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Religious/secular discourses and practices of good sex

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ABSTRACT

This article focuses on the triangulation of sexuality, religion and secularity in Dutch society by analysing two contemporary case studies. We focus on sexual experiences and practices rather than sexual identities to further understand the constructions of what constitutes 'good' sex. The empirical research is situated in the Netherlands, where the binary of religion and sexual regulation versus secularity and sexual freedom has been dominant in both public and political discourse for a long time. Exploring sexual practices and narratives as central to the constitution of both religious and secular selves, we noted these to be fluctuating, inconsistent and subject to discourses. Our first case study discusses sexual experiences of non-heterosexual Protestant women, whereas the second explores the frequently considered 'neutral' notions of secularity in sexual education. Applying insights from both religious studies and queer studies, we bring the empirical study of sexuality together with the theoretical debates about the conceptualisation of the secular and the religious in contemporary Western Europe. This comparative approach to sexuality not only undermines the culturally presumed exclusive opposition of the secular and the religious but it also provides new empirical contributions for understanding the interactions between sexual practices and sexual discourses.

KEYWORDS Sexuality; secularity; religion; gender; The Netherlands; discourse

Introduction

Sexuality has become one of the pivotal stages where boundaries between religion and secularity are imagined, highlighted and discussed. Positioned at the crossroad of the social and the individual, sexuality can be considered as

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something deeply personal while also subject to strong societal, religious and cultural norms and regulations (Foucault 1990; Butler 1993). In the developing intersectional field of the study of religion and gender, increasing numbers of scholars have pointed to the centrality of sexuality, gender and the body in the construction of a religion/secular binary. These scholars call for a recognition of religious women's agency and subject formation (Avishai 2008; Bracke 2008; Mahmood 2012); emphasise the centrality of materiality and the body in both religious and secular lives (Meyer 2012; Engelke 2014); or focus on the relation between religion and LGBTQ[1] rights (Jakobsen and Pellegrini 2004; Dudink 2017). Whereas, gender has been thoroughly conceptualised and theorised, it appears rather difficult to study sexuality in a way that moves beyond discursive identity categorisations. Often sexuality tends to become a label instead of a practice, something that, as Jeffrey Weeks brilliantly put it, 'presupposes the existence of a particular identity which pins you down like a butterfly on the table' (Weeks 2016, 10). Queer theory has been very valuable and necessary in the deconstruction of this often fixating concept of identity, and hence it has contributed greatly to the de-essentialisation of sexuality. Scholars such as José Munoz and Jack Halberstam inspired many scholars of religion to rethink the relation between discourses, practices and embodiments in the formation of sexual subjectivities in religious contexts (see Schippert 2011).

Still, we are convinced that more empirical research on sex with a focus on the interplay of discourse and practice is needed. Since sex frequently is located precisely at such crossroads of the social and the private (Spronk 2012), we think that this research will contribute to obtaining a more comprehensive understanding of 'sex as sex'. Here, we agree with Rachel Spronk, in considering sex as the constantly transforming result of complicated mediations of the social and the embodied individual. In this article, we urge for a focus on bodily, experiential and sensory qualities of sex, which moves beyond an identity approach (see also Wekker 2006b; Valentine 2007) while also taking into account social influences and normativities. We therefore apply Spronk's notion of 'good sex' to refer to the subjective experience of erotic pleasure, and simultaneously to norms about what morally good, proper, derivative or improper sex entails.

In what follows we first situate our research in the expanding field of the study of religion, secularism, gender and sexuality. Then, we discuss the context of the Netherlands as one that provides us with an especially fruitful context to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the interplay of discourses and practices that constitute religious/secular sex. In the second part of the article we continue our exploration by presenting two empirical case studies based on our separate research projects. Schrijvers will analyse the experience of sexual pleasure through the narratives of Protestant women who have sex with women. Wiering explores 'sexular' notions recommended by sexual health care organisations. Together, these case studies explore a variety of sexual practices and discourses that illustrate similar mediations taking place in both case studies.

Sex in the study of religion and the secular

In the last decades, a critical perspective towards gender and sexuality has taken ground in the field of religious studies (Beattie and King 2005; Hawthorne 2011; Korte 2011). However, religion continues to be a rather controversial topic of research in many queer or feminist studies. This is partly informed by a consistent link of secularism and women's and LGBTQ rights movements[2] in Western Europe. When feminist scholarship was institutionalised towards the end of the twentieth century in the form of gender studies, the influence of feminist political activism was deeply felt. Here, religion was mainly considered yet another patriarchal institute which limited sexual freedom, an institute which had to be criticised or even left behind on the way to women's liberation and LGBTQ sexual freedom. This bond between sexual and gender critical movements and secularism is also present in the Netherlands, where narratives of emancipation are frequently considered to be parallel to processes of unchurching. A similar discourse dominates in countries throughout Western Europe and North America by which most religions, and particularly Islam, are met with suspicion when it concerns women's emancipation and sexual freedom.[3] Since 9/11 and the following 'war on terror', Islam is moreover increasingly violently framed as the 'other' of Western culture and stereotyped as most rigid concerning sexual freedom (El-Tayeb 2011; Jouili 2011; Dudink 2017). This genealogy of feminism has linked emancipatory politics and academia with a secular agenda up until today. This is not to say that feminist critiques were absent in religious organisations or theological institutes (see Loughlin 2007; Llewellyn and Trzebiatowska 2013; van den Brandt 2014) but the role that religious actors have played in feminist history is often ignored in the dominant narrative of feminist and gender critical theory.

