

Children of God: Exploring URCSA's Catechetical Sexual Ethic

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Abstract

Human sexuality has been on the agenda of the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa (URCSA's) General Synod since at least 2005. Since then, at each respective General Synod, the discussion has been set forth to theologise about the lives of members who are LGBTIQ+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, queer and other sexual minorities). Yet, throughout this time no attention has been afforded to the denomination's catechesis, specifically its sexual ethic. This essay, then, attempts to contribute to the present dialogue on human sexuality with a focus on catechesis, or faith formation. It does so by following a queer theological hermeneutic, informed by the cultural criticism tradition in the form of queer theory. In order to investigate the sexual ethic at work in URCSA, the primary text engaged is its catechetical literature, *Children of God*. The essay, as such, attempts to note how URCSA has constructed its sexual ethic as heteronormative; and therefore, against all other sexual orientations. In order to do this, the essay probes three questions. First, it questions the existence and identity of URCSA. Second, it questions how a queering of catechesis may be done and what value it may contribute to the denomination. Third, it asks the question: *quo vadis*, where to URCSA? By asking this question, an attempt is made to qualify what it is that URCSA may need in queering its catechesis. Still, it is important to note that this reflection is much informed by the author's experience of the denomination as a gay man.

Keywords: Queer theology; Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa (URCSA); catechesis; Reformed Church



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Introduction

The celebration of the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa (URCSA) offers the denomination an opportunity for critical reflection. The focus of this essay is the historical development of the sexual ethic at work in the ecclesial life of URCSA. It sets out to query (and queer) the denomination's conception of sexuality, by interrogating its discursive power and potential. Throughout this essay, a queer theological hermeneutic is used to wrestle and grapple with the subject matter.

This article is divided into three sections. First, it poses questions about URCSA. As such, it will briefly discuss the possible challenges faced by the denomination; its sexuality discussion; and its catechesis on sexuality. Second, it considers the potential which queer theology offers as a hermeneutical orientation; further, discussing key concepts of assistance in the present dialogue. Third, a possible pedagogical and catechetical route is considered as an answer to the question, *quo vadis* (where to).

Human sexuality was placed on the agenda of URCSA's General Synod (GS) in 2005; when it decided to embrace those who are LGBTIQ+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, queer, and sexual orientations that are not straight). While recognising the differences in opinion, it also commissioned a task-team to prepare a report for the succeeding General Synod (*Report on Homosexuality to the General Synod of the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa* 2008, 1). By 2008, the General Synod (GS) had received the report—not without contention—but made no real change in its policy. At the succeeding GS in 2012, a similar impasse was maintained; the decision of 2005 remained the guiding principle for the denomination. At the 2016 GS a process position was adopted (recognising both the conservative and progressive positions), which called for congregations, presbyteries and regional synods to engage the subject matter in order to move toward a decision at the succeeding GS to be held in 2020. This, then, is the brief history of the denomination's sexuality discussion, which is the context in which this essay is situated.

With this in mind, it is essential to consider the role that catechesis plays in URCSA, for it informs this discussion. Since 1652, with the arrival of Dutch settlers, the Heidelberg Catechism has had an impact on the South African religious life. Van Tonder (2014, 212) notes: "In the early days of South Africa's Reformed history, the Heidelberg Catechism was imbedded [sic] in daily life." Any consideration of catechesis in the Reformed tradition must note the impact of this sixteenth-century German catechism, not least in South Africa. Fundamentally, Van Tonder (2014, 227) rightly captures the scope of the Heidelberg Catechism's influence, stating: "It really is a document with (for some) a praiseworthy theological structure that has been widely preached and taught in the church, but it is only ideally a source of theological origin or direction, and constitutive of the true church." Along with John Calvin's Geneva Catechism (1545), the Heidelberg Catechism is important for Reformed historical catechetical reflection—even in our day.

