

“The Devil Slapped on the Genitals”: Religion and Spirituality in Queer South Africans’ Lives

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Summary

Uniquely among African countries, South Africa's Bill of Rights offers civil protection to individuals on the basis of vectors of identity including sexuality, gender and religion. Public opinion, however, lags behind the ideals of the Constitution. Against this historical background, a range of books has recently appeared, giving expression to the interface between sexuality, culture and religion from the viewpoint of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) people. These texts include autobiographical accounts in three books: *Reclaiming the L-Word: Sappho's Daughters out in Africa* (Diesel 2011a); *Yes I Am!: Writing by South African Gay Men* (Malan & Johaardien 2010); and *Trans: Transgender Life Stories from South Africa* (Morgan, Marais & Wellbeloved 2009). In this article I analyse the effects of autobiographical representations of spirituality and sexuality within different cultural contexts as represented in these books. I show the ways in which religions, including Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Hinduism and African traditional belief systems, can constrain the individual rights of sexually nonconforming believers, and I also reveal ways in which believers establish meaningful spiritual and intimate lives despite these tensions. Queer spiritual autobiographies validate the lives of LGBT people, and they also foster the renegotiation of public culture to permit social justice for all, regardless of sexuality or gender expression.

Opsomming

Suid-Afrika is die enigste Afrikaland met 'n Handves van Regte wat siviele beskerming bied aan individue op grond van identiteitsvektore soos seksualiteit, geslag en godsdien. Die publiek se sienings stem egter nog nie ooreen met die ideale wat in die Grondwet gestel word nie. In die lig van hierdie geskiedenis en agtergrond is 'n reeks boeke die afgelope tyd gepubliseer oor die koppelvlak tussen seksualiteit, kultuur en godsdien vanuit die oogpunt van lesbiese, gay, biseksuele en transgender (LGBT)-persone. Die tekste sluit drie outobiografiese vertellings in: *Reclaiming the L-word: Sappho's Daughters out in Africa* (Diesel 2011a); *Yes I Am!: Writing by South African Gay Men* (Malan & Johaardien 2010); en *Trans: Transgender Life Stories from South Africa* (Morgan, Marais & Wellbeloved 2009). In hierdie artikel analiseer ek die uitwerking van outobiografiese voorstellings van spiritualiteit en seksualiteit in die verskillende kulturele kontekste wat in die boeke uitgebeeld word. Ek toon die wyses aan waarop godsdienste, insluitende die

Christendom, Judaïsme, Islam, Hindoeïsme en tradisionele Afrikageloofstelsels, individuele regte aan bande lê as gelowiges nie seksueel konformeer nie, en ek lê wyses bloot waarop gelowiges betekenisvolle spirituele en intieme lewens vestig ten spyte van hierdie spanning. Gay spirituele outobiografieë verklaar dat LGBTQmense se lewens geldig is, en bevorder die heronderhandeling van die samelewing se kultuur om maatskaplike geregtigheid aan alle mense te laat geskied, ongeag die wyse waarop hulle uitdrukking gee aan hul geslag of seksualiteit.

[W]e must remember that the starting point of our theologies are bodies, but the rebellious bodies: ... the body “as is” before theology starts to draw demonic and divine inscriptions in it.

(Althaus-Reid 2004: 158)

Rebellious Bodies and Queer Spiritual Autobiographies

The project of which this article is a part brings into conversation two intimate domains of life that act as powerful determinants of identity: spirituality and sexuality.¹ I use the term “spirituality” in its widest sense, to encompass organised religion, traditional African religion, and affiliated or non-affiliated spirituality. Within the African context as a whole, Christianity and Islam are growing at the fastest rate in the world. In South Africa, the 2001 census (the most recent to include a question about religious affiliation) showed the percentage of Christians as comprising 79,6% of the population (Kane-Berman et al. 2004: 28). Further, the South African Constitution was the first in the world, and still is the only one in Africa, which offers protection against discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation. Yet, popular opinion is still catching up with the ideals of equality in terms of sexuality and gender enshrined in the Constitution.

