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THE BIBLE AND THE DIGNITY OF HUMAN SEXUALITY:

COMPROMISED SEXUAL SELVES AND VIOLATED ORIENTATIONS[1]

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Abstract

The new South Africa is still haunted by its past, which was informed not only by racism, exploitation and political disenfranchisement, but also by legally regulated heteronormativity which led to – amongst others – the exclusion and demonisation of the homosexual other. Human dignity, it is argued, cannot be restored in piecemeal way but only when – amidst gender concerns – human sexuality is addressed. This paper revolves around two important considerations, namely the importance of biblical hermeneutics amidst interpretative ambiguity and, in particular, the need for an alternative vocabulary with which to address human sexuality in SA today, for which Queer theory proves helpful.

Keywords: Human dignity, Identity, Sexuality/"Homosexuality", Queer Theory, Heteronormativity

1. Introducing the Issue

In our new, post-apartheid South Africa the discourse on human dignity, or worthiness, of necessity comprises twin roles, protest and affirmation. This is especially true of human dignity as it pertains to sexuality and gender in South Africa, and although the focus here is on sexuality, gender[2] cannot be divorced from it.[3] Refocusing the title of the paper slightly away from human dignity as encompassing construct, this contribution is more specifically engaged in addressing the dignity of (human) sexuality and its importance and, indeed, its necessity for conceptualising human dignity in a sustained, affirming way.

Although more than a decade into the new South Africa, the society is still very much aware of how deeply processes of domination and subordination, exclusion and marginalisation were abused to format or construct a certain society. But more recently, South Africans in general are realising more and more that hegemony is not the prerogative of party-political leaders, and that subordination is not restricted to a certain segment of society or some people's lives, but that political ideology, policy and structures quite often build upon age-old convictions and conventions, and that a new round of political conscientisation

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1 Paper prepared for a Stellenbosch University and Protestant Theological University Kampen consultation, 14-15 August 2006, Stellenbosch on "Human dignity at the edges of life".

2 In fact, we are consistently failing to address the link between gender and sexuality; not to mention the possible *3rd gender*! Cf. Boyarin, D 1997. *Unheroic Conduct. The Rise of Heterosexuality and the Invention of the Jewish Man*. Contraversions. Critical Studies in Jewish Literature, Culture and Society, vol. 8. Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, on the link between misogynist thinking and homophobia.

3 Spurlin, WJ 2001. "Broadening Postcolonial Studies/Decolonizing Queer Studies." In Hawley, JC (ed.), *Postcolonial, Queer: Theoretical Intersections*. SUNY Series: Explorations in Postcolonial Studies. Albany: State University of New York Press, 185-205.

(broadly conceived) may be required. A particularly strong, traditional, and ideological conviction is heteronormativity, largely determining that which is considered appropriate sexuality and sexual behaviour, and informing both public opinion as well as legislation in this regard. "Homosexuals" are excluded from heterosexual masculinity in a similar way that the colonised in the colonial narrative was both acknowledged and disavowed, seen as similar and yet also different.[4]

The importance of talking about human dignity in relation to sexual identity has become urgent and can therefore not be seen as a subsidiary discourse, which has to be postponed until issues of race; poverty; HIV/AIDS and so on have been dealt with. This is so for two reasons: The "ideological longevity"[5] of any normalising regime (such as heteronormativity) is perpetuated as long as certain struggles such as those about sexual orientation, are posited as less important and thus deferred. Even beyond SA, an anti-lesbigay bias still seems to be socially acceptable which has led to reluctance among some (conservative) scholars to single "homosexuality" out as deserving special sanction.[6] And in addition, these issues – race, sexuality, and corporeality – are not only related to one another but will probably never effectively be addressed until their interrelationships are acknowledged and policies and practices are devised accordingly.

In this paper I want to reflect on human sexuality and specifically sexual orientation, and even more specifically, "homosexual" or lesbigay sexual orientation from the perspective of both the Bible and our contemporary notions about human dignity. It revolves around two main concerns: The need for an appropriate hermeneutic when considering the Bible on dignity and sexuality, and the equally important need for an appropriate vocabulary to talk about human sexuality, including "homosexuality".[7] However, with the focus on dignity in relation to lesbigay sexual orientations, a few words on our particular South African, postcolonial social location as the primary context for our lesbigay debate, are in order.