Recently, scholars from a wide range of disciplines have started to question this implicit secular/religion binary in gender studies and the study of sexuality, thereby calling for a dialogue between religious studies and gender studies (Hawthorne 2011; Korte 2011; Abu-Lughod 2015). One could in fact argue that the stubborn conviction of religion and sexuality as being juxtaposing is increasingly considered a Taylorian subtraction story of the secular, as more and more studies seem to point to other directions (Taylor 2007). Simultaneously, the popular conviction of secularity and sexuality as being indisputable allies has been problematised (Butler 2008; Scott 2010; Rasmussen 2012; Cady and Fessenden 2013; Bartelink 2016). Inspired by Asad's (2003, 2011) critical assessment of the secular and secularism in the context of myths and pain, many scholars applied a similar critical angle to explore the secular's involvement with sexuality. Probably the best known example of such a critical reflection on secular sexuality comes from feminist historian Joan Scott. In her Ursula Hirschmann lecture (2009) Scott argued that secularism, much like religion, imposes specific forms and notions of sexuality that are particularly related to the treatment of women (see also Scott

2010; Verkaaik and Spronk 2011). Scott suggest that rather than a neutral space of equality, secularism should be considered just another framework within which inequalities between men and women continue to exist:

> Many of the women defending their right to wear a headscarf admit that not all covered women freely choose it. But that is no different, they insist, from women who feel pressured by boyfriends or husbands to conform to the dictates of Western fashion. (Scott 2009, 12).

Scott calls attention to secular normativity related to sexuality, and by doing so questions the often presumed sharp differences between (supposedly oppressive) religious and (supposedly egalitarian) secular treatment of women (Scott 2009, 12). Scott's work encouraged many scholars to explore the normative sexular climate of the West, and we now see a body of literature on 'the study of sexularism' coming into being (e.g. Verkaaik and Spronk 2011; Schuh, Burchardt, and Wohlrab-Sahr 2012; Cady and Fessenden 2013; Selby 2014; Amir-Moazami 2016).

In this study of the sexular, many scholars focus on the social position and freedom rights of sexual minorities in secular societies. For instance, Mepschen, Duyvendak, and Tonkens (2010) shed light on a hypocritical secularist mobilisation of homosexual rights in the Netherlands. Butler (2008) addresses the same problematic utilisation, albeit more broadly in relation to the rights of gay people more generally. van der Veer (2006) highlights the role played by the late Dutch politician Pim Fortuyn, who was gay himself and who had made sexual freedom – or rather, Islamic restrictions of that freedom – a crucial part of the ideology of his political party.

Exploring this literature on sexularism, we are intrigued by the question how to further understand the interactions of secular discourses and secular subjectivities (Wiering 2017). There have been quite some works on the interaction of secular discourses and *religious* subjectivities, but we consider this only one part of a multifaceted story. We primarily aimed to explore interactions between various 'secular' actors. It is one thing to note that secular power seeks to privatise religion, and that, in doing so the state confines religion to what is frequently perceived to be the domain of women. Yet observing how this confinement plays out in everyday life brings forth a different set of questions. It is not as if secular discourses have unmediated access to people's minds and behaviour, nor is it correct to assume that these discourses literally copy the instructions of the secular state. Secularity in society has gained many different interpretations, hence secular people can disagree with each other, or they can disagree with or undermine secular discourses. We decided to zoom in on such interactions.

Sex as more than an identity

We situate ourselves on the intersection of the study of the secular and the anthropology of sexuality. Sexuality has always been an important aspect in

feminist scholarship, answering the now famous call of Gayle Rubin to start 'to think about sex' (Rubin 1984, 143). From different disciplines a theory of sexuality has developed which aims to deconstruct the notion of identity as fixed, and instead points to the historical sociopolitical factors that constitute sexual subjectivities (Muñoz 1999; Boellstorff 2007; Schippert 2011; Schrijvers 2015). In his review of the anthropology of sexuality, Boellstorff (2007) observes how the field of sexuality has shifted from identity politics, which is directed towards increasing visibility and political participation of gays and lesbians, towards the understanding of sexual subjectivity and intersubjective meaning making (Boellstorff 2007, 22). This opened up the conceptualisation of sexuality as shaped by historical contexts, individual desires and experiences, as well as social discourses. Sex is thus something someone *does*, a practice, act or performance, but can also constitute an important part of subject formation and self-identification. Queer theory has radically deconstructed the notion of sexual identity as something fixed (that is, the assumption that one *is* gay, lesbian, heterosexual) to sexuality as fluid, constructed and performed (Muñoz 1999; Schippert 2011).

Even though sex and sexuality are terms commonly used, both can refer to a number of practices, desires or characteristics. Sex can refer to erotic practices in narrow sense, such as masturbation or intercourse, or broader to practices of courtship and performances. Sex can also refer to a category of biologically determined male or female sex, which is then often framed as opposed to gender as a social construct. After this constructivist turn in gender studies, Judith Butler continued the deconstructive project by arguing that bodies, embodiment and the biological categorisation of 'sex' are also shaped by political circumstances and discourses (Butler 1993), as to not essentialise either sex or gender. Sexuality can furthermore refer to personal desires, related to the subject the erotic desire is directed to (gay, lesbian, pansexual) or by desired practices (bdsm, asexual). Yet, more often sexuality refers to a broader social arena 'where power relations, symbolic meanings of gender, and hence moral discourses in relation to sexual behaviour, are played out' (Spronk 2014, 4).

