

Theological Assessment of the Gender and Sexuality Debate in the Netherlands: The Case of the ‘Nashville Statement’

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1 Introduction

It is striking that in contemporary Europe there are more tensions about religion than there have been since the early twentieth century. Tensions today are not about the political power of church and religion in relation to the state, as they used to be in the past; tensions today are about sharing or not sharing a common set of values, norms, and practices.¹ A cultural gap has arisen between conservative religious communities and secular society, and *within* the religious sphere between more conservative and more liberal-minded communities and believers. The term ‘culture wars’ is often applied to these conflicts and polarization on issues such as abortion, homosexuality, same-sex marriage, women’s rights, reproductive rights, and family.² The broader categories of gender and sexuality are involved in all these controversial issues. Also, current debates on nationalism and ethnicity, the demand for a ‘strong’ nation, and the need to protect the nation against ‘a flux of immigrants’ are often intertwined with themes related to gender and sexuality, as we shall see below.

One might wonder why gender and sexuality have become so forefront in today’s political and religious debates. From the more general viewpoint of cultural anthropology, issues of marriage, gender, and procreation are at the core of the conception of what a society is.³ They are fundamentally related to the construction and consolidation of cultural and social order. Religion plays

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- 1 Olivier Roy and the Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies, *Rethinking the Place of Religion in European Secularized Societies: The Need for More Open Societies*. Conclusions of the Research Project Religio West (European University Institute, March 2016), 4, <https://cadmus.eui.eu/handle/1814/40305> (accessed April 15, 2021).
 - 2 The term ‘culture war’ to characterize today’s political battle on conservative and progressive values was introduced by James Davison Hunter, *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America* (New York: Basic Books, 1991).
 - 3 Roy, *Rethinking the Place of Religion*, 3.

a role in this.⁴ It is a two-way traffic: religion is a social and symbolic structure which affects gender and sexuality, and religion is affected by social systems of gender and sexuality.⁵ This elucidates why religion, gender, and sexuality are intrinsically related in their social manifestation, but does not yet explain why today's religious-political debates tend to focus on diverging opinions, values, norms, and practices concerning gender and sexual diversity.

A widely supported explanation, building on Michel Foucault's theory exposed in *The History of Sexuality*,⁶ is that people's identities in modern times have become increasingly tied to their sexuality. We may assume that gender and sexual relations have always been fundamental to human beings' experience of themselves, each other, and the environment. However, in modernity, since the early nineteenth century, the emerging medical discourse on sexuality taught to frame these experiences in a very specific way. Sexuality became a key attribute of the person, a central mark of his or her identity. In late-modern culture, with the dominant paradigm of identity being that of 'romantic expressivism' (Charles Taylor), individuals learned to express their authentic selves in terms of their sexual identity in order to realize their full humanity.⁷ The 1960s revolution of authenticity centered around sexual values, morals, and practices. In the Netherlands, acceptance of sexual diversity (usually labelled as 'homosexuality') became a major identity marker of secularist groups and advocates. Whilst the phenomenon of sexual diversity gained public importance, religion increasingly was considered to be a private matter, and became contested in its public and most characteristic manifestation.⁸

4 Anna Stewart and Simon Coleman, "Contributions from Anthropology," in *The Oxford Handbook of Theology, Sexuality, and Gender*, ed. Adrian Thatcher (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 105–119.

5 Marta Trzebiatowska, "Contributions from Sociology," in *The Oxford Handbook of Theology, Sexuality, and Gender*, 120–136, 121. As anthropologists Talal Assad (1983) and Sabah Mahmood (2005) have pointed out, religion is not to be found only in systems of meaning, but is always articulated in the entanglement of actors in more material and mundane networks of family, economy, and politics.

6 Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality Volume 1: An Introduction* (London: Allen Lane, 1979); *The History of Sexuality Volume 2: The Use of Pleasure* (London: Penguin Books, 1992); *The History of Sexuality Volume 3: The Care of the Self* (London: Penguin Books, 1990).

7 Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

8 Linda Martin Alcoff and John D. Caputo (eds), *Feminism, Sexuality and the Return of Religion* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2011); David Bos and Marco Derks, "Inleiding: God, seks en politiek. Themanummer over een spannende driehoeksverhouding" (Introduction: God, sex, and politics. Special issue on an exciting triangle), *Religie en Samenleving* 11:2 (2016), 97–100; Marco Derks, *Constructions of Homosexuality and Christian Religion in Contemporary Public Discourses in the Netherlands*. Quaestiones Infnitae, vol. 123

This ‘opposing pairing’ of religion and sexual diversity is manifested in the current culture wars. Positions with regard to sexual diversity have become emblems of fiery cultural battles to mark boundaries of religious and secular identities.

In this essay, I take as a case study the turmoil in society, politics, and churches around the so-called Nashville Statement.⁹ The Nashville Statement, that is presented by its authors as “a joint statement on biblical sexuality,” was imported in the Netherlands in January 2019.¹⁰ The publication of the Nashville Statement manifested and fueled the polarization on gender and sexuality in the Netherlands, although there were unintended positive side effects as well. I will seek to analyze the dynamics of polarization in the case of the Nashville Statement, and ask the question: how shall we theologically address these dynamics of polarization and the identity-politics involved, and what could be a theological way forward beyond oppositions that tend to emphasize and prioritize ‘identity’ in the debate?

Polarization refers to the splitting of society into two distinct groups that are at different ends of a spectrum. Dutch philosopher Bart Brandsma describes the dynamics of polarization as a social process that begins with a thought construct of ‘us’ and ‘them,’ which is then fueled by ‘pushers.’¹¹ The best way to give rise to polarization is to engage in talks about identity. Pushers of the conflict make judgmental comments on the other, in order to make the opposite pole suspect. A strategy to defuse polarization requires intervention at an early stage. Efforts should be made to strengthen the middle group, the potential ‘bridgebuilders,’ and to remain nuanced by hearing stories from a diversity of perspectives.

2 The Case of the Nashville Statement

The Nashville Statement originates from the Southern Baptist Convention 2017 in the USA. It was promoted by the Council on Biblical Manhood and

(Doctoral thesis Utrecht University, 2019); Marco Derks and Mariecke van den Berg (eds), *Public Discourses about Homosexuality and Religion in Europe and beyond* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020).

9 Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood, “Nashville Statement,” 2017, <https://cbmw.org/nashville-statement/> (accessed April 15, 2021).

10 Werkgroep Nashville-verklaring, “Nashville-verklaring. Een gezamenlijke verklaring over Bijbelse seksualiteit,” 2019, <https://nashvilleverklaring.nl> (accessed April 15, 2021).

