

SEXUALITY AND SPIRITUALITY IN A SOUTH AFRICAN FEMALE CORRECTIONAL CENTRE

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Abstract

In the first part of this study, the faces of spiritual discourses in a South African female correctional centre are described as they are shaped by culture, race, religious background, and the need for physical contact. The source of this part of the study is the researcher's own observations whilst working in the Pretoria Female Correctional Centre on behalf of the (South African) Judicial Inspectorate of Prisons. The second and main part of the study describes the interface between spirituality and sexuality in this correctional centre as discourses holding the correctees captive in frustration and misunderstanding. The sources of this part of the study are hand-written testimonies by the correctees themselves which they prepared willingly at the request of the researcher. In the final part of the study, alternative religious discourses on the incarcerated female body are proposed.

Keywords: Sexuality, Spirituality, Incarcerated Body, Body Theology, Fierce Tenderness

Introduction

Aims of this Study

The first aim of this study is to describe the faces of religious discourses in a South African female correctional centre.¹ The second aim is to describe how these discourses impact, if at all, on the sexual behaviour of the women correctees. The third aim is to make proposals for alternative religious discourses which will explore the dialogical spaces between anti-lesbian religiosity, on the one hand, and the reality of the sexual needs of women correctees locked in together in small spaces, on the other.

Sex and Religion: A Brief Introduction from Previous Research

Sex in a Female Prison

Worldwide, there is a meagre amount of research on the sexual behaviour of women in correctional centres. In South Africa itself this research is totally absent, while research on the topic elsewhere in the world is skimpy, not readily available in South Africa, and often not applicable to South African (racial) circumstances. This research is usually conducted by men who have restricted access to the experiences of female correctees.

Research undertaken in a US female prison by Ward and Kassebaum (1965) does provide some guidance on what can be expected in local female correctional centres as far as sexual behaviour is concerned, despite the fact that their book is 40 years old. Regarding women correctees becoming sexually involved with one another, Ward and Kassebaum (1965, 4–5) advance two highly sympathetic reasons. The one is that separation from home

¹ "Correctional Centre" is the official term for "prison" used by the Department of Correctional Services in South Africa.

sex leads to alternative forms of intimacy. The other is that, since personal worth is severely questioned in prison, sexual involvement can imply worth.

Ward and Kassebaum's (1965, 2–15) classification of degrees of homosexual involvement that exist in prison is also useful. There are the true homosexuals, those curious about homosexuality, the institutional homosexuals ("jailhouse turnouts"), and those psychologically aroused by homosexual behaviour. Finally, Ward and Kassebaum (1965, 16–25) give a description of the different forms in which (heterosexual) intercourse in prison is simulated. These are oral-genital arousal, breast fondling, manual manipulation, and so-called "dry fucking."²

Religion in Prison

Not only is there a scarcity of studies on the sexuality of female correctees worldwide, but there is also an international absence of studies on their religious behaviour. Locally and abroad a few studies have been done by chaplains on religion in male prisons. These books, however, have no category for sex, while books written on sexual behaviour in prisons, do not deal with religion. Apart from a scarcity of studies on both sexuality and spirituality in correctional centres, studies on the interface between the two, on how religion impacts on the sexual behaviour of correctees, especially female correctees, are totally missing. Hence the present study.

Again, the study of Shaw (1995) on *Chaplains to the Imprisoned* may show some of the faces of religious behaviour, albeit in a male prison in America. Shaw (1995, 18–32) explores three faces of prison religiosity:

- *Religion as comfort*: Shaw observes that only a small percentage of correctees have a solid religious background when they enter prison. The majority are from unchurched backgrounds. However, in prison, a substantial number of correctees seek the solace of religion to ease their minds and find comfort in their bad circumstances.
- *Riding the religious pony*: Shaw furthermore observes that every prison has its fair amount of Bible punchers who use religion (and the chaplain) to impress the parole board with their special branch of "prison religion."
- *God trips*: Also, Shaw notes that correctees who have committed crimes which are regarded as particularly despicable by society, often become born-again in prison and show a fascination for fundamentalist religion.

