the form of the Bible' (Toft 2009, 85).

Even though reliance on religious authorities can be important in navigating queer Christian identities, Andrew Yip's research also indicates that an overwhelming majority of his respondents of LGB Christians relied on the primacy of the self. The influence of religious authorities was scarce, and when it applied, the informants employed human reasoning and biblical understanding in forming their Christian faith and sexual ethics. Yip concludes, 'Thus, the lack of influence of religious authority structures and the primacy of the inner voice made the persistence of faith possible' (2002, 209).

Both Toft and Yip rely on the privatisation of religion as a possible space for constructing queer Christian identities. This does not mean, however, that they find community irrelevant when constructing a religious identity. Rather, starting from David Yamane's 'neosecularisation paradigm' (1997), Yip, for instance, criticises 'postsecularisation' for misinterpreting the 'secularisation paradigm' as proof of the decline and disappearance of religion altogether. Yip explains that the secularisation paradigm emphasises 'its transformation and change (and therefore persistence) in response to the focus of modernity' (Yip 2002, 200). Yamane explains this misinterpretation as a result of polemic discourses 'which have become all too common in debates over the status of religion in modern society' (Yamane 1997, 120) as he calls for a useful and meaningful analytical tool in the concept of neosecularisation within social scientific studies. The strength of this concept in Yip's work is the understanding of secularisation as transformation on three levels: societal, organisational, and individual, the latter of which is Yip's focus. Although Yip does not underline this himself, this focus is reasonable as his data present religious experiences of personal faith amongst LGB Christians. The focus on individual transformation leads Yip to another interesting and relevant concept by Michele Dillon in her work *Catholic Identity: Balancing Reason, Faith, and Power* (1999), where 'pro-change believers remain within the institution to engage in reinterpretation of doctrines and practices to effect changes from within' (Yip 2002, 201). This is relevant as part of the individual transformation Yamane presents because a religious identity forms in relation to but not necessary in alignment with religious authority and its doctrines. Toft and Yip thus focus on the privatisation of Christian faith as one way of navigating queer Christian identities.

Van Klinken, on the other hand, critiques such privatisation as a Western polemic of faith and religion. While van Klinken does not address this, his perspective also starts from a neo-secular position, but he does not divide between the three layers of societal, organisational, and individual. Starting from a Kenyan perspective, he demonstrates how homophobia is a societal problem; however, in this context – just as much in the Global North – Christian churches are under scrutiny from queer activists. Van Klinken particularly focus on the writer Binyavanga Wainaina's understanding of homophobia in Kenya as a consequence of Christian churches' colonial theologies. However, instead of rejecting Christianity and religion altogether, he calls for a decolonised Christianity in Africa to counter homophobia; or, as van Klinken writes, Wainaina is 'calling upon fellow Africans to free their imaginations from colonialist and homophobic modes of thought' (Van Klinken 2019, 52). Instead of polemics against Christian faith, Wainaina seeks liberation in a postcolonial project, wherein Africans can free themselves from homophobia. In his reflection, it is not Christianity that represents homophobia; rather, it is colonial structures of suppression that represent this phobia. It is these structures that we need to challenge, rather than religion. In many ways, such critiques resonate with Althaus-Reid's own call for an indecent theology. Like Wainaina, Althaus-Reid also questions the construction of theology as inherently homophobic, and they both agree that such structures are, first and foremost, results of colonialism rather than Christianity.

As another example of transgressing the polemics of private and public religion, van Klinken introduces a theological reading of the music video 'Same Love (Remix)' (Art Attack 2016), by the Nairobi-based art collective Art Attack. In contrast to the Father Project, this video does not directly address religious homophobia, but through its use of biblical references and relatable gospel tunes, van Klinken discuss this video as a 'creative sociocultural text that provides insight into the intersections of Kenyan, Christian, and queer identities and politics' (Van Klinken 2019, 58).

Continuing his work, van Klinken explores the life stories of queer Christians in Cosmopolitan Affirming Church (CAC) in Nairobi. There are many similarities between the members of CAC in van Klinken's work and the participants of the exploratory case study in this thesis, similarities I return to later in this chapter. For now, I highlight the ways in which a Christian community plays a part in how these participants navigate their identities in more than a private religious position – something van Klinken makes clear in his concluding reflection on CAC:

> Even if, in the long run, CAC turns out to be only a footnote, the existence of the church is deeply important – not only for the congregants who are affirmed in their sexuality

> and faith but also for Kenyan lgbt community members and Kenyan Christians who hear about the church and who, willingly or unwillingly, discover that another form of Christianity is possible. Indeed, the presence of CAC as a Kenyan Christian queer space makes it clear beyond doubt: an alternative to a homophobic African Christianity, and to a secular Western queer culture, already exists. (184)

With this, van Klinken explains that the public space of CAC is an alternative to a homophobic African Christianity which shows the intersectionality of identities and blurs the lines of secular and religious, public and private.

There are, of course, huge historical and cultural differences between Kenya and Norway. Nevertheless, scholars (Knudsen 2000, Wyller, Breemer, and Casanova 2014, Gregersen, Kristensson Uggla, and Wyller 2017) have also problematised the rather simpleminded distinction between the secular and religious in these areas, too. The concept of privatisation is undoubtedly possible in societies, such as those in Norway, which divide between secular and religious spaces (e.g. the division of state and Church). This private/religious distinction, however, is also contrasted by José Casanova's claim of religion as an interconnection of private and public discourse (1994). This is a position which Casanova recently explicitly applied to a Nordic context.

In my view, it therefore made sense when the participants of the exploratory case study claimed that Christian faith and community are important in their lives. Listening to these voices, it is reasonable to assume that this position might not be as private as some secular theories claim.

The blurring of secular and religious, public and private, is a perspective important in understanding how the participants of the exploratory case study discussed the topic of sexuality and the norms that can form queer Christian identities. Throughout this chapter, I return to this blurring; however, for this sub-chapter, van Klinken's work is important in understanding that the neo-secular thesis that Toft and Yip build upon is more complicated than mere privatisation of religion. The critique of queer theories and activism's divide between a progressive secularity and conservative religion (and organised religion in particular) shows us that such claims are more nuanced than just a question of either/or. Van Klinken's work suggests that such thinking can be challenged, starting from queer Christian narratives of their identities. Thus, it is interesting that voices from the exploratory case study seemed to point in the same direction. This is a position that has been supported by other scholars in recent decades, as well. The research mentioned above is, of course, not related directly to queer studies. Nevertheless, this

research problematises the privatisation thesis and allows for more nuanced interpretations of the role of Christian religion in the Norwegian context.

This subchapter showed that the Father Project's claim of religion as inherently homophobic was met with resistance by the participants of the exploratory case study. This resistance aligned with other studies in the field that question the divide between a modern secularity and anti-modern religiosity, wherein the former connects to LGBTQ+ inclusion and the latter involves exclusion of the same group. Toft and Yip have shown that it is possible to privatise faith through positive sexual self-worth, albeit through adhering, in different degrees, to religious authorities. Van Klinken further explained how the concept of privatisation is problematic in a Kenyan context as he sees it as yet another queer theoretical claim of modern secularity. This claim is problematic as it, in an African context, is another colonial project in queer theologies. What Cornwall and van Klinken work support directly, and Toft and Yip support indirectly, is the ways in which the participants of the exploratory case study found a religious place in affiliation and not only through privatisation of Christian faith. This is a point I return to in the next sub-chapter, where I analyse how one such space can be created through the ritual use of communion.

5.2 Ritual as a Site of Queering

The previous subchapter problematised a division between secular and religious, progressive and conservative. The conclusion was that there are reasons to claim that people have identities in Christian communities also when their faith differs from church leadership positions. This subchapter regards the Rainbow Action as a ritual queer space, a topic seemingly different from the one discussed above. This difference is, however, predominantly surface-level. The following argument is that a study of ritual queer spaces also problematises the secular/religious binary in the field of queer studies in a Norwegian context.

The Rainbow Action occurred in Oslo Cathedral during a service held by the bishops. A group of queer Christians attended this service, wearing rainbow wristbands to increase visibility. This is relevant because the participants in the exploratory case study brought up this activism as an alternative to the Father Project. Considering the ritual theories of Catherine Bell, I explain how the Rainbow Action made use of established ritual praxis of communion. They did this through subverting the ritual symbol of communion as an act of emancipation. Sharon Fennema explains such subversions of communion as exposing and fighting the heterosexism in the ritual. Such actions are a queering of the religious space that give agency to queer people. The story of queer

communion leads me to reflect on an incident during a Pride parade in the late 1990s, during which communion condoms were given instead of wafers. Such queering of the ritual can be explained using Melissa Wilcox's queer sacrilege and queer sacralisation. In such ritual practice, queer people can find agency, and for the participants of the exploratory case study, such agency and empowerment can also be found within the Church of Norway.

5.2.1 Starting From Ritual Bodies

In her book *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*, Bell (2009) is critical of the ritual as an object that can only be studied in relation to society, and she finds it necessary to determine how the ritual constitutes its own structures of power, starting from the performative body. The body is imperative to avoiding a disembodied search of objective universality because the social body is always entangled in a grid of power structures which help one analyse rituals and the bodies partaking in them. This is relevant because the body can never be a mere symbol or representation of an action as it *is* the action itself; thus, it is more than a mere expression of an inner state of mind. Furthermore, Bell acknowledges a dichotomised structure of power within rituals, but this does not imply that actions such as kneeling entail total subordination to a ritual system, since such powers are more complex within structures of governmentality. This leads Bell to claim that ritualisation is a strategic way of acting, a ritual practice that can empower and disempower through social bodies. However, one objective understanding of when this occurs will never be reached.

A ritual is thus not merely a question of imposing doctrines and specific beliefs on a passive audience, since rituals use symbols as ways of navigating multitudes of meanings through a mutual practice. This flexibility of meaning within rituals is, on the other hand, strictly constructed within notions of essentialism – that is, within structures which delude and expose the ritual's limits. Firstly, the limits are exposed and clearly defined within specific borders (i.e. specific performers, space, and words, to name a few) which interchange power between all participants. Secondly, the exposed and clearly defined limits delude the construction of the ritual as it is part of the social body. Bell explains,

> [Ritualization] produces and objectifies constructions of power (via the schemes that organize its environment), which the social agent then reembodies. Ritualized agents do not see themselves as projecting schemes; they see themselves only acting in a socially instinctive response to how things are. (Bell 2009, 206)

The ritual incorporates bodies as part of it, wherein the performativity is deluded as an incorporated essential act and thus constructed as different from acting. This construction of essentialism in the ritual itself emphasises the ritual as more than a mere representation; rather, it *is* the presentation itself. In a religious context, not only is the ritual a symbol of religion, but through space, bodies and action become religion.

The body as a site of the ritual becomes imperative to understanding and analysing the powers at play within any given ritual. Just as navigating is an interaction between bodies, Bell claims that ritualisation is a strategy that begins from the same site:

> The strategies of ritualization are particularly rooted in the body, specifically, the interaction of the social body within a symbolically constituted spatial and temporal environment. (Bell 2009, 93)

The ritual itself is not – and cannot be – an objective analytic space as it is constantly in interaction with social bodies, or, as I see it, the ritual constitutes the people who navigate the ritual itself within its own power discourse. I see this navigation as connected to the fluidity of the ritual as the social bodies are part of it through negotiating the performance of it.

The ritual negotiates visibility through the interaction with the space it occupies; in this space, social bodies perform meaning through the use of symbolism, but the bodies do not totally subjugate themselves as objects in the ritual. Instead, the participants navigate their subjective positioning, wherein they negotiate their attachment through action, space, and symbols. This makes it possible to pinpoint where a ritual occurs, but it is not constant because the negotiation of attachment is in continuous movement between social bodies, spaces, and symbols.

In the exploratory case study, the Rainbow Action provides an example of navigating the ritual space communion in the church. The given liturgy of a Sunday service holds in it a wide range of symbolism that connects it to a specific Christian ritual within the Church of Norway. When the participants discussed the Rainbow Action, they acknowledged the ritual space of the cathedral, as well as the liturgy of the Sunday service in general and the communion in particular. When two men kneeled in front of the bishops asking for intercession whilst holding hands, the participants understood this as an action within the framework of the ritual itself (#12/p.44, #14/p.45, #15/p.46). Working as a minister, I have frequently given intercessions during communion, and it is perfectly within the frameworks of the liturgy, so the participants in the exploratory case study were right when they explained that this is a known ritual praxis for the bishops. The participants thus connected the intercession to the ritual that occurred in a

spatial and temporal environment, explaining the social bodies of the two men as ritual subjects within the Sunday service itself. By doing so, they negotiated the two men within the communion ritual as social bodies who had the right to partake in the ritual. Thus, navigating the ritual became a way to incorporate same-sex couples as social ritual bodies who could participate in the intercession. Navigating the ritual meant that they were legitimate gay male bodies who could claim subjective social status within that same liturgy. Thus, during the Rainbow Action, the two men holding hands navigated the power structures of the ritual, and, by doing so, they could claim agency within that specific ritual space.

Continuing with Bell, it is also relevant to add that it is neither the authority nor the symbols – such as dogmas, holy scripture, or religious leaders – that constitute the ritual alone, but the power dynamics between these elements and the social bodies within any given space. When the group navigated the liturgy, they used the established power dynamics between the authority of the bishops and the two men, along with the symbols of intercession and the dogmas connected to them, to do so. Thereby, they attached their own bodies to the symbols of the ritual, creating a meaning that reflected their experiences and made the communion relevant in their own lives.

Since space is part of ritual, the church room plays a significant role in how the ritual is attached to religious space. As Bell understands ritual as an interplay of power using religious symbols in a discourse of dominance and submission, the ritual itself is the place where religion is executed. The ritual, however, is more than a just mere representation of religion because the ritual agents navigate through the religious symbolism in the ritual as if the symbolism is authentic. The symbols are thus fluid, and positioning and repositioning of dominance and submission within the performance of the ritual finds a place. While the Church has a theological argument for marriage, this does not imply that the ritual agents share the same meaning. The possibility of different interpretations of religious symbols makes the ritual possible because the ritual is a space where the social bodies can claim attachment to the symbols without breaking with the ritual. In the context of this thesis, the Church might see the religious symbol of marriage as connected to heterosexuality, but the participants in the focus group contested this position (#12/p.44, #15/p.46, #18/p.47). Through navigating the symbolism of marriage, one can become a social body within the ritual without differentiating between sexual identities. This is where the ritual is not a mere representation of the religion, but the execution of it *is* religion. For Bell, the ritual is not a mere performance of religious power; it is the space where religion *becomes* religion, where ritual agents attach to religious

symbols. The ritual agents' navigation of the ritual shows the fluidity of the religion itself, the symbols it portrays, and the institutions that imbed them as they engage in efforts to keep an 'authentic' attachment to religion and, in this case, to Christianity.

Becoming a ritual agent, where one can navigate the symbols and one's attachment to them, is a question not only of being allowed to get married but also of partaking in the religious community. For Bell this means that one can become a religious subject through the ritual itself (e.g. one can find an identity as Christian through a wedding liturgy, for instance). The performative aspect of the ritual implies that exclusion from liturgies, such as weddings, means that one also can find oneself excluded from the Church as a whole. With this in mind, one might think that this exerts consequences for the participants in the conversation, since it becomes a question of not only how they legitimatise the two men as ritual bodies within this structure, as well as how they negotiate themselves as directly affected by the ritual. When the ritual denies same-sex couples access to intercessions, the group cannot partake in them, but this exclusion is only present in the wedding liturgy. So, although we might be tempted to think that Bell's theory exerts consequences for the group, it might not be as important as the same-sex marriage debate argues.

The Rainbow Action showed that queer Christians have access to other rituals within the Church of Norway, as the two men holding hands were two amongst a larger group of queer-identifying Christians. This access made it possible to redefine the ritual truths of a communion liturgy as a representation of a same-sex couple changed the meaning of the intercession in that specific incident. These bodies in this liturgical space constructed a blurred ritual truth of the intercession: it was both a decent and an indecent receiving of communion. When the two men navigated within the ritual, they exposed the delicacy and fragility of the ritual, not because the social bodies were alien to the ritual, but rather because they behaved differently from what was expected by authority of the bishops. The bargaining of the ritual exposed the fluidity and delicate structures of power, which deprived the straight Bishops of the possibility to confirm or deny the action as proper religious liturgical conduct. At this point, the men negotiated themselves within the ritual; this made it difficult to correct their conduct as they actually put their bodies in an already existing ritual, probably knowing that both they and the bishops saw the symbolism in their action. This navigation showed the power structure of a symbolism that was strictly separate at the time, but the social ritual bodies within it challenged this divide, exposing the intertwined meeting of the symbols within a new temporal space.

The Rainbow Action's use of the ritual thus flipped the power relations within the liturgy, a movement Bell explains as the empowerment within the ritual's own structures of dominance. The same dominant power structures within the ritual can be empowering, which 'demonstrates the actual limits of most ritual practices as a means of domination and control; it is the flip side of their strategic effectiveness' (Bell 2009, 207). The flipside of the bishops' control over the ritual was that the two men used it to empower themselves as social bodies through being conscious ritual agents. They positioned themselves as queer subjects within the framework of not only the ritual, but also the Church of Norway. When the two men knelt in front of the altar, they navigated within the communion ritual as a protest which challenged the dominance of the bishops as ritual leaders. Playing on the religious symbols of the intercession allowed them to connect two different rituals, which questioned the bishops' authority in the same-sex marriage debate.

So far, Bell's ritual theory has helped explain how the Rainbow Action took part in the ritual practise of the communion. Through using the symbolism of the intercession, the activists flipped the power relation to their advantage. In this subversion, they could claim agency through participation, which is an act of empowerment. In the next part of this subchapter, I explain how such subversions are a queering of the communion ritual as queer sacrilege and queer sacralisation.

5.2.2 The Communion: Queer Sacrilege, Queer Sacralisation

The subversion of ritual power in the Rainbow Action can also be explained by considering Melissa Wilcox and her presentation of the Metropolitan Community Church (MCC). Both the action of the two men holding hands and the participants of the exploratory case study's reaction to it fit, in many ways, with the deconstructive power that Wilcox explains is present in Metropolitan Community Church (MCC). In her work *Coming Out in Christianity* (2003), Wilcox discusses how the celebration of communion becomes a ritual that expresses an alternative world of affirmation:

> During MCC services, unlike in most other churches, same-sex couples can hold hands or put their arms around each other in the pews. More important, they can come to the 'Lord's table' hand in hand, receive communion together, and have a pastor pray over them as a couple. The *habitus* that conveys second-class status to the world and to oneself is broken during MCC ritual. Communing with God and with each other, MCC

> congregants physically express the alternative world of affirmation offered by their church. (140)

The similarities between the Rainbow Action and Wilcox's retelling of a Sunday service in MCC, is striking. However, the queer presence, through holding hands, generated quite different reactions in the different spaces. Two men holding hands in the Cathedral of Oslo disrupted the service, and specifically the communion, which underlined the second-class status that Wilcox explains. Two men or women holding hands in a MCC church, however, breaks with such habitus, and the receiving of communion even allowed for blessings of same-sex couples. The importance is that the navigation through the ritual praxis of communion is an act of empowerment both in MCC and in the Rainbow Action.