11 Bart Brandsma, *Polarisation: Understanding the Dynamics of Us versus Them* (Schoonrewoerd: BB in media, 2017); see also John Paul Lederach, *The Moral Imagination: The Art and Soul of Building Peace* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

Womanhood, established in 1987 by Wayne Grudem.¹² On the initiative of seven Dutch Protestant pastors, the Nashville Statement was translated and imported into the Netherlands. The Nashville Statement is a typical product from a complex American context that combines evangelicalism and fundamentalism, a certain Victorian sexual repression and strong undercurrents of sexism and misogyny. The translated Statement and its signatures were prematurely leaked to the Dutch press.¹³ The manifest was signed by over two hundred pastors, mainly from the Restored Reformed Church (Hersteld Hervormde Kerk), the Reformed Congregations (Gereformeerde Gemeenten), the Reformed League (Gereformeerde Bond, conservative wing in the Protestant Church of the Netherlands), the Christian Reformed Church (Christelijk-Gereformeerde Kerk), and some Evangelical and Baptist churches. Furthermore, it was signed by two lecturers of theology at the Seminary of the Restored Reformed Church at the VU University Amsterdam, whilst also a prominent Christian-conservative member of parliament, Kees van der Staaij, party leader of the SGP, supported the Statement.¹⁴

The Nashville Statement is drafted in the literary genre of a confession of faith, with affirmations and denials. It affirms the created, unchangeable nature of manhood and womanhood. It condemns same-sex relations, transgender sex-reassignment surgery, the use of gender-terminology and feminist aspirations. The extensive yet little specific enumeration of references to Biblical texts are not part of the original text but were later added. In the USA, the publication reinforced polarized positions. While Owen Strachan, Baptist theologian and former president of the Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood, praised the Nashville Statement as “a moment of remarkable

12 Wayne Grudem is Professor of Theology and Biblical Studies at Phoenix Seminary, Phoenix, Arizona; with John Piper he edited the influential book *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood: A Response to Evangelical Feminism* (first edition 1991, second edition Wheaton: Crossway, 2006).

13 Because the Dutch version of the Nashville Statement was leaked prematurely, some signatories withdraw their support or said that they, while supporting the content, never intended to sign. The initiators soon removed the list from their website. The website *Geenstijl*, however, kept and published a copy of it: <https://www.geenstijl.nl/5145658/zo-en-nu-mogen-de-jankers-weer-whatallahboutisms-huilen/> (accessed April 15, 2021).

14 After publication, Van der Staaij declared that he was not intending to sign the Nashville Statement, but that he gave in an initial stage his support to translation into Dutch, because the Statement contained “the Biblical notions on marriage, family, and sexuality,” <https://nos.nl/artikel/2266443-van-der-staa-j-blijft-staan-voor-bijbelse-noties-in-anti-lhbt-pamflet.html>; <https://www.nporadio1.nl/achtergrond/13964-van-der-staa-j-handtekening-nashville-was-geen-bewuste-actie> (accessed April 15, 2021).

unanimity of the spirit,”¹⁵ queer Lutheran pastor Nadia Bolz-Weber scorned the manifest as “a document that doubles down on conservative Christian views on sexuality and gender”¹⁶ and causes tremendous harm to people. Together with her parishioners of the House for All Sinners & Saints in Denver, she responded to it with the parodying Denver Statement, a line-by-line rewriting of the Nashville Statement affirming the goodness of all sexual and gendered beings.¹⁷

The impact in the Netherlands, however, was in comparison much greater and affected more levels of society. For Dutch society, such a public manifestation of fundamentalist beliefs on gender and sexuality was new. Although there was some support for the Nashville Statement, it was much more criticized by religious leaders for its lack of pastoral concern towards LGBT people. Human rights organizations and non-religious politicians condemned its discriminatory contents. The Minister of Education, Culture, and Science, Ingrid van Engelshoven, spoke out against the Statement, as did the mayor of Amsterdam, Femke Halsema. The COC, advocacy organization for LGBT in the Netherlands, made an official complaint at the Office of the Prosecutor, who in March 2020 finally concluded that publication of the Nashville Statement was not liable to punishment. Many public buildings, including churches and universities, flew the rainbow flag as a sign of solidarity with LGBT people. These symbolic performances demonstrated how much moral positions on sexuality and gender have become *shibboleths* of the right faith, whether it be religious or secular.

Also in conservative Reformed church communities, many were unhappy or at least had mixed feelings about the Nashville Statement. Perhaps they could agree with its theological line of thinking, but the manner of articulation and the complete lack of pastoral concern were not appreciated. The fear was that such a manifest would only polarize instead of serving a more trustful and honest conversation on the delicate issues of gender and sexuality.¹⁸ As

15 Colin Smothers, “Owen Strachan: The Nashville Statement ‘is a moment of remarkable unanimity of spirit,’” website *Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*, September 1, 2017, <https://cbmw.org/2017/09/01/owen-strachan-the-nashville-statement-is-a-moment-of-remarkable-unanimity-of-spirit/> (accessed April 15, 2021).

16 Nadia Bolz-Weber, *Shameless: A Sexual Revolution* (London: Canterbury Press Norwich, 2019), 81–82.

17 The integral text of the Denver Statement is included in Bolz-Weber, *Shameless*, 94–97. A theological critique of the Nashville Statement also by Megan K. DeFranza, “Good News for Gender Minorities,” in *Understanding Transgender Identities: Four Views*, eds. James K. Beilby and Paul Rhodes Eddy (Grand Rapids: Baker Academics, 2019), 147–178.

18 See, for instance, the professors of the (Christian-Reformed) Theological University Apeldoorn, Arnold Huijgen and Maarten Kater, “Na bezinning door kerken pas visie op

a positive side effect, Christian media began to give the floor to LGBT people in traditional church communities, to hear their highly personal stories about how they negotiated their sexual orientation or gender identity with their Christian faith. In terms of the polarization model of Brands, these newspapers and broadcasting channels were playing the role of ‘bridge builders.’ Hearing and reading these stories of LGBT persons made many conservative Christians in the Netherlands more careful and reluctant to harsh condemnation of non-normative sexual and gender identities on biblical grounds, exactly the opposite of what ‘Nashville’ had intended. *Nolens volens* it became a measure for a beginning acceptance of homosexuality in conservative Protestant environments.¹⁹

3 The Global Neo-conservative Campaign for ‘Traditional Family Values’

‘Nashville’ has an interesting contradictory character. It is a public witness on sexuality and gender; however, it doesn’t address the wider society but very articulated “Christians who are faithful to the Bible.”²⁰ It is a testimony first of all for the in-group. Why then go so public with it?

To unravel this complexity, I will describe the historic emergence of the neo-conservative ‘traditional (family) values’ discourse as a new and in fact very modern public ideology, which at the same time provided churches with a discourse to demarcate their identity against that of secular society. For the specifics of the Dutch situation, it will be illuminating to analyze the role of parliamentarian Kees van der Staaij who signed the Nashville Statement. Supported by a constituency of conservative Reformed Christians, he plays his part in intensifying identity politics in regard to gender and sexuality, which may lead to further societal polarization.

Today’s ‘culture wars’ on (supposed) secular or religious values with regard to gender and sexuality trace back to the 1960s. A first indication was the

genderideologie” (Only after reflection by churches a view on gender ideology), *Reformatisch Dagblad*, December 28, 2018, revised January 17, 2019.

19 Matthijs D. Appelman and Ruard R. Ganzevoort, “Refo houdt zich steeds intensiever bezig met onderwerp homoseksualiteit” (Reformed are getting busy more and more with the topic of homosexuality), *Reformatisch Dagblad*, December 16, 2019, <https://www.rdn.nl/opinie/refo-houdt-zich-steeds-intensiever-bezig-met-onderwerp-homoseksualiteit-1.1617912> (accessed April 15, 2021).