Despite all this emphasis on the social influence on sex, we still agree with the critique of Gloria Wekker who has argued that 'the mere existence of a sexual identity [still] is usually taken for granted'. Wekker asks us to pay more attention to the multiplicity of subjectivity (Wekker 2006a, 445). Our empirically based approach to sex does not exclude the importance of political formations and emancipation, but does argue that starting from these practices complicates the story of identity politics built on a supposed neat divide of secular and religious sex. In this approach, sex becomes a topical area to further understand the intersections and overlappings of discourse and practice and deepens the insight in the multiplicity of lived sexularities. We employ the term 'good sex' (Spronk 2014) to investigate the various messy ways in which sexual experiences are narrated and constructed. In our approach, 'good sex' refers both to

subjective experiences of sexual pleasure and interactions, as well as to norms and ethics of what the interlocutors consider to be 'good', or 'proper' sexual practices and desires.

Introducing the Netherlands

In order to understand the intersections of sex, religion and the secular in the Netherlands, we need to go back to the 1960s and 1970s when the Netherlands experienced its so-called 'sexual revolution'.[4] This revolution occurred in the context of the so called 'pillarisation', which refers to the politico-denominational segregation of the Dutch society. This popular metaphor of the pre-60 Netherlands presents the Dutch nation as divided into several distanced pillars of segmented organisations, all representing distinct social groups such as Catholics, Protestants and Social Democrats, which together are suggested to hold up the Netherlands (van Dam 2015, 293).

Based on his own account, van der Veer (2006), raised in the 1950s and 1960s, illustratively tell us:

> I was raised as a Protestant, and we had our own church, political party, sports teams, schools, shops, and welfare organisation, as if we formed an ethnic community. Everything in society was organised according to these pillars. The Dutch pride themselves on their long tradition of tolerance, but this was part of a broader system of noninterference with other pillars. Marriage patterns in the Netherlands also followed such divisions. This is well expressed in the Dutch proverb, 'When you have two beliefs on one pillow, the devil will sleep in between.' (idem).

In the 1960s, Dutch society started to de-pillarise as a consequence of student revolts, the rise of the so-called post–Second World War 'baby boomer generation', the sexual revolution (van der Veer 2006) and the expanding welfare state that reduced the need and longing for confessional support structures (Schuh, Burchardt, and Wohlrab-Sahr 2012). Along with the gradual collapsing of the pillarisation, a particular notion of modernity made its way into general public opinion, one that excluded the role of the church and strongly encouraged individuality (Kennedy 1995). Echoing this latter plea for individuality, a very important first step towards this modernity was to get rid of the supposedly outdated and restricting taboos on sexuality (Schnabel 1990, 15–17). More and more Dutch seemed to agree that people should be able to decide on their sexual behaviour actions individually, which suggested that the topic was in urgent need of discussion after years of problematic silence. As a consequence, in the 'wild sixties' sex and sexuality became increasingly visible for the public eye. Porn magazines, sex shows in Amsterdam and the naked appearance of Phil Bloom[5] on television all shocked the ground, implementing the popular Dutch conviction of the 1960s as having successfully liberated the previous restricted Dutch sexuality (Schnabel 1990).

As mentioned above, this alleged sexual revolution went hand in hand with processes of unchurching and depillarisation.[6] Between 1958 and 1966 the number of unaffiliated people for instance increased from 24 to 36% (Becker and Vink 1994). Since the church was considered as the flagship of the pillarisation from which the Dutch sought to distance, many expressed a disaffection with the church through an abandonment of traditional moralism (Mepschen, Duyvendak, and Tonkens 2010, 967), and engaged in one of the many previously considered unconventional manifestations of sex, such as reading porn magazines. Secularity and sexual openness were taken to be welcome avenues to modernity, and this narrative continues to dominate Dutch public discourse on sexual freedom. The opening up of civil marriage for same-sex couples, commonly referred to as gay marriage, as the first country worldwide in 2001 is still considered the peak defining moment of Dutch sexual freedom and emancipation, reaffirming the image of the Netherlands as a sexually liberated and secularised country.

This binary between, to put it bluntly, religious traditional chastity on the one hand, and secular sexual openness on the other (see also Rasmussen 2012) continues to prominently feature in contemporary Dutch culture. Besides being deeply implemented in the Dutch cultural memory, the dualistic representation has also successfully blurred any variety in any of the parties ascribed to either side of this socially constructed spectrum. Christianity is seen as a religion that, per definition, has unyielding difficulties with sex, whereas secularity is suggested to always be non-restrictive. In the aftermath of 9/11, this polarisation adjusted as Christianity was joined by Islam in its position as, now evermore so racialised, secularity's 'Other'. Islam was taken to be threatening the Dutch norms and values, and many scholars have argued that this was in fact quite convenient for secularist discourse, as it enabled Dutch secularist to let their notions of sexuality appear all the more liberal (Hekma 2002; Mepschen, Duyvendak, and Tonkens 2010; El-Tayeb 2011). White Dutch homosexuals are for instance framed as part and parcel of Dutch secular culture and as such national identity and pride, a suggestion that did not strike with previous protests regarding the public display of queerness of only a few year earlier (Verkaaik 2009; Mepschen, Duyvendak, and Tonkens 2010). It is at this particular moment in Dutch history, where religion and sexual taboo have been assigned to team-up to represent the completely opposite pole of modern, liberal, free secular sex, that we conducted our anthropological fieldwork.