Focusing on the Rainbow Action, the empowerment through communion, retells a shift in the power balance of the ritual space. Whereas affection between same-sex couples reflected an alternative world of affirmation in MCC, such affections challenged the hegemony of ritual control in the Church of Norway by demanding the same world of affirmation through the Rainbow Action. The two men's navigation of the communion connected this ritual insubordination to the bigger picture: theological discourse of a world of queer affirmation. Reusing the symbol of 'communion' injected queer agency into the debate. This agency allowed the participants to claim themselves as Christian subjects within the institution of the Church, through navigating the ritual space of the communion, thus fighting back against subordination and second-class status.

Sharon Fennema also highlights the same disruptive power of rituals in her dissertation 'Falling All Around Me' (2011). She reflects on the passage from Wilcox, which I presented above, in discussing the communion ritual of San Francisco Metropolitan Community Church (MCCSF). By analysing liturgies and interviewing congregants of MCCSF during the HIV/AIDS crisis from 1982–1997, she investigated their worship as performing theodicy. In a time in which sexual intimacy between gay and bisexual men was demonised as death-bringing, Fennema understood the liturgies of MCCSF as acts of queer theodicy amidst the crisis in the LGBTQ+ communities in San Francisco. She found that, through performing the Body of Christ with AIDS, the MCCSF 'disrupted the social theodicy that interpreted AIDS as God's punishment' (340). To achieve this connection, the ritual praxis stood central in an ecclesial claim of being part of the Body of Christ. One such praxis was the communion. The communion ritual became a praxis that deconstructed the oppositional binary that divided gay from Christian; this was a table that was open for everyone, with no strict set of beliefs. One common praxis was to receive

communion with loved ones, disrupting the societal erasure of gay and lesbian families. Fennema's reflection on this praxis is directly applicable to the Rainbow Action:

> In a context where public display of kinship relationality between same-sex partners could, and often did, elicit verbal and/or physical violence, this simple recognition of different models of kinship relationships disrupted the hegemonic discourse of heterosexism. (242)

As Fennema's work is space-specific to San Francisco, I am cautious in applying her thought-provoking and relevant reflections directly to the material from the exploratory case study. The two men in the Rainbow Action, for instance, did not experience verbal or physical violence during communion, so claiming agency in the praxis did not disrupt the hegemonic discourse of heterosexism in the communion ritual. However, by claiming space through this ritual, The Rainbow Action navigated a discourse of sexuality and expectations of the invisible presence of same-sex couples in the communion ritual as much as in the communion of the Church of Norway. This navigation subverted this expectation, and displays of kinship relations other than that of heterosexual intimacy were visible in the very core of the community.

Fennema explains reactions to such subverting as a fear of polluting the community at whole as these actions challenge societal control over the ritual itself. However, she explains that such actions are signs of the sacred communion amongst and between humans and God:

> These very relationships, deemed so dangerous by those who espoused the dominant social theodicy because of their potential for pollution, were performed as sacred symbols of God's communion with humanity's communion with each other and the world. (242)

It is interesting to observe how her analysis of this specific execution of the communion ritual defies the theodicy of queer death connected to HIV/AIDS. The communion ritual can thus defy the intended control over the social bodies that partake in it, subverting the ritual to a site of queer empowerment. Controlling the ritual of communion is therefore more than a question of receiving the Body and Blood of Christ because it controls the symbol of *how* we are part of a Christian community through communion with each other. In this regard, the Rainbow Action and MCCSF are examples of how the ritual of the communion can be a space of empowerment for queer Christians, wherein visible queer bodies make use of the symbols in the ritual itself. Instead of being a site of control, this becomes a site of agency, where they can claim presence as queer and Christian within the frameworks of the ritual itself.

The potent powers of rituals give agency to participants as a praxis of empowerment, and the communion ritual can be one such practise. This emancipation brings me back to a story a good friend of mine frequently tells during late, supper conversations. In the late 1990s he, other students at the University of Oslo, and active members of *Åpen Kirkegruppe* attended the gay Pride parade. They studied theology to become ministers, and, as an act of spreading the love of God to the community and bystanders, they put on full vestments and delivered hosts to everyone they met. However, as this was gay Pride, the host people received was a condom with the inscription 'Tend to Love!' followed by a greeting from *Åpen Kirkegruppe.* This act demonstrates the possibility of navigating the power of religious symbolism in rituals, wherein using a space other than a church and a substance than bread granted new meanings to the highly symbolic ritual of communion. Thus, they contextualised the ritual and used the potent symbols of the minister and the communion to spread safe-sex awareness to the community as an act of God's love to humans.

My friend always finds joy in mentioning the surprised eyes he met as bystanders saw the ministers happily skipping around in the parade – in my mind, I imagine them flaring their albs and chasubles to a mix of Vangelis and Vengaboys. Apparently, most people recognised the ritual and accepted the condom host in their hands. If the story had ended there, it would have been a good example of empowerment through the ritual of communion in a queer space, but the peak of my friend's story turns to an even more sacral happening. As he and his friends skipped through the parade, a two-metre-tall drag queen in high heels, with big blond hair and a stunning red sequined gown, appeared before them. For everyone who has met a queen, you know you are at risk of being told a candid truth about whatever you happened to do, wear, or say that day. Wearing the liturgical vestments of the Church and knowing the heated debate on lesbian and gay inclusion the Church of Norway, my friend approached rather cautiously to avoid a potential scolding. As the minster *in spe* continued their work in the garden of God, my friend noticed that the glamazon[1] had approached him, and he prepared for a tirade on the Church's homophobia. However, nothing of the sort occurred. Instead, she knelt in front of my friend, opened her mouth, and stuck her tongue out to receive the condom host.

The ritual of the communion resonated in the Pride parade, and the symbols of the condom host gave it meaning beyond a safe sex awareness. Receiving the hosts reflected the community as HIV/AIDS still spread within it, and, with few preventions other than condoms, this act became

[1] 'Glamazon' is a portmanteau of 'glamorous' and 'amazon', which refers to a larger than life, tall and glamorous drag queen.

a religious symbol of taking care of each other as an act of God's love towards human beings. Delivering condom hosts in a Pride parade could, however, have been received very differently. Firstly, the use of the religious symbolism tightly connected to sexual praxis could be seen as sacrilege: a mocking of Christianity. Secondly, Christian ministers entering a safe space of pride parade, could be interpreted as a hostile intrusion by a religious community. After all, even today the Pride parades in Oslo have bystanders who express religious homophobia, biphobia, and transphobia to the community; and in the late 1990s, even the Church of Norway expressed such views publicly. Nonetheless, the ritual praxis of communion and its symbols resonated in the community at the Pride parade. It was a queer and Christian ritual that empowered the 'congregation' in sacramental safe sex praxis as an act of God's love.

My friend's story is similar to Melissa Wilcox's story of an order of queer nuns, the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence, and their celebration of Mass Against Papal Bigotry in San Francisco in 1987. They took over the Union Square for the celebrations, 'during which they exorcised the pope of the demons of homophobia and canonized slain San Francisco gay political leader Harvey Milk'. In addition, they topped off the event with 'large trays of condoms in gold foil [that] were distributed as communion wafers' (Wilcox 2018, 72-73). I return to both Wilcox and the sisters in Chapter 6, but I want to briefly consider the connections she makes between sacrilege and sacralisation. The story of my minster friend, who connected typical religious sacrileges of promiscuous sex with the sacred communion, is by no means the only who has done so in queer communities. This is, in fact, so common that Wilcox comments on the connection with the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence, who dress up in Catholic nun attire to claim the role of 'queer nuns':

> Queer sacrilege and queer sacralisation may in fact go hand in hand, since the sacralisation of queer bodies is perceived as sacrilegious by many socially conservative religious organizations and individuals. (2018, 87)

Wilcox's point is that sacralising the queer body through traditional religious imagery (the Catholic nun) is an answer to the religious and cultural shaming and oppression of queer bodies and their communities. Through being a queer nun, the sisters thus re-sacralise the queer body, which is both queer sacrilege and queer sacralisation at the same time. The ritual practise of the communion that have been discussed so far – the Pride parade, MCCSF, and the Rainbow Action – can also be explained as queer sacrilege and queer sacralisation. In these instances, same-sex couples showing emotional connections with each other and delivering condom hosts connected the queer sexual bodies to the ritual practice of communion. This was a

resacralisation of the queer body, which used the religious imagery imbedded in the ritual symbols of the communion to claim agency in act of empowerment. This act thus created a queer religious space that embodied queer sacrilege and the queer sacralisation in its act.

In this subchapter, I used Bell's ritual theory to explain how the Rainbow Action subverted the symbolism of the communion. This was a queering of the ritual that gave agency to the participants in an act of empowerment. With examples from MCC, MCCSF, and the Oslo Gay Pride Parade, such subverting can be a queering of communion that fights what Fennema calls the heterosexism of communion. Further, through queer embodiment of the ritual practise and religious imagery, these examples of communion rituals can be explained as examples of queer sacrilege and queer sacralisation of the communion. With this background, there are good reasons to interpret the Rainbow Action as one way of practicing queer Christian identity in indecency. Important as well, this practise does not represent a privatisation of what it means to be queer Christian; the ritual centres community as relevant in this context.

5.3 Talking Back: Answering Scolding

The ritual of communion can be a space for queer sacrilege and queer sacralisation. In this ritual praxis the sexual body takes up space in the religious community through what Fennema explains is God's communion with humans' communion with each other and the world. This shows that the ritual space can be a space that defies a distinction not just between queer and Christian, but also between the queer body as a sexual body and as a Christian body. However, as the exploratory case study implies, defying such distinctions can generate negative reactions to embodying a queer sexual body in the ritual of communion (#11/p.42, #18/p.47). I therefore return to the participants of the exploratory case study and their experience of scolding as acts of microaggression. Microaggressions are usually based on different forms of phobia and systematic negative categorisation of groups such as misogyny and racism. Additionally, they are usually 'invisible' and understood as harmless and trivial by those who seldom or never experience such aggressions (Gressgård 2014, Nadal et al. 2016, Sadika et al. 2020, Sue et al. 2007).

To understand this scolding, Chris Greenough's claim of churches' fear of discussing sexuality is relevant (2018). He sees a discrepancy in Western societies, where 'sexuality can now be discussed alongside religion, yet the position of the churches have not progressed so far.' (125) Greenough connects this divergence – between societies that talk about sex and religion, and the churches which cannot – to a story of Christians who have learnt to hate themselves because of religious suppression. Explaining this through the story of Caddyman, an ex-gay survivor,

Greenough shows how his 'story is one which denotes the long, lonely craving to meet expectations' (97). The limited material from the focus group in this thesis does not show a lonely craving to meet expectations, rather the participants demand to be heard as queer Christians in a community of the Church of Norway. I do argue, on the other hand, that Greenough's observation of churches not being able to discuss sexuality is relevant in understanding the participants' navigation of the scolding. It is this fear of discussing sex and sexualities that frames the discourse of sexualities in the Churches. What is interesting in the material from the exploratory case study, however, is that the participants told their stories of navigating scolding. This implies that evident cases of scolding do not result in people quieting or hiding themselves.

5.3.1 Microaggression

The exploratory case study shows that the participants navigated the Rainbow Action as a Christian ritual practise; nonetheless, the same story scolding happened, both in this specific event and in the bishops' press release on same-sex wedding liturgy (#11/p.42, #18/p.47). Visibility in the communion ritual and questioning the bishops' decision resulted in reprimanding and invalidation of the feelings and meanings of the participants in the exploratory case study. Such invalidation of feelings and scolding of visibility have recently been reported in a survey on LGBT health in the Church of Norway (Elgvin, Grønningsæter, and Larsen 2020). While such experiences were few, the ones that were reported were severe. The communion ritual in the pride parade and in MCCSF can be answers to such invalidation, reclaiming Christian identity in safe queer spaces, with less risk of religious scolding. This does not mean that queer Christians are powerless in navigating such scolding in other religious spaces, but the religious space and expectations of heteronormative adaptions to it form ways of possible navigation within them.

Returning to Cornwall, in her study on intersex Christians in the UK, she addresses navigations of heteronormativity. The participants had many positive experiences and personal benefits in identifying as Christians and even being active in their religious communities. However, some were cautious in opening up about their intersex identities in their religious communities. Cornwall notes that one participant, Anthony, was hesitant to speak openly about intersex after experiences of scolding, and 'although he felt that churches should learn more about intersex, he said he had done enough activism and consciousness-raising, risking his own safety, and now wished to lead a quiet life' (Cornwall 2013, 230). Another participant, Vanessa, treated her intersex identity as an intimate detail; and Poppy saw it as irrelevant for most people. Just

like Cornwall noticed that her participants experienced disproportionate aggressions towards their openness, the participants in this thesis expressed similar reactions (#11/p.42, #14/p.45, #15/p.46, #18/p.47, #22/p.50-51).

Aggression based on visibility is perfectly explained in Derald W. Sue et al.'s (2007) article 'Racial Microaggression in Everyday life'. They describe racial microaggression as a 'brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioural and environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults to the targeted person or group' (2007, 273). Although this definition focuses on racism, microaggression is an effective term for addressing discriminatory praxis based on race, gender, disability, poverty, sexual orientation, and so on. Microaggression can be both intentional and unintentional, and the article distinguishes between three types of microaggression: 'microassault', a 'verbal or nonverbal attack meant to hurt the intended victim through name-calling, avoidant behaviour, or purposeful discriminatory actions' (274); 'microinsult', which is 'characterized by communications that convey rudeness and insensitivity and demean a person's racial heritage or identity" (274); and 'microinvalidation', which is 'characterised by communications that exclude, negate, or nullify the psychological thoughts, feelings, or experiential reality of a person of colour' (274).

While many studies on microaggression target different forms of racism, a growing number of works on LGBTQ+ also address microaggressions targeted at queer identities and within queer communities (Nadal 2013, Nadal et al. 2016, Sadika et al. 2020, Vaccaro and Koob 2019). In intersectional studies on microaggressions in queer communities in Canada, Bidushy Sadika with others, also addressed such racial microaggressions, which 'challenges the myth that LGBTQ+ communities are homogenous and, instead emphasizes the social hierarchy existing in these spaces; a hierarchy prioritizes and privileges White gay men' (Sadika et al. 2020, 142). The assertion in Sadika's article, and others' articles, is that the intersectional aspects must play a part when studying microaggressions in the LGBTQ+ communities, because these communities represent diversity that is often under-communicated in studies on microaggression towards LGBTQ+ people. However, even though microaggressions are part of queer communities, microaggression still targets queer-identifying people as a whole (Nadal 2013, Nadal et al. 2016, Vaccaro and Koob 2019).

Microaggression can perhaps best be explained as an objectification of the *other,* as a result of power structures that Jean-Paul Sartre describes as *le regard,* 'the gaze' (2003). The gaze is the way in which one person observes another, creating a subjective difference of power between

two. This power lies in the objectification of the other through the onlooker's gaze. The importance is that the person who is gazed upon is an object in the eye of the observer. In feminist theory the concept of 'the male gaze', for instance, explains how art can depict women as sexual objects from a heterosexual male view. Foucault picks up Sartre's gaze as a system of power-knowledge production (2003, 1977). Through objectifying human beings, it is possible to dehumanise them and thus disregard their subjective meanings as relevant in the production of knowledge in a given situation. This means that it is possible to deny that individuals' experiences, feelings, opinions, etc. are relevant or irrelevant in any given discourse. One such discourse involves inclusion of queer people in the Church of Norway.

The experiences of aggression in Cornwall's work and in the exploratory case study exemplify forms of microaggression. The microaggressions we find in these stories are reactions to different forms of queer visibility in the bishops' questioning of queer sexual presence in the communion, the bishops' scolding of Sophia, and Cornwall's intersex participants experiencing the repercussions of openness. These stories are experiences of scolding are examples of the same reactions found in microaggressions; however, in these examples, the reactions can be explained as a result of queerphobia. When Sophia, for instance, discussed the silencing and reprimanding of his queer visibility in discussions with the bishops, he explained a form of microinvalidation in which his feelings, thoughts, and experiential reality were nullified by others in the interest of a larger religious cause.

The objectification that the concept of gaze builds upon, can be found amongst the participants as well. Remembering Cecilie, for instance, she experienced being an issue or case in the discourse of queer inclusion in the Church (#16/p.46-47). Cecilie's experience of being an issue is a feeling of being gazed upon. Instead of understanding her and the queer communities' experiences and needs, the bishops expressed a need to keep their own theological coherence in the debate. This gaze objectified the queer community as an issue in which the bishops could keep a 'rational' distance from theological questions such as those regarding same-sex marriage liturgy. Cecilie reacted to this gaze, as it was a privilege for the Bishops to become provoked over a matter that she found rather unproblematic. Thus, being a gay issue underlined this gaze as alienating to Cecilie in the discussion.

5.3.2 Navigating Microaggression

Breaking with expected conduct in the ritual can be a site of empowerment. The communion ritual has been an example of an action that Bell explains as the flipside of ritual control, which subverts the ritual powers from its 'leaders' to other partakers in the ritual. This is possible

because the ritual is an organic action with human beings who act as social and ritual agents in it; thus, it is in constant movement in a matrix of symbols which humans navigate and relate to. However, such subverting does not necessarily come without contestation. In MCCSF and the pride parade, subverting the heterosexist symbolism in the communion ritual seemed unproblematic. Nonetheless, in the Cathedral of Oslo, the Rainbow Action's subverting of the communion ritual did not go uncontested. The Rainbow Action seemed to have challenged the hegemony of control over the ritual, which resulted in microaggression by the bishops.

Dealing with microaggressions is not, however, a question of passively receiving scolding; it is a question of navigating these actions and sometimes answering back. In his study involving 60 gay male Christians, Yip demonstrated that in situations of stigmatisation, people in this group 'have undergone an *ideological empowerment* that provides them with the mission not only to defend, but also to attack the attacker' (1997a). Yip does not use Sartre's nor Foucault's 'gaze' to explain the structures of stigmatisation. However, his study is relevant in that it shows us that responding to stigmatisation is also a form of offensive navigation that subverts the power of the 'gaze' by attacking the hegemonic position of power. In other words, attacking the attacker is a reaction that empowers.