20 See the Preamble of the Nashville Statement.

encyclical letter *Humanae Vitae* of Pope Paul VI in 1968.²¹ Only a few years after the modernizing attempt of the Second Vatican Council under the spiritual leadership of his predecessor John Paul XXIII, the new pope issued this document which put sexual morals at the core of the preoccupations of the Catholic Church. Both in Europe and the USA, contraception and abortion became the central issues of an ongoing assault by conservative and fundamentalist churches on secular modernity, later culminating in the battle against same-sex marriage. The debate on the nature of gender, family, and reproduction goes to the core of the conception of what a society is or should be. Whereas since the 1960s civil society in many parts of the world put gender and sexuality norms into question, the Vatican has focused more and more on themes of gender, family, and reproduction. At the earliest since the UN International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo in 1994, and the World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995, the Vatican started to develop a counter-strategy against 'gender ideology' as they labelled the enemy image.²² A recent document of the Congregation on Catholic Education defies gender ideology as "an ideology that is given the general name of 'gender theory', which denies the difference and reciprocity in nature of a man and a woman and envisages a society without sexual differences, thereby eliminating the anthropological basis of the family."²³

In the USA, white Evangelicals went ahead of the political-religious campaign for 'traditional family values.' In the 1970s and 1980s they used this rallying cry as they worked to stem the tide of social and political change caused by women's liberation, the civil rights movement, the sexual revolution, and the rise of global economy.²⁴ The opposition against reproductive

21 Encyclical Letter *Humanae Vitae*, http://www.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-vi_enc_25071968_humanae-vitae.html (accessed April 15, 2021); Roy, *Rethinking the Place of Religion*, 4; Maria Behrensen, Marianne Heimbach-Steins and Linda E. Hennig, "Einleitung," in *Gender—Nation—Religion: Ein internationaler Vergleich von Akteursstrategien und Diskursverflechtungen*, eds. Maria Behrensen a.o. (Frankfurt/New York: Campus Verlag, 2019), 7–24, 14–15.; Andreas Püttmann, "Geschlechterordnung und Familismus als Policy-Angebote des Rechtspopulismus und Autoritarismus für das katholische Milieu," in *Gender—Nation—Religion*, 51–80.

22 Behrensen a.o., "Einleitung," 12.

23 Document of the Congregation on Catholic Education, *Male and Female He Created Them: Towards a Path of Dialogue on the Question of Gender Theory in Education* (Vatican City, 2019), par. 2, http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccatheduc/documents/rc_con_ccatheduc_doc_20190202_maschio-e-femmina_en.pdf (accessed April 15, 2021).

24 Seth Dowland, *Family Values and the Rise of the Christian Right* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015), 11–12; Silas Morgan, "American Masculinity, Feminism, and the Politics of Fatherhood," in *Gender-Nation-Religion*, ed. Behrensen a.o., 101–123, 106.

rights of women, same-sex relations, sexual education programs, and social government programs such as health care, poverty assistance, and public housing were all seen as damaging to the American family. The campaign for the ‘traditional American family’ was motivated on social, political and theological grounds. The family was viewed as the foundation of God’s moral vision for a society built on and organized around biblical principles.²⁵ Two primary beliefs are at the core of the ‘traditional values’ narrative²⁶:

1. The belief that manhood and womanhood are a natural given, part of the created order.
2. The belief that lines of authority matter and must be observed in order for society to function well. The ‘traditional family’ becomes the model for all structures of authority in society and nation. Traditional values are always patriarchal values.

Theologically, it is anchored in a ‘headship theology’ that argues on the basis of key texts such as Gen. 2–3, 1 Cor. 11: 1–16 and Eph. 5: 22–33 that manhood and womanhood are complementary in the sense of a hierarchical role-order of leading and serving, and that the father/husband is assigned to be the head of the family in accordance to God’s order for humanity.²⁷ Masculinity and fatherhood receive primary theological significance, to undergird and legitimate their sociopolitical power and privilege.

So, from different confessional strains and political contexts, the religious neo-conservative movement for ‘traditional family values’ arose. It has gone global since, working through transnational pro-family organizations such as the Federation of Catholic Family Associations in Europe (FACFE)²⁸ and the International Organization for the Family (IOF)²⁹ with its influential annual World Congress of Families.³⁰ Strong and unlikely political alliances are built between the Vatican, American Evangelicals, the Russian Orthodox Church, African Indigenous Churches, and Islamic leaders to pursue a ‘traditional values’ and ‘anti-genderist’³¹ agenda in the domain of global politics and human rights.

25 Morgan, “American Masculinity,” 106–107.

26 Dowland, *Family Values*, 11.

27 Morgan, “American Masculinities,” 112–113; a clear example of ‘headship theology’ is the collection of essays edited by Wayne Grudem and John Piper, *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood: A Response to Evangelical Feminism*, see note 12.

28 <https://www.fafce.org> (accessed April 15, 2021).

29 <https://www.profam.org> (accessed April 15, 2021).

30 About the XIII World Congress of Families in Verona, 2019, see <https://wcfverona.org> (accessed April 15, 2021).

31 Roman Kuhar and David Paternotte (eds), *Anti-Gender Campaigns in Europe: Mobilizing against Equality* (Washington: Rowman and Littlefield, 2017); Sonja A. Strube, Rita

Increasingly, they and their spokespersons, with a prominent role for the Catholic German sociologist Gabriela Kuby, find themselves in discursive and activist intertwinement with populist and far right organizations, parties and groups.³²

4 The Campaign for ‘Traditional Family Values’ in the Netherlands

Turning to the Netherlands, we can situate the ‘Nashville’ campaign within this wider neo-conservative religious movement. The seven pastors, who took the initiative, were inspired by the narrative of ‘traditional family values’ that anchors in a ‘headship theology.’ They applied similar strategies of polarization, like creating an enemy image (e.g., ‘gender ideology’ or ‘gender delusion’),³³ and making the opponent suspicious by feeding conspiracy theories (e.g., ‘the influential homo-lobby’).³⁴ In the dynamics of polarization also groups on the other side started creating enemy images, like ‘hate-christians’ (‘haatgristenen’).³⁵

Perintvalvi, Rafaela Hemet, Miriam Metze and Cicek Sahbaz (eds), *Anti-Genderismus in Europa: Allianzen von Rechtspopulismus und religiösem Fundamentalismus. Mobilisierung—Vernetzung—Transformation* (Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag, 2020), Open Access: <https://www.transcript-verlag.de/pdfgen/html2pdf/create.php> (accessed April 15, 2021).

32 Gabriela Kuby’s book *The Global Sexual Revolution: The Destruction of Freedom in the Name of Freedom* (New York: LifeSite/Angelico Press, 2015; originally published in German in 2012) became a bestseller and was actively promoted both by Roman-Catholic bishops and new right/far right groups in Germany and elsewhere, see Sonja Angelika Strube, “Rechtspopulismus und konfessionelle Anti-Gender-Bewegung: Milieu-übergreifende Allianzen und rhetorische Strategien im deutschen Sprachraum,” in *Gender—Nation—Religion*, ed. Behrensen a.o., 25–49, 29. Kuby accepted the invitation to speak at the Kremlin-backed event “Large Family and the Future of Humanity,” an alternative conference that was organized instead of the planned World Congress of Family in Moscow, which faced cancellations because of Russia’s annexation of Crimea. Püttmann, “Geschlechterordnung und Familismus,” 61–63.

33 “Nashville initiator: De kerken zwegen bij nazi-ideologie, bij gender-ideologie gebeurt dat weer” (Nashville initiator: The churches were silent on Nazi ideology, with gender ideology it happens again), interview with Piet de Vries, lecturer at the Restored Reformed Seminary at vU University, *Algemeen Dagblad*, February 1, 2020, <https://www.ad.nl/binnenland/nashville-initiator-kerken-zwegen-bij-nazi-ideologie-bij-gender-ideologie-gebeurt-dat-weer-ac8ec6b3/> (accessed April 15, 2021).

34 “The day after’: ds. M. Klaassen blikt terug op Nashville” (“The day after’: Rev. M. Klaassen looks back on Nashville), *Reformatorisch Dagblad*, January 15, 2019, <https://cip.nl/71497-the-days-after-ds-m-klaassen-blikt-terug-op-nashville-ophef> (accessed April 15, 2021).