Shaw (1995, 35–38), furthermore, comments on the chaplain's "powerlessness" to influence sexual behaviour in prison, that is, in a "world of reversed morality." In an immoral environment where the strong prey sexually on the weak and force them into silence, where nothing can be done against forced homosexuality, rape, kangaroo courts and blanket parties, and where there is no distinction between right and wrong, according to Shaw, the chaplain dare not breathe a moral word.

In the last part of this study, Shaw's (1995, 20–25) concepts of right and wrong, moral and immoral – which are typical of current chaplaincy thought – will be questioned and alternative views presented. However, it is first necessary to reveal the faces of sexual and religious discourses as they exist in a South African female correctional centre.

² "Dry fucking" is what Afrikaans-speaking women in the Pretoria Female Correctional Centre call "koekstamp." It simulates the heterosexual sexual act of contact between genital parts, obviously without penetration.

The Faces of Religious and Sexual Discourses in a South African Female Correctional Centre

In South Africa, at least 188 000 people are incarcerated at any given point in time. Of these, not more than 4 000 are women, which constitutes a small percentage of 2,1%. Of the 235 correctional centres in the country, only eight exclusively accommodate women.³

The Pretoria Female Correctional Centre in Tshwane, the capital of South Africa, on which this study is based, was built to house 90 correctees, but actually accommodates 300 plus women, with numbers increasing every day. This is a medium-term correctional centre, with women serving sentences ranging from six months to 10 years. Approximately one-third of these women are white, and two-thirds, black.⁴ The white women, who historically have more access to large amounts of money, mainly serve sentences for fraud, whereas the black women are imprisoned for (petty) theft. Broadly speaking, both black and white committed these economic crimes for the financial benefit of their families.

The source of this part of the study, which deals with the faces of sexual and religious behaviour amongst female correctees, is the researcher herself who worked as an Independent Prison Visitor⁵ in this correctional centre for 13 months, from November 2003 to November 2004. Hence, seen in the light of the absence of material on the issue of spirituality and sexuality in female correctional centres in South Africa, this section is based purely on the observations of the researcher and on the complaints lodged by correctees which were recorded by this researcher as an IPV.⁶ Selected correctees were asked to write down their own spiritual and sexual experiences, as well as their observations of the experiences of others. Some of these reports are cited in this section.

The Faces of Religious Practices

Conflicting Cultural Spiritualities

It is no secret that South African blacks are moving away from missionary Christianity and reclaiming their spirituality for African cultures. The massive growth in the African Independent Churches, to which the majority of South African blacks belong, testifies to this. Because of the huge differences in worship between black and white Christians there is conflict in overcrowded spaces such as correctional centres, as illustrated in the example below. From one of the corridors of the Pretoria Female Correctional Centre, where 41 women were incarcerated in five single cells, a white correctee lodged the following complaint: During Easter, she said, a black correctee who called herself a Christian *sangoma*,⁷ gathered other black correctees around her for a Good Friday service. According to the correctee, they beat the bed (there is nothing else to beat), made sounds like pigs, and

³ Numbers based on the annual report of the Judicial Inspectorate of Prisons and compiled by Judge Hannes Fagan, 2003/2004.

⁴ According to information provided by the Pretoria Female Correctional Centre to this researcher.

⁵ Independent Prison Visitors are appointed by the Judicial Inspectorate of Prisons (in terms of Section 85 of the Correctional Service Act of 1998) to visit correctees in their cells, and to report the latter's requests and complaints to the Head of the Correctional Centre, and to refer unresolved complaints to Judge Hannes Fagan who heads the Judicial Inspectorate of Prisons.

⁶ As an IPV, this researcher was obliged by law to write down and report all complaints lodged by correctees. It was insignificant whether the IPV regarded the complaints as relevant or not, or whether or not they were racist. To repeat: all complaints were to be taken down.