In the exploratory case study, one such instance of attacking of the attacker can be seen in Cecilie's response to the bishops' reaction to the Rainbow Action. Remembering her reflections in Chapter 3 (#14/p.45), she nullified the Bishops' theological understanding of Christian sexual ethics. This can be described as taking agency in a debate on her own sexual body, a form of agency that Andrew Yip calls 'attacking the attacker' (1997a). Even though this article is over 20 years old, it is still relevant in explaining some of the tactics that queer Christians can use when facing Christian religious oppression. Yip explains, 'In their relationships with the Church, gay Christians are subjected to the Church's vocabulary of motives that labels their lifestyle as unacceptable' (116). However, in the Church of Norway, acceptance of lesbians and gays has increased since 1997, so this is not directly applicable today. Nonetheless, being an 'issue', as Cecilie stated – a church's political argument for or against inclusion – is very much a state of being subjugated to the church's 'vocabulary and motives'. However, this vocabulary and these motives are more nuanced than in Yip's research from 20 years ago. In Yip's research, he found that gay Christians applied strategies to fight church stigmatisation, as well as its vocabulary and motives. Firstly, his participants would *attack the stigma*, such as negative biblical readings of gay male sexuality; *attacking the stigmatizer* was another strategy, the goal of which was to discredit the church as a moral guardian of gay Christians. The third tactic was

to *use positive personal experience*, wherein they highlighted their own experiences in response to suppression. Finally, they made us of *ontogeneric argument*, in which they underscored themselves as having been created gay in the image of God. Cecilie's answer to the bishops' negative reaction can be explained as a way attacking the bishops' position. She even argued the necessity to provoke as an answer to the bishops' invalidation (#16/p.46-47). Cecilie continued by stating that she did not find the Rainbow Action challenging, and she attacked the bishops' claim of provocation when she argued they were blinded by the 'gay issue'. She asserted that the focus on LGBTQ+ in the Church was a question or an issue that was discussed amongst bishops who did not have any experience of being lesbian or gay. It was not the Rainbow Action or the intercession in the communion that provoked Cecilie, but rather that the bishops themselves were provoked by an action that she perceived as a fairly harmless expression of religiosity. Other case study participants responded similarly: For instance, Markus also answered back to the authority of the bishops who were provoked by the request for intercession in the communion (#15/p.46). Sophia responded in similar ways when he reflected on how the bishops did not really know what issues were at stake in their theological conclusion on same-sex marriage (#18/p.47). Thus, their response to the bishops was to attack them back by discrediting their position in the discourse on same-sex marriage. By doing so, the participants avoided becoming passive receivers of scolding; rather, they took control of the discussion so they could claim agency.

So far, in this subchapter, we have seen that structures of microaggression can help us understand the scolding that the participants experienced and related. In navigating these microaggressions, the participants took charge in answering back, and, in many ways, they did so in accordance with Yip's second strategy of attacking the stigmatizer. Such strategies gave agency to the participants as much as it did Yip's gay Christians. As he explains,

> They have undergone an *ideological empowerment* that provides them with the mission not only to defend, but also to attack the attacker. (1997a, 125, Italics in original)

This empowerment can challenge the 'gaze' of the religious authority and fight back against microaggressions, even attacking the norms on which they are built. This means that the different strategies of attacking the attacker avoid leaving the community or quietly moving into the private area.

5.5 Reclaiming Sexual Ethics

In Chapter 3.5, 'Discussing Sexual Ethics', I presented the ways in which the participants of the exploratory case study discussed the sexual ethics with each other. The conversation highlights Cecilie and Sophia's arguments as they, to a certain extent, disagreed with each other on matters of sexual ethics. Disagreements on sexual ethics amongst queer Christians are in no way alien in empirical research. Yip's study on gay male Christians, for instance, showed that, through the argument of God creating all sexualities, many of his participants found it important to build their sexual ethics on a Christian, moral framework. Regardless of one's sexual orientation, Christians 'have the same responsibility to practise their sexuality within a Christian moral-ethical framework' (1997a, 124). Nonetheless, the participants did not speak with one voice because while some stressed the importance of sexual exclusivity, most of Yip's respondents rejected sexual ethics built on such a framework. Thus, the question of sexual ethics is diverse and in no way one-sided, and it shows that, within a relatively small group of gay male Christians, different opinions on the matter emerged.

The discussion between Cecilie and Sophia can be seen as one such discussion as the two openly discussed their sexual ethics with each other. Cecilie argued for a holistic love that is more fulfilling than sexuality; love, for her, implied a relationship with another girl, another human being. Love did not, however, negate sexuality altogether, but Cecilie was critical of the focus on sex. Even though the participants of the exploratory case study did not explicitly talk about Christian sexual ethics, focusing on a holistic notion of love resonates with Yip's work and his findings that some gay Christians practice their sexualities within such a frame. The creationist connection that Yip builds this argument on is also found in Norwegian debate on inclusion of queer Christians in the Church of Norway. The universality of 'love' is most notably an argument that builds upon a biblical quote from 1 John 4:8: 'Whoever does not love, does not know God, because God is Love'. The phrase 'God is love' can be found on rainbow banners, t-shirts, and other articles promoting same-sex marriage and as a counter-argument to the exclusion of same-sex couples from the Church. In Norway, a question of universal love further builds upon the notion of creation within theology, where being 'born like this' becomes an argument of being 'created like this' (Mellingen 2013, 72-74). Helle Ingeborg Mellingen argues that different sexualities and genders reflect a magnitude of God the Creator's intended will over His (sic) creation; thus, including LGBTQ+ Christians is a way of embracing God's

creation itself.[2] In the article 'Når sømmelighet blir teologiens mål'[3] (Berg 2019), I also show how theological arguments around lesbians and gays in particular have changed from a language of sexuality to one of love, wherein one embraces the magnitude of creation itself. This is notably apparent in Bishop Rosemarie Køhn's 1999 press release on the reinstatement of Siri Sunde in her position as pastor after Sunde entered a same-sex partnership. Bishop Køhn's argument built on ethical principles of similarities between partnership and marriage, wherein same-sex couples had opportunities to 'arrange their lives in accordance with central principles within the ordinance of Christianity and society, such as community, solidarity, faithfulness, intimacy, and love' (Køhn 1999, 4). This argument was crucial in questions of the inclusion of same-sex couples in the Church up to the marriage liturgy of 2017.

While the concept of love has been important in a Norwegian creationist context, during the exploratory case study, Sophia questioned this approach (#22/p.50-51). In his arguments, as presented in Chapter 3.5, Sophia stated that he found it problematic to accept that love would stand as the main factor in how queer Christians should be included in the Church. He worried that such an approach would exclude other forms of sexual expressions that did not fit a heteronormative structure.

Van Klinken also found that queer Christians can disagree on sexual ethics. Regarding his research interviewing Kenyan queer Christians, van Klinken reflects on a conversation he observed between congregants of CAC on WhatsApp. The disagreement, in many ways, resembles what Yip found amongst his respondents. In text messages between the different congregants, some people argued against sex outside of a committed relationship, making their point based on abstinence and courtship, a position that was supported by one of the leading ministers in the congregation. What is interesting in this context, however, is the construction of a Christian ethical standard that mirrors heteronormativity:

> The model of heterosexual relationships that are made public and visible to the community (and thus subject to social control) is presented as exemplary for same-sex couples. (2019, 181)

Van Klinken's participants claimed a specific set of Christian sexual ethics which, being visible, built on heteronormative principles of sexual monogamy. Others questioned such approaches,

[2] On that note, it is important to emphasise that the general debate concerning Queer inclusion, has been a discussion concerning sex. Questions of trans, gender fluidity, or intersex has hardly been debated at the Church Synod or any other departments of the Church of Norway.

[3] "When Decency Becomes the Goal of Theology"

especially since some of the congregants were sex workers and did not have the privilege to follow such standards in earning their livelihood. Van Klinken therefore stresses that CAC represented a plurality event, though the church ideologically set standards that mirrored heterosexual relationships. This leads van Klinken to reflect on the expectations on transgressive queerness: 'CAC's moral discourse on sexuality and relationships reminds us that queer spiritual spaces are not necessarily transgressive in every respect' (182-183). This leads van Klinken to be cautious in demanding transgressive and anti-heteronormative examples of queerness, especially since the romantic and long-term, committed relationships seem to be out of reach for most of the congregants because of socioeconomic and cultural constraints. However, CAC fulfils a specific role that can embrace the longing for such romantic love:

> In this context, the moral and spiritual community that CAC provides not only supports and nurtures romantic aspirations but also provides space for sharing feelings of disappointment, frustration, and failure, along with advice, relationship counselling, and pastoral support. (183)

For van Klinken, CAC therefore becomes an example of pastoral support when it comes to questions of sexual ethics and relationships. CAC might not be transgressive in matters of sexual ethics, but it provides a space wherein the congregates can find support for their sexual lives and relationships in a religious community.

The interesting part of these examples is that they show us that discussions of sexual ethics are important and diverse within queer Christian communities; and, perhaps because of the public and visible aspect of sexuality, for some people, it is important that it mirrors heteronormativity. Nonetheless, when facing Christians who do not conform to or wish to conform to heteronormativity, such as sex-workers or polyamorous people, other voices appear. In the case study, for instance, Sophia explicitly asked for a space where he could express his sexuality without adapting to heteronormative standards of sexual ethics in the Church (#23/p.51). Cecilie addressed a more holistic notion of love as she understood her identity as more than her sexuality. While the same differentiation is not present in van Klinken's material, nonetheless, van Klinken did discuss how sexuality forms expectations on how people should behave as queer Christians. Sophia addressed how expectations to adapt to heteronormative sexual ethics formed the Church's ethics. Considering this, heteronormative sexual ethics are tightly connected to the Christian sexual ethics that van Klinken presents in his work. In the exploratory case study, both Cecilie and Sophia acknowledged that the expected sexual ethics in the Church

are heteronormative, and van Klinken explains such heteronormative standards as the basis of the sexual ethics in CAC.

Adapting to heteronormativity is a common tactic in being accepted in society in general. Lisa Duggan explains how hegemonic gay cultures can adapt to heteronormativity. She explains that queer adaption to heteronormativity is more complicated than mere rejection since certain alterations of one's queer visibility can result in homonormativity. She further explains how the structures of such norms form as a way of seeking acceptance through 'a politics that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions, but upholds and sustains them, while promising the possibility of a demobilized gay constituency and a privatized, depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption' (Duggan 2003, 50). However, even though such adaptions can explain navigations on a structural level, such navigations are more complicated on a personal level. Failing to adapt to heteronormativity, cis-normativity, and other forms of normative structures can result in exclusion, bashing, or, in the worst case, death. Statistics show that violence based on sexual and gender identities is frequent internationally and in Norway (Bufdir 2019, Flores et al. 2020). Failing to adapt is sometimes fatal. Luckily, the material in this thesis does not show such worries when breaking with heteronormativity.

Discussing sexual ethics demonstrates that there is no one way of understanding a queer Christian sexual ethics. This can remind us Elisabeth Stuart's football match. In this discussion, a discussion takes place amongst queer Christians, wherein they have the ball and can play amongst themselves. In this 'game', they can be active participants, agreeing and disagreeing without having to answer to religious authorities in their discussion. In this way, we can see that clear-cut lines of appropriate and inappropriate ways of doing sexuality, can mirror heterosexual norms; at the same time, the discussion blurs these lines. There are several ways of doing queer Christian sexual ethics, and they all are ways of navigating identity as queer Christians.

5.5 Summary

This chapter has demonstrated that it is possible to re-narrate the heterosexism in communion rituals, by responding to microaggressions by attacking the attacker and discussing sexual ethics from a position of personal interest. All these are examples of different forms of queer agency. Further, these examples of agency are signs of empowerment in claiming identity as queer Christians. In many ways, they are the 'living parables of transgression' (2000, 179) that Marcella Althaus-Reid discusses. In the next chapter, I thus look more closely at Althaus-Reid's

economy of theology, which can be explained as an economy of salvation. Discussing this part of Althaus-Reid`s position with regard to positions held by members of the exploratory case study provide a deeper understanding of some specific ways the exploratory case study participants empowered themselves. One important aspect is how queer bodies can be sites of Althaus-Reid's call for decentralised theological discourses. This decentralisation allows for a richer interpretation of what it might mean to be queer Christians in indecency.

6.0 Decentralising Theological Discourse

In the previous chapter, I explained how this thesis's exploratory case study finds support in van Klinken's and Wilcox's work, regarding the participants' critique of the Father Project's polemics on religious homophobia. I also showed that a binary between a secular and religious societal order can be questioned in the same way as in van Klinken's critique of such divisions. I also demonstrated that the ritual of communion can be a space of queer sacrilege and queer sacralisation and that such forms of empowerment can also be found in how the participants answered back to microaggressions with Yip's strategy of 'attacking the attacker'. Together, these perspectives contribute to form responses to the primary project question as presented in Chapter 1: What does it mean to become a queer Christian in indecency? The persons in the exploratory case study seemed to confirm that the religious/secular binary is itself an obstacle in adopting a position as a queer Christian in indecency. This is, in my perspective, one important outcome of this study so far.

However, there are more issues still to be discussed to achieve a complete answer to the project question. One important aspect concerns the concept of theology itself. What it means to be a 'queer Christian' must involve theology. Accordingly, one important controversy concerns which kinds of theologies support and contribute to the lives of queer Christians – that is, which kinds of theologies support being queer and a person of faith at the same time?

In this chapter I therefore return to the structures of what Althaus-Reid explains as the dominant theological discourse, as well as her call for decentralised discourses. Decentralised theologies can challenge the control over religious bodies in an economy of salvation. In such decentralised discourses, indecent sexualities can form theologies that start from life stories and

experiences rather than from a centralised, dominant theological discourse which builds on heteronormative structures in a binary of absolutes. This chapter presents various works which start from sexual life stories and experiences as examples of different forms of theological decentralisation.

In 6.1 I present Althaus-Reid's explanation of Western theology as an act of heteronormative imperialism which colonializes Christian religious bodies as heterosexual in a market of souls. She connects this imperialism with the neoliberal market economy, in which the dominant theological discourse can capitalise on souls. I explore Althaus-Reid and her explanation of such capitalisation as an economy of salvation. Further, I investigate how the binary of decent and indecent sexualities controls the religious bodies and how salvation can be a representation of decency. I speculate about the possible implications this has for inclusion of LGBTQ+ people in Christian communities and whether they are expected to adapt to the dominant theological discourse that controls the religious body within a system of decency. Further, I examine how challenges to this system can be understood as threats to the hegemony of theological discourse, which can be one explanation for the microaggressions the case study participants experienced. In the conclusion of this subchapter, I return to Althaus-Reid's concept of decentralising dominant theological discourse, investigating this a site of becoming queer Christians in indecency.

In 6.2 I return to both Andrew Yip and Chris Greenough; I present their contributions to understand how queer Christian identities can go beyond an economy of salvation. I also present a more detailed explanation of Wilcox's work on the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence. I explore how the works of Yip, Greenough, and Wilcox can be examples of Althaus-Reid's call for decentralised theological discourse that does not stand accountable to a centralised dominant discourse. I investigate Yip's presentation of LGB Christians and their navigation of religious authorities, as well as Yip's finding that it is possible to start from a positive sexual self-worth. I explore how such self-worth does not have to bargain with sexual decency in becoming a queer Christian. As Yip is, first and foremost, a religious sociologist, his findings lead me to Chris Greenough's work on undoing theology. Greenough starts with three sexual stories to undo theology as an act of Althaus-Reid's call for decentralised theological discourses. I examine how such undoing is a way of queering theology and embracing the messiness that life stories contain in theological discourse. Further, I explore how the undoing theology that Greenough presents can be found in Wilcox's work on the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence. Wilcox explains how, through serious religious parody, the Sisters undo the religious and queer

tropes of ‘nun’ and ‘drag queen’ to do the queer nun. I therefore examine how this can be a form of queer religious expression which truly blurs the lines between religious and profane as this expression does not demand personal religious nor spiritual convictions.

6.1 Dominant Theological Discourse as Market of Souls

Althaus-Reid explains that the sexual discourse we find in theology is a discourse that bases itself on sexual decency in a dichotomy between decency and indecency. In this discourse a decent theology is a reproduction of heteropatriarchal structures. This is a binary system of being inside or outside, right or wrong – a struggle between opposites and absolutes. Althaus-Reid explains this form of dominant theological discourse, which is tightly connected with economic desires of oppression, which rely on definitions and exclusion. This control generates and capitalises on souls:

> Traditionally, we may consider that theology deals with a market of souls and the definition of their needs: sacraments, prayers, ritual ordinance and an allegiance to beliefs which regulate people’s lives, in order to effectively distribute the spiritual goods of redemption or forgiveness or even eternal life amongst them, the spiritual clientele. (2000, 166)

The dominant theological discourse is thus a site of market economy that is controlled and centralised through the institutional Christian churches. This hegemony deals with more than distributing the spiritual goods to congregants because, as in a market economy, the churches also produce the demand itself through promises about the effects of the goods: salvation through heteropatriarchal theology. By encouraging people to adhere to the norms, theological arguments, etc. in the spiritual goods themselves, it is possible to regulate the congregants as sexually decent Christians.

In the frameworks of dominant theological discourse that Althaus-Reid presents, controlling the ritual goods, and thus salvation, is a question of absolutes. Being inside or outside marks the control over the salvation market, which centralises the regulation of people’s lives. When people challenge the religious regulations – by asking questions about sexual ethics, for instance – the centralised hegemony can define the questioning as irrelevant, problematic, heretical, etc. In this thesis, I have provided some examples of microaggression that are invalidations of personal experiences in theological discourse. These voices where never claimed to be heretical, but the retelling of the incidences tells of actions and questions that disturbed a status quo.

However, as Althaus-Reid problematises the centralised dominant theological discourse, it is more complicated than a question of either/or. As she explains, theology is deeply connected to market economy, and one does not have to be a producer of theology to be a consumer of it. On the contrary, she explains that women, for instance, are the main consumers of theology but not the main producers of it. Althaus-Reid's point is that even though women are consumers of theology, their stories are not part of the dominant theological discourse:

> Theology uses a sense of hetero-normativity, where political and religious autonomy *and* sexual autonomy are linked concepts in mutual contradiction. Economic theories in which women are reduced to units of consumption due to the invisibility of their domestic work (including the affective erotic work which nurtures the workforce) are theories not of autonomy but of dependency. (170, italics in original)

This dependency is regulated in the lives of people in a theological economy, where the need for theological goods is defined within hegemonic definitions of heteronormativity. This means that a centralised and dominant theological discourse does not automatically exclude its consumers. In this regard, LGBTQ+ consumers of theology can also benefit from a centralised economy that ensures the theological goods of salvation.