2. Postcolonial South Africa: Are we There yet?

The public role and position of religion in South Africa since 1994 has not diminished, and discussions on its proper place emerge through social concerns, the popular media and various other channels. The new, democratic political dispensation is built on the Constitution and Bill of Rights and while already ushering in some change they also challenge the (traditional?) role of specifically Christian communities of faith.[8] The new political ordering of religion was institutionalised – or better, constitutionalised – in proclaiming South

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4 Cf. Holden, P and RJ Ruppel (eds.) *Imperial Desire. Dissident Sexualities and Colonial Literature.* Minneapolis & London: University of Minnesota Press, ix-xxvi (xii).

5 Spurlin *ibid.* 200.

6 Johnson, WS 2006. *A Time to Embrace. Same-Gender Relationships in Religion, Law, and Politics.* Grand Rapids & Cambridge: Eerdmans, 74-75.

7 "Homosexuality" is put between abbreviated commas since it is a contested term. In the discussion on sexual orientation and lesbigay people, other important issues that cannot be addressed here are the relationship between race and sexuality (cf. Spurlin 2001; Liew, TB 2005. "Margins and (Cutting-)Edges: On the (Il)Legitimacy and Intersections of Race, Ethnicity, and (Post)Colonialism." In SD Moore and FF Segovia (eds.) *Postcolonial Biblical Criticism: Interdisciplinary Intersections.* The Bible and Postcolonialism. London: T & T Clark International, 114-165), the link between heterosexism and homophobia and the still vastly neglected relationship between homophobia and misogynism. More generally on dignity and sexuality, cf. Vorster, N 2005. "Human Dignity and Sexual Behaviour – A Theological Perspective." *Verbum et Ecclesia* 26(3), 891-911.

8 Cf. Hartin who briefly describes how the function of the state towards matters religious is perceived differently with the change from an authoritarian to a pluralist-secular state (Hartin, PJ 1997. "Christian Ethics in a Pluralistic Society: Towards a Theology of Compromise." *Religion & Theology* 4(1), 21-34 (28-30)).

Africa a secular country in the new Constitution of South Africa (1996), which together with the Bill of Human Rights, are frequently and positively cited for their inclusivity, liberality, and so on, in SA and by the international community. This has led to an ongoing and vociferous dispute at various levels about religion's public face in post-apartheid South Africa, ranging from issues related to the teaching of religion or religious-related courses at school, the exclusion of reference to the divine in the preamble of the 1996 Constitution, to the role of religion in arresting the erosion of human dignity and moral values in a violence-torn society, to ultimately restore a healthy morality and sense of values.

It is within the context of the new South Africa therefore reasonable to ask about the possible contribution and potential value of the Bible to contemporary social issues and concerns. The public role of the Bible has in fact been emphasised also in other countries amidst similar attempts, although from different historical conditions and positions, to come to terms with their past in a new, reconstructed present. "The Bible enabled the gradual development of those very values which to this present day provide Europe with a basis for democratic consciousness ... and also lay the foundations for a code of human rights".[9] After years of isolation, it is of this global community that South Africa increasingly finds itself part, even if the global community is increasingly touched by postmodern influences, vexing against metaphysical dualism and its often accompanying ascetic practices, denouncing logocentric and positivist attitudes.

The quest for human dignity cannot be separated from the focus on human rights and freedom. With the postmodern incredulity towards master narratives (à la Lyotard) – such as religious systems – the quest for human freedom reaches radical proportions, and impacts heavily on organised or structured religious systems. The medieval concept of freedom was tied up in a low, or even negative, anthropology, "an awareness of human failure and the threat of eternal judgement" which made the actualisation of freedom totally dependent on the intervention of God in human life.[10] However, since the Enlightenment and the discovery of human ability through science and technology a different consciousness took over. "Today the basic assumption is that we all have a right to exist and to realize our own potential".[11] The political realisation of this assumption has been deployed in notions such as those related to representative democracy accompanied by a culture of human rights, and freedom and dignity.