⁷ A *sangoma* is a traditional healer. While some black Christians have incorporated traditional healing in their Christian spirituality, other blacks as well as many white people regard traditional healing as exclusively "pagan."

fell down in a stupor. The white correctee and her cell mates closed their cell door and prayed for the blood of Christ to protect them against “the devil.” The tension created by this incidence will long be felt in this centre.

Racial Spiritualities

Tension between people in secluded spaces always runs high, especially where races mix. Because of the history of *apartheid*, white women see a class difference between themselves and black women, which makes living together even more difficult. White women, moreover, feel uncomfortable with black spiritualities, often considering them to be “unchristian.” For example: A white correctee made a formal request to be placed in a cell with other white women, basing the request on the assumption that she “has the right to be with other Christians in the same cell.”

Complaints of Spiritual Abuse

This researcher has received only a few, if any, complaints that the prison authorities were forcing correctees to attend religious services or compelling them to subscribe to specific religious convictions. Correctees instead complained about their families insisting on their “religious rehabilitation.” The following is an example of a woman who was awaiting trial, and whose father was a well-known preacher and evangelist. She complained that her family was negotiating with the court to send her to a fundamentalist Christian rehabilitation centre. She was convinced that this was a place where “God was going to be used to manipulate me.” And indeed this woman, who was an embarrassment to her family, was whisked off to this rehab where she feared being spiritually abused, without her consent, in spite of the fact that she was almost 50 years old.

These three examples, of course, do not exhaust the faces of religious practices in a female prison. On the contrary, where, in male prisons, men form gangs to protect and affirm themselves, women seem to form religious groupings. Also, devotional books for personal Bible study are seen in every cell, and a substantial number of women take courses in Biblical interpretation and pastoral counselling, courses paid for privately by their families. Sunday services are well provided for by local pastors. In this prison, Sunday services are conducted by pastors from the pentecostalist tradition, the (Dutch) reformed tradition, the charismatic tradition and the African Independent Churches. There are four Muslim women in this correctional centre. It is interesting to note that there are no women, from any denomination or religion, ministering there.

The Faces of Sexual Practices

Correctees in the Pretoria Female Correctional Centre form three types of intimate relationships which are more or less in accordance with the findings of Ward and Kassebaum (1965, 2–15).

Heterosexual Relationships between Correctees from Adjacent Prisons

This researcher was amazed at the number of relationships that had developed between the female correctees of the correctional centre under discussion, and male correctees from the adjacent correctional centres, namely Pretoria Local and Pretoria Central Correctional Centres. At the time of the study, many couples were corresponding regularly, and visits are permitted between them within the four visits per month allowed to each correctee.

Sexual intercourse is, of course, not allowed. Also, they are not permitted to marry, which led to a complaint from one of the correctees who had fallen in love with a correctee from the male prison next door. The correctees involved took their request, and later their complaint, to the highest level of prison and judicial authority, but to no avail.

'Clandestine' Homosexual Relationships

Female correctees, who maintain heterosexual relationships outside of prison, enter into homosexual relationships inside for survival, or for the need for physical contact. Correctees have pointed out to this researcher that they often compete for the (sexual) favour of a lesbian correctee when the latter has influence with the warders.⁸ Often, too, heterosexual women start touching other women intimately for the sake of self-worth and because of skin-hunger. This researcher accidentally once entered a cell where a tiny white woman, known for her subordinate behaviour towards warders, was sexually caressing a huge black woman. In this situation she had shed her subordinate stature in favour of a proud, "manly" body language.

Loyal Homosexual Relationships

Many loyal homosexual relationships are being formed in the correctional centre. Nothing can describe the situation better than the testimony written down by one of the gay correctees (*femme*) on her relationship with another correctee (*butch*). Of special interest is the distinction she makes between lesbian (which is clandestine) and gay (which is truthful), and her estimation that 90% of the relationships in the correctional centre are "lesbian," and only 10% are truly gay. The testimony was originally written in Afrikaans, in pencil on a piece of paper, and no translation can really do justice to the author's idiolect:

For the first two weeks after they had sent me here, I was just staring at what was happening around me. A bunch of frustrated women behind bars. In the evenings I saw women sleeping together in one bed, one of the two preparing food, washing the dishes, doing the laundry, while the other would just lie in bed and be served. This was how I found out exactly how such an "affair" worked. I could not understand how women with a husband and children outside, could climb into bed with other women and behave like a married couple, having sex under the blankets, satisfying each other with deodorant cans.