Linn Tonstad responds to and extends Althaus-Reid's theory on theological consumption and consumerism in theology. Where Althaus-Reid explains how the theological market economy upholds heteropatriarchy through a theological economic dependency, Tonstad explains such dependency using examples of queer inclusion in the churches. She explains that inclusion of queer people in the churches occurs within the same market economy of heteronormative theology. Even though inclusion of queer people as consumers of theological goods implies that dominant theological discourse can be a site of movement, it does not mean that the dominant theological discourse itself has moved. Inclusion might not loosen the grip on absolutes that controls the consumers' access to and use of theological goods. Even though queers can be included in the religious communities of mainline Churches in Scandinavia, for instance, the centralised control over beliefs can still be upheld. Tonstad briefly describes such inclusion as a site of exclusion:

> Mainline churches' response to homosexuality usually focuses on issues of inclusion of the other, a logic that extends rather than challenges normative distributions of power and recognition. (2016, 256)

This means that while queer Christians are often included in mainline Churches, this does not automatically entail a drastic shift in the theological market of souls. Someone is still the *other* even though the room is bigger and more 'inclusive'. This is because the compulsory heterosexuality in theology forms the basis of inclusion, which means that instead of being the *other*, queer Christians can be on the inside. This further means that queer Christians can consume the same heteropatriarchal theology, in which they can – using Althaus-Reid's claim – be reduced to units of consumption. According to Tonstad, this means that a centralised control over people and their beliefs is still in effect as a system of inclusion and exclusion through heteropatriarchal theology.

The idea of controlling the ritual goods within a centralised theological discourse of absolutes might help provide an understanding of the microaggressions that we have seen in the former subchapter. In the Church of Norway, for instance, even at the time of the Rainbow Action, there was already a fairly open discussion on inclusion of queer Christians in the Church. This is something that we recognise from Sophia's retelling of the bishops' press conference, during which they wanted to include same-sex couples in a liturgy of intercession. Following Althaus-Reid, within such a systems of inclusion, controlling the religious body as a sexually decent one means that the sexually indecent body is wrong and inappropriate as a religious body. However, since Althaus-Reid wrote her work in the early 2000s, the social and theological discourse regarding queer people in the West has increasingly moved away from discourse on exclusion to a discussion on inclusion. At first glance this seems to question the somewhat clear-cut divide that Althaus-Reid presents in her work. However, her use of queer people as examples of indecent sexualities does not change the neoliberal consumer market of theology that she highlights. Being a consumer of theological goods does not mean that one produces these goods. Even though LGBTQ+ people can be openly included in some churches, this does not automatically mean that different queer people, their experiences, and their stories form or change the dominant theological discourse. The public debate on inclusion has shifted, and, as Tonstad comments, this shift has not changed the concepts of decent and indecent, inside and outside; rather, it has renegotiated the queer body, particularly in relation to homosexuality, within an economy of salvation. In this economy, queer people can consume theological goods within the centralised theological discourse.

However, a centralised dominant theological discourse is not unaware of the plurality and difference amongst its consumers, Althaus-Reid claims. The reactions to such diversity are often to perceive it as a threat rather than as a reflection on people's lives and the stories

connected to those lives. The fear and exclusion of diversity prevents a theological 'coming of age', and it becomes impossible to reflect on theologies' prejudice and mistakes. Althaus-Reid explains, in terms of epistemology,

> There is always an epistemological ceiling, called faith, or patriarchal faith, which is not removed. This I call the ceiling of decency. (167)

This epistemological ceiling of faith hinders a reflection wherein life experiences have room to take part in the dominant theological discourse. It is within the epistemological ceiling of decency that we find a centralised economy of salvation. In the market of souls, salvation corresponds to a system of what Tonstad, for instance, explains as exclusion of the other, wherein the ceiling of decency marks the ideological parameters of inclusion and exclusion. The point is that queer Christians becoming consumers of decent theology might increase the height of the ceiling but will not necessarily change the heteropatriarchal structures of faith. Althaus-Reid therefore calls for the coming of age of theology; and, instead of increasing the height the ceiling of decency, her solution is to decentralise theological discourse. With such decentralisation, it is possible to start from the margins in constructions of theologies that are not accountable to a centralised theological discourse. Thus, one can produce theologies in which one is more than a mere consumer of heteropatriarchal theology. Instead of attempting to force sexual stories and experiences, women, and queer people to adapt within a theological market economy, starting from the margins forms theologies that can handle diversity rather than colonising the same bodies in a system of salvation.

Considering Althaus-Reid's theory on the dominant theological discourse as a centralised market economy, I have argued how such discourse capitalises on souls through controlling salvation. Being a consumer in this theological economy has direct consequences for people who 'buy' products of salvation. Just like women can consume such goods without being the producer of them, so can queer Christians. Such a consumer market can have direct consequences in becoming queer Christians because, as Tonstad explains, such consumer dependency is applicable when it comes to inclusion of LGBTQ+ people in churches. Althaus-Reid explains that even though the room of theology expands through the inclusion of queer people, the heteropatriarchal taxonomy of theology is not challenged. The becoming of queer Christians within many churches can therefore be limited by what Althaus-Reid calls the ceiling of decency. Becoming queer Christians in indecency therefore seems to need a form of decentralised theological discourses that is not accountable to a centralised economy of theology. Such decentralisation starts from the margins, where one does not need to expand the

ceiling of decency through inclusion; rather, these decentralised discourses can be alternatives to centralised theological discourse which controls salvation. In such decentralised discourses, the decent body does not have to be an example of a religious body. With such decentralisations of theological discourse in mind, in the next subchapter, I introduce different examples of such decentralisation and explain how they can form examples of queer theologies.

6.2 Transgressing a Market of Souls

In the former subchapter, I explained Althaus-Reid's call for decentralised theological discourses. Her point is that starting from queer people and their sexual stories, is a way of beginning to reflect on theology from the margins. Tonstad has explained that the problem with inclusion of LGBTQ+ people within dominant theological discourse is that it does not necessarily change the structures of heteropatriarchal theology. Althaus-Reid also reflects on 'difference' and the homogenisation of the 'other' that occurs for this 'other' to become a relevant voice in dominant theological discourse. However, she also claims that this does not have to be true:

> Difference and the presence of the *Others* amongst us do not always need to mean exclusion nor does plurality need to be homogenised with incoherence. (Althaus-Reid 2000, 171)

Althaus-Reid's point is that difference does not need to be excluded nor homogenised to be part of theological discourse. Starting from the margins and starting with the experiences that do not work from a binary of inclusion and exclusion, Althaus-Reid calls for a decentralising the power of theological thought and thus challenging the dominant theological discourse itself. In this subchapter, I present three works by other researchers, as examples of starting from the margins. Starting from the margins involves starting from difference and *other* which need not be excluded or homogenised in a centralised dominant theological discourse. Andrew Yip's work on LGB Christians can help us understand how the experiences of this group might form ways of becoming queer Christians starting from the margins. Chris Greenough presents an undoing of theology, answering Althaus-Reid's call for 'a coming of age' of theology. Melissa Wilcox's work on the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence is an example of a decentralised theological discourse that undoes the centralised dominant theological discourse to be able to be queer nuns.

6.2.1 Andrew Yip: Personal and Social Collective experiences

In his article 'Spirituality and Sexuality (2003b), Yip analysed the religious beliefs of 565 lesbian, gay, and bisexual Christians in Great Britain. He acknowledges that the major denominations in Great Britain have conflicting positions regarding non-heterosexual identities

as discussions on sex and sexualities in general demonstrate a high degree of unease. He notes, 'non-heterosexuality (homosexuality particularly, bisexuality is comparatively undiscussed) has proven to be the most contentious' (137). Even though the position of the institutionalised Churches in general discusses the 'issue' of non-heterosexuality, Yip demonstrated that this group's beliefs 'are informed by the specificity of their own social circumstances, particularly their stigmatised sexualities' (139). His findings show that his informants found compatibility between their sexualities and their Christian faith, in contrast to the arguments of denominations. Yip builds this argument on the finding that the majority of respondents were confident about their sexualities and critical of institutionalised churches and Christianity when it came to religious orthodoxy of homosexuality. Further, 'the respondents argued for Christian sexual ethics that do not demarcate sexual orientation and sexual practice' (143). Rightfully, Yip connects this to what he calls the 'theology of relationships', an approach that lesbian- and gay-affirming theologians in the 1990s, as well as many of today's queer theologians, have promoted.

As Yip established the respondents' sexuality in relation to Christianity, he continued exploring their religious beliefs. He divided the question using four perspectives to explore the participants' understanding of God's attributes, their 'queer' dimensions in beliefs about God, their beliefs about God in relation to their own lives, and their beliefs about the power or functions of God. Most of the respondents' answers corresponded to feminist theological reflections as they agreed with God being genderless and were more critical about gendering God in patriarchal terms. The latter was especially true amongst lesbian- and bisexual-identifying respondents. Regarding the 'queer' dimensions, Yip found that the respondents related to the understanding of 'God as love' and, further, that the Godself is invested in social concerns in our society. According to Yip, this correlates with queer theological arguments of God as devoted to social justice, which 'is indicative of the relationship between [the respondents'] social circumstances and their belief that God is loving and accepting of people of all sexualities' (145). In relation to their own lives, and the power or functions of God, the participants found the Godself close and within themselves and rejected an all-determining God. All of this led Yip to conclude, 'Their beliefs in God were more pantheistic … rather than theistic' (146).

Regarding the participants' beliefs about Jesus Christ, Yip found that the respondents acknowledged classical doctrines of Jesus as both divine and human in nature, but the majority of them rejected the exclusive soteriological claim of Christ. With support from qualitative

interviews, Yip demonstrates that even though the divinity of Christ constituted the respondents' understanding of Jesus, the humanity of him received greater emphasis. Connecting the respondents' understanding of God and Jesus led Yip to conclude with the perspective of a personal and loving God who takes great care of people's interests. This shows Jesus Christ as 'an enabler who identified with marginalised people'; and such beliefs being linked to his respondents' social position as 'religious marginals' gives evidence 'that their social circumstances do inform and shape their religious beliefs' (148).

To conclude, Yip examined how the respondents' lived experience as a stigmatised community affects their understanding of Biblical authority and how this influences their religious beliefs. He asserts that conventional interpretation of biblical texts forms the churches' dominance in discourse regarding non-heterosexuals. The data show that even though the Bible was relevant in most respondents' everyday life, the Bible was not the sole basis for their Christian faith. When interpreting the Bible, personal lived experience is important, and what Yip calls 'situatedness' and 'constructedness' of both the scriptures and its exegesis is key.

Yip connects these findings to a broader theological context as he considers queer theology and how it 'problematises, disrupts and transgresses the binary hetero/homosexual categories that form the cornerstone of heteronormativity' (150). For him, the acknowledging and rejecting strict orthodoxy queers the binary of absolutes as the 'respondents' personal and collective social experiences appear to have a significant impact on their religious beliefs. (151). Thus, his findings – according to Yip – seem to support Thomas Luckmann (1967), in that 'individuals construct systems of ultimate significance based on a process of subjective reflection and choice shaped by their own social biographies' (Yip 2003b, 151).

Applying Yip's research to Althaus-Reid's claim about theological decentralisation is relevant. What Althaus-Reid explains as a decentralisation of theology is, for Yip, the personal and social circumstances that form beliefs based on his LGB Christian's experiences. Such a belief system queers the binary of absolutes in a theological economy of salvation. What is interesting about Yip's study is that navigating between different religious authorities, such as the Bible and various churches, is not bargaining with salvation. The LGB Christians in this study did not question whether they were Christian; rather, they navigated the religious Christian authorities in adapting to their lived experiences. However, as a religious sociologist, Yip does not reflect on the theological consequences of his findings. The interesting part of his findings, then, is how the personal and social collective experiences form queer theologies. To see examples of

this, I believe it is important to look at Chris Greenough and his contribution in *Undoing Theology*.

6.2.2 Chris Greenough: Undoing Theology

This form of navigation allows for a multitude of different ways to discuss theology because decentralised theological discourse does not need to be accountable in an economy of salvation. This means that sexual stories can generate theologies that challenge the central dominant theological discourse. Starting from sexual stories is a method that Greenough calls an undoing of theology. In his book *Undoing Theology* (2018) Greenough positions his field between sexual theology and practical theology as the space to explore life stories of non-normative individuals as he seeks to produce an inclusive sexual theology. He performed qualitative in-depth interviews with Alyce, an intersex Christian; Caddyman, a gay Christian man; and Cath a practising Christian heterosexual woman who engages in BDSM practise. The contributors in his project 'characterise an approach that exposes just how sexual contemporary Christian lives are, not just in relation to minority sexuality or practices, but across the sexual continuum' (2018, 7). This leads Greenough to address how queerness affects theology in general, rather than seeing queerness as a specific subcategory of queer theology. Following Althaus-Reid's claim that all theology is sexual theology, Greenough claims to demonstrate this in his specific research, wherein the sexual stories go beyond queer theology and into theology in general, showing that 'they are part of a process by which theology is being revealed as having always been sexual' (7).

As Greenough continues, he explains how Althaus-Reid's call for sexual life stories is lacking in her own work and that these stories 'have not been adequately addressed in academic terms by other theologians' (13), which is the gap that his book seeks to fill. To do so, he uses sociological practice and turns to Yip's work (1997b, 2005, 2003b, 2002, 2010, 2003a) to explain how a 'bottom up' approach to theology, which starts from life stories of queer people, 'demonstrates that individualism prevails over institutionalism' (Greenough 2018, 35). This is an important forebearer in Greenough's own work of using sexual stories in practical theology. Before examining how Greenough explains sexual stories as a way of perverting practical theology, it is important to understand his use of the life stories in the five main reflections he presents: 1) stories are transformative because they are relational, 2) stories can help individuals make sense of their lives, 3) stories are messy, 4) stories subvert the material/divine binary, and 5) stories mark and queer heterosexuality.

Greenough's first point emphasises that sexual life stories are relational because they are subjective and individual, and they evoke emotions in the recipient. This is relevant in theology that wants to start from these stories because they have transformative potential, especially when starting from Gayle Rubin's bottom layers of the 'erotic pyramid' (1984). The bottom layer of the erotic pyramid includes bar dykes and promiscuous gay men, and on the very bottom, we find trans people, transvestites, sex workers, and people who fall along the BDSM spectrum. Seeking these sexual stories 'may provide a pathway to bring about change in the institutional forms of religion – religion which has taught many to be ashamed of themselves' (Greenough 2018, 28).

Greenough's second point, that stories help individuals to make sense of their lives, builds on Ken Plummer's (1995) argument that the telling of sexual stories constructs an identity, which is a tool that enhances life and the development of oneself. However, such constructions are usually non-uniform, and even though the personal and subjective interpretation might question and even compromise the material, Greenough claims, along with Norman Denzin (2004), that all research is a subjective construction, and thus, we do not need fear non-uniform and subjective storytelling. With support from psychotherapy, Greenough found that telling sexual stories can be a process of healing and can be constructive for LGBT religious and spiritual people as means of reconciling spiritual and sexual conflict. Thus, 'sharing sexual stories can aid one's self-understanding', and 'it enables individuals to move from sexual shame to embracing themselves' (2018, 30), according to Greenough.

The third point emphasises Elisabeth Stuart's assertion that doing theology is a messy business (1997), and this mess adheres to the non-uniform structures of sexual storytelling. However, Greenough warns about the complexity of such messiness. As theology is a discipline that seeks order and structure in life stories that are unsystematic, the question concerns how far queer theologies should bend the grand narrative of theology itself. While sexual life stories might be messy, Greenough acknowledges the concerns of messing up theology for those who actually seek it for reassurance of the stability in their religion 'because their lives are so messy' (2018, 31). Nevertheless, he leans on both Stephen Pattison (2007) and Susannah Cornwall (2010) as he argues that the messiness of life and a stable religion might be a space of transformation.

In his fourth point, Greenough connects the messiness of lives and the systematics of theology in an argument to subvert the binary systems between the material and the divine as, he claims, 'queer theology itself must provide a liminal space where the messiness of life and the sanctity of religion can coexist' (2018, 32). With this, Greenough argues that sexual storytelling

involves stories that reveal the false binary between the material and the divine, wherein 'the binary of personhood and divinity is erased' (33) because sexual theology is a theology that starts from life experiences and constructs divinity from the material body. Subverting the binary of material/divine leads Greenough to subverting straight heterosexuality. In his final point, Greenough concludes that, since the sexual stories might reformulate theologies of 'God, Christ and the dominant heterosexual frameworks' (33), these same stories might also queer heterosexuality. I would like to add that Greenough's point follows Butler's concept of gender and sexuality as a constant repetition of itself (1990), and the undoing of heterosexuality involves straight-identifying as well as LGBT people. This last point is also an important argument for Greenough's own inclusion of straight-identifying people in his research as he investigated deviating heterosexual praxis rather than exclusively including LGBT identities.

The goal of Greenough's work is to undo theology. He starts from Althaus-Reid's concept of per/version as he seeks a perversion of practical theology, which means including alternative interpretations in discourse on theology. In this undoing, the praxis of theology stands central, and 'critical engagement with sexual stories from non-normative lives is an act of practical theology' (38). The aspect of theology of practice is important for Greenough as he claims that all theology should have the objective of making a difference, and such difference occurs in the interaction between theological theory and practice. He starts from both Jeanne Hoeft (2012) and Kathleen Talvacchia (2015) as he explains that practical theology is a site where one can engage in debates on sexuality and gender. Greenough explains that Hoeft's work in pastoral theology has been groundbreaking for issues of gender and sexuality in practical theology because, for instance, '[She] notes how intersex-identifying individuals problematize simplistic categories of gender' (Greenough 2018, 40). Talvacchia's work is also important as she shows that 'theology is not a theoretical task, but one which also engages in practical discovery of living religious experience' (40-41). Greenough is, however, critical of how both authors want to incorporate the lives of others in such work, without providing concrete examples for how this should be done. Furthermore, he criticises the autobiographical starting point of Talvacchia as an elitist project for trained theologians that engages academic scholars but seems to forget other voices that do not have the privilege of academic endeavours. This is critically important for Greenough as it is 'a necessary injunction for practical theology' (41). In this critique, it is clear that Greenough wants to start from voices and stories other than those of theologians. I see this as an act of decentralising the theological discourse from theological scholars to stories in the margins. This is an important insight which can challenge theologies solely based on

academic theological discourses; starting from other sexual stories can provide space for decentralisation. Thus, Greenough's project is about embodying human beings; or, as he explains, 'theology is done by embodied human beings, and embodiment is gendered and sexual' (42). This decentralisation through embodiment is what he considers an undoing of theology.