This discussion may also be further stimulated by noting URCSA's church order. Following the General Synodical Regulation 33(2); catechesis is comprised of a focus on Scripture, the confessional basis, church history, and a consideration of contemporary life (Carelse 2014, 82). Moreover, the catechetical curriculum must be informed by the Heidelberg Catechism. However, a cursory analysis of URCSA's catechetical material proves that the Heidelberg Catechism does not enjoy the attention that the church order stipulates.

Following the insights of queer theology, it is perhaps helpful to introduce the subject matter with an anecdote rooted in my own experience. In 2011, I came out as gay (at the time in confirmation class); in time I would meet with a minister of my congregation for pastoral care. Knowing I would pursue theological studies, I had at the time internalised URCSA's *Report on Homosexuality* prior to the pastoral care session. Unsurprisingly, the minister at the time held the position that being LGBTIQ+ was sinful.

I am intentional about introducing the subject matter with this anecdote. While it is deeply personal (about my particular experience), still, I think it lays bare some general experiences. Here a few observations are noteworthy. First, it was clear that the minister had not engaged the *GS Report on Homosexuality*. I contend his failure is more general than we would like to admit; in the present sexuality discussion, it is quite clear that ministers have not engaged it. Second, the general and regional synods had failed the minister to assist him with the necessary resources to offer pastoral support for those who are LGBTIQ+. Third, queer theologising prioritises the recognition of positionality. That is, theologians who follow this practice make concerted efforts to uncover the many ways in which their identity informs their theological reflection.

Questioning URCSA

It may be helpful to pose questions about URCSA by considering various challenges faced by the denomination today. One such challenge the denomination faces is an identity crisis. Since 1994, URCSA has prided itself with the notion that it is a black church (informed by a black liberation theology); quite simply, it is not. In a very real sense, the denomination has proven itself to be too immersed in the logic of coloniality. As such, it is unable to imagine a postcolonial ecclesiology. Reflecting on the challenge of identity, Tshaka (2015, 1) posits: "the assertion that URCSA is in fact not a black church is also not true, especially when one considers the relationship of a particular church in patronising a particular theology."

As such, Tshaka (2015) further argues:

It then goes without saying that URCSA needs to realise [its] position. ... [It] needs to learn to get comfortable in [its] black skin and insist on a history that has existed in Africa way longer than the arrival of Western Christianity. A church that is conversant

with [its] own context is one which must realise that black people are not yet liberated and as such it cannot continue to behave as if nothing has happened.

This identity crisis is made even more complex by the denomination's self-disclosed identity as African and Reformed. URCSA's dogmatic foundation continues to be informed by its Reformed heritage—there is no doubt. In recent years there has been a consistent rise of a stream of evangelicalism throughout the denomination. An analysis of lived religion is helpful here; a cursory perusal of URCSA membership's social media posts proves this. The influence of evangelicalism is important here for two reasons.

First, the evangelical tradition has in recent decades preferred a Biblicist position; thus, advocating for a rather literalist interpretation of scripture (Treier 2011, 174). This is greatly in contradiction with the classical Reformed view of scripture. Moreover, this approach (by evangelicalism) has proven unhelpful in the present sexuality discussion. Second, the evangelical tradition's conception of "purity culture" has had quite a negative impact on religious reflections on sexuality. As such, Moslener (2015, 1) writes:

Contemporary Christian sexual-purity campaigns have given teenage virgins [usually girlchildren] ... a platform for declaring their commitment to God, family, and their future spouses. Though sanctified through the authority of personal choice, sexual purity is not ultimately about what is best for individuals seeking safe passage through adolescence.

There is no doubt the present homosexuality discussion is a challenge to URCSA. At least since its 2005 General Synod, this discussion has been on the denomination's agenda. At its succeeding synodical meeting, in 2008, the infamous "homosexuality report" would be tabled. Eleven years later Allan Boesak (2019) would reflect on this synod:

It was an experience that had left me shaken and disoriented: how could the same church that took such a strong stand against apartheid and racial oppression, give such inspired and courageous leadership from its understanding of the Bible and the radical Reformed tradition; that had, in the middle of the state of emergency of the 1980s with its unprecedented oppression, its desperate violence and nameless fear given birth to the Belhar Confession that spoke of reconciliation, justice, unity and the Lordship of Jesus Christ, now display such blatant hatred and hypocrisy, deny so vehemently for God's LGBTQI children the solidarity we craved for ourselves in our struggle for racial justice, bow down so easily at the altar of prejudice and bigotry?