(She then describes how she met her partner.)

One day the two of us sat down and talked. S*** hates the word lesbian. I asked her what the difference between lesbian and gay was. She explained to me that a gay person was committed to one person, while a lesbian would sleep with somebody else every night.

(While out on bail they were married by a reverend from the gay Reformed Church. At the time this testimony was written, they were both serving sentences in the Pretoria Female Correctional Centre.)

To be in prison is punishment. However, I can honestly say that S*** and me have never made a spectacle of ourselves. The women who cling to one another without respect towards themselves or others, are what we call lesbians. My estimation is that 90% of the relationships here are lesbian, and only 10% are gay and trustworthy.

Many people think that it is a crime to be gay. I myself was married and divorced twice. I was assaulted with belts and buckles over my whole body, with vacuum cleaner pipes in

⁸ In South African prisons, warders are called "members" because they are members of the Department of Correctional Services.

my face. I would not trade my “butch” for all the money in the world. She does not think a woman is a punching bag. She treats me like a lady.

Loyalty to a Heterosexual Relationship Outside

Although a heterosexual relationship outside does not prevent the formation of a homosexual one inside the correctional centre, many women expressed their fear that the heterosexual relationship outside might fail because of their incarceration. The following testimony is from a woman expressing this fear, as well as her longing for the male body and the loving environment of her children, which includes an 18-month-old baby:

Nothing prepared me mentally for the day I got sentenced to eight years for fraud. Remembering back to that day gives me cold shivers.

I was marched down grey barren passages to the admittance cell holding 62 women, even though it was only supposed to accommodate 30. Two wedges of bread the size of door stoppers were shoved into my hands as the gate vibrated closed and the double lock was turned. A sea of faces jumped up before me and I started my first step of the “green mile.” As I walked down the row of beds, the crude remarks and cat calls were deafening, a white face jumps out and grabs my arm, steering me to a corner where others sit huddled on a bed trying to keep warm. All the stories of being forced to become somebody’s bitch sprang to mind. Hugging my belongings to my chest, I fell asleep on the floor crying...

All forms of daily contact with your family fall away and for the first six months no contact was allowed without a thick glass separating you from you loved ones. You desperately need the physical and emotional side in those trying months which are denied for the 45 minutes a week that you may see them. Your mental transition in the first six months is the worst, you long for your “old” life and the things that you took for granted – playing with your children, sleeping in your husband’s arms, opening up a fridge, even a hot bath. All your privacy gets taken away, a sitting on the toilet is only a faded memory. All showers are watched by a dozen eyes in case the water gets warm and you take too long. It is very degrading and humiliating when your toiletries are accomplished publically...

Every afternoon you get locked up at 3pm and that’s when you struggle with your emotions. You lie on your bed conjuring up old memories, wondering what your husband is doing without you, who is keeping his bed warm. You are permanently insecure about your marriage and any future that you might have left outside with him. You worry about your children, are they warm, is there someone to hug them when they cry, will they remember you? Do they still love you? ...

You lose more than your freedom when you get sentenced; some lose their families, friends and eventually their minds.

The Interface between Spirituality and Sexuality in a South African Female Correctional Centre

Traditionally, in South Africa, sexuality is regulated by piety. Therefore, when writing about their sexuality, the women correctees inevitably also mentioned their spirituality. The following is testimony to the way in which the women see the interface between sexuality and spirituality:

Spirituality versus Homosexuality⁹

A variety of women correctees expressed their disgust, on religious grounds, at the homosexual activities in the correctional centre. One correctee formally insisted on early parole, based on the fact that she was a Christian, and should not be exposed to looking at “white and black women licking each other’s genitals,” sharing a cell with her.