Greenough's concept of undoing theology builds on Judith Butler's concept of doing and undoing as performing identity. Identity is produced relationally, wherein we become subjects through the eyes of and interactions with others. To become something – such as male, female, Christian, European, etc. – is an act of performativity. This means that we are not simply born one gender, but through culture we, for instance, become women through compulsory acts of heterosexuality. The importance of Butler's theory of gender performativity is that being an autonomous agent in forming one's own identity is much more complicated than just a question of sheer will because we perform gender in interactions with each other, and our identities are relationally produced in these interactions. To consciously make choices about gender identity, one must actively undo the performativity of compulsory heterosexuality to do one's 'self' the way one feels and wants to be seen by the world. It is these actions that Greenough builds on when he calls for an undoing of theology because theology needs to undo itself from compulsory heterosexuality to do queer theologies:

> I express my desire to subvert the *doing* of theology by describing the sharing of sexual stories as part of a queer paradigm: an undoing of traditional theology. Fully aware of the inescapable binary of 'doing' and 'undoing', this form of theology subverts traditional approaches by undoing them, thus remaining a queer enterprise. (64, italics in original)

The concept of undoing theology is one alternative to the dominant theological discourse that Althaus-Reid presents. Greenough concretises this discourse by actively seeking an undoing of theology, thus building on Butler's system of undoing and doing gender and identities. Even though Greenough stresses the inescapable binaries of his project, the undoing itself is a queer enterprise, not only because it subverts traditional approaches, as he himself underlines, but the very act of undoing theology itself is doing decentralised theological discourse. In this way, Greenough, undoubtedly contributes to the project question of what it means to be a queer Christian in indecency. Undoing theology, like in Butler's own theory of undoing gender identities, involves starting from relational connections and interactions. The bottom line is that we must first be undone in the larger societal matrix of existence to do our selves. For

Greenough, such undoing can be seen in his participants' stories: 'Desiring God and desire for engaging in non-normative sexual practices are processes by which my participants are "undone"' (61). Through the intimate life stories of his participants, Greenough seeks to undo the dominant discourse of theology. This is, then, a way of subverting theology to a creative and unbound method that does not 'create or follow rules, nor search for concrete models' (64).

Thus, Greenough's theological project is one that is fluid and one that does not seek a coherent system. However, this does not mean that the participants are oblivious to Christian traditions and teachings. It is this knowledge – the religious matrix – that forms the participants' understanding of God. The embodiment that the stories embrace provides insights that are transformative, according to Greenough:

> These insights summarize the transformative experience of participants, which are formed in liminal space between traditional Christianity and Christianity from the margins, a move in which faith is informed by personal experiences. (160)

Starting with stories from the margins, Greenough finds a liminal space where traditional Christianity and embodied sexual and gendered experiences form theologies that do not answer to absolutes. Starting from these life stories, Greenough demonstrates the fluidity of theology and the possibilities for navigating and constructing creative ways of doing theology. One participant, Alyce, for instance, uses her intersex experience to talk about the 'Tranity', a play on 'trans' and the 'Trinity', 'to conceptualize her self-understanding as 'neither/nor' and her future hope of self-affirmation' (160). Greenough also found that the dual embodiment of Alyce and Jerry echoes a traditional Christology of Jesus as both human and divine. Caddyman also represents forms of theology as his conflict between sexuality and Christianity ended in self-acceptance, due to which he now experiences a healthier self-view and a healthier understanding of God. Cath's story of navigating a dualism between sexual self-pleasure and expectations of being a good Christian girl shifted as she discovered the grace of God, which changed her understanding of God and the relationship she has with God.

The undoing of theology through life stories is a method that explains the fluidity of theology. Such fluidity is a messiness that cannot be a specific systematics of theological reflection. The sexual life stories are therefore an undoing of dominant theological discourse. With this, Greenough explains that dominant Christian theology is not a stable foundation. The dominant theological discourse does, like in Butler's claim about gender, repeat itself in continuous acts of performativity, wherein theology gives an impression of being orderly constructed. This

construction is a representation of the past which promises a stable future in its reproduction of theology. Starting from sexual stories, Greenough shows possible ways of undoing dominant theological thought. In this undoing, another *doing* appears, one that starts from the margins, or what Althaus-Reid calls decentralised theological discourse. Greenough concludes that such forms of undoing represent theological troublemakers as they expose the ways in which theology is temporal and its hegemony is upheld through continuation of certain normative theologies that are simply repeated. An undoing of theology thus allows for doings of *theologies* in which sexual life stories navigate, sift, and construct different theologies in decentralised discourse. However, as his work starts from personal sexual life stories, Greenough might be close to Yip's concept of how queer Christians privatise their beliefs. In the context of the participants in the exploratory case study, this 'privatisation' might seem challenging. They insisted that it is possible to be a queer Christian in indecency and simultaneously participate in Christian communal practices. It is thus important to take a closer look at how an undoing of theology might look in a community and how such a decentralised theological discourse might form as a 'church'. In the next subchapter I therefore look more closely at the Sisters of Perpetual indulgence in Melissa Wilcox's work *Queer Nuns* (2018).

6.2.3 Melissa Wilcox: The Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence

I introduced the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence through Mellissa Wilcox (2018) in Chapter 5, where I briefly touched on the sisters as an example of queer sacrilege and queer sacralisation. In this subchapter, I return to Wilcox and the sisters, taking a closer look at the sisters as a decentralisation of theological discourse.

The Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence are often seen at rallies, pride parades, and other venues and spaces where queer people gather. They have homes predominantly in the United States, Europe, and Australia; and their spectacular – mostly Catholic inspired – iconography and attire are ways for the sisters to 'pursue the promulgation of universal joy and the expiation of stigmatic guilt' (xii). They do this through HIV/AIDS fundraising, fighting phobias of promiscuous sex, promoting safer sex practices, and the like. Although the sisters might look a bit different from country to country, 'the playful, sexual humour and the commitment to activism, education, and various other forms of community service are consistent across the order, as these Sisters' simultaneous camping and claiming of the role of the nun' (2).

It is the role as 21st century queer nuns that is important in the context of both Wilcox and this thesis. To understand the order of the Sisters, they play on two known cultural references which

are often relevant in queer communities. The first is the religious, mostly catholic, representation. Most visually, this is present in their attire which resembles that of the Catholic nun pre-Vatican Council II. This look fits with the origin story: their first attire from a Catholic school that presumptuously assumed they were doing a production of *The Sound of Music* (240). Playing on a sort of 'Nun ala Julia Andrews', a Hollywood musical version of the Catholic nun is a way of invoking a positive connection in queer communities. Not only does it embrace Andrews and her iconic voice, but also musical theatre, which is an important part of gay male culture. The other important aspect of the positive invocation to the Sisters can be found in their connection to the drag queen. Playing on gender and doing gender, their expression is not only connected to a religious culture, but a culture within queer communities. Drag is, to various degrees, a long-standing tradition in different queer communities, and it is recognisable as a representation of these in various fluctuating ways. However, blending these two recognisable cultural tropes creates something other than a drag queen or a Catholic nun as Wilcox explains:

> The Sisters are neither of these figures, but in blending them to create something new, the order also creates a figure that is immediately legible within their communities, at least once one understands what one is seeing; the drag reference is evident to most community members, but the nun reference less so when a house favours party dresses over formal habits. In referencing both drag queen and nun simultaneously, the Sisters invoke a persona that is nurturing, selfless, sexy, sassy, and eminently queer. (81)

Embodying both of these tropes, the Sisters thus construct a form of queer religiosity, or at least a persona that represents both religious and queer culture through their presence. In this blending, they represent traits that also reflect the order of the Sisters' goal of spreading love and care to queer communities, fighting the internalised phobia and religious shame and guilt that can be put on these communities.

The last point of the former paragraph also underlines the seriousness of the order. Even though the Sisters play on camp and exaggerated forms of gender and religion, they combine these expressions with devotion and sincerity. Wilcox found that the nuns of the order claim their position as nuns on four counts:

> (1) the Sisters do the same work as nuns do, they sometimes do it better, and they are more fun; (2) they have more moral integrity than the Roman Catholic Church, especially toward queer communities and toward Roman Catholic nuns; (3) their work

> is spiritual or even prophetic, like that vowed women religious; and (4) the Roman Catholic Church has no monopoly on nuns anyway. (88)

According to Wilcox these four arguments represent a self-understanding of the order that resembles the doing of Catholic nuns. Another interesting part of these accounts is that their arguments are tightly connected to religious imagery and argumentation; for instance, they compare themselves with prophetesses. In this regard, there are similarities to Greenough's undoing of theology as, starting from the margins of the queer communities, the Sisters navigate a dominant theological discourse and construct a new discourse that does not stand accountable to the hegemony, in this instance, of the Catholic Church.

Even though the Sisters are serious in their work, Wilcox does not discount the playfulness that the Sisters embed in their work and appearance. She explains that the Sister imbed a form of parody in their embodiment of queer nuns. Playing on camp, they still claim, in all seriousness, that they are nuns, which Wilcox explains:

> This combination of gleeful parody, however marked or intentional on the part of any individual Sister, with the absolutely serious claim to be nuns in their right is an example of what I term serious parody. (68)

Serious parody embraces the camp expression as well as the seriousness involved in the doing of a Sister. Wilcox perhaps explains it even better in her introduction as she focuses on how serious parody is an activist strategy that 'simultaneously critiques and reclaims cultural traditions in the interest of supporting the lives and political objectives of marginalized groups' (2). Embracing different cultures to benefit queer communities is thus a parody of seriousness. This strategy navigates different tropes of culture and religion, generating a new form of religious expression that plays on both Catholic and queer traditions.

As we have already seen some parables regarding Greenough's undoing of theology, there is one big difference between his theory and Wilcox's. Even though the Sisters can be seen as doing a sort of queer nun, being a nun does not entail any specific religious affiliation or any religious affiliation at all. Greenough's participants were all Christians who navigate their sexual and gender experience with Christian beliefs. The Sisters, on the other hand, do not necessarily navigate their experiences within a Christian theological mindset, other than in parodying the Catholic nun. However, such navigations are not obsolete in the order, and most of the Sisters who Wilcox interviewed navigated religion and spiritualty in their doing of Sisters. Their religious and spiritual beliefs were connected to Christian beliefs, other traditional

religions, or simply ways of finding spiritual paths in their lives. This does not mean, however, that Greenough's concept of undoing theology is obsolete when encountering the Sisters; I argue that it rather strengthens Greenough's method. Being invested in doing queer nun plays on Christian religious tropes that connect to performativity, wherein they undo the repetition of the nun as religious to do a queer nun who actually queers religious expression. The possibilities for unbecoming and becoming religious are embedded in the doing of the Sisters, as Wilcox explains:

> Through their serious religious parody, the sisters of Perpetual Indulgence engage seriously with tradition of religious figures leading the struggle for justice while using parody, play, and pleasure to queer those traditions and to push back against their own vituperative exclusion from the very traditions they emulate. (221)

The novel aspect of the serious religious parody of the Sisters is similar to what can be found in Greenough's *Undoing Theology*: it involves 'laying claim to the truly faithful enactment of the still-valuable aspect of the oppressors' tradition' (221).

On this background, the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence doing the queer nun represents a decentralisation of theological discourse. This decentralisation uses the religious tropes of Christianity, mostly Catholicism, in undoing the nun to do the queer nun. Starting from queer bodies, bodies that can be problematised in dominant theological discourse, they embody seemingly contradictory tropes in a serious religious parody which becomes a queer religious expression. This is a queering of the Catholic nun and the drag queen through the undoing of these religious and queer expressions. This queering results in a doing of the queer nun who does not need to be Christian or have personal religious or spiritual convictions to be a Sister. This decentralised theological discourse shows the possibilities for discussing theology in spaces and with bodies that do not have to be Christian or religious; this constructs other forms of religious truths through the act of serious religious parody.

In this subchapter I have demonstrated that the undoing of theology that Greenough presents and Yip's construction of Christian faith based on personal and social collective circumstances are decentralisations of theological discourse. The Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence also highlight ways of undoing theology in a decentralisation of the theological discourse. The crucial point of such undoings is that different stories create different theologies, such as queer. These queer theologies do not need to correspond to each other, nor do they have to be responsible to a dominant theological discourse as a centralised economy of salvation; rather,

people navigate their experiences as theological truths that they use to form Christian and/or religious and non-religious identities. By doing so, it is possible to navigate different theological discourses, and a magnitude of experiences can challenge a notion of theological absolutes.

What remains open for future discussions is, however, the character of the community aspect. The Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence are, beyond any doubt, decentralising theology. In this way, they represent interesting responses to the question of becoming queer Christians in indecency. The voices in the exploratory case study, however, are not practising performances of parody in their way of being queer Christians. So, the question concerns whether there are ways of being queer Christians in indecency and simultaneously practising un-parodical, and denominational, lives.

6.3 Summary: Blurring the Lines of Absolutes

As Althaus-Reid explains, theology is a market economy that controls Christian religious bodies in a market of souls, and this market promises spiritual goods in the consumption of salvation. Instead of starting from the centralised theological discourse, Althaus-Reid proposes that we start from the margins so that a decentralised theological discourse can take place. This chapter presented three different means of theological discourse; however, as these presentations are examples of materials that comment on specific research involving different queer people and their navigations of faith, they are connected through their indecent sexual positions.

Yip's contributors, and Greenough's contributors, the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence, and any other voices starting from the margins of Christian theology can provide examples of decentralising theology and responding to heterosexism in the Christian theology. Through decentralisation, we can see that different sexual stories and experiences create different and sometimes even incoherent theologies. Such incoherence is not problematic; on the contrary, it exemplifies the fluidity of lived experiences and the liberty that lies in decentralised discourse that does not construct theological 'identities through coherence' (Althaus-Reid 2000, 168).

Not adapting to a coherent theological system blurs the theological absolutes, in that the market economy of salvation does not adhere to *one* centralised matrix in producing spiritual goods. Starting from queer bodies, their sexual life stories, and their experiences allows one to challenge the economy of salvation. Starting with Yip, it is clear that religious authorities do not have to validate queer Christians' life experiences for queer people to find a Christian faith. Starting from a positive self-worth thus challenges the dominant theological discourse on

indecent sexual bodies as impossible as Christian religious bodies. Greenough not only explains how these same bodies defy this dominant theological discourse, but he also shows that these bodies are sites of decentralised theological discourse. Through an undoing of theology, Greenough thus shows that it is possible to queer theologies, which questions the reproduction of heteropatriarchal theology as the basis of spiritual goods that can give salvation. In connection with Greenough's undoing theology, Wilcox's presentation of the Sisters is exciting and relevant. The Sisters undoing the 'catholic nun' and the 'queer drag queen' in a serious religious parody presents another decentralised theological discourse that blurs the binary of absolutes between Christian and non-religious. Starting from this position, one can see that the market of souls does not have to make use of a centralised economy of theology to be consumers of spiritual goods. Through serious parody, 'non-religious' people can even be producers of these spiritual goods.

With decentralisation as examples of queer theologies, in the following chapter, I deepen the significant Christian community aspect of what it means to be a queer Christian in indecency. The main topic of discussion is Linn Tonstad's theological contribution, especially concerning the apophatic church that she postulates. The apophatic church is a position wherein insecurity of theological futurity stands central, a futurity which can also be challenged by decentralised theological discourse. In my view, Tonstad's apophatic church opens promising perspectives. It should, however, reflect more on how being queer Christian in indecency presupposes a discourse that starts from sexual life stories and experiences of LGBTQ+ people.

7.0 Decentralising Church

As the former chapter explained some decentralised sites of theological discourse, this chapter takes a closer look at how such decentralised theological discourse can be understood, not only from a personalised and private position, but also in the form of Christian community. Therefore, in this chapter, I first return to Althaus-Reid in 7.1. She warns of empowerment as a positive reproduction of heteropatriarchal theology, thus reminding us that theology is an economy in which its consumers can consume theology even though it can be suppressive. Considering W.C. Harris and his critical view on theology, I examine whether this results in an abandonment of theology altogether. Harris is especially critical of Althaus-Reid's project; however, while his somewhat polemic critique might be relevant as a critique of heteropatriarchal power, he seems to forget that Althaus-Reid's position of indecent theology is one that does not want to stand accountable to a dominant theological discourse. Thus, I wonder whether Harris's goal of 'gaytheism' might be closer to Althaus-Reid than it seems at first glance.

As Harris also critiques Christianity for its heteronormativity, this problem is more than a religious one. I therefore explore Lee Edelman and his claim of queering as a destructive site. This site is destructive because it does not seek affirmation through a positive reproduction of heteronormativity; instead, it is a site of non-productivity of a certain future.

In 7.3 I examine Linn Tonstad's theology on the apophatic church, a church that builds on the destructive element of queerness that Edelman presents. Tonstad postulates that an apophatic church does not produce an image of God which can be claimed through reproduction of it. I conclude that Tonstad's apophatic church is relevant and that we do not have to reproduce a heteropatriarchal theology to have agency as queer Christians. I therefore continue speculating about how we can embody such an apophatic church, a reflection I bring with me into the Interlude and Chapter 8.

7.1 Questioning Religious Transgression

Returning to the material of this thesis, the undoing of theology can challenge a centralised dominant theological discourse. Starting from life stories and experiences of queer Christians

is a decentralisation of theological discourse which constructs different theological truths and which does not have to homogenise or exclude such truths in a binary opposition of right and wrong. Althaus-Reid explains it in the following way:

> Binary thought can only be challenged in theology and capitalism alike by people whose bodies are living parables of transgression. (Althaus-Reid 2000, 179)

This claim is progressive as it embraces bodies, such as queer bodies, in a theological reflection that breaks with an imbedded heteronormativity and the heterosexual decency of it. As Althaus-Reid continues her reflection, she argues that we might 'learn something about difference' (2000, 180). This thesis has shown that it is possible to learn something about difference through a decentralisation of theology, and Chapter 5 demonstrated how different LGBTQ+ people can be examples of living parables of transgression. Although we have witnessed stories of microaggression, these stories also tell about an active response to such aggressions, wherein the *other* has a legitimate voice. The decentralisation of theological discourse shows us that it is possible to construct queer theologies that do not need one coherent system, rather the sifting, navigation, and re-narration in interactions with dominant theological discourse constructs theological truths that answer to different experiences. This creates different theologies that start from and reflect the life stories of different queer Christians. Althaus-Reid's visionary goal is tantalising, and we might question which church she postulates as self-reflective and learning and which willingly submits to its hegemony over Christianity. However, this is not the point of Althaus-Reid's work, nor of decentralisation of theology, I might add, because claims to be *the* theological discourse stand at risk of making queer theology into a site of absolutes. At the same time, queer theologies are in conversation with dominant theological discourse, which, in many ways, queers the discourse itself because it presents different truths based on an already existing system. However, as with all hegemonic discourse, we should be aware of the flipside of partaking in discourse as a site of agency. Althaus-Reid comments on this:

> The problem is that in development and theology it is easy to follow implicit hegemonic theological orders, no matter how well disguised they may be in terms of participation and 'empowerment' (Althaus-Reid 2000, 167)

Her point is that despite good intentions or goals of participation, empowerment and agency can be a guise that strengthens the same system of sexual suppression through positive reproduction of heteropatriarchal theology.