For Boesak, URCSA had both implicitly and explicitly preferred a position of hypocrisy. Moreover, since 2008 the denomination has shown no progress in its discussion at its two succeeding synodical meetings. As previously stated, rather in 2012 and 2016, the GS re-affirmed its 2005 decision. Therefore, it may rightly be argued that the discussion on human sexuality remains a challenge for the denomination.

This, then, brings us to the subject matter—URCSA’s catechetical literature *Children of God: Handbook for Senior Catechesis, Year 2* (SCE of the Cape Synod of URCSA 2002). At least since the start of the millennium, this publication has had a command over the catechetical formation of the Regional Cape Synod’s congregations. Of crucial interest is the publication’s chapter on sexuality, which is discussed under the section “Issues and problems that the children of God face today” (*Children of God* 2002, 139). This is most interesting; through it the publication implicitly problematises sexuality. Thus, a pathologising of human sexuality is fundamental to the text and its authors. It does one well to consider the developments made at the time in the traditions of body theology, queer theology (including lesbian and gay theologies) and feminist theology; all which contributed to a healthy and positive understanding of sexuality. If anything, this pathologising of sexuality proves to be disconnected from the discourse on sexuality within the field of theology.

In our time, of course, literature of this nature poses various problems. This should not be understated though, given *Children of God* forms the basis for our catechism—that is, the faith formation of our members. One problem is the gender and sexual construction at work in the publication. Throughout the chapter, gender is constructed as binary (man or woman). This, then, renders transgender, gender non-conforming and gender non-binary people as not created by God. It also fails to recognise that gender is socially constructed; whereas, sex is biologically determined. Further, given the gender binary, the only sexuality recognised is that of heterosexuality. Thus, the text suggests: “At a certain stage in their lives, boys and girls will therefore find one another *extremely attractive*” (*Children of God* 2002, 142). No other sexual orientation is presented; as such, homosexuality, bisexuality and pansexuality are not considered relevant.

Another problem worth highlighting is the publication’s critique of sexual liberation. Commenting on casual sex, the authors (*Children of God* 2020, 143) write that “this kind of sexual intercourse takes place outside of marriage and also with different partners. People who practise sex in this way, degenerate into *immorality*.” The text continues in its critique of the sexual liberation: it attributes sexually transmitted infections (emphasising AIDS) to immorality; further, rape, adultery and divorce are regarded as the result of “a wrong perception of sex.” There is no doubt that such an understanding of sex is greatly problematic in our time. Quite simply, casual sex is not the product of immorality; moreover, rape, adultery and divorce are not a consequence of the sexual liberation.

The sexual ethic of URCSA may be construed as colonial, evangelical and patriarchal. *Children of God*’s insistence that sex must take place within the confines of marriage communicates a missionary colonial sensibility. The prioritisation of purity culture (as articulated by Molsener) and its preference for a Biblicist literalist reading of scripture suggest the denomination’s conception of sexuality to be evangelical. Yet, quite fundamental to URCSA’s sexual catechesis is a patriarchal point of departure. This point of departure is one that rigidifies the construction of gender as a binary, that shows

a biased preference for heterosexuality (to the exclusion of others). Therefore, I posit that URCSA's sexual ethic is in need of queering.

Queering

In the second half of the previous century, much progress was made in LGBTIQ+ politics—including the discourse in the academy. Thus, by the end of the century queer theory came to be regarded as an academic discipline. In religious circles, queer theory would be articulated through queer theology. In this section, I consider how a “queering” of URCSA's sexual ethic may be helpful in our time.