35 The term ‘haat-gristenen’ is an invention by the website *Geenstijl*, <https://www.geenstijl.nl> (accessed April 15, 2021).

At the same time, we cannot draw a straight line from the North-American neo-conservative religious movement to the Netherlands. Therefore, given the context, the Dutch neo-conservative movement had a too specific genesis, as Merijn Oudenampsen demonstrates in his illuminating study on the conservative revolution in the Netherlands.³⁶ We need to describe this process briefly, in order to understand the newness and impact of the ‘Nashville’ phenomenon in the Dutch context, and how it marks a new stage in the public debate on sexuality and gender.

The conservative backlash, already going on since the 1970s in the USA, reached the Netherlands only in the 1990s and the first decennium of the new century. Conservative-liberal politicians such as Frits Bolkestein, Pim Fortuyn, Geert Wilders, and Ayaan Hirsi Ali introduced the ideas of new-right Anglo-American thinkers (Bernard Lewis, Samuel Huntington, Daniel Bell, Roger Scruton, John Gray, Francis Fukuyama) in the Dutch political context.³⁷ For this introduction, a complex process of translation was required. This had to do with the particularity of the Dutch situation. The progressive values of the 1960s protest-movement (gender equality, reproductive rights, LGBT rights, individual freedom, and tolerance) had found a self-evident place in the Dutch society. Oudenampsen, following historian James Kennedy, points to the Dutch political culture with its typical accommodating attitude.³⁸ Ideologies and conflicts around ideologies are relatively absent. If there is a dominant political ideology, it is ‘organicism,’ understood as a doctrine that tends to conceive Dutch society as a differentiated, historically developing and organic entity. There is a stress on the inevitability of sociopolitical adaptations over time. From this accommodating attitude it can be explained that political elites in the Netherlands did not resist the progressive 1960s movement, like they did in the USA, but chose ‘to go with the flow’ and to incorporate certain elements in their own agenda. Neoconservative politicians in the Netherlands knew they would only be successful in creating sufficient support if they embraced the discourse of emancipation. They did it in a paradoxical way: on the one hand they presented themselves as defenders of ‘Western’ progressive values, such as women’s emancipation and sexual diversity, against the Islam; on the other hand, they pointed to the progressive ‘baby-boomers’ as the main

36 Merijn Oudenampsen, *De conservatieve revolutie: Een ideeëngeschiedenis van de Fortuyn-opstand* (The Conservative Revolution: A History of Ideas of the Fortuyn Rebellion) (Amsterdam: Merijn Oudenampsen en Nijmegen: Uitgeverij Vantilt, 2018). Based on his doctoral thesis *The Conservative Embrace of Values* (University of Amsterdam, 2018).

37 Oudenampsen, *De conservatieve revolutie*, 111–124.

38 Oudenampsen, *De conservatieve revolutie*, 10–15, 318–319; James Kennedy, “New Babylon and the Politics of Modernity,” *Sociologische gids* 44:5–6 (1997), 361–374.

culprits of all kinds of problems, from the failed integration of migrants to the erosion of national identity.

Angela McRobbie speaks in this regard about a ‘complex conservative backlash’ in Western-Europe and the UK, manifesting a less traditional conservative-Christian character than in the USA.³⁹ She adopts the term ‘conservative backlash’ from Susan Faludi, as the ‘coordinated conservative reaction to fight the achievements of feminism.’⁴⁰ She adds the adjective ‘complex’ because the conservative counter-movement in Western Europe does not straight-away oppose feminism or sexual diversity, but creates a new synthesis in which moderate forms of emancipation are incorporated. It does so in such a way that the larger agenda of feminism can be effectively put away as outdated and superfluous. McRobbie calls this complex backlash *postfeminism*. The emancipation of women and gays has been completed, according to the new right. The only challenge that remains is to defend those achievements against the threat of Islamization.

How shall we situate the politics of the SGP, as an important backbone of the ‘Nashville’ campaign, within this larger picture of neo-conservatism in the Netherlands? Conservative Reformed people in the Netherlands have their own political party, the SGP (Staatkundig Gereformeerde Partij).⁴¹ Since 1918, it is the political body of the ‘bevindelijk gereformeerden,’ a conservative movement within Dutch Calvinism, that emphasizes the necessity and experience of being born again in order to be saved, together with a literalist view of the Bible. Geographically these believers can be located on the Dutch Biblebelt. The movement embraces a strict conservative lifestyle and strongly opposes secularism. In the elections of 2017, the SGP retained its three seats in the Parliament (out of 150). Most signatories of the Nashville Statement belong to the constituency of the SGP, while the Evangelicals and Baptist who signed it may feel more at home in the other small Christian party, the ChristenUnie. The ChristenUnie however, immediately distanced itself publicly from ‘Nashville.’⁴²

39 Angela McRobbie, “Post-feminism and popular culture,” *Feminist Media Studies* 4:3 (1991), 255–264. See Oudenampsen, *De conservatieve revolutie*, 198–202.

40 Susan Faludi, *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against Women* (New York: Vintage, 1991).

41 Half of the membership is member of the ‘Gereformeerde Gemeenten,’ a quarter is member of another ‘bevindelijk gereformeerde’ church, and a quarter is a member of the ‘Gereformeerde Bond’ in the Protestant Church and the ‘Hersteld Hervormde Kerk.’

42 The leader of the Christen Unie, Gert-Jan Segers, declared on January 7, 2019: “I have not signed the Nashville Statement because I’m afraid that it doesn’t serve the conversation about homosexuality. The conversation about this topic is important, affects people, and should therefore—whatever your conviction is—be conducted in full respect and openness.” <https://www.christenunie.nl/blog/2019/01/07/Nashville> (accessed April 15, 2021).

The SGP opts for a more aggressive strategy, most likely because it finds itself in different waters. Right-wing populism sails alongside. The anti-Islam position of SGP, its attachment to law-and-order and the nation, and its outspoken nativism—being the belief that the territory of the nation should be primarily reserved to descendants of the own people—, brings the party close to the ideas of right populist parties. On the other hand, however, its theocratic principle—the belief that the nation is under God’s absolute sovereignty—is fairly incompatible with populism.⁴³ Notwithstanding this fact, many of the voters of the SGP feel attracted to the firm speeches and standpoints of right-wing populist leaders such as Geert Wilders (Party for Freedom, PVV) and Thierry Baudet (Forum for Democracy, FvD). Popular among nationalist populists is the expression of the ‘Judeo-Christian culture’ as the dominant culture (‘Leitkultur’) for the nation. In particular the young generation of SGP-voters seems to embrace this ‘culturalization’ of Christianity, as the belief that the Dutch cultural identity bears the stamp of Christianity.⁴⁴ Under this influence, a shift is taking place in the ideology of SGP, from confessional arguments to cultural arguments, e.g., when it comes to rejection of the place of Islam in society. Ernst van den Hemel points to the risk that this tendency of embracing religion for its cultural value may in the end place the party for difficult dilemma’s.⁴⁵ How to navigate between, on the one hand, what populist leaders praise as achievements of Dutch culture with its ‘Judeo-Christian roots,’ and what, on the other hand, is really far removed from the Reformed conservative beliefs, namely full gender equality and the acceptance of sexual and gender diversity? It leads the SGP into a splits position between culturalization and confessional identity. Party leader Kees van der Staaij is aware of the problems and risks. Therefore he insists on a sharp demarcation between Christian values and

43 See Simon Otjes and André Krouwel, “De SGP-kiezer: Wel radicaal en rechts maar niet radicaalrechts populistisch?” (The SGP voter: Radical and right-wing but not radical right-wing populist?), in *Theocratie en populisme: Staatkundig gereformeerden en de stem van het volk* (Theocracy and populism: Political reformed and the voice of the people), ed. Koos-jan de Jager (Apeldoorn: Labarum Academic, 2020), 179–201.