Case study 1 – Sex and pleasure among non-heterosexual Protestant women

In the spring of 2014, Schrijvers met 14 women between the ages of 25 and 72 who have sex with other women. They referred to themselves as lesbian, bisexual or queer, and who where a member of a congregation within the Protestant

Church Netherlands (PKN). Schrijvers engaged in long in-depth interviews with these women which focused on their personal stories and narratives with regard to religion, gender and sexuality (Schrijvers 2015). Initially, Schrijvers started off this research with the question of how lesbian religious women deal with the conflict of religion and sexuality. Since most research on religion and LGBTQ people focuses on cisgender male homosexual people in religious institutes, she wondered if and how experiences of 'women who have sex with women' (Wekker 2006a, 437) differed. Talking to the research participants, Schrijvers gradually realised that the lived experiences did not at all confirm the idea that religion inherently excludes or represses non-normative sexual identities and practices. In speaking about their sexual practices and desires, religion was not excluded but instead was central to the narrating of sexual experience. As such, the interlocutors created a sexual ethics that draws both on religious sources, as well as secular discourses about sexual freedom circulating in broader Dutch society. At the same time, the interlocutors were very aware of the dominant Dutch public discourse in which religion and non-normative sexuality are counter posed, and dealt with this in different ways. They certainly thought about the potential influence of their sexual identification on their role and position in their congregation. Some expressed a concern for their acceptance as lesbian woman and explicitly asked their church board to take a stance on same-sex marriage. Others specifically joined a church that they already knew to be open for LGBTQ people. Some struggled more than others with their position in their religious community, and one of the women was expelled from the church board because of her coming out. Yet these difficulties were only marginal topics in most of the conversations. Instead these women continuously emphasised the importance of embodied experiences and personal relations with God.

God-given sexual pleasure

'I can now thank God when I have an orgasm', Dieke, a lesbian woman in her fifties, said. Dieke told Schrijvers how she experiences God during sex and how she thanks Him when she has an orgasm. In describing her sexual experiences and desires, Dieke made a clear separation between her sexual experiences in a heterosexual marriage and in her relationship with another woman: Not only does she have more orgasms in having sex with women, but she *now* thanks God for these moments of pleasure. Most women had engaged in sexual relations with one or more men before opening up about and/or acting upon their sexual desires for women.[7] For all interlocutors, heterosexual sex was framed in terms of reproduction by their parents, at school and in church before and during their marriages. Non-heterosexual sex was at the same time considered deviant and sinful. Dieke explained to Schrijvers how the sex with her husband was 'nice as long as we had children. […] I was raised with the idea that you have to please your husband, but it didn't really do anything for me'. She used to consider

intercourse desirable as long as it could result in a pregnancy, which was the most important reason to engage in it. It was furthermore her duty as a wife to please her husband, which she did, and the sex mainly consisted of penetration. She enjoyed it for the potential outcomes in the form of pregnancy, but did not experience pleasure in the act itself and did not feel aroused by her husband.

For many married years, Dieke did not consider her lack of sexual pleasure a problem because she was raised with the idea that this was not the most important aspect of sex, and women's pleasure was especially unimportant. She gradually discovered that sex could be different, and that her lack of arousal came out of a lack of attraction to her husband, because he was a man. She came to recognise that good sex could be about more than reproduction, and that she did feel aroused by other women. After divorcing from her husband Dieke fell in love with Mia, which gave her the confidence and the opportunity to explore her own sexual desires. With Mia, she engaged in sexual acts of mutual masturbation and oral sex; acts that she experienced to be directed at her and that included pleasure of both partners: 'this is the kind of intimacy I'd been looking for all that time' When she stepped out of her heterosexual relation in which her sexuality was defined as passive and opposed to men's, Dieke entered a different space of sexual subjectivity and in some sense became subject of their own desires.

Most women told Schrijvers how they experience sexuality more fully and autonomous since they have sex with other women, and most women describe themselves as lesbian and as exclusively attracted to women. What struck Schrijvers in their stories was that having sex with other women did not conflict with their personal religious beliefs, but was intrinsically connected to their religious experiences. Nienke, in her thirties and married to Anne, told Schrijvers that even though she contemplated how her sexual orientation stood in relation to *religion*, she never experienced any problems towards *God*, by which she separates her personal religiosity ('God') from church doctrines (religion).[8] Astrid, a 45-year-old lesbian woman, described her relationship as threefold: 'Eva, God and myself are a strong cord that can simply not be broken[9] […] I have such a strong feeling that we are bound together, and as well together with God'. The relation she had with God is for Astrid a central element in her romantic relationship with Eva, she even considers this a threefold relationship. For Astrid, Nienke and the others, religion was not something separate, but an essential and central element in their experience and practices of sex. Furthermore, sexuality was considered a central and crucial aspect of what it means to be a human being created by God. They creatively claimed religious space to seek desirable and pleasurable sex with other women. And for Dieke, whom we started this paragraph with, sexuality became something she can enjoy and in which she can experience God through her body; she can now, now that she has sex with another woman, thank God when she has an orgasm.