A recent example of this disjuncture is found in pronouncements made by Zulu King Goodwill Zwelithini at a public gathering commemorating the Battle of Isandlwana. He was quoted as saying that people in same-sex relationships “are rotten no matter who they are” (quoted in Miya 2012a: 2). To support his opinion he cited Zulu traditional norms of sexual behaviour as well as Christian imagery, claiming that “[a]ngels desert people who do such things” (p. 2), a comment which the audience reportedly received with “rapturous applause” (p. 2). The king, viewed as a leader and father of the Zulu people, used both culture and religion to bolster ethnic identity and

1. The assistance of the National Research Foundation in funding a research project on the representation of spirituality and sexuality in texts is hereby acknowledged. Opinions expressed in the research, and conclusions arrived at, are those of the author, and are not necessarily to be attributed to the NRF.

influence popular opinion in portraying same-sex sexual behaviour as “offensive”, “unnatural” and “un-Zulu” (Koopman quoted in Miya 2012b). Interestingly, at this same event President Jacob Zuma, who himself in the past faced accusations of homophobic utterances, noted that “[t]he new challenge we face as a nation is to build a nation that does not divide people according to their race, gender and sexual orientation” (quoted in Miya 2012b) – a comment that some interpreters took as a rebuke to the king. Adding weight to this side of the debate, various human rights groups called for an explanation and retraction of the king’s comments. Pointing to the national context of “growing levels of hate crimes against people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered and intersexed (LGBTI)”, the South African Human Rights Commission declared that it found “such utterances to be inflammatory” (quoted in Miya 2012b). The commission further noted that if the comments of the king were accurately reported and translated, “they constitute hate speech, are dehumanising and are a violation of the constitutional rights of LGBTI people to equality and freedom” (quoted in Miya 2012b). Instead, the commission suggested that the king should “uphold the Constitution and promote tolerance and diversity” (quoted in Miya 2012b).

Similar debates about human rights, prohibitions and social effects of sexual behaviour occur within organised religion in South Africa and beyond its borders. Don Schrader observes: “To hear many religious people talk, one would think God created the torso, head, legs and arms, but the devil slapped on the genitals” (quoted in Yip 2010a: 667). Body hatred, sexism and the prevalence of what Judith Butler terms the “heterosexual matrix” (1990) fuel such attitudes. Yet progressive elements in religious bodies and elsewhere are involved in investigating ways in which, as Michel Foucault puts it, sexuality is “an especially dense transfer point for relations of power: between men and women, young and old, parents and offspring, teachers and students, priests and laity, and an administration and population” (1978: 103).

Reading literature which explores issues of spirituality and sexuality provides an imaginative entry into the ethics of difference, which may encompass a spectrum of attitudes including tolerance, sensitivity, respect, compassion, empathy and identification. Against the socio-political background I have just sketched, a range of South African texts has recently appeared, giving expression to the interface between sexuality, culture and religion from the viewpoint of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) people. These texts include autobiographical accounts in three books: *Reclaiming the L-Word: Sappho’s Daughters out in Africa*, edited by Alleyn Diesel (2011a); *Trans: Transgender Life Stories from South Africa* edited by Ruth Morgan, Charl Marais and Joy Rosemary Wellbeloved (2009); and *Yes I Am!: Writing by South African Gay Men*, edited by Robin Malan & Ashraf Johaardien (2010).

I employ a range of theoretical works to assist in my analysis, which focuses on selected aspects of these three autobiographical compilations, each of which encompasses a specific identity category. The largest faith group is addressed by *Aliens in the Household of God: Homosexuality and Christian Faith*, edited in 1997 by Paul Germond and Steve de Gruchy, but the most sustained and comparative critical examination of the intersection between religion, spirituality and sexuality which can illuminate the significance of these primary texts emanates from outside South Africa. In particular, I am reliant on two important recent texts, *Queer Religion*, a two-volume book edited by Donald L. Boisvert and Jay Emerson Johnson (2012), and *Queer Spiritual Spaces*, edited by Kath Browne, Sally R. Munt and Andrew K.T. Yip (2010), in addition to the brilliant insights of the late Marcella Althaus-Reid in books including *Indecent Theology: Theological Perversions in Sex, Gender and Politics* (2000) and *The Queer God* (2003), as well as the work she co-edited with Lisa Isherwood, *Trans/Formations* (2009).

The words “religion,” “spirituality” and “queer” that appear in the subtitle of my article are all problematic. In the influential United States of America context, “religion” generally refers to Christianity, and more particularly certain types of institutional Protestantism, but in the South African context the dominant religious tradition of Christianity is accompanied in public discourse by references to other traditions, including Islam, Hinduism, Judaism and African traditional belief systems. “Spirituality” is a less institutionalised concept, and may be applied to lived experiences of individuals or communities who may or may not be part of accepted religious affiliations. The word “queer” originated as a derogatory term to describe difference from the heterosexual norm, but since the 1990s has been recognised as a reclaimed, positive word used by some as a badge of pride. It can be used as an umbrella term for LGBT and other groupings, but it is also connected with the concepts of queer theory and activism, thus implying a radical, countercultural edge. Within the South African context it is a suitable word to employ in view of its historical usage. In *Defiant Desire: Gay and Lesbian Lives in South Africa*, Mark Gevisser quotes an autobiographical account by “Hannah”, who remembers that in the 1950s and ’60s “queer is the word we used” (1995: 21). The book also contains a number of instances of its later usage, accompanied by varied feeling-tones ranging from identification to abhorrence (Gevisser & Cameron 1995). The word is also employed by present-day commentators such as Ashraf Johardien (2010: 15), Muhsin Hendricks (2010: 90), Zackie Achmat (2012), Zanele Muholi (2011: 11) and Pumla Gqola (2012). In addition, the concept of queer is used as a central principle in recent theoretical work, including the two *Shaping Sexualities* volumes edited by Mikki van Zyl and Melissa Steyn, *Performing Queer: Shaping Sexualities 1994-2004 – Volume*