44 Ernst van den Hemel, “Korte rokjes tegen de Islam? De SGP en het boemerangeffect van geculturaliseerd christendom” (Short skirts against Islam? The SGP and the boomerang effect of culturalized Christianity), in *Theocratie en populisme*, 149–178. The notion ‘Judeo-Christian culture’ is a modern invention, in right-wing populism used to exclude those who are deemed not to subscribe to Western values, and applied particularly to Muslims, see Philip C. Almond, “Is there really such a thing as ‘Judeo-Christian Tradition?’” website *ABC Religion and Ethics*, February 14, 2019, <https://www.abc.net.au/religion/is-there-really-a-judeo-christian-tradition/10810554> (accessed April 15, 2021).

45 Van den Hemel, “Korte rokjes,” 214–219.

secular values.⁴⁶ His service record on extra-parliamentarian actions on issues of marriage, family, and reproduction attests to this.⁴⁷ In this context of contestation, I understand Van der Staaij's support for the Nashville Statement also as a deliberate performative act, prompted by the need to publicly establish and affirm a distinct identity marker of 'Christian values,' in a time where the nativist and culturalizing tendencies in his own party are blurring the boundaries with secular culture.

However, we could ask: doesn't Van der Staaij himself fall into the trap of a culturalization of religion? In supporting this import product from the Christian right in the USA, he in fact embraces a highly cultural discourse of 'Christian identity' marked by moral positions on gender and sexuality. Defense of 'traditional values' is undertaken from a perceived 'Christian identity' which presents itself more as a cultural marker than as a religious marker.⁴⁸ This is really not far away from how the radical-right adhere to the 'Judeo-Christian' tradition with its assumed stabilizing values of family, the hierarchical gender order, pro-life policies, the idea of ethnic purity, and the nation. The nation is threatened and weakened, and must defend itself against the invasion of Islam. In particular Baudet from the Forum for Democracy actively adopts elements of traditional values rhetoric. Van der Staaij's campaign for Christian family values does not so much distinguish him from secular right parties, but brings him closer to these groups.

Sander Rietveld, who investigated the entanglement of the radical-right and orthodox Christianity in the Netherlands, points to an additional reason why Christian conservatives tend to support right-wing populism.⁴⁹ It is the experience of loss and a certain sense of victimhood among orthodox Reformed Christians. They have become a minority in a deeply secularized society. They realize that it is impossible to impose their sacred values on the rest; what remains of the theocratic ideal of a Christian nation ruled by God's authority

46 Van den Hemel, "Korte rokjes," 225.

47 Van der Staaij joined the *March for Life* in 2011. In 2015, he launched a large-scale campaign against adultery, agitated by billboards of the dating site Second Love along the highway. He placed billboards with the text "Adultery. The family game with only losers." Two years later, on Valentine's Day, he placed a full-page message of love in major Dutch newspapers, under the headline "Choose One Another," in which he called for fidelity in love relationships. See De Jager (ed.), *Theocratie en populisme*, 204, 132–233.

48 Roy, *Rethinking the Place of Religion*, 3.

49 Sander Rietveld, *Nieuwe kruisvaarders: De Heilige Alliantie tussen orthodoxe christenen en radicaal-rechtse populistten* (New Crusaders: The Holy Alliance between orthodox Christians and radical-right populists), (Amsterdam: Prometheus, 2021).

is a kind of second-best option: to ally with the ‘cultural Christians’ of the right populist parties in order to at least bring a Christian glow over the society.

Furthermore, there is also the internal threat. Defense against the secular society and against more liberal parts of Christianity is required to hold back the growing plurality and fragmentation in the own faith community when it comes to moral attitudes and practices with regard to sexuality and gender. Orthodox Reformed churches in the Netherlands, and many Evangelical churches as well, are facing the empirical reality of shifting sexual and gender mores within their communities, in particular among the young generations (e.g., having sex before marriage, use of contraceptives, political agency of women, and so on).⁵⁰ Above all, unity must be preserved. The manifest of ‘Nashville’ marks a watershed. With some exaggeration we can say that sexual ethics, over against dogmatic faith issues, have become the emblem of ecclesiastical and political-religious cohesion.

5 Union with Christ: Moving beyond Identity Politics?

We see the weaknesses and traps of identity discourses, on different levels. Posing Christian identity and values *against* secular identity and values in the realm of sexuality can make one fall into the trap of culturalization of religion. Posing liberal sexual identity, as the freedom to celebrate sexual diversity, *against* conservative religion can make one fall into the trap of absolutizing sexuality as the way to human fulfillment.⁵¹ Such ‘common enemy’ identity politics reinforces the polarization.⁵²

Theologians have started working on methods and approaches to move beyond identity politics in matters of gender and sexuality. As queer theologian Marco Derks rightfully states: the emphasis on the concept of identity can be

⁵⁰ Ad de Bruijne, “Culture Wars About Sexuality: A Theological Proposal for Dialogue,” in *Public Discourses About Homosexuality and Religion in Europe and Beyond*, 105–124, 109–110.

⁵¹ Cf. Mark Jordan: “Outside Christian churches, rightly ordered sexuality promises present salvation. Inside many churches, right words about sexuality now determine your eternal salvation.” In Mark Jordan, “The Return of Religion during the Reign of Sexuality,” in *Feminism, Sexuality and the Return of Religion*, eds. Linda Martín Alcoff and John D. Caputo (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2011), 39–54, 41.

⁵² Francis Fukuyama, *Identity: The Demand for Dignity and the Politics of Resentment* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2018); Kwame Anthony Appiah, *The Lies That Bind: Rethinking Identity* (New York: Liveright, 2018); Amartya Sen, *Identity and Violence: The Illusion of Destiny* (New York: W.W. Norton Company, 2007); Mark Lilla, *The Once and Future Liberal: After Identity Politics* (New York: Harper, 2017).

found both in secular and theological pro-LGBT discourse and in conservative Christian discourse.⁵³ In the dominant script of LGBT discourse, sexual identity is viewed as a core aspect of a person's identity that needs to be discovered, developed, cultivated and profiled. The freedom of 'being yourself' is understood as a moral and, by many Christian gays, also a religious calling. In this, they affirm the modernist view of sexuality as a key characteristic of a person's identity. Christian ethicist Ad de Bruijne has underlined that this late modern discourse on sexual identity resonates with the Christian doctrine of creation and can be viewed as its desacralized result: "Sexuality too has become valued as just a phenomenon within God's good creation."⁵⁴

Turning to today's conservative Christian narrative—be it the Nashville Statement or the above quoted recent Vatican document—, we notice that it is not that all different from the 'being yourself' homosexuality script, since it also relies on the modern concept of sexuality as the core of a person's identity. The difference is that Christian conservatives bind the sexual identity of the person to his/her biological sex, consider genitals to be leading for the process of self-expression, and prioritize procreative sex above non-procreative sex.