Spirituality in Service of a Multipartnership

Several of the women correctees share a “husband” outside, and claim religious grounds for this sharing. Since polygyny is not permitted in terms of South African civil law, the authorities of the Department of Correctional Services do not acknowledge such relationships. An interesting case ensued from this non-acknowledgement. Two women, incidentally two white Afrikaans-speaking women who were sisters, claimed that they were both “married” to the same man in an adjacent male prison. In effect this meant that they had a longstanding relationship with this man (more than 20 years) and between them had five children with him. The “husband” and his two “wives” were in prison for the same offence. The two women correctees lodged two complaints. The first was that their “husband” was sending them letters with explicit descriptions of sexual fantasies, and that the letters were being held back by the prison authorities. The women argued that, as their “husband,” he was permitted to write letters of such a private nature. Prison authorities insisted that pornography was not permitted in the correctional centre. The women then also questioned the fact that pornography was permitted in male prisons, but not in female ones. Their second complaint was that their “husband” was only allowed to visit them from the adjacent prison according to normal visiting hours, while they felt that he should have double visiting hours because he had two “wives.” With him, they claimed that they had turned Mormon and that he was entitled to these two wives. Prison authorities were not convinced about the religious argumentation. After the “husband” started to write more decent letters, the letters were permitted to go through, but the women were allowed neither double visiting hours nor pornography.

Gay Spirituality

This researcher met with gay spiritualities in the female correctional centre that were of an advanced level. One correctee, who was in a stable relationship with another correctee, expressed her spirituality as follows (translated from the Afrikaans):

We both know that we are special. If the Good Father were not happy with gay people, why did he let us both go through such hell before he brought us to one another? And let us love each other more every day?

Gay people, like all other people, are believers and deeply religious. Straight people say that gays are sinful. They say that we shall never inherit the kingdom of God. Why would God not let us into his kingdom if he has made us happy with one another? To be gay is not a sin, I am sure.

Why do people think gay only means having sex? When they think gay, they only think about what people from the same gender do behind closed doors. People are obsessed with sex. They do not see that we have a spiritual side too.

⁹ “Wit en swart vroue wat mekaar se parras lek”

Spirituality as Tolerance

Although a number of correctees find the practising of sex between women abhorrent on religious grounds, others argue that one's faith should lead one to tolerance towards these practices on the grounds of the women's difficult and overcrowded circumstances. A heterosexual, extremely sexy-looking correctee writes as follows (translated):

It is very true that sex is actively practised here, and we are very much exposed to it. Because the prison is overcrowded and privacy does not exist, one needs strong faith to look beyond these things.

You cannot distance yourself completely from these activities; space is too restricted. So, even if it contradicts your Christian principles, you have to be strong enough to live with it. But if I would say that I would distance myself from certain people, then I actually say that I do not want anything to do with growth, soul searching and God.

Alternative Religious Discourses on the Incarcerated Female Body

The Structuralists of the 1960s and 1970s pointed out that we create our reality through language, and that we create it in terms of binary oppositions. Male, for instance, derives its meaning from being the opposite of female. Similarly, then, homosexual would be defined as the opposite of its binary, heterosexual. The Structuralists also focused our attention on the fact that, underlying and supporting these binaries, are societal discourses which have been formulated by the powerful in society and which, in turn, regulate our reality and control our lives. It was left to the Poststructuralists of the late 20th century to deconstruct the binaries and undermine their power discourses by exploring the dialogical spaces between the opposites which allegedly constitute reality.¹⁰

According to the observations of this researcher and the testimonies written by women correctees themselves described above, we have indeed seen that the religious discourses which regulate the sexualities of women correctees are constituted by binary oppositions. We have also seen that these religious discourses are power discourses which do not allow dialogue between binaries.

To sum up, the religious discourses which control the sexual behaviour of women correctees are as follows:

- "True Christianity is white" versus "True Christianity is black."
- "Homosexuality is a sin; racially mixed homosexuality is worse" versus "Homosexuality points to a deep gay spirituality."
- "My body does not belong to me but to somebody who can give me power" versus "My body is powerless."
- "Pornography is bad for women" versus "Women correctees have the right to pornography."