W. C. Harris picks up this point in 'Slouching towards Gaytheism' (Harris 2014). He questions how and whether theology can be the sexually liberating space that Althaus-Reid postulates. Harris argues that her indecent theology is too optimistic regarding theology because the churches are pervasively heteronormative institutions. He questions whether queer bodies are as transformative for theology as Althaus-Reid postulates. He critiques the desire to queer theology and claims that the institution will not change just because one wants to think queerly because the structures of theology do not contain the ability to adapt to indecency. In addition to Althaus-Reid, Harris also criticises other theologians, such as Toby Johnson, when he questions possibilities of sexual transgression through religion:

> If sexual transgression were capable of transforming religion symbolically or practically, one would think some effect would be apparent by now – from efforts of gay Christians or even ex-gays. (129)

Harris's critique emphasises the power of heterosexual hegemony, a force that queer Christians have bargained with to adapt, with little or no effect. Harris acknowledges examples of churches and theologies that have included queer Christians but states that this inclusion builds on heteronormative hegemony, wherein a transgressing queer body does not change the discourse.

Harris sees these alterations as evidence of sexual transgressions' failure to queer theology. His solution is to introduce 'gaytheism', a construct that builds on 'atheism' and that should not be confused with a form of queer theology:

> My use of the term 'gaytheism', far from advocating that queers turn to religion (theism), invites gays to opt for atheism, so as to opt *out* of religious ideology and the damage that its so-called moral clout continuous to inflict on queer Americans. (206-207)

This negation of queerness from theology is, I believe, an accurate and necessary reflection as it questions lofty academic discourse of the consequences of being a sexual and gendered transgressing body in a heteronormative theology. Although Harris's critique points at some of the problems with claiming a transgressing sexuality within theology, what I find problematic in Harris's critique is not his opposition to Christianity but rather the idea that abandoning it solves problems of heteronormativity. Researchers such as Jasbir K. Puar have demonstrated that homonationalism (Puar 2007) involves politics that employ sexuality as a crucial part of forming a proper US citizen, nationally and internationally, within structures of heteronormativity. This is even applicable to Scandinavian countries that pride themselves on

such labels as ‘gay friendly’ (Jungar and Peltonen 2017). Other structures, such as homonormativity, adapt to heteronormativity, particularly in secular politics of inclusion (Polaski 2011, LaFleur 2019, Conrad 2010) – and, might I add, politics of decency.

Harris’s project does, on the other hand, start from a non-heterosexual hegemony, postulating LGBTQ+ experiences as the starting point of gaytheism. Harris connects to queer bodylines as he sticks with a positive affirmation of queer gaytheism:

> ‘Gaytheism’ also means to connote a project of believing in queerness, in our own subversive nonnormative ethical cores, believing in it *more than* in the ability of religious authority, extramundane beings, or invidious normative valuations to make us whole, to sanction us in ways that queerness best insights have taught us to question. (207)

While I find Harris’s solution interesting, I question whether seeking gaytheism is the answer, at least in its current form. I wonder – considering queer bodies – whether Harris, in his eagerness to queer, starting from the queer bodies, forgets the fluidity and adaptability of the same bodies. After all, this thesis has indicated that it is possible to start from the fluidity of queer bodies and the sexual life stories to form queer theologies. Queer Christians believe in more than the abilities of religious authorities and questions of norms, whereas society is imbedded in different structures of norms in which heteronormativity is not particularly Christian. Ending religion is not the solution to homophobia and violence towards queers. Harris’s critique also misses the point that queer and Christian do not need to be diametric opposites. The theoretical divide is not as absolute when starting with people who identify as queer Christians without experiencing inner or outer conflict when they do so.

Harris’s critique of queer theology is, however, appropriate because we stand in danger of reinforcing heteropatriarchal structures when we try to claim theology as a sexually transgressing enterprise. However, this critique does not fix the heteronormative structures of society in general, and I, on the other hand, believe that Althaus-Reid’s reflections have a stronger impact than what Harris grants her. Althaus-Reid is not, first and foremost, engaging in a theological discourse to save theology; rather, she uses it to explain how theology is part of a colonialising heteropatriarchal system, wherein heterosexual decency functions in an economy of salvation. It is within this system that advocating for an indecent and per/verted sexual theology leads to social change. Furthermore, it is within these colonising structures that

indecency reminds us that arguments of universality are a social construct, wherein bodies interact in relation to this grand narrative:

> Deviancy is a category which can act as a reminder that an economic model, such as theology, is basically a social relationship model, conceptually linked to social science theory and classifications of anatomy and erotic conduct, definitions of nature and needs and desires, while implementing laws and regulations to ensure its efficacy in society. Therefore the criticism of one implies the other too. (Althaus-Reid 2000, 174)

For Althaus-Reid, the critique of theology is a critique of the entire economic structure which builds on heteropatriarchy, and claiming indecent theology is de facto claiming deviance as social critique.

The gaytheism that Harris postulates as a queer solution, wherein we from a queer perspective, embracing ourselves instead of God, is certainly a starting point, and starting from sexual life stories is one such embrace. Therefore, I do not see the polemic difference between Althaus-Reid's indecent theology and Harris's gaytheism as they both start from a sexually transgressing body as a social critique: Althaus-Reid uses theological language to illuminate economic structures of heteropatriarchy in society. Gaytheism believes in 'queerness, in our own subversive nonnormative ethical cores, believing in it *more than* in the ability of religious authority' (Harris 2014, 207), and indecent theology does the same, as Althaus-Reid explains:

> Throughout this book I have been using the term 'indecent', in a positive, subversive sense, referring to a counter-discourse for the unmasking and unclothing of the sexual assumptions built into Liberation Theology during the past decades but also today when confronting issues of globalisation and the new neo-liberal world order. (Althaus-Reid 2000, 168)

Althaus-Reid's entire project actually attempts to do what Harris postulates gaytheism does. It starts from the subversive, and it questions not only the religious authorities but also the structures of colonising powers in our neoliberal world.

I have demonstrated that gaytheism and indecent theology strive for the same end, which is a societal critique that starts from a position of queering; the difference is that Harris finds a language of theology problematic altogether. I find this scepticism relevant because a theological language of empowerment stands at risk of following implicit hegemonic theology. However, starting from queer experiences shows us that it is possible to navigate both theology

and LGBTQ+ identities in decentralised theological discourses. Further, in such critiques we can forget that the system of heteronormativity is not a theological system alone, it is an integrated part of how society is constructed. This is Althaus-Reid's point, as theology mirrors society just as much as society mirrors theologies. Therefore, in the next subchapter I consider an alternative to heteronormative discourse: Lee Edelman's (2004) theory on queer destructivity.

7.2 Becoming Non-Productive

In his book *No Future* (2004), Lee Edelman situates queer bodies in discourse on productive and non-productive bodies. He argues that queer bodies stand in opposition to heterosexual bodies and thus threaten heteronormative productivity. The future of heteronormativity rests on reproductive bodies in society. As the future is a construct of progress in time, it must be controlled as a positive and progressive extension of our own lives. What better way to do this than to claim it through a biological reproduction, the Child itself? The image of the Child carries universal meaning – conservative and liberal alike – of something upon which we can build a future; or, as Edelman frames it,

> In its coercive universalization, the image of the Child […] serves to regulate political discourse […] by compelling such discourse to accede in advance to the reality of a collective future whose figurative status we are never permitted to acknowledge or address. (Edelman 2004, 11)

Thus, even though the future is intangible, it becomes corporeal in the Child, creating a collective and universal discourse. The Child is more than a symbol of prosperity, or of property external to us; instead, it is a reproduction of our very selves. In this way, the Child is not just a gift in the present, it is a means of guaranteeing our own future, our own post-mortem existence. Accordingly, to oppose the Child is to oppose our own future, our own existence in our lives, and the meanings we create for them.

The problem with the queer body in this system is not queer sexuality per se but that this sexuality literally does not reproduce a child. For Edelman, this means that the queer body not only challenges a straight futurity, but literary destroys this futurity through a lack of biological offspring. For him, this destructiveness *is* queerness. While he admits that LGBTQ+ people have children and form families within structures of homonormativity, queerness is a force rather than an identity:

> I am proposing no platform or position from which queer sexuality or any queer subject finally and truly become itself, as if it could somehow manage thereby to achieve an *essential* queerness. (17-18)

Consequently, Edelman does not deny any queer identities, nor does he seek to form an essential identity politics from queerness itself; rather, for him, queering is a disturbing force within the same discourse in which queer bodies operate.

According to Edelman, in this discourse, a queer body finds value in 'its resistance to a Symbolic reality that only ever invests us as subjects insofar as we invest ourselves in *it,* clinging to its governing fictions, its persistent sublimations, as reality itself' (Edelman 2004, 18). Edelman includes queer bodies as examples of identity politics and addresses how discourse around queer bodies is part of heteronormative structures. He might embrace the queer body, but he is sceptical of how heteronormativity can claim control over it as a representation of hegemony. In a theoretical discourse, the body can be an image that does not necessarily involve lived experiences. This is, of course, not Edelman's project, but the destructive power does also entail a radical change in how we think and reflect. If we want to start from the queer experiences, the radical change that Edelman seeks is not the body itself, but rather the effect of the queer body in a heteronormative matrix. Edelman's solution is to embrace queerness as more than a form of identity politics and as more than an argument for inclusion in a society of heteronormative structures, in order to understand queerness as anti-identity and thus question the Child as 'the fetishistic fixation of heteronormativity' (21). Queerness becomes, for Edelman, a force of destruction as it challenges the discourse on the future through embracing non-reproduction. This destructive power does entail a radical change in how we think and reflect. However, the radical change, the non-productive space of Edelman, does not necessarily mean that we must abandon sexual stories and queer experiences altogether. Starting from sexual life stories and experiences of LGBTQ+ people has highlighted the fixation that heteronormativity has with a stable coherent futurity, which is a construction that decentralised theological discourses challenge. The stories are examples of a sort of queer futurity, wherein stable structures of absolutes do not exist. Rather these stories represent many ways of doing Christian, which are not based on a heteronormative future and the reproduction of this as the stable centralised dominant theological discourse.

7.3 A Queering Solution?

For Edelman, the queer body destructs heteronormativity on a structural level, and such destruction can entail direct consequences for the same bodies. He explains such reactions as queer negativity, a site that he claims we must embrace because such negativity cannot justify a positive future built on heteronormativity:

> The embrace of queer negativity, then, can have no justification if justification requires it to reinforce some positive social value; its value, instead, resides in its challenge to value as defined by social, and thus in its radical challenge to every value of the social self. (Edelman 2004, 6)

The entire point of Edelman's project is to embrace queerness as this negative voice within this system because – as the material shows – the presence of queer bodies challenges heteronormativity itself. Thus, instead of seeking a political solution and 'normalising' queer bodies as decent or as a positive affirmation of heteronormativity, Edelman sees this disruptiveness as forming its own value system in opposition to any reproduction of futurity.

Linn Tonstad continues this thread of critical thinking on otherness in her book *God and Difference* (2016), wherein she critically assesses various approaches of queer theologians which treat the Trinity as 'inherently queer'. She starts by claiming, 'Trinitarian theology has lost its way' (1). From this point of view, she critiques the concept of Trinitarian personhood as reflecting only a deeply gendered reproduction of Trinitarian difference. The shift, by feminist and queer-friendly theologians, towards understanding this difference as a sexual difference, according to Tonstad, 'often repeat[s] and sometimes heighten[s] the historical proclivity of Christianity to encode masculinism and (symbolic) heterosexuality' (1).

The problem Tonstad articulates is that these arguments build on symbols of the Trinity that uphold the affective and productive power of gender and sexuality. Tonstad, for instance, asserts that David Jensen's (2013) argument on the queerness between human beings and God, based on the metaphor about being brides of Christ, seemingly forgets that women have often played the role of the passive receiver of men's grace. This submission to God is an imperative understanding of God's grace towards humankind and builds upon the ecclesiological understanding and self-preservation of many denominations, not to forget the Catholic Church, which justifies its power and the patriarchal structures of the bridal metaphor. This means that even though difference connects to sexuality, it builds on the same heteropatriarchal structures

it tries to defy. Thus, the hegemony of heterosexuality is the theological standpoint at which Trinity is explained.

For Tonstad, the Trinity reproduces heteronormativity by either reflecting on the passive and active component of the Trinity or by imposing this understanding of sexuality as a reflection on us. She argues, 'We should not collapse the different forms of difference by reading the God-world relation into sexual difference, or by reading trinitarian or human difference into the God-world relation' (2016, 287). This means that arguments of the Trinitarian personhood as a reflection of the relationships between humans and between God and humans is only a reproduction of hegemonic heterosexuality.

This emphasises Althaus-Reid's notion of decent theology as a heterosexual colonial structure that uses queer bodies to form, identify, and hegemonise heterosexuality as intrinsically Christian. Tonstad's critique of heterosexual dominance is used to examine the ecclesiological consequences of queer theoretical deconstruction, challenging the ways that theology justifies the Church as a representation of God's will through the reproduction of theological truths. This leads her to argue for an apocalyptic ecclesiology which builds on Lee Edelman's term 'sinthomosexual' (2004). As the sinthomosexual is destructive and non-reproductive – a force of death – Tonstad calls for an apophatic church whose goal is 'the abortion of the Church, or aspiring to be a church that chooses abortion over reproduction' (Tonstad 2016, 269). This point of view is a result of how she understands the Church as a means to its own end because an ecclesiology that claims ownership over the speech of God is only reproducing its own heteropatriarchal grand narrative. Thus, Tonstad claims that we should understand the Church as distanced from the Godself, wherein it cannot claim ownership of the divine.

She differentiates between an ecclesiology of reproduction and an ecclesiology of abortion, wherein the former secures a Christian futurity through the reproduction of heterosexuality as a body of Christ, either through the eucharist, the institution, or both. She calls for an ecclesiology of abortion that does not claim a certain futurity through a reproduction of heterosexual decency:

> The need for a positive plenitude of faithfulness makes ecclesiologies of reproduction seem more powerful than ecclesiologies of abortion; the former set up a purportedly clear and distinctive alternative to the 'World's' failures and injustices. (275)

Tonstad's apocalyptic ecclesiology is one that cannot claim ownership over God through the reproduction of heterosexuality, or any other sexuality for that matter. Queering is the site of

destruction, and thus, Tonstad understands the church's position in theological thinking. By not claiming a positive plenitude of faithfulness, the church cannot claim a decent theological body because one does not represent the body of Christ on Earth. With this, Tonstad claims to transcend a question of inclusive or exclusive ecclesiology because, just like Edelman's death drive, it is not a reproduction of an imaginary self.

Tonstad suggests an apophatic church where Christ's body is missing after the ascension. This stands in contrast to the reproduction of Christ through the institutions, both ecclesially, as '[Christ's] body is handed over to the church, which both becomes and mediates that body to its members' (258), and liturgically: '[i]n the eucharist, the mediation of Christ's body takes place through word-signs uttered by Christ's authorized representatives' (258). In short, the body of the Church has, according to Tonstad, claimed control over God through a non-biological reproduction of the logic of faith. In other words, through the production of the correct doctrine and eucharist, the Church reproduces its own law, leading to what Tonstad sees as the second power production of 'the church's responsibility to *be* the body of Christ' (259). Following this, the Church establishes itself as a *vicarius filii dei*, the representative of the Son of God, in the broader sense, with the responsibility to order a disordered and sinful world and distribute the body of Christ to its members. Tonstad explains that the Church reproduces proper faith, liturgy, and even the lives of Christians, and this is the main point that aligns with the focus group. They bargained themselves as decent queer Christians, reproducing a proper Christian body to participate in the community of the Church:

> To gain access to the body of Christ, those who intend to eat it must order their own lives and abjure in impropriety and disorder of alternative, ecclesially unsanctioned forms of reproduction. (259)

Putting Tonstad's reflection in a Norwegian context, we can easily see how access to the body of Christ results in the ordinance of Christianity and society. Allowing same-sex couples to marry only shifts the theological arguments slightly, but it does not change the reproduction of a heteronormative theology.

Thus far, Tonstad has emphasised the structures of a theology that reproduces the body of Christ. This ensures a hegemonic locus, a place which physically controls God within heteropatriarchal structures. Not being confined to these structures results in exclusion or the microaggressions that the focus group identified. Tonstad's solution is an abortion of this locus – the Church – or at least 'aspiring to be a church that chooses abortion over reproduction. For

the church signifies its own end' (269). We could critique Tonstad and ask what then becomes of the community of believers. In her defence, Tonstad builds on Althaus-Reid as she seeks 'apocalyptic transformation rather than eschatological fulfilment' (257). Her project is not about queer inclusion; rather, she uses queer theory to consider an apocalyptic ecclesiology, a church that seeks fulfilment not as a representation of the divine but rather as a representation of sin. This means that the church's mission is to be non-existent, an apophatic church that resigns any claim of reproducing the body of Christ because this reproduction constitutes exceptionalism. By holding on to ascension, we are all in a limbo, betwixt and between death and salvation. The only thing we know for certain is that we cannot be certain. This means that we no longer need to ask who is or is not included; rather, we can start from 'resurrection hope, ascension's difference, and Christ's promise that he will come again' (276).

The apophatic church is an answer to the problem that Althaus-Reid identifies as decency, and Edelman as productivity. Althaus-Reid explains how a straight futurity forms social interactions:

> The problem is that heterosexuality stratifies and compartmentalises our vision of the present, constructs our past according to its own categories of important selected historical events, and therefore, controls our community projects of the future. (Althaus-Reid 2000, 175)

Althaus-Reid and Edelman agree that queer bodies disturb a positive construction of a political or theological heterosexual future; and, as argued above, Althaus-Reid understands this disturbance as a comment on the socio-cultural and economical structures in which theology takes part. We could, like Harris, think that Althaus-Reid's project is one of theological futurity which uses transgressing queer bodies to build a theological reality rather than queer it:

> [I]f [transgression] did work, it would fashion a queer-positive space so tolerant, so nonnormative, as to no longer resemble the world as experienced by most queers, even those lucky enough to live and work amid a decent degree of tolerance. (Harris 2014, 130)

This critique is relevant because theological discourse can easily pose as a transgressing power that gives agency and empowerment within its same suppressive system. Lofty theological discourse about queerness and the transgressing power of queer bodies tends to ignore the reality of LGBTQ+ people in the Christian discourse of inclusion. The material in this thesis, however, shows a more positive outcome than Harris postulates. The different examples of

navigating theology and Christian affiliations show that it is possible to find agency and empowerment in decentralised theological discourse. However, this is not Harris's point; he rather questions whether transgression is possible – if we want to start from the margins – and, with the institutions that hold the power of centralised dominant theological discourse. We should therefore be careful in embracing a concept of transgression as it can be a delusion.