A naturalist interpretation of the creation narratives Gen 1 and 2 is leading here, yet Elizabeth Stuart also points to a soteriological undercurrent in this view of sexuality. Stuart analyzes how in twentieth-century theology maleness and femaleness have become theological categories and how sexuality has become caught up in the drama of salvation. Theologies of marriage and sexuality from Karl Barth to Hans Urs von Balthasar express that human beings only become truly human when men and women are in relationship to each other. In this view, heterosexuality is propelled to the heart of the Christian project.⁵⁵

Recently, an alternative discourse has been developed. For some Dutch orthodox Protestant theologians, among them also who identify as gay, grounding sexual ethics in the doctrine of creation in this static form does not satisfy anymore. They propose an approach that focuses on 'identity in Christ.' The argument goes that our identity lies primarily in Christ, not in sexual feelings or experiences. Biblical scholar Wolter Rose argues, that for a Christian a homosexual identity is always subordinated to a religious identity 'in Christ.' He writes, that "choosing a gay script means organizing all aspects of who you

53 Derks, *Constructions of Homosexuality*, 80.

54 De Bruijne, "Culture Wars About Sexuality," 112.

55 Cf. Elizabeth Stuart, "The Theological Study of Sexuality," in *The Oxford Handbook of Theology, Sexuality, and Gender*, 18–31, 21.

are around your homosexual orientation. You are primarily gay.”⁵⁶ Instead, he emphasizes that our primary identity is ‘in Christ.’ To live according to the ‘being in Christ’ script does not mean that one’s homosexual orientation is not important anymore.⁵⁷ Yet, it is relativized and subordinated as a secondary identity. Rose prefers to speak of a ‘together with Christ’ script (cf. Rom 8:17), and of love of or friendship with Christ.⁵⁸ In practice, for Rose, it leads to the choice of celibacy, while keeping open one self to committed friendship relations.

Positive aspects of the identity ‘in Christ’ or ‘with Christ’ approaches are that they break away from the naturalistic reasoning of creation-based theologies of sexuality. This alternative discourse has a decisive eschatological orientation, “it has not yet been revealed what we will be” (1 John 3: 2), and even corresponds to some extent with the queer approach. The queer approach aims to liberate erotic desires from normative sexual identities and a binary gender system.⁵⁹ Christian identity, as constituted in baptism, is profoundly eschatological, relativizes all other identities, and deprives the categories of sexuality and gender from their ultimate meaning. It may free us to the ‘affections of the flesh’ and to co-creating in and with the divine Spirit new forms of community and relationship, beyond what historic Christianity has deemed ‘decent.’⁶⁰ However, this is not the direction which Rose and fellow-thinkers take. Limiting the choice of life-style to either heterosexual marriage or celibacy (with a gnostic-like contempt of the desires of the flesh) is far away from the queer perspective of doing justice to a multiplicity of sexual and gendered desires.

It should make us cautious how the ‘identity in Christ’ or ‘unio mystica cum Christo’ script has quickly gained ground in evangelical and orthodox Protestant theologies of sexuality in the USA, from where it influences European theology. A prominent propagandist and inspirator for the ‘union with Christ’ script is the much sought-after speaker Rosaria Butterfield,⁶¹ who used to

56 Wolter Rose, “We hebben elkaar wat te vertellen” (We have something to tell each other), in *Open en kwetsbaar: Christelijk debat over homoseksualiteit* (Open and vulnerable: Christian debate on homosexuality), ed. Ad de Bruijne (Barneveld: De Vuurbaak, 2012), 115–122, 118.

57 Rose, “We hebben elkaar wat te vertellen,” 120.

58 Rose, “We hebben elkaar wat te vertellen,” 117.

59 Stuart, “The Theological Study of Sexuality,” 24–27; Linn Marie Tondstad, *Queer Theology* (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2018).

60 See the works on theology of the flesh by Marcella Althaus-Reid, Mayra Rivera, Gerard Loughlin, Graham Ward, Mark Jordan and others.

61 Rosaria Champagne Butterfield, *The Secret Thoughts of an Unlikely Convert: An English Professor’s Journey into the Christian Faith* (Pittsburgh: Crown and Covenant Publications, 2012); *Openness Unhindered: Further Thoughts of an Unlikely Convert on Sexual Identity*

identify as a lesbian activist, converted to Christianity, became a member of the Reformed Presbyterian Church, decided “to submit all sexual desires to Christ” and now is in a heterosexual marriage and mother of a teenager son. In her view, being in ‘union with Christ’ competes fundamentally with a sexual identity as gay or lesbian. “There is no middle ground” between ‘union with Christ’ and ‘homosexual desires.’ The latter are ‘fallen desires’ because they do not respect the ‘nature of the garden’ (of Eden). Sexual identity is a false secular concept, according to Butterfield. Any compromise here would be equal to ‘surrender.’ Only in biblical marriage based on ontological and essential maleness and femaleness can human sexuality glorify God.

Butterfield’s theology shows unequivocally how a ‘union with Christ’ script can go together with full condemnation of non-heterosexual orientations and desires. From this background, it is no surprise that Butterfield signed the Nashville Statement and affirms it as a matter of *status confessionis*: “By God through the merit and power of Jesus Christ, here I stand.”⁶²

The ‘unio mystica cum Christo’ script thus can go in various directions when it comes to ethical implications for a person’s lifestyle. For Butterfield, being ‘in Christ’ and being ‘homosexual’ or living same sex desires are mutually excluding. For Rose, being ‘with Christ’ and being in relationship with someone from the same sex can go together as long as the friendship remains platonic. For Wim van Vlastuin (see his contribution in this volume),⁶³ having our identity in Christ relativizes all other identities and relieves us from the need to have our own identity performed in this life. Potentially, this may be a critical notion. However, he simultaneously argues that in apostle Paul’s view there is an indissoluble relation between the holiness of marriage, exclusively understood as between a husband and a wife, and ‘identity in Christ.’⁶⁴ Because of this privileging of heterosexuality in van Vlastuin’s reasoning here and elsewhere,⁶⁵

and Union with Christ (Pittsburgh: Crown and Covenant Publications, 2015); “Sexual Identity and Union with Christ,” lecture at Geneva College, April 21, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0Esj9Hh59uw> (accessed April 15, 2021).

62 Rosaria Butterfield, “Why I Signed the Nashville Statement,” website *Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*, August 31, 2017, <https://cbmw.org/2017/08/31/rosaria-butterfield-why-i-signed-the-nashville-statement/> (accessed April 15, 2021).

63 Wim van Vlastuin, “Retrieving the Concept of *Unio Mystica cum Christo* for the Application to Sexuality in a Pluralistic Postmodern Culture,” 68–88.

64 “Because marriage refers to our identity in Christ as the body that is determined by Christ as the head, the holiness of marriage is central in the apostle’s treatment of sexual life.” Van Vlastuin, “Retrieving the Concept,” 78.

65 In a lecture at a study day of the platform *Bijbels Beraad M/V* (Biblical Council on Manhood/Womanhood), which is the continuation of the Nashville-group in the Netherlands, Van Vlastuin emphasized that the Bible begins with the order of (heterosexual) marriage and

there remains no proper place for equally acknowledging same-sex sexualities as desires that may be lived out. Referring to the pneumatological dimension of being in Christ, he points to “huge implications for our sexuality.”⁶⁶ Here in Reformed theology, he writes, we enter the field of sanctification, of the Spirit’s transformation of human life. How will it look like? The next sentence reveals the author’s unsuccessfully hidden ‘erotic injustice’⁶⁷ towards same-sex sexualities: “Without suggesting that sexual identities have to be changed and can ‘easily’ be changed, we cannot deny the effect of the spiritual union with Christ on sexual desires and on our character.” Although he hastens to explain that this transformative effect will apply equally to heterosexuals and homosexuals, it becomes clear that the impact for the latter is far more drastic: it shall lead to a denial of the full realization of their sexualities.