Queer theology, of course, seeks to wrestle with how religion is used to discriminate against those who are LGBTIQ+. To be sure, queer theology utilises the ideational paradigms of liberation theologies, feminist theologies, political theologies and body theology. Queer theology also furthers the successes achieved in gay and lesbian theologies, while still recognising their limits. As such, Lisa Isherwood (2011, 423) contends: “Queer theology is a political and sexual queering of theology that goes beyond the gender paradigms of the early years of feminist theology, and also transcends the fixed assumptions of lesbian and gay theology.”

Therefore, queer theology endeavours to uncover the hermeneutics at work in these theological traditions, interrogating their normative character. It is quite important to note that an intersectional analysis is central to the queering of theology; thus, class, race, and gender are critical tools when reflecting on sexuality in relation to faith experience. This means that queer theology is a religious reflection from the margins.

In his publication, *Radical Love: An Introduction to Queer Theology*, the Asian-American Patrick Cheng (2011) attempts to introduce and define queer theology. He suggests the “queer” in queer theology refers to: first, those who are LGBTIQ+ (it is used as an umbrella term; interestingly, straight allies are here included); second, a self-conscious transgressive act; third, an erasing and deconstructing of constructed boundaries (or the strictures imposed by the heteronormativity). Fundamentally, queer theology is the coming to terms with radical love, as confessed in the dogmatic formulation of the Christian faith. For Cheng (2011, x), “radical love is premised upon safe, sane, and consensual behavior. Thus, non-consensual behavior—such as rape or sexual exploitation—is by definition excluded from radical love.”

Queer theology, then, works from the margins attempting to deconstruct the theological hegemonic centre. How, then, would a queering of URCSA's sexual ethic look? Or, what contribution would queer theology make to the catechetical epistemology of the denomination? In the remainder of this section, I would like to highlight three themes in queer theology.

First, queer theology is an incarnational sexual theological orientation; truly, it takes seriously God's creating humans as sexual beings. Like any theological tradition, it is

informed by the Methodist Quadrilateral; scripture, tradition, reason and experience are all important. Yet, queer theology rightly offers experience preference—especially in the discussion of bodies. Therefore, queer theology is suspicious of any attempt to prioritise scripture, tradition or reason at the expense of people’s experiences (particularly those rendered marginalised).

Second, the pioneering figure in queer theology, the Argentinian Marcella Althaus-Reid, regards tradition as quite indecent; and calls for the *indecenting* of theology as a whole. Here “indecent” communicates theologising from the margins (or, from those on the underside of history, from God’s preferential option). Moreover, the act of *indecenting* is theologising in the nude without underwear; that is, it is honest reflection (Althaus-Reid 2000, 2). That said, the *indencing* of theology must be cognisant of the market culture in which we live. Therefore, any queer theologising must recognise that the (sexual) lives of those who are LGBTIQ+ are rendered precarious by “imperialist white supremacist [hetero-]patriarchy.” Indecent theology, then, pursues religious reflection at the intersection of race, gender, sexuality, ability, class and other such identity markers.

Third, much of queer theology’s scholarship has been devoted to the idea of “coming out.” The queer theorist, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, discusses this at length in the publication *The Epistemology of the Closet* (1990). Sedgwick conceives of the closet as spectacle, attracting attention because it is unusual or queer. Reflecting on coming out, Edwards (2009, 49) posits that coming out is an act of self-disclosure in the first person, noting that “no two people’s experience of the closet will be the same. Some people don’t ever come out of the closet. Some people were never in a closet in the first place. Some people’s closets seem to be made of transparent glass, some of stained glass, others of paper, fabric, skin and bone.” Coming out of the closet, then, must note the uniqueness of particularity. For the queer priest, the Reverend Elizabeth Edman (2016, 123), “Coming out is an act that changes the world. Coming out makes it easier for the person behind you to come out.” Therefore, Edman (2016, 127) suggests that coming out is an act of evangelism or the bearing of witness.