While Harris highlights an important critique of theology, Althaus-Reid's project is not an attempt to solve theology's grand narrative of heterosexuality; rather, she begins from the sexual body to point at societal structures that are reflected in theological thinking. Harris's solution, to abandon religion altogether, is, of course, a possible outcome, but as I see it, Harris's gaytheism and Althaus-Reid's indecent theology need not be mutually exclusive. They both respond to Edelman's concept of queering and thus embrace the hegemony of queerness to create a non-apologetic truth for a queer presence in a heteronormative world.

7.4 Summary

In this chapter, I started with Althaus-Reid's warning of empowerment in theology as a reproduction of heteronormative theology. In examining an alternative, Harris's gaytheism, I conclude that excluding Christianity altogether is not the way to counter reproduction of heteronormative theology. In addition, I argued that Harris and Althaus-Reid seek the same deconstruction of heteronormativity in their work and that Harris is too polemic in his arguments against Althaus-Reid. What Althaus-Reid stresses is that heteronormativity is as much a societal problem as it is a Christian problem.

To address the issue of heteronormativity on a societal level, I thus introduced Edelman and his concept of queering as a destructive force of heteronormative reproduction of futurity. Instead of seeking emancipation through inclusion in a heteronormative society, Edelman calls for queer bodies as sites that disrupt and thus destruct heteronormativity.

Further, I introduced Tonstad's use of Edelman's concept in theological constructions of ecclesiology. She calls for an apophatic church which does not seek a reproduction of heteropatriarchy through a positive finitude. She explains that not only are queer people and their bodies at the margins of the divine, but we all are, in waiting for Christ's return.

So far in this thesis, I have presented different materials which address navigations of queer Christian identities and how such identities can find space in Christian religious communities. In the Chapter 8, the final chapter, I connect these different materials in a conversation wherein

I reflect on the becoming of queer Christians in indecency. However, before moving on to Chapter 8, I invite the reader into the second interlude of this thesis.

Interlude 2

Easter Sunday, 1 April 2018:

Sister Roma: Are you ready to piss off some Christians? We don't mean any harm, but we have all of these Foxy Maries and Hunky Jesei here today that want to show off. And we know God has a sense of humour!

It was a warm Easter Sunday, and some friends and I had taken a trip to Golden Gate Park in San Francisco. As we sat down amongst the thousands of colourfully adorned people – many wearing outlandish and extravagant Easter bonnets in attempts to outshine their neighbours – Sister Roma, from the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence, demanded our attention. We gave it to her willingly as this was the main reason for us to be there that day. Every Easter Sunday, the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence hold a benefit for the queer community called Easter in the Park, which thousands of San Franciscans attend to show their support.

This is an all-day event, starting with an Easter egg hunt and ending with the main event of the day: the Foxy Mary and Hunky Jesus contest. In this contest, participants parody Christian portraits of Virgin Mary and Jesus through humour that often has sexual undertones. The event has featured participants such as Bloody Mary, Pregnant Reality TV Mary, Bollywood Mary, Jesus Fucking Christ, *The* Hunky Jesus, and Cheerleader Jesus, to name a few. Encountering the difficulty of introducing several Jesus characters, the Sisters cleverly created their own plural form of Jesus, 'Jesei', parodying ecclesial Latin. Even though everything about this Easter Sunday parodied Christian religious gatherings by playing on traditions found in Christian and secular-Christian cultures –from the Easter egg hunt to the Easter bonnets popular in Britain and in Christian communities in the United States – everything felt warm-spirited. It felt like a safe space where questions of sexuality, gender, and faith seemed irrelevant. We celebrated a community, and even though not everyone identified as queer, I would describe the atmosphere as a transgressing one: everything about being there was as a regular Easter Sunday at church, but then again, it was not.

As the Sisters presented one Jesei after another, two stood up against each other: Gun Control Jesus, who asserted, 'Shoot cum not guns!', and Puerto Rican Jesus, who – in a parody of

President Trump – threw paper towels at us. Both Jesei reflected a political reality in the United States as the political establishment had faltered in implementing gun control, and the Trump administration had responded slowly in the wake of devastating hurricanes Irma and Maria in 2017. To the loudest cheers from the audience, Puerto Rican Jesus won.

With drag queen nuns and hunky Jesei, a play between a Christian decency and queer indecency occurred. Returning to Wilcox and her work on the Sisters, this Easter Sunday was an act of serious religious parody. A part of Golden Gate Park that early April, claimed a queer Easter through an act that 'simultaneously critique[d] and reclaim[ed] cultural traditions in the interest of supporting the lives and political objectives of marginalised groups' (Wilcox 2018, 2). The Foxy Mary and Hunky Jesus contest demonstrates a critique of a Christian cultural tradition as it plays on sexual language and display two half-naked – and sometimes fully naked – figures that are essential for Christian theology. At the same time, the contest participants reclaim a Christian culture through this parody, playing on a Christian gathering on Easter day.

The interesting part of this celebration is that the community is central, just like in any other church; however, a Christian confession was not required in order to participate. It is this juxtaposition that makes serious parody an interesting starting point for thinking about theology because on this Easter Sunday, the community gathered in the Golden Gate Park and did a serious religious parody of Easter. Wilcox (2018) explains the dynamics of such parody as follows:

> Serious parody, as I conceive of it, is a form of cultural protest in which a disempowered group parodies an oppressive cultural institution while simultaneously claiming for itself what it believes to be an equally good or superior enactment of one or more culturally respected aspects of that same institution. (70)

This construction is interesting when discussing an indecent theology because it plays with a structure, like Easter Sunday, to create a space that builds a new narrative for understanding of the celebration. The concept of parody is not just a question of ridicule, but this was cultural expression within a new framework, a performative action that mirrored Easter Sunday without claiming a religious essence. Wilcox, for instance, explains,

> Like parody itself, camp does not necessarily entail a rejection of its subject; in fact, as biting as camp humour can be, it can also be downright reverential. (95)

As serious parody explains a form of queer activism using culturally Christian expressions to do so, this Easter Sunday was a queering of this celebration – a camp expression of an ordinary Easter Sunday celebration.

PICTURE 1 TODD, A PARTICIPANT OF THE CELEBRATIONS IN HIS EASTER BONNET. 'EASTER IN THE PARK' 2018. PICTURE IS PRINTED WITH PERMISSION FROM THE PERSON PORTRAYED. PRIVATE PHOTO

PICTURE 2 'GUN CONTROL JESUS' IN THE HUNKY JESUS CONTEST. 'EASTER IN THE PARK' 2018. PRIVATE PICTURE

8.0 Concluding Reflections

To start this chapter, I return to the research question in Chapter 1 on page 11, which forms the basis of this thesis:

> *Given the concept of Althaus-Reid's indecent theology, how can we understand a becoming of queer Christians in indecency?*

Throughout the previous chapters, various approaches to this basic question were presented, mostly with the content from the exploratory case study from Norway as one prioritised perspective. One important outcome, so far, is the significance of Althaus-Reid's concept of decentralisation. Queer people can decentralise theological dogmatics and establish spaces that are beyond church control. One can also use the concept of decentralisation as an interpretation of Greenough`s 'undoing' of theology. Neither Greenough nor Althaus-Reid abandon theology; nevertheless, they search for concepts that has thus far remained in the margins of theological discourse: what one might call theological indecency.

8.1 Starting from the Margins

Throughout this thesis, I have presented different navigations of queer Christian identities, and I have outlined possible ways to discuss theology from decentralised positions. What is important in this reflection is the use of decentralised theological discourse as sites to queer the dominant theological discourse. In this dominant discourse, Christian believers can be consumers of theology, like Althaus-Reid explains, without necessarily being producers of it. However, in queering theology, queer bodies can be central, as producers of theologies. When Althaus-Reid begins her reflection on indecent theology from 'Librada', 'the unstable image of Christ dressed as a Mary' (Althaus-Reid 2000, 80), 'God the Faggot' (93), and 'Bi/Christ' (117), she is not adapting LGBTQ+ people to fit a mould of heteronormative theology. Rather, the body is transforming theological thought in front of our eyes, on the streets, in bars, in living rooms, and in bedrooms.

Greenough's undoing theology is a methodological way of decentralising dominant theological discourse. We can understand this as a queering of theology, wherein the fluidity of sexual

stories and experiences form theologies from the margins. Starting from the queer bodies, instead of a dominant theological discourse, can empower and give agency to queer Christians in undoing heteronormative theology. Undoing theology is thus a tool, wherein the sexual *other* is not an object in a dominant theological discourse. Undoing means that queer Christians do not have to justify their navigation in a discourse of heteropatriarchal theology. In this way, undoing theology responds to Althaus-Reid's use of 'indecency' as a positive and subversive term to deconstruct the system of dominant theological discourse.

Greenough starts from sexual life stories in undoing theology; this thesis, however, started from an exploratory case study of four queer Christians who discussed the stimulus, the Father Project. I presented some findings from this exploratory case study, which sparked reflections involving other more thorough empirical work. In Chapter 3, I presented the different ways in which the participants of the exploratory case study navigated the Father Project, and I discussed how this stimulus led the participants to share some aspects of their experiences of being queer Christians in the Church of Norway. The polemics of the Father Project – portraying religion as homophobic – demonstrated, for the participants, that the activist was unfamiliar with the Church of Norway. Even though Tooji Keshtkar's critique was aimed at religions in general, the participants understood this critique as targeting the Church of Norway. This is probably because the Father Project was filmed in Frogner Church, whose congregation is part of the Church of Norway. The participants were, however, sympathetic towards the intention of the video and its criticism of discrimination against same-sex couples in religious societies, including the Church of Norway. However, as they had found space for their sexuality, gender, and religion in the Church of Norway, the participants called for a more nuanced discussion on inclusion of queer people in the Church. They recognised and addressed queerphobia in this site, but they did not see such phobia as a particular problem of the Church alone. The participants also claimed that the Father Project's critique was outdated, as the political climate in the Church of Norway was rapidly changing towards enacting a gender-neutral wedding liturgy. This led Sophia to introduce the Rainbow Action, in which queer Christians attended a service held by the bishops in the Church. Wearing rainbow wristbands, two men asked for intercession during communion, which they received from the presiding bishop, and this created controversy in the aftermath of the incident. The negative reactions from the bishops further led to a conversation about the bishops' press conference regarding their recommendation on blessings of same sex couples in an intercession liturgy. Sophia explained that questioning of the bishops' foundation for this recommendation resulted in

scolding from one of the bishops, which the participants of the exploratory case study explained was unnecessary and made them reflect that the religious authorities held their own interests as more important than queer inclusion.

To understand the groups' navigation of the Father Project and the conversations spurred by this stimulus, I presented an analysis in Chapter 5, wherein I contextualised the participants' specific experiences with other researchers and their findings in studies of queer Christians. With support from Adriaan van Klinken and Melissa Wilcox, I explained that the participants' critique of the Father Project as lacking nuance corresponds with a constructed binary between 'religious conservatism' and 'secular progressiveness'. In this way, the participants undid a religious/secular binary in the area. With Andrew Yip and Alex Toft, I further found that privatisation of religion is a common solution for queer Christians. However, like van Klinken criticises such division as problematic in an African context, I also question a division between private and public in a Norwegian context, something we also can see the contours of in the exploratory case study. This is another undoing of a binary between private and public, religious and secular. I continued by explaining that the intercession in the Rainbow Action can be understood as queer sacrilege and queer sacralisation as it challenges what Sharon Fennema calls the heterosexism of communion. Such actions give agency to those who participate, and these actions can be sites of emancipation. I also explained that the participants experienced microaggression; however, instead of just being defensive, they applied Yip's tactic of 'attacking the attacker'. I ended the chapter by comparing the conversation between Cecilie and Sophia with van Klinken's reflection on his observation in CAC. I conclude that the disagreement in the exploratory case study and in CAC reflect discussions that are held between queer Christians, on their own premises.

8.2 Queer Bodies as Ritual Truths

In Chapter 5, I also introduced Catherine Bell and her ritual theory, explaining the structures and importance of ritual as a site of religion. Perhaps we can draw on some of her theory to explain the embodiment of indecency, as well as how this space can be a site of decentralised theological discourse. Bell understands the ritual as religious agents navigating religious symbols, wherein this performativity forms a space where the fluidity of the dogmatic symbols interacts with the bodies who interpret and create meaning through these symbols. Through this action, we become ritual subjects, which means that the ritual itself is the place where religion is executed because the ritual subject relates to and acknowledges that the ritual is religious.

We have seen examples of such navigations in this thesis. For instance, the communion can be a ritual which fights heterosexism, according to Sharon Fennema. In addition, the Rainbow Action, the MCCSF, the theology students at Oslo Pride in the late 90s, and even the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence all used communion as a site of queer acknowledgment and inclusion. They made use of the multitudinous possibilities in the symbols of the communion itself. Not only did these examples express queer inclusion, but – again referencing Fennema – they were sites of activism as well as performances of the 'sacred symbols of God's communion with humanity's communion with each other and the world' (2011, 242). By demanding space in a heterosexist ritual, these queer Christians queered the symbol of the communion, taking part not only in communion with the Church, but also with God.

Indecency is therefore more than a theoretical reference since, just like the Sisters start from a queer body in creating their own space in answer to the Catholic nun, Althaus-Reid starts from a similar space in response to theology. She is constantly in contact with the performativity that generates indecent theology, such as, for instance, when she focuses on carnivals in Argentina:

> I have seen transvestite Jesuses, surrounded by their Drag Queen versions of Veronica and Magdalene (this last one, the object of veneration in many transgender communities of the poor). Jesuses with false eyelashes surrounding big, sad gay eyes and Magdalena's with wigs, penises and breasts, marching at night in the illuminated city and provoking the admiration from public by finery of their clothes and presentation. (Althaus-Reid 2000, 199)

This display is, in many ways, similar to the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence, as its performativity expresses the same ambiguity of essence as that of the Sisters' queer nun. Just as the Sisters claim 'the nun', the carnival claims 'Christian', and they both obscure *one* essential interpretation of their performance, which simultaneously is and is not recognisable within a dominant theological discourse. This is what Althaus-Reid brilliantly explains as provoking an admiration. It is a provocation – and even outright blasphemous – because both expressions unapologetically demonstrate queer bodies as indecent representations of Christianity. The spectacle – the performativity of this queering – fashions, on the other hand, an admiration as its form is recognisable; yet the body and its content provokes a heteropatriarchal theology.

Althaus-Reid's retelling of the carnival is one such ritual wherein the navigation of religious symbolism queers theological discourse as decentralised sites that start from bodies in the

margins of the Church. The spectators can explain and understand the transgressive gender expressions in the carnival, and this is a queering of theological thought as these bodies demands to be religious at the centre of its own discourse. This ritual, however, is a ritual that starts from the periphery, where, for instance, the veneration of a drag queen Magdalena challenges the dominant theological discourse. It starts from and communicates to the indecent congregation, and within this power–knowledge construction, the ritual is a legitimate religious expression because it creates its own semantic framework. When this occurs, the ritual space constitutes its own rules of interaction wherein the ritual subjects interpret the symbols as religious. Bell explains,

> [R]itual acts must be understood within a semantic framework whereby the significance of an action is dependent upon its place and relationship within a context of all other ways of acting: what it echoes, what it inverts, what it alludes to, what it denies. (Bell 2009, 220)

So, the ritual act performed in the carnival is somewhat site-specific to the space in which it is performed; however, this does not mean that it cannot happen in the church.

As I explained in Chapter 2, the Father Project plays on religious imagery through its use of Frogner Church. I also explained that this video was 'an encounter to be found at the crossroads of desire' (Althaus-Reid 2000, 200) or – as the Rainbow Action also made use of the Cathedral of Oslo – to re-narrate the story of queer visibility and same-sex love in the Church of Norway. The point is, the decentralised discourse can also find a place in the centre of theological power when bodies in the margins claim space amidst this discourse. This is a queering of theological discourse, which is a result of undoing theology through queering theologies.

8.3 The Fluid Queer Bodies

Starting from the fluidity of the body shows the fluidity of deterministic systems because these structures are living interactions, or, as Foucault explains, 'There is no power that is exercised without a series of aims and objectives' (1990, 95). This means that dominant theological discourse can reproduce heteropatriarchy as inherent in theology. However, since the discourse of theology is a discourse with and between humans, such systems can be challenged when bodies in the margins of theological decency claim visibility in the discourse. This is the point of Althaus-Reid's carnival: indecent sexual bodies form theologies in a discourse that reflects a queering of the theological discourse, as sites of decentralised theologies. And in this

discourse the religious bodies can reflect sexual and gender diversity because it does not have to be accountable to a centralised dominant discourse.

The importance is that the body in general and the queer body in particular is not a site of determinism. Even amongst the four participants in the exploratory case study and van Klinken's observation from CAC, disagreements occurred in conversations regarding sexual ethics. Although the participants in the exploratory case study all contested the Father Project's format (a commercial music video), they had different views on the explicit sexual display in front of the altar of a church. Cecilie perceived the Father Project as over-sexualising the queer body, and she called for a holistic portrayal of same-sex love. Sophia questioned such arguments as belonging to heteronormativity, and he called for more radical sexual inclusion, which is not based on heteronormativity, in the Church of Norway. Van Klinken also highlights the same dynamics in CAC when he explains that 'CAC struggles with this moral dilemma, and it will continue to do so as long as it upholds moral norms that encourage sex to be practices only in the context of long-term committed relationships' (2019, 181). What these disagreements on sexual ethics suggest is that queer Christians are a heterogeneous group. Placing expectations on sexual ethics aside, what this shows is that this diversity also finds space in theological discourse. Decentralising theological discourse is a way of embracing the magnitude of difference that queer Christians represent. Starting from Yip, we can see that queer Christians challenge a dominant theological discourse by diminishing the importance of religious authority in their queer Christian identity, starting with positive self-worth. In this way, Greenough and his methodology of undoing theology is relevant. By starting from the margins with three sexual life stories, he challenges the doing of theology as a sexually decent reproduction of heteronormativity. Where Greenough starts from individual stories, Wilcox presents the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence, looking at the community and its members. I see this as another site of undoing theology, wherein Wilcox's term 'Serious Religious Parody' undoes the concept of the 'Catholic nun' and the queer 'drag queen' in a becoming of a 'queer nun'. The undoing of the Sisters also makes it possible to take part in a religious community, no matter one's faith or lack thereof.