One (van Zyl & Steyn 2005) and *The Price and the Prize: Shaping Sexualities in South Africa* (Steyn & van Zyl 2009).

Writing from outside the South African context, Lee Edelman observes that queer opens up a “zone of possibilities” in rigid social systems (1994: 114). Applying the insights of queer theory to religion throws into focus forms of othering in terms of sexuality, gender and race. Such insights can be used in different ways: Jay Emerson Johnson notes that “[f]or some, queer theorizing prompts a critical retrieval of traditional religious discourse as a culturally destabilizing force. For others, ‘queer’ sparks innovation and radically new forms of cultural engagement and spiritual practice” (2012: x-xi).

To cite some brief, pertinent facts from one religious tradition, Christianity, this belief system was disseminated into various colonial contexts during the nineteenth century by missionaries, who encountered various sexual behaviours and gendered forms which they perceived and castigated as immoral, unchristian and perverted. This had the effect of stigmatising and suppressing indigenous gender and sexual variations. Today, the legacy of this judgemental, punitive, homophobic binarism is still prevalent in former Western colonies in Africa and South America. In the West, meanwhile, the development of the late-nineteenth-century pathologising identity of “the homosexual” was called into question by the countercultural fomentation of the 1960s, and this seismic shift caused crises in churches. Developments such as second-wave feminism, gay and lesbian rights movements and liberation theology pressurised responses from organised religion. Some queer Christians, conscientised by these social currents, criticised churches for deploying the Bible as a “savage text” (Thatcher 2008: 5) to promote persecution, ostracisation and oppression, instead of providing a message of hope and love.

One of the most radical thinkers in the field of queer theology is Marcella Althaus-Reid, who died in 2009. In her work she critiques the colonising use of the Bible as a “savage text”, and visualises instead an innovative, queer use of Christianity. As a Latin American feminist liberation theologian using insights from queer theory, postcolonialism and Marxism, her prime focus is on the body, particularly as experienced by poor women. In her first book on queer theology, *Indecent Theology: Theological Perversions in Sex, Gender and Politics* (2000), Althaus-Reid criticises liberation theology and feminist theology for their lack of attention to the sexual body, especially the gender- or sexually-variant body. She urges finding the divine through abandoning “the ideological order of the heterosexual pervasive normative” (2000: 200). In her later book, *The Queer God* (2003), she examines the potential of the dialogue between the transgressive body and the sacred. She uses bisexuality as a potent metaphor enabling the divine to be conceptualised beyond the limits of ideological dichotomies. Her notion of a bisexual critical epistemology allows for the displacement of the hegemonic heterosexual

dyad, and considers the implications of “transcendence via the instability of God, sexual identity and humanity” (Althaus-Reid 2003: 15). Similarly provocatively, the book edited by Althaus-Reid and Lisa Isherwood, *Trans/Formations* (2009), gives voice to the lived experiences of trans-people, thus destabilising comfortable gender identities and posing a challenge to religious denominations and the wider society with regard to patriarchy, misogyny, body hatred, homophobia, and heteronormativity.

The narratives Althaus-Reid weaves act as potent antidotes to narrow, confining views of appropriate relationships between queer desiring bodies and the divine. Alongside such theoretical texts various first-person accounts of spirituality as experienced by queer subjects have appeared; in Christopher Buren Stewart’s term, these can be viewed as a specific literary subgenre of “queer spiritual autobiography” (quoted in Marsh 2012: 265). These memoirs or autobiographical pieces are particularly significant as their courageous accounts are written in non-academic terms and function politically and sociologically to document experiences of oppression, resilience, agency and transcendence, offering information and hope to others in similar circumstances. Victor Marsh comments:

First-person testimony ... challenges the “discursive colonization” (Stone-Mediatore 2000: 122) that would position queer folk at the margins of a full humanity, and reconfigures the myths that sustain the hegemonic control of dominant and homophobic religious ideologies. Autobiography ... provides multiple sites of resistance to dominant prevailing myths. Instead of following preordained scripts that would reserve spiritual research exclusively to folk privileged by heteronormative models, nonconformists feeling the “urge to merge” have written new scripts, rewriting the life in texts that wrest control of culturally prescribed narratives to become new sites of resistance to religious homophobia, producing affirmative narratives that reconfigure the meaning of queer experience as it is lived, and as it can be inscribed as text, to open up new fields of knowledge, being, and becoming for people previously regarded as “beyond the pale”.