The importance of these themes in the discourse of queer theology cannot be overstated. Even so, for the present discussion is it needful to draw this into conversation with URCSA as an African and Reformed denomination. Given the recognition that identity markers inform queer theological reflection, it is pertinent to discuss sexuality within the southern African context. Here the *Report on Homosexuality* (2008) devotes much attention to the question; noting historical practices in many cultural groups that would today be considered homoerotic. In our time, of course, queer theology is quite dominated by a Western focus. However, Cheng (2011, 39) notes that the concepts of intersectionality and hybridity are gaining traction. This, then, centres an analysis of coloniality and race; allowing for deeper engagement by URCSA’s theologians as it relates to the present discussion.

Despite the pitfall of queer theology's Western focus, it still offers some insight into the interpretation of the Belhar Confession. The three pillars of unity, reconciliation and justice may truly be understood through the lens of radical love; which is at the heart of the queer theology. Understood this way, radical love—as unity, reconciliation and justice—“challenges our existing boundaries” (Cheng 2011, x). Differently put, the Belhar Confession (read through queer theology) challenges the denomination to recognise the human dignity of all.

It is helpful to acknowledge that queer theology could also critique the Belhar Confession, similar to that offered by Christina Landman. Landman (2017, 372) helpfully argues: “The Confession of Belhar already confesses the political voice of the church. What still needs to be done is to include women of faith in both the church's own politics and its political call for justice and to embody this commitment in the inclusive language of interconnectedness.” Quite pervasively present in the confession is a binary (most clearly articulated in the affirmations and rejections); queer theology, then, deconstructs any binary that is assumed. Articulating a prophetic vision via its affirmations and rejections, the confession fails to recognise that the binary does not allow for an acknowledgement of complicity in apartheid (perhaps hegemonic) theology. In this manner, then, following Landman, queer theology employs appreciative critique for the Belhar Confession and the language used.

The three themes previously discussed (incarnation, indecency, and coming out)—while not mentioned in the Belhar Confession—may be used as a heuristic tool to interpret the meaning of the confession for us today. In doing so, our interpretation would grapple more adequately with URCSA's identity as an African and Reformed denomination. Moreover, utilising the insights of queer theology may afford the denomination to centre the human dignity of LGBTIQ+ people in its present sexuality discussion, thus prioritising radical love.

Quo Vadis?

The insights that queer theology offers is, no doubt, interesting. For this reason, I propose that it may help our catechetical and ecclesiological imagination a great deal in our time. The proposal articulated here takes cognisance of the challenges that beset URCSA; that is, its identity crisis, the influence of fundamentalist evangelicalism and its sexuality discussion. Here the question is probed: Quo Vadis URCSA? Where are you going URCSA, with your catechising?

I posit three acts that are quite helpful to reconsider and reform the foundations of URCSA's catechism material and practices. It is not enough to simply preach and teach the acceptance of being gay; this fails to recognise the actual challenge. History has taught the denomination that a mere synodical decision does not change much; we see this displayed by the denomination's trenchant patriarchy. Leepo Modise (2018, 7) acknowledges the pervasive power of patriarchy, noting “that the church ought to play the role of deconstructing the constructed mentality that women are not equal to men

when coming to positions of power.” Therefore, an agenda that is more transformative is to be pursued. Considering catechesis as part of the life of the congregation, the confirmation curriculum must be understood to be part of worship and general ministry. As such, URCSA may need to attend to three acts in order to guide its catechetical and ecclesiological imagination.

With the first act URCSA must attend to is its context. Reflecting on the context, Cloete (2012, 4) writes: “the Church is afraid to speak on sexual matters—to break the silence—as there are very complex matters in this regard, such as the sexuality of single people, the ordination of members without regard for sexual orientation, the increasing pluralism of marital and family styles and the epidemic of teenage pregnancies.”

It serves us well to acknowledge Cloete’s insight. The South African context, since 2006, is one where two people of the same gender may enter a civil union. Furthermore, the government is currently working on the synthesising of matrimonial legislation (the *Marriage Act, 1961*; the *Recognition of Customary Marriages Act, 1998*; and the *Civil Union Act of 2006*). It is also becoming all the more commonplace for people to come out as LGBTIQ+ at younger ages. This has a direct impact on catechetical practices—and of course the future of the denomination.