'Good' Christian sex

By the claiming of space in their personal faith stories, these women carefully shift boundaries of 'good sex' by arguing that having sex with women is permissible rather than sinful, and as such they subtly question some of the sexual morals they were raised with. They thus create more room for sexual freedom, while this space is at the same time limited and regulated. In speaking about their sexual ethics, most participants reiterated forms of homonormativity by emphasising monogamy and questioning promiscuous sexual behaviour. Dieke and René considered sexual pleasure as something that should be desired by both men and women, and with whomever they want, in their case with other women. This type of sexual pleasure is a gift of God, so there is nothing sinful in enjoying good sex. At the same time they were very clear on whose and which sexual practices are permitted or desirable, which practices are 'good sex'. Most women pointed to their similarity to heterosexual couples, which is considered the ideal, or even the only 'good sex' in much of Christian doctrine (Gerber 2008; Cornwall and Isherwood 2011). Evelien stated in this regard that she is 'just very normal'. What it means to be normal meant a similarity to heterosexual couples, which was then in almost all cases defined by monogamy. Annelies formulated this as follows: 'you have to ask the same things of [non-straight] people as of straight people: love and faithfulness have to be central in a relationship'. A distinction was made between sex out of love, and sex out of lust, by which 'good sex' should be enjoyed in a one-for-one relationship which is built on notions of trust, fidelity and mutual support, instead of giving into sexual lusts. Not the partner one has sex with, but the characteristics of the relationship became the primary site on which to separate 'good sex' from 'bad sex'. In many of the communities these women attended, the sexual boundary between proper and improper Christians was built on a distinction between heterosexuals and homosexuals, with the latter considered deviant. This emphasis on similarity and normalcy of their own sexual relations with heterosexual relations constituted a symbolical boundary of 'good Christian sex'.

Marriage in church is one of the ways to affirm this one-for-one intention, and often considered one of the most important benchmarks of sexual equality and aspirations for homosexual (homonormative) couples. All women referred to this as a potentially important ritual to gain the blessing of both God and the religious community.[10] Yet only a few women actually desired to get married themselves for several reasons. Civil same-sex marriage has only been possible since 2001 in the Netherlands, at a time when many interlocutors were already in long-term relationships or had a civil partnership. They did not consider marriage to have any added value. The second reason some women did not want to get married was because they had been divorced and associated marriage with their negative heterosexual experiences. In the Protestant Church of the Netherlands (PKN), there is no central policy on same-sex marriage, but the board leaves this up to individual congregations. Because of this possibility and

diversity, the potential of same-sex marriage in a particular church was considered a way to measure the acceptance of lesbians and gays, even though the interlocutors did not always wanted to use this possibility themselves. Evelien asked her church board to decide on the matter before agreeing to join the board as church elder, 'eventually, they decided that the church allows the blessing of different kind of relations.[11] It gave me a feeling of 'yeah, I'm really welcome here!' Nienke on the other hand, took a more pragmatic approach. She and Anne wanted to have a wedding ceremony in church, and simply looked for a church in which this would be possible. In their previous community, same-sex marriage was not permitted, but Nienke never felt out of place there and this did not influence her feeling of being accepted by her community.

A third theme which came up in the narratives of these women was that monogamy was not only considered preferable, but even considered a particular positive feature of Christianity. Christianity, especially was valuable because it restrains one to 'go from one to another' (Evelien), and motivates one to seek for long time and trustworthy partners instead of engaging in promiscuous sexual relations with multiple partners. The women made a clear distinction between non-religious sexualities and Christian sexualities, in which the latter provide more support for loving and caring monogamous relationships. Secular spaces were often regarded as oversexualised and providing ample opportunities to engage in non-monogamous 'bad sex'. Many of the interlocutors also felt out of place in mainstream secular LGBTQ networks because of anti-religious tendencies in these spaces. Karlijn, for example, said: 'I feel like I'm misunderstood on two sides. I think the gayworld is as intolerant as the religious world'. This 'gayworld' she refers to celebrates her queer sexuality, but her religious beliefs are often met with suspicion or atheist negativity. These women experienced the limits of the notion of sexual freedom in secular gay spaces when it came to religion, something that marked the boundary of acceptance and recognition for them. On the one hand, they did consider secular LGBTQ spaces valuable in having the opportunity to meet future lovers and providing information about sexuality that they did not find in their religious upbringing and current communities. On the other hand, secular spaces were often considered to be shaped be loose sexual morals that did not put the same emphasis on loving monogamous relations as the women desired themselves. In that sense, religion provided them with strength and tools to search for 'good sex', motivated by love and trust, but nevertheless something to be desired and enjoyed.

Case study 2 – Sexularism in sex educations

In the four months of his fieldwork in 2016 and 2017, Wiering investigated Dutch sexual practices and notions recommended by organisations working in the field of sexuality (e.g. health care organisations). He interviewed 16 Dutch professionals working for such organisations, usually white, highly educated

doctors, sexologists, people working for Community Health Service (CHS, 'GGD') or people working for different, usually smaller, organisations. He additionally participated in many meetings, seminars and sexual educations for students, parents, migrants or teachers, and he engaged in a long-term training to have eventually become an instructor himself.

In doing so, he set out to explore secular sex, that is, those notions and practices of sex that his interlocutors considered secular (see Wiering 2017). In order to investigate how individual interpretations of sex would relate to broader secular discourses, Wiering decided to compare findings from interviews with observations from sex educations. Out of a variety of sex educations, Wiering, for this article, selected sex education through theatre shows, since these included embodied practices and thus provided examples of how all the ideals about sex were put into practice. In these one-hour performances, a play about sex was performed for students.