(Marsh 2012: 263)

Although it has been argued that the binarised structuring of religious discourse is dependent on the creation of a stigmatised, accursed Other cast outside the charmed circle of the sanctified (Marsh 2012: 262), the increasingly visible presence of such outcasts, laying claim to full acceptance, creates a critical mass of intermeshing narratives. The topics covered in these queer spiritual autobiographical accounts include coming out, body narratives, responses of religious authorities to disclosure or discovery of sexual variance, family relationships, intimate relationships and their recognition, community relations and connections to friends and the wider society.

Sapphic Views

Reclaiming the L-Word: Sappho's Daughters out in Africa (Diesel 2011a) comprises a collection of edited life stories and poems by 16 women from a wide range of socio-economic, ethnic and religious or secular backgrounds. Its stated purpose is to provide positive role models. Three of the contributors elected to choose pseudonyms, and a further two declined to have their photographs accompany their pieces, illustrating anxieties about the negative consequences of disclosure. The problematic matter of the choice of label for their sexual identity is raised by a number of authors, with usages spanning lesbian, gay, lesbian/gay and queer. Photographer/activist Zanele Muholi points to the inherent connections between queer groupings (2011: 11), as does lesbian transgender activist Liesl Theron (2011: 88), who also notes her belief that “gender and sexual orientation is fluid” (p. 72). However, Theron refers to the prejudice, label-policing and ostracisation she received when she had female-to-male transgender partners. Transgender is also referred to as lived experience by one of the contributors, Mmapaseka “Steve” Letsike (2011: 145-58). Some of the pieces in the book refer to partners who would not identify as lesbian, as they had previously had heterosexual relationships, but generally the concept of bisexuality is elided. In a related vein, Melissa M. Wilcox comments that “bisexuals and transgender people have had little voice in queer theory” (2012: 230; see too Stobie 2007: 11, 19, 25, 28, 56, 63-64, 75-76, 91, 94). In her introduction, Diesel refers to some 22 historical and contemporary “lesbian lives” (2011b: xii); however, of these 22, nine have either been retrospectively considered bisexual lives by biographers, or the women concerned have proclaimed themselves to be bisexual. Additionally, the Sappho of the book’s subtitle was, according to ancient legend, what today would be called bisexual. The possibility therefore exists of reading the book in a queer-inclusive way, although this would entail reading from the margins. Despite the use of the word “queer” in the book, overall the radical, subversive potential of this concept is not fully realised, either in the book or as its contributors portray society at large, and possible alliances between other members of the LGBT spectrum are not invoked, revealing fault-lines between women-identified women. While *Reclaiming the L-Word* fulfils the theoretical enterprise suggested by Althaus-Reid of accessing the spiritual through countering pervasive heteronormativity, the book in general maintains ideological dichotomies and misses the opportunity expressed by Althaus-Reid and Isherwood of incorporating the destabilising potential of bisexuality and, to a lesser extent, transgender.

Many of the authors in *Reclaiming the L-Word*, in addition to addressing their designation of choice, refer to intersections between different aspects of their identities, such as race, gender, sexuality and religion, some of

which are particularly contentious, given South Africa's history of oppression on numerous grounds.

As would be expected given the census figures relating to religious affiliation, most of the references to religion in the book are to forms of Christianity. Some of these references are painful and traumatic, pointing to shame and lack of acceptance felt in conservative religious settings, the pressure to be "good" in narrowly defined terms, the requirement that women speak to a pastor or priest after coming out, and the view that the church is a prime instrument of patriarchal sexism. The most shocking and egregious example of religious intolerance is given by Keba Sebetoane, who was raped repeatedly by a "friend" as a means of "changing" her lesbianism and claiming her as his "girlfriend." The young woman sought a medical examination, and after she had explained to the doctor that she had been raped because she is a lesbian, the doctor started to cross-examine her about her sexuality.

He said: "Why are you a lesbian at this age? Do you know that it is against the constitution to make such a decision without the consent of a parent? You are wearing the cross of Christ, did you know that it is an abomination in the eyes of God to be a lesbian?"

I asked him, "The guy raped me because he wanted to change me, are you saying that was a right thing to do?"

He didn't answer me, but instead he scratched off the report and wrote, "There is no sign of forceful penetration because the girl had already broken her virginity and the blood stains in the eyes are due to constant rubbing, and they might develop further if they are not treated."