The three interpretations of Butterfield, Rose, and van Vlastuin have in common that they all construct an identity ‘in Christ’ that is disconnected from the body’s desires or even opposed to them.⁶⁸ The risk is evident. If this *theological* notion of identity ‘in Christ’ conflates with the *sociological* notion of Christian identity, we see how such theological discourse may fuel a Christian identity politics, of which ‘Nashville’ was a sad low.⁶⁹

6 Notions for a Theology of Sexuality beyond Identity Politics

In this final section, I want to explore three possible approaches that may lead beyond the polarization of sexual identity politics. First, I affiliate with the proposal of Mark Jordan,⁷⁰ Andy Buechel,⁷¹ and Marco Derks⁷² to speak

ends with the wedding of the Lamb. Therefore, he stated, heterosexual marriage is inextricably related to Christology. Lecture “Wat is waarheid?” (What is Truth?), website *Bijbels Beraad M/V*, September 2020, <https://www.bijbelsberaadmv.nl/2021/02/15/luister-lezing-prof-dr-van-vlastuin-tijdens-besloten-studiedag/> (accessed April 15, 2021).

66 Van Vlastuin, “Retrieving the Concept,” 83.

67 From the essay of Gayle Rubin, “Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality,” in *Pleasure and Danger*, ed. Carole Vance (Routledge and Paul Kegan, 1984); reprinted in *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, eds. Henry Abelove, Michele Aina Barale and David M. Halperin (New York: Routledge, 1994).

68 Compare Derks, *Constructions of Homosexuality*, 92.

69 Compare Derks, *Constructions of Homosexuality*, 93.

70 Jordan, “The Return of Religion,” 52–54.

71 Andy Buechel, *That We Might Become God: The Queerness of Creedal Christianity* (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2015).

72 Derks, *Constructions of Homosexuality*, 77–94.

of ‘sacramental characters’ instead of ‘sexual identities’ and ‘identity in Christ.’ Second, I believe that the notion of the ‘broken middle’ of philosopher Gillian Rose offers creative space to dwell in, and protects against premature theological ‘healing’ in unfruitful identity positions. And third, I would like to derive from these theoretical concepts some core spiritual values for a conversational, non-violent attitude in matters of divergent theological views and beliefs on sexuality.

6.1 *Gesturing towards a Sacramental Character*

Derks suggests to work towards “a better *theological* understanding” of the meaning of ‘identity in Christ.’⁷³ Therefore, we should better avoid the term ‘identity’ and follow the queer approach of Jordan and Buechel to speak of a ‘sacramental character’ that is inaugurated by baptism. A sacramental character, according to the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, is an indelible spiritual ‘seal’ or ‘mark’ by which the baptized person is configured to Christ.⁷⁴ This classic theological concept is retrieved by Jordan when he radicalizes the queer approach. Sacramental characters are not ‘identities’: “Absent a legal code”⁷⁵ Christian sexual ethics has to derive its principles from mimetic, unstable characters rather than regulations. These characters are imitated from biblical narratives and the rich lives of saints, beyond good and bad; they are performed and mediated through rites and liturgies. It renders them a complex temporality that cannot be captured by any identity. For Jordan, there is not a single ‘Christian identity,’ but a multiplicity of sacramental characters. He sees them close to drag or camp. He claims that Christianity remains “a repository of archaic, transgressive characters of desire and gender.”⁷⁶ They challenge and

73 Derks, *Constructions of Homosexuality*, 89.

74 *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1993, par. 1121: “The three sacraments of Baptism, Confirmation, and Holy Orders confer, in addition to grace, a sacramental *character* or ‘seal’ by which the Christian shares in Christ’s priesthood and is made a member of the Church according to different states and functions. This configuration to Christ and to the Church, brought about by the Spirit, is indelible, it remains forever in the Christian as a positive disposition for grace, a promise and guarantee of divine protection, and as a vocation to divine worship and to the service of the Church. Therefore these sacraments can never be repeated.” https://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/_INDEX (accessed April 15, 2021).

75 Jordan, “The Return of Religion,” 52.

76 From Derks, *Constructions of Homosexuality*, 91, reference to Mark Jordan, *Recruiting Young Love: How Christians Talk about Homosexuality* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2011).

resist the modern regime of sexuality, which is a regime of identities, and make an openness to the unspeakable erotic.

I am sympathetic with this approach. In a creative and integrative way, it avoids the pitfalls of adopting identity politics in a Christian jacket, be it of the conservative or progressive kind. I would like to bring together the concept of ‘sacramental character’ with the ‘new asceticism’ approach to sexuality as proposed by Sarah Coakley.⁷⁷ She also strives to move theologically beyond the polarized identity-positions in the sexuality and gender debates. For Coakley, sexuality is deeply connected to spiritual reality, such as the contemplative love for God or even God’s own innertrinitarian desires. She wants to address the issues of sexuality and gender more profoundly than in the current debates. Her approach is one of re-enchantment of sexuality and of liberating gender and sexual identities from false desires to dominate and control, by contemplatively drawing these realities in the light of God as source and purpose of human desires. The ‘new asceticism’ she proposes aims at intensification, transformation, and purification of desire, not at extinction of it, and without privileging heterosexual desires. Authentic eros is rooted in God. Trinitarian desire energizes reality. Our erotic desire will reflect and embody God’s desire, by not wanting to possess, own or control someone, nor simply to create pleasures for ourselves, but by wanting our bodies and their activities to bring joy to someone other than ourselves. Rowan Williams calls this ‘the body’s grace,’ since desiring and being desired by another person helps us to understand what it is to desire and be desired by God.⁷⁸

6.2 *Attending to the Broken Middle*

As another helpful notion, I consider Gillian Rose’s socio-philosophical concept of the ‘broken middle.’ Gillian Rose, née Stone (1947–1995), was a philosopher, social theorist, and Jewish convert to Christian religion. In her highly original work she offers a language for the co-belonging of religion and politics, and the secular and the sacred. She developed a novel account to faith, inspired by her reading of Hegel and Kierkegaard, and the Jewish emphasis on observation of the law. She opted for a secular faith, as a mode of social practice. Faith is a practice: it is the practice of continuing to grapple with the world, realizing that the world is, and always will be, uncertain. Yet, in every

77 Sarah Coakley, *God, Sexuality and the Self: An ‘Essay on the Trinity’* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013); *The New Asceticism: Sexuality, Gender and the Quest for God* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015).

78 Rowan Williams, “The Body’s Grace,” in *Theology and Sexuality: Classic and Contemporary Readings*, ed. Eugene F. Rogers (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), 309–321.

moment, we are called to act. In her memoir *Love's Work* (1995) she impressively testifies to it in a personal voice.

I believe that Gillian Rose's idea of 'attending to the broken middle' can be made fertile in our theological search to move beyond the polarizing dynamics of the sexuality debate. She develops the notion of the broken middle in the context of understanding the strained relationship between Judaism and Christianity, and between theology and philosophy. It is a concept with several layers. Important in the background is her re-interpretation of Hegel. She reads Hegel's philosophy not as about synthesizing oppositions but rather about dwelling in the contradictions. On the one hand, the 'broken middle' expresses the epistemological condition, how thinking the absolute is rooted in the actuality of experience, in the risk of asserting oneself in the 'broken middle' and at the same time having an awareness of it that actually manifests: thinking the absolute is experienced both as dichotomy and as beyond dichotomy. On the other hand, the 'broken middle' can be read as a twentieth-century version of Kierkegaard's 'suspense of the ethical.'⁷⁹ It refers us to the utterly mundane, everyday experience of living amidst social realities of ambiguity and contradiction, in which we have to act as if there is no law. There is a law, yet acting as a free person never depends on law only.