Acting sexular

The theatre show[12] begins, and the actors on stage begin to introduce the characters they are about to play. We, about 60 students, two teachers and myself, learn that Bram, a somewhat shy-looking boy, has a girlfriend named Linda. They have been in a relationship for a year now, but they do not see each other a lot as they live in different parts of the Netherlands. In the coming summer this will fortunately change, because they have selected the same campsite for their holidays. They will both go there with a good friend. Bram will be joined by Raymond, who, in contrast to Bram, appears very confident. He uses cool and funny language, is absolutely witty and he wears sunglasses. Linda will bring along Kirsten, a girl who is a Christian, as Linda explains the very first moment Kirsten appears on stage. Linda and Kirsten will also be camping together and they will also share a tent. Finally, there is Melisandre, a confident, sexy-looking girl (the students in the audience usually particularly agreed on this) who wears short skirts.

In the first scene on the camp site, we see Bram and Raymond having a discussion next to their tent. As one could have expected, they are talking about sex. Reason for this is the potential of a first sexual encounter between Bram and Linda. Raymond tells Bram that he is stunned that, despite Bram and Linda's one-year relationship, they did not have had sex yet. He asks Bram:

> But, I mean you have been in a relationship for a year already! That's really mean of her [*to not have had sex yet*]. Is she good at giving a blowjob then? You don't know that either? Man. How does she taste? I mean, you did taste her didn't you? That nice wet mussel!

Bram responds: 'No, no, I haven't. I am just not sure if she wants that, you know. I just don't know!' Raymond then tells him: 'Pfff, I know what ladies like. Trust me, they want it'.

During the rest of the show it becomes apparent that Raymond clearly does not know 'what the ladies like'. It turns out that Raymond has a crush on Melisandre and they have a few flirting conversations where it becomes evident that Raymond basically has no clue on how to appropriately approach her.

Meanwhile, it is elaborately put forward that Melisandre is a supposedly free-spirited girl. For instance, when the group goes swimming, Melisandre goes fully naked, whereas (Christian) Kirsten sticks to her swimsuit. During a scene in a disco, Melisandre shows off sexy dance moves, whereas Kirsten is absent as she, encouraged by Linda, decided to remain in her tent. Melisandre also informs the audience about her various sexual experiences, and that she has had sex with a lot of different boys. Moreover, after she and Raymond had sex near the end of the show, she is capable of rightly pointing out, on the basis of Raymond's sexual performances, that he probably was a virgin up until then.[13] Finally, we also learn that she lives by three rules: (1) sex should be safe, (2) she should, at least, know the boy's name and (3) the sex should not take place at her own (parental) home.

Meanwhile, Raymond managed to persuade Bram to urge his girlfriend into having sex with him ('be more decisive man, girls dig that'). Bram, quite bluntly and awkwardly, physically attempts to have sex with Linda several times during the show, who then tells him that she is not ready for it yet. Near the end of the show she finally does agree to have sex, but it is quite obvious that she only does so because she feels pressured. After the sex, she tells the audience that she feels absolutely terrible about what happened. The show ends, and, subsequently, the moderator asks for advice from the students in the audience. Once in a while, she asks a student to come on stage to engage in a performed conversation to advise the actors.

These post-show discussions were particularly helpful in Wiering's analysis, as they somewhat indicated how the students interpreted the show, and also because they helped Wiering to spot the agenda implicitly advocated by the script and the moderator. The moderator's specific selection of particular parts of the show for the discussion does, of course, not come out of the blue.

Secular sex as modern sex

Observing this show,[14] Wiering designated two components that were suggested crucial for having 'good sex'. First, the forms of sex recommended in the shows all suggested a particular liberated notion of women, and to a lesser extent, a somewhat disciplined notion of men. It was implicitly suggested that women should be represented and treated differently than in the past, which is why men had to take a step back. Men had to take women's wishes and needs more into consideration and should respect the emancipated status of women. Secular sex was presented as incompatible with the supposedly outdated understanding of women as chaste, a term often used to capture the period before the

sexual revolution in the Netherlands. For example, each of the audiences that Wiering was part of perceived Melisandre as a slut, upon which the moderator was very eager to point out the problematic differences between boys and girls in this regard. It was stated that it is problematic to assign Melisandre the label of slut because she was just showing a particular form of behaviour, which she had the full right to opt for.

Wiering observed that, albeit very implicitly, Christianity seemed to be paying the price for this supposedly progressive and modern image of sex. Kirsten, the Christian girl, who wanted to delay sex until after her marriage – a decision that was outstanding given the sexual behaviour of the rest of the group – was not defended in a similar way as Melisandre. The moderator did mention that it was her own decision to delay sex, but that choice was not highlighted nor was it defended equally to Melisandre's outstanding decisions. Additionally, Kirsten was by no means as funny as Melisandre, she was criticised by Melisandre and Linda for being weird ('you are not going to pray in our tent now, are you?'), she was condemned for being boring (Linda and Melisandre strongly ridiculed her decision to not go naked during the skinny dipping) and, finally, she simply had little time on stage.