The dilemmas faced by the chaplain to correctees as described by Shaw (1995, 20–25) can be related to the binary nature of the religious discourses which not only hold correctees captive, but apparently their spiritual caregivers too. These discourses are based on the binaries "good versus bad," "moral versus immoral," "criminal versus born-again," "powerful bodies versus powerless bodies," and "forced homosexuality versus sinful homosexuality."

In conclusion, the aim of this essay is to deconstruct the binaries which constitute the religious discourses holding the incarcerated female body captive. It seeks to explore the

¹⁰ See Weedon (1997, 10–17).

dialogical spaces between the binaries of “body as bad” and “body as site of oppression,” and offer alternative discourses on the imprisoned body.

The works of Isherwood and Stuart (1998) on body theology, and Porter’s (1991) work on women and morality were helpful in this search.

In *Introducing Body Theology* and in “Sex and Body Politics: Issues for Feminist Theology,” Isherwood and Stuart (1998, 15–32) and Isherwood (2000, 20–34) explore the body as our most intimate space that can be colonised or liberated. The liberated body, as a “divine body,” is a stubborn objection of life as it is. The insight of the female body as colonised, yet one which can be liberated through religious discourses which object to the bodily circumstances brought about by imprisonment, is an important one in the re-languaging of the incarcerated body. So also are further insights expressed by Isherwood and McEwan (2001) in *Introducing Feminist Theology* which emphasise the fierce tenderness in friendships between women, and women’s experience of their bodies as vehicles of joy and erotic power.

In her book, *Women and Moral Identity*, Porter (1991, 196)¹¹ uses the concept “self-in-relations” to explore the dialogical spaces between the binaries “moral versus immoral.” Three of her insights in this regard are important for this study on the deconstruction of the sexually immoral criminal body, as it is traditionally seen:

- 1) The self should not be voiced *in opposition to others*, but *in relation to others*. “In standard moral philosophy, the moral self is viewed as a disembedded and disembodied being. The tension is between universal selves and particular individuals. Feminist moral theory, on the other hand, views the self as closely entwined with significant others and thus emphasises the domain of particular others in relations with one another.”¹²
- 2) Moral identity is self-dignity. It “should ensure that one is not the instrument of another’s will.”¹³ Yet, moral identity is an identity in “dialogue to determine shared values, common purposes and the conditions whereby human potential might be realised.”¹⁴
- 3) A narrative approach to moral identity has two inseparable components:
 - I am the subject of a history, and
 - I am part of others’ stories.

“Moral identity is built on the basis of recognising the mutual dignity of self-reflective others.”¹⁵

Hence with these insights into the female body as a site simultaneously of stubbornness and tenderness (Isherwood and Stuart 1998; Isherwood 2000 and Isherwood and McEwan 2001), and women’s moral identity as that of “self-in-relations” (Porter 1991), the following alternative – that is, deconstructed discourses on the incarcerated female body – will be proposed here. Hopefully, it will also bring relief to the dilemmas of the chaplain to women correctees.¹⁶

¹¹ These few paragraphs on Porter resemble the work of Landman (2005).

¹² Cf. Porter (1991, 13).

¹³ Cf. Porter (1991, 17).

¹⁴ Cf. Porter (1991, 196).

¹⁵ Cf. Porter (1991, 20).

¹⁶ The language used here to describe the alternative deconstructed discourses resembles that of Isherwood (2000) and Isherwood and McEwan (2001).

- A theology of friendship explains fierce tenderness as a moral characteristic of the relationship between women.
- A body theology acknowledges that our bodies are vehicles of joy and relationship, a theology according to which sexual lust is not wrong, but alienating and objectifying the recipient of one's sexual lust is wrong.
- Women who have reclaimed their bodies, understand them as good and powerful.
- Pornography is bad for women, but erotic power (with power understood as the energy one releases in another person) can be good for women.

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