In this actual life, we experience a tension between, as Gillian Rose puts it metaphorically, the city of New Jerusalem and the city of Old Athens.⁸⁰ The one refers to a love-based community ideal, the second to a law-based ideal. In none of these cities the human being lives. She inhabits a third city, that of ordinary life. There in the 'broken middle' between love and law, between the aspirations of love and posited social norms, the human being negotiates life. This condition raises anxiety. Anxiety belongs to true freedom. A faithful person, and we may look at Abraham, experiences anxiety. She realizes that all actions are continually implicated in violence and yet she perseveres in acting, in putting herself at risk in any given social or political act, in the commitment "to stay in the fray, in the revel of ideas and risk" that is living.⁸¹ Faith is needed when the law is suspended. Faith is needed all of the time because navigating

79 Part One of Gillian Rose, *The Broken Middle* (Hoboken: John Wiley and Sons, 1992), 3–114; Gregory David Parry, *The 'Void' in Simone Weil and the 'Broken Middle' in Gillian Rose: The Genesis of the Search for Salvation* (Doctoral thesis Durham University, 2006), 249–258, <http://etheses.dur.ac.uk/1300/> (accessed April 15, 2021).

80 Rose, *The Broken Middle*, 277–295; see Parry, *The 'Void'*, 259–289; Anna Rowlands in a lecture about Gillian Rose on YouTube, *St. Johns Timeline*, 4 July, 2018. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8hgXmNORFw> (accessed April 15, 2021).

81 Gillian Rose, *Love's Work* (London: Chatto and Windus Limited, 1995), 135.

social norms with excellence always involves anxiety. Failure is inextricably part of this faithful work of love.

Gillian Rose criticizes most political theologies, because they run into the void and try to mend the broken middle. They provide holistic solutions, and want to drive us closer to a world of 'holy middles' by replacing Old Athens by New Jerusalem.⁸² But the broken middle cannot be mended and should not be evaded. Sacralization is a way of evading. Instead, theology needs to attend to the broken middle, dwell in its ambiguity and contradictions, take the risk of negotiating difference or otherness in any given order.⁸³

What could the notion of 'attending to the broken middle' possibly contribute to a theology of sexuality that resists polarizing tendencies? A theology of the broken middle is first and foremost aware of complexities and contradictions of the lived life. These complexities are most intimately experienced in our sexual desires and relationships, in a mixture of pleasure and pain, surrender and withdrawal, hope and disappointment, violence and tenderness, power and love, might and grace. A theology of the broken middle is an existential theology. It does neither dogmatically hold to concepts, nor to biblical 'truths' on sexuality and gender, but attends to living persons who freely yet anxiously are navigating their lives between love and social norms. A theology of the broken middle acknowledges that social norms are not rigid and static. In moments of crisis, social norms are suspended. Examples of such moments of suspension, besides Abrahams' sacrifice, are for Gillian Rose crises of illness, bereavement, separation from a loved one, or natural disasters.⁸⁴ We can add: also moments in which our experienced sexualities and genders make us extremely vulnerable to ourselves and to the social world we live in, and make us honestly question the moral and religious norms we live by. Faithful living then means whole-heartedly participating, indeed as a sacramental character, in the practice of testing norms against reality, always willing to revise the concepts, energized by a greater love and acceptance.

For a Christian faith community, that centers its faith on the crucified and risen Christ, attending to the broken middle should almost be a naturally given.⁸⁵ A church pre-eminently would be able to accept the paradox of the

82 Rose, *The Broken Middle*, 272–282; Parry, *The 'void'*, 261. Rose criticizes for instance John Milbank's political theology, for it mends the middle with holiness without examination of its brokenness.

83 Parry, *The 'void'*, 259.

84 Gillian Rose, *Love's Work*, 98. See also Vincent Lloyd, "The Secular Faith of Gillian Rose," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 36:4 (2008), 683–705.

85 This idea is elaborated by Anderson H. M. Jeremiah, "Dalit Christians in India: Reflections from the 'Broken Middle,'" *Studies in World Christianity* 17:3 (2011), 258–274.

broken middle as a creative paradigm for building community through an open conversation, without suppressing any internal theological conflict. Attending to the broken middle holds difference and reconciliation together. It can never go with identity politics which in fact evades the broken middle.

7 Conclusion

As Andrew Shranks notes:

Thus the church of the broken middle would be one that was essentially dedicated to conversational openness of every kind. Its worship would be a celebration of conversational openness, as the will of God; its whole prayer life would be a cultivation of the virtues that make for good conversation.⁸⁶

I envision the church of the broken middle as a church where conversation is rooted in the transformative love of God that works from below, from the broken and wounded middle. The conversation seeks to engage people of good will everywhere in a transformative journey grounded in love, which is the foundation of justice and peace. It offers companionship to those who join the pilgrimage by celebrating the gifts of every individual, visiting the wounds, and transforming the injustices.⁸⁷ Honoring the worth and dignity of every person is a hallmark of the church's conversations. In these conversations, personal stories in their very concreteness and endless ambiguity are carefully listened to and begin to defuse tensions and conflicts that were perpetuated by ideological contestation.

My analysis of the polarized debate on the Nashville Statement in the Netherlands has shown that framing the contesting positions in terms of 'identity' will not advance the conversation. The inclination of conservative Reformed groups, both in politics and in the church, to respond to secularizing threats by increasingly marking their Christian identity with clear-cut and unnegotiable views of gender and sexuality, may seem to be a full religious

86 Andrew Shranks, *Against Innocence: Gillian Rose's Reception and Gift of Faith* (London: SCM Press, 2008), 162.

87 These are the dimensions of the Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace process to which the World Council of Churches invites its member churches and all people of good will. See WCC Central Committee, *An Invitation to the Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace*, July 8, 2014, Geneva. <https://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/central-committee/geneva-2014/an-invitation-to-the-pilgrimage-of-justice-and-peace> (accessed April 15, 2021).

response but actually brings them close to a present-day form of cultural Christianity, in fact a form of civil religion. This civil religion is based on the defense of ‘traditional (family) values’. Relatively late it has also gained a foothold in the Netherlands. In the discourse of right-wing populist parties, the concept of a ‘Judeo-Christian civilization’ is strategically adopted and interwoven with a nationalist, authoritarian, and ethnocentric narrative, in which anti-genderism and anti-LGBTI rhetoric play a key role as mobilizing tools. At first sight, the move by some theologians towards a higher ‘identity in Christ’ brings in a potentially critical notion. However, in the elaboration heterosexuality functions as an implicit theological norm and the critical potential gets lost. My proposal is to open up and advance the debate by theologically opting for the notions of ‘sacramental character’ and ‘new asceticism’—without assuming any heterosexual privilege—, and to embrace the concept of the broken middle.

A church attending to the broken middle gracefully offers space to all kinds of sacramental characters, grateful and proud of their bodies and human needs such as love and sexuality, celebrating the gifts of creation, giving thanks to the Creator and Redeemer of all, and worshipping in a freedom that is beyond words. Between the city of Old Athens and the city of New Jerusalem, the church of Jesus Christ may live and breathe as a learning community on a transformative journey, dwelling with forbearance and hope in the broken middle. It may provide a place where people feel safe to share about their gendered experiences and human sexuality in the earthly brokenness of glory and shame, of fleshly vulnerability and divine exaltation, of feeling safe and being at risk. “To live, to love, is to be failed, to forgive, to have failed, to be forgiven, for ever and ever.”⁸⁸

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88 Gillian Rose, *Love’s Work*, 98.

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