This implicit stigmatisation of Christianity as outdated was a recurring theme in Wiering's fieldwork, of which the theatre shows, again, were only a small part. Among his interlocutors, Christians were frequently seen as a 'different' group of people. In several conversations Wiering had, Christians were described as people who just do not want to talk about sexuality, and who, for that reason, were simply a bit outdated. Cor,[15] a sexologist, implicitly confirmed this notion of Christianity as outdated during an interview:

> They [Christians] are catching up, though. For now, they just need different education, and that's not really available at this moment is it? There is attention for refugees and their culture, but the Christians are missing the boat. The Dutch health system has simply overlooked them.[16]

Jantien, a woman working for a large health care organisation, told Wiering that an acquaintance of her recently had adapted sexual educations to make them applicable to reformed Christians, implying that this had been quite a task. Also during several sex education classes Wiering attended, Christianity was implicitly presented as a religion that recommended outdated forms of sexuality. It seems that, to somehow proof the up-to-date-ness of secular sex, an outdated example was needed.

Secular sex as safe sex

A second feature suggested in the shows to be essential for having 'good sex', was safety. First, sex had to be safe in the sense that it always should include contraceptives. Melisandre, the free-spirited girl was absolutely clear about

this as was reflected in one of her three ending statements mentioned above. Additionally, a condom wrapper was thrown over the wall during the scene in which Bram and Linda had sex, which took place in a toilet stall.

Second, and much more cunningly, 'good sex' was suggested safe because it demanded a particular disciplining of boys. The post show discussions always elaborated extensively on Bram and Raymond's mistakes. Bram, the audience and the moderator usually agreed, had simply acted stupidly. This was the consequence of his lack of knowledge and his blinding respect for Raymond. As for Raymond, the audience's laughter and comments suggested that there were many things for him to improve upon. The audience considered it inappropriate that he explicitly said that fucking was really nice; openly spoke of 'hot girls'; stated that an ideal woman should have the body shape of a Coca-Cola bottle; pulled down his pants in public when Melisandre asked him to do so; danced in a somewhat awkward way; said that it was weird to not yet have had sex with a girl after already seeing her six times; made obscene gestures; peaked into a toilet, and so on. Raymond, in the end, was suggested to be a show-off, and after more questions from the moderator about how we could explain all this problematic behaviour, as someone who was extremely uncertain deep down.

Like the demand of secular sex to be up-to-date, the requirement of secular sex to be safe resonated well with findings from other parts of Wiering's fieldwork. Again, it seemed religion was paying the price, although this time it was Islam. Particularly in the interviews he held, Islam was frequently considered the complete opposite of Dutch-ness, and especially newly-arrived Muslims were seen as a huge threat against sexual progressiveness. The main problem, Wiering learned, was that the religion was presumed to be violating the common Dutch, sexual rights, norms and values. Islam was considered a very serious threat, pre-eminently because the supposedly Islamic notions of sex were considered potentially dangerous. Cor told Wiering:

> Let's take two kissing men. A Syrian[17] Muslim boy cannot just go and beat them, because [listen] boy, that is just the way things are in the Netherlands! That's our foundation, you cannot cross that, that's how it is and you have to accept that! And two people drinking wine together does not mean that they are going to have sex together. That's just how things work in the Netherlands.

Wiering heard many similar stories in his fieldwork, for instance about Muslim boys who had not been able to control themselves when they first encountered Dutch girls wearing short skirts. 'They [newly-arrived Muslims] are simply walking through our town as we speak!', Els, a colleague of Jantien, stated somewhat panicked. Els used this statement to support her earlier mentioned argument that there was an urgent need for more sex education among Muslim refugees.

The fact that this fear always concerned *Muslim* refugees reflects the more general disapproval of Islam in Wiering's fieldwork. Islam was considered deviant, sometimes dangerous, and therefore incompatible and unwanted.

Good secular sex

Though Wiering's interlocutors generally considered most of the content of the sex educations described here to be neutral, it is clear that others, for instance some religious practitioners, would not likely appreciate it. It is no coincidence that religious schools in the Netherlands mainly opt for other organisations to provide the mandatory sex educations than secular schools.[18]

But there is more to be said here. If one would follow the recommendations of the educations, boys would not be boys anymore. On the contrary, we are suggested that boys are in need of disciplining themselves. Shown representations of dangerous boys unable to control themselves suggest that boys should reflect critically on their own behaviour, including what they say and how they dance. Moreover, given the depiction of boys as being rather unaware, Wiering could not help wondering whether this depiction of boys as completely clueless and as having a worse understanding of girls' boundaries might perhaps be driven by the prevailing image of dangerous Muslim boys who are supposed to be completely unaware of the Dutch norms and values, and who 'even' happen to walk in our towns.[19]

Additionally, this theatrical performance confirms the association of religion as something that needs to be privatised – in fact, religion is suggested to be in a need for a privatisation that goes even further than a tent – and as something that is boring. Given the non-coincidental fact that religion becomes personified by a girl with a short, non-interesting time on stage, one cannot neglect the suggestion that a particular secular agency of girls is advocated. One that simultaneously encourages girls to become liberated, and hence to not be dully. Religion merely is depicted as a stumbling block, for both girls and boys, in their process of confirming and maintaining supposedly correct and 'liberated' forms of behaviour that will eventually lead to 'good' secular sex.