(Sebetoane 2011: 93)

The complaint docket was subsequently lost by the police, and Sebetoane feels she was dismally failed by the medical establishment, using lies about the Constitution and religious hate speech, as well as by the justice system. This is a prime instance of the way in which sexuality is a site of the misuse of power, as Foucault suggests (1978: 103). There is attempted discursive colonisation from a composite hierarchy consisting of male rapist, older, male, heterosexual doctor, state, parent, church and police, being pitted in concert against the individual: raped young woman, patient, citizen, daughter, believer and civilian. Yet despite this discourse of multiple dominance, the words which echo most powerfully are those in the question "are you saying that was a right thing to do?" This ignites a sense of outrage and empathy on the part of the reader, creating an ethical bond between author and reader, which provokes the desire for Johnson's "radically new forms of cultural engagement and spiritual practice" (2012: x-xi).

Despite such references in the book to negative connections between religion and variant sexuality or gender presentation, however, there are also positive comments about religion and spirituality. Some refer to an ingrained

sense of spiritual awareness, and a sense of sexual attraction being a spiritual connection. Others refer to a surprised sense of acceptance by understanding ministers or priests. These may occur in contexts of religious rites such as funerals or weddings. One key example is that of Zanele Muholi, who acknowledges her roots in traditional religion, and after the death of her much-loved mother also comes to find peace and acceptance in the Catholic church, which her mother staunchly supported. Against tradition, Muholi wore masculine attire to the funeral, and this was accepted, signalling for her a validation from the church of her “blackness/lesbian identity/sexuality” (Muholi 2011: 25), thereby integrating her position in her family, culture, religion and social activism. A number of the authors refer to their same-sex wedding ceremonies and the importance these have had in their lives. These instances point to real changes in society, including in people and institutions depicted as conservative. Partly as a result of the increasing visibility of lesbians and female same-sex couples, and partly because of the climate of opinion fostered by the Constitution, some religious denominations and the wider society are seeing shifts in attitudes regarding patriarchy, misogyny, homophobia and heteronormativity.

While most of the contributors to *Reclaiming the L-Word* refer to Christianity, there are also two pieces by Jewish women, and two by Hindu women. One of the latter, Ashika Maharaj, notes that she would like to marry at some stage, but it would be impossible to find a Hindu priest to perform a traditional ceremony, as homosexuality is taboo. However, pointing to the importance of individual experience over essentialising claims, the other Hindu contributor, who uses the pseudonym Rani Soni, expresses her feelings:

For me Hinduism is an amazing religion, because it is quite open and free about God. Being a lesbian is part of actualising myself and my potential Being in love challenges me to ask: Is this my karmic journey, is this my soul journey? I don't believe that God is a *sexual* being, but the Creator, the Divine Light. I don't believe God sees gender; so for me it is just that I happened to fall in love with a woman; I didn't look for a woman to fall in love with. I have connected with this person, this soul, on a soul-level, and the physical form is incidental, in a way God is here for me, and God is everywhere, in all creation.

(Soni 2011: 119)

While many of the pieces in *Reclaiming the L-Word* illustrate the difficulties and tensions associated with religious affiliations from a lesbian woman's perspective, this quotation gives luminous expression to the positive interconnections possible between the sacred and variant sexuality.

Transcendental Transgender Narratives

The life stories in *Trans: Transgender Stories from South Africa* (Morgan, Marais & Wellbeloved 2009) were collected as part of an oral history project conducted by Gay and Lesbian Memory in Action (GALA) and Gender DynamiX, a Cape Town-based transgender support group. Most of the contributors are identified by first name only, again highlighting fears of judgement and stigma. As is the case with *Reclaiming the L-Word*, the authors of *Trans* come from a variety of socio-economic, racial, ethnic, cultural and religious backgrounds. Two of the contributors sought asylum in South Africa because of persecution elsewhere in Africa, and because of South Africa's liberal Constitution. Although individual accounts differ, and there are marked variations between the experiences of male to female (MTF) and female to male (FTM) people, there are certain striking similarities in the first-person narratives. Typically, there is an early awareness of a mismatch between the individual's given gender and the desired one. This feeling of alienation intensifies at adolescence. There are struggles at home, school and religious institutions with gender-appropriate clothing, roles and behaviour. Problems of identity are answered to an extent once the person discovers a label such as "gay" or "lesbian", but there still seems to be a missing dimension with respect to body identification. Belatedly, the individual learns about transgender, and then has to negotiate physical transformations and problems with the medical profession, the law, family, relationships, marriage, children, belief systems, the workplace and the wider society. Finding a sense of acceptance by self and others is profoundly difficult, and heartrending accounts are given of pain, isolation, bullying; rejection by family, friends and the lesbian or gay community (particularly lesbians because of anti-male sentiment, according to a number of authors); loss of children; depression; nervous breakdowns; psychotherapy; imprisonment; rape; and self-harming, including cutting, castration attempts and suicide attempts. Yet, despite these problems the overarching feeling-tone of the collection is buoyant, hopeful and inspiring, as individuals work to adjust their bodies to their self-conceptualisations and to find acceptance in various spheres of life. This narrative arc is one of the "new scripts" offering "sites of resistance" Marsh (2012: 263) refers to, illustrating survival and the transcending of adversity.