Second, URCSA would have to reform its catechetical content. Quite simply, *Children of God* is at best outdated; at worst, it is patriarchal and queer-phobic. A sexual ethic cannot be predicated on a colonial understanding of sexuality (as set forth in the *Report on Homosexuality*). Therefore, URCSA must take seriously the works of Freire (1974; 1998) and other pedagogues, which centre the oppressed by teaching for freedom and transformation. The black feminist, bell hooks, is quite helpful, as she considers what it may be to pursue education as a practice of freedom in a world she terms “imperialist white supremacist capitalist [hetero-]patriarchy.” Thus, hooks (1994, 13) writes: “To teach in a manner that respects and cares for the souls of our students is essential if we are to provide the necessary conditions where learning can most deeply and intimately begin.”

Moreover, Nel questions and critiques the dictum “children must be heard not seen”; arguing that current realities call for youths to be listened to like conversation partners. Nel (2016, 4) calls for a disruption of the status quo that leads to transformation. Therefore, catechising must present a space for young people to co-create theology. Catechists, then, are not “masters” who dispense knowledge (following Paulo Freire’s banking model); rather, they are facilitators of dialogue and meaning-making. Thus, both the context and the content must be reconsidered.

This paper argues for a third act that URCSA should pursue to community formation. As an institution, the church often fails to recognise itself as a community, thus interrogating the implications that its identity and existence have for the context and its members. We should be clear; catechesis is not restricted to the curriculum and

proverbial classroom. The ministry of the congregation serves as the very launching pad for any catechetical imagination. Worship, then, must embrace the realities of the present context; further, it must affirm and celebrate those who are LGBTIQ+. Elizabeth Stuart (2004) argues that what is required are intentional liturgical practices that recognise the presence that the heteronormative theology renders voiceless and invisible.

Still, congregational life is not limited to the Sunday service. The various ministries in the congregation must ensure that the lives and gifts of those who are LGBTIQ+ are recognised as holy. Ministries, then, must become homes to the downtrodden, if they are to fulfil their missional mandates. This requires much work and presents a challenge to presbyteries and synods. In very simple terms, congregations and ministries can only attempt to be faithful to the present homosexuality decision when resources are mobilised to assist them. At present, ministers, ministries and congregations are not capacitated to have the sexuality conversation; much less pursue a catechetical path that centres the bodies of those who are LGBTIQ+.

These are the foci that URCSA must attempt to centre in its catechetical and ecclesiological imagination. Failure to do so would maintain the present hegemonic epistemological paradigm that does harm to God's LGBTIQ+ children. It suggests that those who are LGBTIQ+ are superfluous in the life of the denomination and immorally reprobate. If it were not so, URCSA would wrestle with its colonial identity; would reject the violence of its fundamentalist evangelicalism; and, centre the bodies of those who are LGBTIQ+ in its sexuality discussion.

Sadly, this is the reality of URCSA. Presently many URCSA members continue to consider God's LGBTIQ+ children wretched sinners. On 1 March 2019, URCSA's Presbytery of Wellington convened a discussion on "homosexuality"; it lacked both nuance and sensitivity to the subject matter (*Presbytery of Wellington Discussing Homosexuality ...* 2019). If anything, it was queer-phobic hate speech in religious terms. This, therefore, presents URCSA with the challenge of interrogating its sexual ethic and ecclesiological imagination.

If we are to engage the queering of our catechesis and our ecclesiology, URCSA must affirm the incarnational dignity of those bodies that are LGBTIQ+; recognising the violence they endure because they are LGBTIQ+. Queering the denominational life must attempt to be indecent; therefore, it must follow an intersectional approach that theologises from the margins. Finally, such a queering would require URCSA to come out of the closet of non-disclosing heteronormativity; that is, following the Belhar Confession (article 4) to "reject any ideology which would legitimate forms of injustice and any doctrine which is unwilling to resist such an ideology in the name of the gospel." Doing so would require the recognition that those who are LGBTIQ+ also share in Jesus Christ, who is our only comfort in life and in death (Heidelberg Catechism, Question and Answer 1).

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