Conclusion

We have presented two very different case studies on sex, and we are the first to admit that of course any comparison is rather difficult for a variety of reasons. What we do argue, though, is that our empirical investigations and analyses of the constructions of *both* religious and secular sex have revealed underlying norms and assumptions, illustrating that even supposedly 'free' sexual practices are performatively shaped in accordance to discourses and norms about correct and incorrect sex. This article illustrates how religion can be an essential factor in the self-narration of sexual experiences and desires. Sexual pleasure can be a moment in which God is experienced, which makes sexual practices essential in their construction of a religious self. At the same time, religious women's beliefs strengthen their faith in monogamy and they uphold strong norms about which sex is considered 'good'. The space in which sex can be experienced fully, directed

at women's pleasure instead of procreation, is furthermore managed carefully by opposing Christian sex to secular sex. The latter is suspected of consisting of morals too loose for their Christian standards and preferring non-monogamous sexual acts which are only based on lust. Faith, on the contrary, enables a sexual ethic which simultaneously emphasises pleasure while directing this towards trustworthy and monogamous relationships.

In Wiering's case study of secular sex, we have seen how Dutch sex education does suggest specific norms of how people are to have sex. We have seen how notions of secular sex are constructed through their opposing to conceptions of religious sex: we are suggested that, in contrast to supposedly outdated and dangerous forms of religion, secular sex is both modern and safe. These empirical findings, we think, accurately illustrate how the religious and the secular are indeed engaged in processes of producing each other in society (Asad 2003).

Finally, our empirical material urges us to think about sexuality beyond disembodied identity categories. Such an analysis that begins from the intersections of discourse and sexual practices instead provides us with new insights into the workings of religion and the secular in daily lives of people in the Netherlands, and shows how ideas of sexuality are shaped through norms and moral codes, both in 'secular' and 'religious' contexts.

Notes

1. Abbreviation of 'lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer'. We follow the mainstream of contemporary scholarship in this regard. Recently, activist voices call for an even further multiplication of the term: LGBTQASP or LGBTQI+. This is a mainly US-based discourse that up until now has not been that present in the Netherlands or Europe at large.
2. Though allies, LGBTQ movements and feminist movements have not always been aligned. In the development of the academic field of gender studies, women's studies, feminist studies or LGBTQ studies, however, these often overlap. Acknowledging the complexity of this field of study, and diversity in emphasis depending on national geographic location, we will not further specify gender studies and queer studies.
3. For example France (Scott 2010), the UK (Hawthorne 2011), Belgium (van den Brandt 2014) and the USA (Jakobsen and Pellegrini 2004).
4. See Schuh, Burchardt, and Wohlrab-Sahr (2012, 360–365) for an excellent, much more comprehensive account.
5. Phil Bloom is a Dutch artist, entertainer and actress. She appeared naked on television on 28 July 1967 in a VPRO (originally an acronym for Vrijzinnig Protestantse Radio Omroep, or Liberal Protestant Radio Broadcasting Corporation) show called 'Hoepla'.
6. The church also contributed strongly to the sexual revolution, though its role is marginalised and not really acknowledged by the Dutch (see Knibbe & Bartelink *paper in progress*).
7. Most women used terminology of 'coming-out' (uit de kast komen in Dutch) to refer to the moment they were first open about their sexual desires for other women to friends and/or family.

8. See Wilcox for a thorough analysis of this type of religious individualism among queer women in the United States (Wilcox 2009).
9. Astrid referred here to Ecclesiastes 4:12 'And if one prevail against him, two shall withstand him; and a threefold cord is not quickly broken.' (KJV), in Dutch Prediker 4:12 'En indien iemand den een mocht overweldigen, zo zullen de twee tegen hem bestaan; en een drievoudig snoer wordt niet haast gebroken.' (Statenvertaling).
10. Many Dutch religious people have two wedding ceremonies (or these can be combined): one civil ceremony at for example city hall, and one religious ceremony in which they receive the blessing from religious authority. Only civil ceremonies provide legal basis and it is this official institute of marriage that is legally and nationwide open for same-sex couples.
11. There is no explicit mention of same-sex marriage in PKN documents. Policy refers to non-heterosexual relations as 'different kinds of relations' (andersoortige relaties), terminology repeated by Evelien. In practice most women referred to this as gay marriage, similar to the discourse about civil marriage. Officially, this is 'opened up for all kinds of couples', and there is no difference between gay and straight marriage, but gay marriage is a commonly used term.
12. This only is a partial selection of the show that serves this article's aims. We do not want to compliment nor criticise particular features of the show: we merely wish to illustrate certain assumptions regarding religion from which the show departs.
13. The audience was not informed about how she had noted this.
14. Though it is not our aim to evaluate the show, we want to point out that it was quite successful in capturing the students' attention.
15. Names of the interlocutors in this article are pseudonyms.
16. There is a lot more to this quote than we can address here, particularly with regard to nationalism, ethnicity and race. For a discussion of what has been referred to as 'the Dutch nativist triangle of sexuality, race and religion', please see the chapter of Balkenhol, Mepschen and Duyvendak (2016).
17. We realize that ethnicity is important here too. However, for the article's purposes, we decided to limit ourselves to religion. Yet it should be kept in mind that we regard religion, ethnicity, race and culture to be intersecting concepts empirically.
18. In the Netherlands, schools are, except from some very general guidelines put forward by the government, free to conceptualise sex education according to their own preferences.
19. Please note that the fieldwork was conducted before the #metoo discussion ensued. This is important to mention, as the discussion's prevalent role in Dutch society could otherwise perfectly have explained the described emphasis on the need for disciplining boys.

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