The expression of transgender individuals' sexuality is a particularly sensitive subject because of operations, shifting states and normative expectations, so in general, intimate relations are referred to in discreet terms. This delicacy is also understandable because of the kneejerk reaction of many conservative elements, particularly in religious communities that consider transgender body modification or sexual expression outside the heterosexual norm to be "unnatural", sinful or satanic. Most of the contributors to *Trans* identify as Christians of various denominations, and

the more conservative branches adopt a hard-line denunciatory approach. One contributor, Charl, explains his mother’s Christian viewpoint:

A traditional [Christian] Cape coloured would say what I am doing is demonic. I have to have demons exorcised because it is not Godly and therefore it is satanic. When my mother first discovered she said she could not let me into the house because God would punish her because it means she is condoning what I am doing. In the thirty years I have been doing this it hasn’t changed. My mother has changed towards me but she would still say that what I am doing is satanic.

(Morgan, Marais & Wellbeloved 2009: 226)

This judgemental attitude stems from a vehement binarism that makes absolute distinctions between good and evil, God and Satan. Much anguished debate in the book concerns the creation of the body in God’s image, whether God is able to make mistakes, and whether these should be rectified. Guilt, confusion, conflict and shame result. Intolerant comments are made by church leaders and members, employers, and partners.

Yet a number of contributors in the book describe ways in which they find spiritual peace. One way is to point out the hypocrisy and sanctimonious othering of interlocutors. Vanya narrates such an anecdote:

“There was a situation on campus. There was this girl who needed my help with accounting. As I am helping her she says, ‘You are not going to heaven.’ I said, ‘If it is a sin, it is a sin I am prepared to die for.’ She said, ‘Don’t say that too loudly.’ I told her, ‘I am a virgin, I stay at home, I sleep in my bed the whole night. And you are not a virgin, you spend the whole night with a man and you are not married. Does this mean I am going into the diesel fire and you are not?’”

(Morgan, Marais & Wellbeloved 2009: 226)

As in the passage by Sebetoane, a trenchant question sparks the reader’s sympathies for one who is being subjected to unjustified judgements and cruelty, thus reinforcing the compact between reader and author in the realm of the private, but also eliciting a fervent wish for more public transformation, as church leaders’ ethical voices are necessary to shift private opinion.

Some authors find solace in more progressive and welcoming settings, either cultural (such as the Muslim Cape Malay community, which is queer-friendly), or liberal churches, or understanding pastors or priests. Some contributors to *Trans* attend church under duress, even though the church makes them feel uncomfortable. Others move beyond what they portray as religious indoctrination and conformity to create a personalised, loving religion which embraces rather than damns humanity. One particularly interesting example concerns Tebogo, who happily combines traditional African belief systems, including himself being a sangoma or traditional healer

(most of whom, as he points out, are not heterosexual), and his staunch Christianity. Tebogo further explains that bodily modification is acceptable in traditional African belief systems, as the body is merely a house for the spirit, and can be corrected to ensure happiness. However, it is necessary to communicate with the ancestors to explain a change of gender in order to maintain a connection with them (Morgan, Marais & Wellbeloved 2009: 229). His syncretic beliefs are a cogent refutation of the homophobia which was imported to Africa, and challenge both rigid traditionalism as expressed by King Goodwill Zwelithini and narrow Christianity.

Some of the authors of *Trans* are not religious, but find spiritual meaning in life. One contributor suggests that the inwardness of the gender/sexuality journey undertaken by trans people promotes a spiritual awareness. A few contributors recount anecdotes about dissociating themselves from religion, which they found a personal obstacle to their self-acceptance as it cast them as sinful, although they subsequently experienced powerful spiritual epiphanies which they found liberating. Joy's revelation made her realise that "*I consisted of a mortal body and an eternal soul, and that all I was doing was bringing my mortal body in line with my eternal soul*" (Morgan, Marais & Wellbeloved 2009: 228), and this insight gave her the strength to feel right about transitioning.