But is the postcolonial nation-state the first prize in the reconstruction of South African society, the gold medal in the parade of rebuilt nations? Or is the quest for the postcolonial South Africa an ongoing one, which demands of us to continuously work for the inclusion of those on the margins – of whatever nature and/or level – not as a point of arrival, but as constant quest? That the "religious factor in the individual search for human dignity and in the unity of a culture" fell by the wayside is not only cause for concern to religious committed people, but it is indeed playing havoc with the lives of people in a generally religiously oriented country.[12] And regardless of how the question is finally answered whether a cer-

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9 Lee and Arapović, quoting Drnovšek, Prime Minister of the Republic of Slovenia in 1996 (Lee, NC and B Arapović 2001. "The Bible in political context. New republics from old Yugoslavia and the former Soviet Union." *Interpretation* 55(4), 378-388 (378)).

10 Pannenberg, W 1981. "Freedom and the Lutheran Reformation." *Theology Today* 38(3), 287-297 (295).

11 *Ibid.* 289.

12 This term is used by Paul Tillich in the context where he uttered the following: "For the question of the ultimate meaning of life cannot be silenced as long as men are men [sic]. Religion cannot come to an end, and a particular religion will be lasting to the degree in which it negates itself as a religion" (quoted by Schüssler, W 1995. "Paul Tillich's dynamic Concept of Faith." *Theology Digest* 42(3), 247-252 (252)). While many agree that "To be human is to be religious" (Krüger, JS 1993. "Religion on the Canvas of Human Evolution."

tain amount of religious or religion antipathy is instrumental in this, it can hardly be denied that in post-apartheid South Africa a variety of marginalised voices are claiming their "subjectivity, cultural legitimacy and political viability".[13] A strong current of voices is coming from the lesbigay-community, also from within the established churches as exemplified by the so-called gay-debate in mainline churches.

3. Dignity, Sexuality and the Bible: Some Pointers

It remains somewhat of an open question to what extent the gay-debate in the mainline churches is indeed about the sexuality of people, and to what extent it is the unfortunate symptom of a bigger debate about the status and role of the Bible and its interpretation?[14] It is an even more open and stronger question to what extent uneasiness with body, sexuality and gender, and the increasing struggle against (if not quite yet loosening of) the patriarchal bonds in the church, informs the immense ecclesial discomfort with lesbigay people in particular and queered sexuality in general?

While it is true that in the past the Bible has been seen as "a source that has given rise to values which are fundamentally to be associated with human rights, such as human dignity, freedom, justice and equality",[15] this is not an uncomplicated matter. From the perspective of biblical studies, the hermeneutical question of how an ancient story is used and contextualised for our modern times was often and is today still too often left unaddressed, and the accompanying ethical and political implications[16] of such interpretative stances in particular, ignored. More appropriate questions have to be asked and answers formulated regarding the applicability and appropriateness of using a moral template such as "the right to dignity" to interpret the portrayal of sexuality in biblical stories, not to mention the appropriation of such stories for our day.

3.1 The Bible on Human Dignity?

It is important to note from the start that the Bible and the New Testament in particular makes more of the indignity, the unworthiness of humans and human life rather than promoting "human dignity" as a concept in itself. A few texts such as Ps. 8 in the Old Testament, and Matt. 25 in the New Testament were frequently employed in the past to argue for the Bible having a favourable disposition towards notions such as human *rights*, human *dignity*, and the *value* of human life. However, simplistic claims are not borne out by the biblical texts that generally stress both the vulnerable and almost brittle nature of human life, and along with mortality the propensity towards disobedience, violence, sin and the like.[17]

CSD/SWO Bulletin, 10, 13), the influence of religion in South Africa in particular has been pointed out variously before, referring to the "incurable religiosity" of Africa (cf. Lategan, BC 1993. "Teaching Theology in the Context of the Humanities." *Scriptura* (S11), 28-35 (28, 32)), or the "pervasive public reality of religion in Africa" (Lombard, C. 1995. "The Study of Religion in Independent Namibia." *Scriptura* 53, 97-124 (102)) – even amidst secularism's influence, "South Africans are still a comparatively religious people" (Prozesky, M 1992. "The Broad Picture: Religion for All Times." *NU Focus on Faith*, 13-14 (6)).

[13] Spurlin *ibid.* 187.

[14] Cf. Bates, S 2004. *A Church at War. Anglicans and Homosexuality*. London, New York: IB Tauris.

[15] Vorster, JN 2000. "(E)mpersonating the bodies of Early Christianity." *Neotestamentica* 34(1), 103-124 (104).

[16] Cf. Punt, J 2006a. "The Bible in the gay-debate in South Africa: Towards an ethics of interpretation." *Scriptura* 93, 419-431.