Queer bodies have been examples of undoing theology, an embodiment of queer theologies that challenges *one* specific way of theological thought. This is an embodiment that starts from the margins, wherein queer Christians can also find agency and emancipation. By challenging the reproduction of heteronormative theology and the intrinsic heterosexuality in such theology,

they show that queer Christians can form queer theologies that start from their bodies with their experiences.

8.4 Decentralising Salvation

When Althaus-Reid starts from indecent sexual bodies, she starts from the queer bodies as reflections wherein a market economy of theological consumption can be challenged. When theology deals with a market of souls and 'the definition of their needs' (2000, 166), such as access to salvation, the decentralised theological discourse queers the centralised systematic thought. What this thesis has shown is that such decentralisations can imbed different queer bodies in different religious spaces. Claiming agency through being visibly queer is an undoing of theology that shows how souls at the margins of dominant theological discourse can challenge access to salvation. The mechanisms of distribution, with their 'phraseology and conceptualisations of exclusion and inclusion' (167) are thus blurred when sexually indecent bodies claim visibility as Christians.

At this point, I return to Linn Tonstad because she is aware of the fluidity of the queer body when it comes to Christian communal locations. This makes Tonstad relevant for further interpretation of voices from the exploratory case study. They are, like Tonstad, strongly occupied with 'community', a space in which they navigate identity in relation to the specific site of the church. A discussion with Tonstad can allow for perspectives on the implications of such navigations.

Instead of starting from empirical research, Tonstad – like Althaus-Reid – starts from the discourse of the queer body, and in a proposition to avoid generalisation, she aligns with Lee Edelman's 'queering'. Her answer to indecent theology builds on Althaus-Reid's exclusion and Edelman's destruction, as she embraces the site of uncertainty as the position of the Church. According to Tonstad (2016), we cannot claim the reproduction of God as a positive finitude of our own existence; instead, 'Christians should distribute Christ's body freely for they do not know where Christ is' (125). This is not a point that only Althaus-Reid makes; the fluidity of God's presence outside of the Church is found in other materials presented in this thesis, too. What I emphasise is that this thesis has shown that queer Christians navigate their faith inside, outside, and in-between Christian religious communities; this is private and public, religious and secular. For Tonstad, 'queering' is a stable theoretical tool for theological reflection rather than the 'queer body' being a practical, ambiguous site of this reflection. Even though the participants in the exploratory case study, Susannah Cornwall's intersex informants, and van Klinken's study of CAC, disagreed with each other at times and had experiences of different

queer phobias and microaggression, these same studies show that queer Christians navigate these experiences and manage to claim agency and empowerment in Christian religious spaces. While Althaus-Reid worries about the dominant theological discourse as a site of sexual religious colonialism, queer Christians have navigated such discourse successfully to find faith. What seems apparent in the different material I have presented in this thesis is that the different queer Christians find God outside the control of the churches.

This is, then, one important outcome of this thesis: In the Norwegian context of the exploratory case study, queer bodies can queer dominant theological discourse's control over an economy of salvation even if they remain in Christian communities. In these positions, the queering process also challenges and reformulates what Christian communities mean; queering in this context signifies that there can be churches that cannot order control because such controls are always queered again. However, Tonstad's point about an apophatic church is similar to this in acknowledging that we are in the margins of theological centre – in the periphery of the divine. Theologically, the churches should not claim control or representation of divinity through reproduction of a positive finitude. Such reproductions only reproduce the churches' own legitimacy through protecting the body of Christ from the people at the margins of society. It is from this perspective that Tonstad's apocalyptic ecclesiology is an example of how the queer body is a starting point for theological reflection because Tonstad considers the queer body disruptive in theological discourse. However, she challenges the desire of queer people to become centre of the divine. In this perspective, starting from the margins is a site of queering, in which seeking theological coherence cannot be done through ecclesiology. Nor should the church be a site of refuge for queer people because Tonstad positions every person in the margins of the divine until the return of Christ. By radically changing the position of the Church as a site of certainty to a site of uncertainty, a decentralised position on salvation is in effect. This decentralisation then questions who holds the key to salvation when we are all in the periphery of certainty.

With Tonstad, decentralisation of theology is not only a question of starting from queer sexual bodies, but it is a question of not desiring to be in the centre of theological discourse. By putting the Church in the periphery, wherein no one can own the body of Christ, the Church becomes a site that does not hold salvation. Instead of controlling religious bodies in a system of inclusion and exclusion, we must all distribute Christ's body freely around us because we are all in the margins of salvation. This means that decentralised discourses on salvation are discourses of uncertainty, a position wherein we are all left in an interminable state of undoing. This is a form

of queering position where we do not have to seek theological affirmation as a means of queer emancipation.

8.5 Undoing Theology and Becoming of Queer Christians in Indecency

As I have presented the reflections of this thesis and what it has argued for, I now return to the research question one last time:

> *Given the concept of Althaus-Reid's indecent theology, how can we understand a becoming of queer Christians in indecency?*

Throughout this thesis, this has been the question of concern. Starting from an exploratory case study in Norway, and in conversation with other researchers and theologians, this thesis has shown that becoming queer Christians in indecency involves decentralised positions that challenge a centralised dominant theological discourse. These are multitudinous sites, heterogeneous positions that are just as fluent and incoherent as the bodies that inhabit such identities. Becoming queer Christians in indecency is a queering of dominant theological discourse on the control of the religious bodies. To understand this, one can look to Greenough, who explains this as an undoing of theology, and becoming queer Christians in indecency is a reflection of such undoing.

Further, such undoing can also reflect on the work theologians undertake. With Tonstad's concept of the apophatic church, the decentralised theological discourse can occur without theologians defining it as such. The Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence are one example of a decentralised theological discourse, in which personal connection or adherence to Christian beliefs is unnecessary in making this a site of queer theologies. By staying in the periphery, in a position wherein theologians' work is to distribute Christ's body freely rather than defining the limits of salvation, queer theologies do more than assure queer Christians that we are worthy of God's love and salvation – although they do that as well. As becoming queer Christians in indecency is fluent and multitudinous, this thesis also explained that such becomings are a messy business, wherein sexual life stories and experiences defy *one* centralised and coherent dominant theological discourse on salvation.

8.6 Future work

This thesis attempted to start from a Norwegian context in reflections on queer theologies, and the limited exploratory case study in this thesis is small contribution in such doing. However, there is room for further, more extensive work within this field. While the Church of Norway has mainly focused on lesbian and gay inclusion, there has been a growing number of trans

Christians in the community, and their – or might I even say 'our' – voices are relevant in constructions of queer theologies in a Norwegian context. However, even though there are increasingly open LGBTQ+ theologians, the visibility of intersex and other non-heteronormative identities and sexualities is low in Christian communities. Within research in Norway, one of the few openly gay theologians who uses queer theoretical critique in his research is Halvor Moxnes. Within queer theological research, we all stand on his shoulders. His sound research in biblical studies is important, but the fact that he is one of the few with a queer interest in theological research in Norway also highlights the dire need for future research from such perspectives. We need research that starts from the sexual life stories of queer Christians in Norway and that understands such life stories as relevant in theological reflections. This form of decentralising the dominant theological discourse in a Norwegian context may contribute to the understanding that, theologically, LGBTQ+ is more than the *other* which confirms heteronormativity in a coherent system, in an economy of salvation. Regarding Althaus-Reid's call for decentralising the theological discourse, I believe this is possible through Greenough's method of undoing theology. When starting from the body, it might, however, be difficult to embody Tonstad's call for an apophatic church. Nonetheless, by starting from the sexual life stories and experiences of queer Christians, we might challenge a positive finitude and the reproduction of compulsory heterosexuality, which all the works I presented in this thesis strive to do. Thus, the future contains many possibilities for investigating decentralised theologies and queering theologies in a Norwegian context.

Epilogue

Throughout this thesis we have seen examples of different decentralised theological discourses. Some have started their reflection from sexual life stories, other from more 'classic' theological traditions, and even though they might vary in form and content, they all disrupt a theological coherence of heteronormativity. Queer theologies are theologies in the peripheries, a constant undoing of theology, perhaps a surface touch, which does not need to claim coherence nor a central position for such theologies to be true. To end this thesis, I therefore want to include the reader in the last personal interlude, as my personal undoing of theology. I ask the reader to envision a warm evening in August 2017 and a crowd gathered in the square of the City Council for an evening dubbed 'From Oslo with Love' at Copenhagen Pride. Norwegian queer artists had been invited to Copenhagen, and, as the master of ceremonies, I had led the five-hour programme as the drag queen reverend Gloria Mundi. Throughout the evening I had engaged the audience in classic minister techniques, one of which was call and response. After hours, the audience had grown accustomed to my act, and they now, without hesitation, yelled 'Christ!' every time I uttered 'gay' on stage. As a drag queen, I draw much of my inspiration from my profession as an ordained minister, mixing the performativity of a Christian revival with a queer connotation; and that evening, I led the audience through queer revivals, using Gloria as both a religious and queer figure to do so.

At this note, I must admit that a drag queen is hardly a novelty at pride; nonetheless, neither is Christian presence in recent years, as different affiliations throughout the years – such as MCC, Norwegian *Åpen Kirkegruppe,* and similar groups – have been visibly present in the celebrations. In recent years in Norway, we have also seen that the national Church of Norway have actively been present at Pride, following the national Church of Sweden's example. With blessings from the Oslo Bishop Veiteberg, who followed Bishop Kvarme (whom I introduced earlier in this thesis), the presence of the Church has shifted from marginal activist actions starting from queer Christians in the Church to a centralised undertaking with support from the dioses of Oslo. Now the Church takes pride in being visible in queer communities, at least at Pride. However, this is not done without controversy: As late as in 2021, a member of the

Church council called for abstaining from Pride on the basis that the Church has two theological views on homosexuality.

I cannot claim that doing drag started as a conscious reflection of undoing theology. It has always been a creative outlet for me because, as a child, I found inspiration and empowerment in female role models from the strong women of my family to Belle in the Disney movie *Beauty and the Beast*. Regarding my later discovering of my trans identity, it kind of makes sense, because my imitation is also a form of undoing of the boy and man that society expected and still expects me to be. It is almost like a Butlerian fulfilment of the effect of gender:

> The effect of gender is produced through the stylization of the body and, hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and styles of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self. (Butler 1990, 191)

Throughout my life, my effeminate *doing* as a boy has often gotten me in some sort of trouble, and growing up, I learned how to adapt to mundane gestures so as not to disturb an illusion of a gendered self. This was done to the world around me just as much as it was a way of convincing myself that I 'really' was a boy – that I was 'really' a man even though I was still a bit feminine. Drag, on the other hand, became a safe tool for me to experiment – although clearly defined on the stage – with my own gender expressions in my early twenties. I felt empowered by the way that people saw me and how easy it was to manipulate the world around me with the illusion that I could be a sort of woman, or at least something other than a man. The thrill I felt from other people observing me, giving me compliments, and even finding Gloria sexy, I believe, is less a desire to be admired than it is a desire to be seen as something other than a man. My drag has, over many years, been an undoing of 'man' to be able to do me. I am aware of the binary that this story might invoke in the reader. However, for me, this is not a story of succumbing to a binary gender system; it is a story of navigating the binary system of gender and challenging it in a parody of drag.

My issues with finding space within a binary gender system are also reflected in my connection to faith. Growing up, I was in a congregation that made clear distinctions between Christian and non-Christian. Reading Althaus-Reid's explanation of this distinction as a sexual discourse of indecency and decency has fascinated me. I remember countless sermons in the youth group where different ministers would stress that human beings were made heterosexual, we were created in the image of God as men and women, nothing more nothing less. Even in a splendid magnitude of creation we were part of a harmonised ideology of heteropatriarchy, and in this

creation we were either Christian or pagans, heterosexual or homosexual, man or woman. One might think that it is a wonder I started theological studies at all, but here I am, ordained as a minister in the Church of Norway. Even though I mostly meet positive response on my identity as minister, queer, drag queen, and any other aspects that makes me, me, I have many times felt stifled by the compulsory heterosexuality of which fills the role of the minister. The expectations of me representing heteropatriarchy, has led me to construct Gloria, not only as an outlet of gender frustration, but Christian religious frustration. Just as Gloria became a way for me to express my desire of doing my gendered self, it also is a place where I have been able to seek my desire of undoing my Christian self. For me this is a sort of undoing of gender, sexuality, and religion, wherein a seemingly instable system creates an incoherent theological system that can be everything and nothing in a queer space.

So bringing you, the reader, back to Copenhagen Pride I want to prepare you for what is coming. What I am doing as Gloria Mundi is primarily out of love where I rephrase connections to Jesus and the Holy Spirit within a queer lingua, as the crowd call upon Gay Christ, who will top us up, and the Queer Spirit, with flaming thongs. Even words of praise "homonata" is a rephrasing of *'marana ta'*– Aramaic for 'our lord come' – a merger of 'homo' and 'ata', which creates a queering of the prayer. The final blessing is based on the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence's own rewriting of Jesus's words: "Go and sin no more" (Joh. 8:11). In any regular Sunday service, most – if not all – of the expressions above would be difficult to incorporate as anything other than a mocking of Christian traditions, mostly because of their sexual language. Within Pride, however, the sexual language is formed within a queer context, a form of serious religious parody using humour to create meaning and recognition that plays upon centralised, dominant, and heteropatriarchal theology. This is my own a decentralised undoing of theology.

Gloria: Beautiful people of Copenhagen! I am saddened to tell that we are nearing the end of this revival meeting. We've come all the way from the North to show you how love of siblings embodies through music, but please do not forget that we are gathered here to celebrate all the week. We are gathered here, united, in the spirit and power of community, to celebrate life! We are gathered here because we are whoever we want to be, whoever we feel like being, we love whoever we want, and we bang whoever we want! Together we stand up against bigotry, queerphobia, sexism, genderism, trans violence, and all that heteronormative crap of this world! And we'll all do it in the power of Gay…

All: Christ!

Gloria: No, no, no good people of Copenhagen…Are you losing faith? Have I not given you all I know? I can hardly hear you. I do need to call upon the Queer Spirit's presence once again, because there shan't be a lack of faith amongst you all…Queer Spirit descend your fiery thong and let us all be filled with your warm spirit of our Gay…

All: CHRIST!

Gloria: Hallelujah! Yes, my children! Now you're filled with the warmth of our Gay…

All: CHRIST!

Gloria: Homonata! I can safely leave you all to the indecency of Pride. My children: Go forth into the world and sin some more!

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Appendix

Appendix 1

Permit from NSD

Norsk samfunnsvitenskapelig datatjeneste AS
NORWEGIAN SOCIAL SCIENCE DATA SERVICES

NSD

Andreas Ihlang Berg
Fagseksjonen Det teologiske fakultet Universitetet i Oslo
Postboks 1023 Blindern
0315 OSLO

Vår dato: 01.04.2016 Vår ref: 47547 / 3 / HIT Deres dato: Deres ref:

TILBAKEMELDING PÅ MELDING OM BEHANDLING AV PERSONOPPLYSNINGER

Vi viser til melding om behandling av personopplysninger, mottatt 22.02.2016. Meldingen gjelder prosjektet:

47547	*Assimilition or the right of equality through diference. A queer theological discourse on same sex mariage and intimate relationship*
Behandlingsansvarlig	*Universitetet i Oslo, ved institusjonens øverste leder*
Daglig ansvarlig	*Andreas Ihlang Berg*

Personvernombudet har vurdert prosjektet, og finner at behandlingen av personopplysninger vil være regulert av § 7-27 i personopplysningsforskriften. Personvernombudet tilrår at prosjektet gjennomføres.

Personvernombudets tilråding forutsetter at prosjektet gjennomføres i tråd med opplysningene gitt i meldeskjemaet, korrespondanse med ombudet, ombudets kommentarer samt personopplysningsloven og helseregisterloven med forskrifter. Behandlingen av personopplysninger kan settes i gang.

Det gjøres oppmerksom på at det skal gis ny melding dersom behandlingen endres i forhold til de opplysninger som ligger til grunn for personvernombudets vurdering. Endringsmeldinger gis via et eget skjema, http://www.nsd.uib.no/personvern/meldeplikt/skjema.html. Det skal også gis melding etter tre år dersom prosjektet fortsatt pågår. Meldinger skal skje skriftlig til ombudet.

Personvernombudet har lagt ut opplysninger om prosjektet i en offentlig database, http://pvo.nsd.no/prosjekt.

Personvernombudet vil ved prosjektets avslutning, 31.07.2016, rette en henvendelse angående status for behandlingen av personopplysninger.

Vennlig hilsen

Katrine Utaaker Segadal

Hildur Thorarensen

Kontaktperson: Hildur Thorarensen tlf: 55 58 26 54
Vedlegg: Prosjektvurdering

Dokumentet er elektronisk produsert og godkjent ved NSDs rutiner for elektronisk godkjenning.

Appendix 2

Informed consent

Forskningsprosjekt om skeive relasjoner.

Denne avtalen inngås mellom forsker Andreas Ihlang Berg og fokusgruppedeltager. Vi samles til fokusgruppe tre ganger. Alle opplysninger du oppgir vil bli behandlet konfidensielt av forsker. Samtalen mellom deltagerne i fokusgruppen vil bli tatt opp på lydopptaker og data som samles inn vil bli anonymisert ved innleveringen av doktorgraden den 31.10.2019.

Når data fra lydopptaker har blitt skrevet ned vil du motta en kopi som du har mulighet til å lese igjennom. Hvis du ønsker kan du forandre eller korrigere utsagn du har kommet med. Dette kan du gjøre uavhengig av grunn, enten om du opplever at du må utdype et utsagn eller har lyst til å forandre på det du sa. Du har også mulighet for å slette deler du ikke vil ha med. Dette kan du gjøre uten begrunnelse til forsker

Det er helt frivillig å være med i prosjektet, noe som betyr at du kan trekke deg når du vil uten begrunnelse. Dette er også mulig etter at fokusgruppen har sluttet å møtes.

Jeg er innforstått innholdet av denne avtalen og gir samtykke i min deltagelse.

_____ _____

Andreas Ihlang Berg

Appendix 3

Interview Guide

- Welcome
    - Food, coffee, snacks
- "The Father Project"
    - Questions:
        - How would you explain this music video?
        - What are your opinions on this video?
        - Tooji, the artist of this music video, claims this to be a contribution for equal rights of marriage within the church. Do you agree/disagree and why?
        - Who and how do you relate to in the video?
        - In what way does this video represent your sexual identity?
        - In what way does this video represent you Christian identity?
        - If you could change anything about this music video. What would it be?