A significant number of the contributors to *Trans* discuss ways in which, despite opposition based on religious grounds, they have found a deepened sense of spiritual connection through being transgender. Cross-dressing and bodily modifications associated with transgender lead to social unease and ostracisation, but at the same time being "in-between" or in the scandalous ground of the both/and rather than either/or allows for a profound spiritual journey. Lisa Isherwood, in her introduction to *Trans/Formations* (2009), notes that Christianity is an "incarnational religion" with a "very 'trans' core" (p. 1) and it is thus potentially destabilising rather than fixed and static. Although theologically these effects are particularly striking in Christianity, other religions too ponder the relationship between body and soul, and trans people highlight ways in which sex, gender and sexuality are fluid and constantly in process, thereby refuting the intolerance and inhumanity of absolutism in religion, heteronormativity and patriarchy.

Affirming Gay Men

Yes, I Am!: Writing by South African Gay Men, edited by Robin Malan and Ashraf Johaardien (2010), includes the work of luminaries in various fields, including the law, acting, writing, the theatre and activism, as well as religious leaders. Overall, over the course of the 53 pieces included, the same attention is not paid to religion or spirituality as is seen in *Reclaiming the L-Word* or *Trans*; however, there are notable exceptions. In addition, a

number of pieces display a humorous attitude towards these matters not found in the other two books, which is refreshing. Pieter Jacobs relates an amusing story, in high camp style, of a young black man being driven by his white, Jewish lover to meet his parents for Pesach; the parents have no idea that their son is gay or that his lover is not of their culture or religion. The narrator thinks, “Here I am, an innocent young gay black boy on the road to crucifixion by the Jews” (Jacobs 2010: 28). Another story, “The Second Coming (Out),” sets the tone for its discussion of sexuality and spirituality with its mock-blasphemous title. The author, Pieter Fourie, employs a mocking spoonerism by referring to the “Much Deformed”, instead of Dutch Reformed, church affiliation of his mother, who has to come out as the parent of a gay son. In more serious vein, but with a twinkle, he notes that being gay and out entails foregrounding one’s sexuality as heterosexuals are not forced to do: it requires a confession declaring “here I am, doing what is unusual and culturally deviant; I am a strange sexual being” (Fourie 2010: 35). As he points out, the family of gay (or queer) people have to face the difficulty of making similar announcements about their loved ones. He ends the piece by suggesting, tongue-in-cheek, that “as the book says, in the end the truth sets you free. Well, not always, but it does help” (p. 35).

The third in the book’s sequence of humorous Pieters is Pieter-Dirk Uys, who remembers a moment of high psychic drama when he felt sexually attracted to a coloured man at a nudist beach:

1966? Lying naked on a beach with a non-white? My life was over. I was breaking the Immorality Act which made sex between the races a crime. I’d also broken the sacred law of the Afrikaner God which made all sex illegal. Not only would I go to jail; I’d go to hell! And I was already in Hell. I went home and cried and prayed: “Please Jesus, I’ll never do it again. Forgive that terrible sin ...” I waited for It to fall off. It didn’t fall off. It stood up. It wanted more. And so I became a democrat.

(Uys 2010: 105)

Although out of drag as Evita Bezuidenhout and in *propria persona*, Uys is characteristically satirical here, as he draws together sex, race, religion, notions of sin and politics in a passage using self-parody and a light-hearted but trenchant, mocking version of God as culturally constructed, essentialised, punitive and anti-sex. Uys exposes the myths of Afrikaner culture, and uses this moment of realisation as a springboard for an activist consciousness.

The three humorous stories referred to in *Yes I Am!* offer an extra dimension not found in the other texts under scrutiny, in that they allow the reader the anarchic power of laughter against literal-minded, petty religious authority and people who unthinkingly subscribe to the inhumane precepts of such institutions. Questioning is shown to be personally liberating and progressive. These stories also provide a foil for the more genuinely

anguished or serious pieces, such as a poignant piece by renowned HIV/Aids activist Zackie Achmat, which recounts his dawning realisation of his sexuality as a moffie, a derogatory term used for an effeminate or queer man. This recognition terrified him as he saw the stigma attached to the term “moffie” and the identity it implied. He describes an elegant, gay, cross-dressing sex worker tauntingly dubbed Peter Moffie by the community. With shame, Achmat remembers leading a group of stone-throwing children jeering “Moffie! Moffie!” at Peter Moffie. Achmat continues:

To this day I can see his bulging eyes filled with tears; I can see him holding his head high, dignified, while I tried to exorcise the *Shaytaan*. It did not work.

The *Shaytaan*, of course, is Satan. And stone-throwing has a particularly important place in Islam. It is not only used to punish adulterers, fornicators, homosexuals and thieves, it has a far more cathartic function. The *Shaytaan* is not only in the world, but is also within the individual. When Muslims go to Mecca and reach Mount Arafat, one of the holiest places in Islamic mythology, the place where Abraham had to sacrifice his son, they have to cast the *Shaytaan* out of their persons, with stones.

(Achmat 2010: 60)

Having recently learned of Peter Moffie’s death, Achmat is pierced with remorse, explaining that in Islam, forgiveness can only be vouchsafed by the wronged party, so he will not be forgiven for his scapegoating of another. This memory segues into another, where he discusses falling in love with a young boy in his class, and even more so, with the boy’s sister. He wonders whether this love was another attempt to exorcise the *Shaytaan*, “or whether there was a genuine bisexual side to my desire. I would like to develop it” (p. 61). Seemingly, however, this desire is not easily accomplished, possibly because of pressure to conform to the norms of identity politics and the relative erasure of bisexuality in sexuality discourse in South Africa.

Queer Muslims provide a particularly interesting case in point in terms of personal narratives, as “the intersection and multiplicity of their sexual, religious, and ethnic minority identities offers significant and interesting insights into the complexity and interconnectedness of contemporary social life” as Andrew K.T. Yip writes in the British context (2010b: 48), although these comments are equally applicable in the South African context, where the percentage affiliation for Islam in the 2001 census is given as 1,5% (Kane-Berman et al. 2004: 28), the second-highest religious grouping.

One of three pieces in the book by a religious leader, Imam Muhsin Hendricks’s “A Letter by Way of Explanation” (Hendricks 2010: 88-90), describes his angst on becoming aware of his same-sex feelings: “I was indoctrinated from a young age to believe that I was destined for hell and that I would be severely tortured in the hereafter if ever I should act upon the feelings that I had for other men” (p. 88). As a result of his fear he immersed

himself in religion, married a woman and had children. After parting from his family he had a revelatory dream in which his dead father assured him that he would enter heaven and that his being gay was God’s intention. This epiphany spurred him to come out even though he might lose the love of family members and possibly “be killed by fanatical Muslims in my community” (p. 89). His decision to reconcile his religion and his sexuality led to his founding The Inner Circle, a support group for queer Muslims, showing that alternative scriptural viewpoints are possible, as is change in religious institutions.

Because of masculine privilege, including as religious leaders, gay men have a visible and significant role to play as socially transformative queers. In addition, they have a sense of collective history and a long-standing association with camp which confer the self-confidence and style to use the power of humour to convey their autobiographical narratives and shift public opinion.

A Zone of Possibilities

In conclusion, the changing socio-political landscape of contemporary South Africa allows this collection of life stories in the three books I have mentioned to be published and become part of the public sphere, allowing for greater visibility and debate. These narratives may serve as a powerful educational resource for those outside and within both queer and religious communities. South Africa is a conventional, traditional, religious country, and in general none of the cultural or religious groups accept, let alone embrace, queers. So while the stories highlight commonalities in terms of discovery of difference, coming out, rejection, shame, punishment, scape-goating and violence, they also highlight the divisions between the LGBT continuum in terms of gender, class, race, ethnicity, religion and age. In addition, as I have suggested, one identity element of the LGBT umbrella, bisexuality, is often elided, and the representation of queer fails to meet its fullest radical potential. However, beyond these divisions and criticisms, there is also a sense in reading these stories as a corpus that the authors are creative, resilient and resourceful. They question bigotry from religious bodies, families and the wider community, and create strategies to find love, express the desires of their bodies, challenge dogmatism and engage profoundly with religion and spirituality. Their personal quests for authenticity, meaning and acceptance resonate into the political and social domains as they refute the concepts of sin, evil, the Devil or *Shaytaan* and establish a dynamic synchronicity between queer sexuality and spiritual beliefs.

On 26 July 2013, Archbishop Emeritus Desmond Tutu spoke at the launch of the United Nations “Free & Equal” global campaign for lesbian, gay,

bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) equality in Cape Town. He is reported as having said: “I would refuse to go to a homophobic heaven. No, I’d say sorry. I mean, I’d much rather go to that other place” (Etheridge 2013). Firmly stating: “I would not worship a God who is homophobic and that is how deeply I feel about this,” he continued: “I am as passionate about this campaign as I ever was about apartheid. For me, it is at the same level” (Brydum 2013). “We have to build a society that is accepting and it is not a free society until every single person knows they are acknowledged and accepted for who they are” (Etheridge 2013). Tutu’s progressive stance refutes a colonising, oppressive, homophobic use of religion, and instead urges social justice for all, regardless of sexual orientation or gender performance. The voices of such influential leaders, together with the intermeshing narratives of the three collections of queer spiritual autobiography under scrutiny, offer a zone of possibility for resistance to reactionary myths, and new understandings of democracy in action.

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