[17] Cf. Hanks' recent commentary on the NT and its attention to, amongst others, the voices of sex-workers (Hanks, T 2000. *The Subversive Gospel. A New Testament Commentary of Liberation*, trans. JP Doner. Cleveland: Pilgrim Press).

In the Old Testament the transitory nature of human life, and therefore of being human, of human existence itself, is generally emphasised. The Pentateuch's focus is clearly on human beings in so far as they exist and live in terms of the divine covenant – and careful not to generalise and oversimplify, it is one particular group which remains in focus, namely the Israelites. Their story is not one generally characterised by dignity, nor do they exercise a claim to dignity. In the wisdom literature it is precisely the vulnerability of human life which is emphasised and which receives different possible responses: "Fear God" (Prov. 2:5; Eccles. 12:13) as well as "Eat, drink, and be merry because tomorrow we die" (Prov. 9:7). Even the position that the prophetic literature holds human dignity as a basic consideration is to be subordinated to these texts' strong focus on divine justice as their primary point of departure.

In the New Testament an equally intricate situation is found with many of the Old Testament themes functioning as the points of departure for the New Testament's authors. In the gospels it is the weak human beings who not only deliberately expose their selfish and undignified natures in the least expected ways *and* when least expected, but they are often portrayed to do so in contrast with the example of Jesus. But the example of human life provided by Jesus is at least in the eyes of the spectators, friend and foe alike, hardly praised for its dignity – humility, vulnerability and even shame will better describe the life of Jesus! In the earlier writings of someone like Paul, the image presented of human beings is not only one of weakness and lack of dignity, but to a large extent also corruptibility (e.g. Rom. 1 and 7). And in the General Epistles human beings find themselves not only without dignity but even without a home (1 Peter's "aliens and exiles"). In these and other late New Testament writings, such as the Johannine materials, a worrying tendency is that dignity is not only derived but also postponed: Temporally (Revelation; found already in Paul's apocalyptic), but even spatially to a different level of existence (Fourth Gospel).

A common denominator in the anthropological considerations of the biblical texts is that as far as human beings – and to be kept in mind, in the first century this category did not imply any form of equality in status and hierarchy, in gender or so forth – indeed have it, their dignity is *derived* from God. Using the Bible as starting point, claims about the inherent dignity and quality of human life have to be carefully qualified! Furthermore, eventual claims about the derived or attributed dignity of human life are not absolute but *relational*, and function primarily in terms of God's justice, and of course, in relation to the incarnation and ministry of Jesus.

3.2 Human Life in Biblical Times: The Indignity of Sexuality?

Although heteronormativity will be in focus in the second main part of the presentation, it is at this stage already important to start this sub-section with a brief note. The fact that some Bible readers and even a few exegetes feel right at home with the biblical texts pronouncing on first-century homoeroticism and cull these rather arbitrarily from amidst various other, but equally social-historically determined texts (e.g. on slaves and women, and on dress-codes and hair-styles), is probably in a large part testimony to the extent to which heteronormativity unrelentingly characterises both ancient and modern societies.

The importance of the contexts of the authors, of the texts' transmission, and of the readers or receivers, for understanding the meaning of texts, is crucial. Feminist biblical scholars have long pointed out that "classic texts and traditions are also a systematically distorted expression of communication under unacknowledged conditions of repression and

violence"[18] – an observation particularly applicable also in the case of texts related to homoeroticism. Amidst varying opinions about homoeroticism in the Greco-Roman world, the Jewish context which provided one primary context for the biblical texts was consistently negative about such practices. But, the reasons for such negativity have to be investigated and identified; such contexts and reasons cannot be assumed to summarily be analogous to our times and contexts. The "dominant male perspective" of the texts, and that "the available sources do not tell the whole truth of the life and reality of ancient people"[19] have to be considered seriously.

The differences in the similar-sounding values and institutions found in the Bible include marriage which did not necessarily exclude loving relationships between parents and children within extended, multi-generational families, but which was primarily regulated by honour and shame, and patronage and clientage as core values rather than modern notions of security, nurturing and so forth.[20] Sexuality in the first-century culture with extinction rather than overpopulation as the threat, was governed by concerns about fertility and procreation with male domination of women in a hierarchical, patriarchal world taken as an unquestioned given.[21] This differs vastly from modern notions of sexuality as a non-vital, or an at least equally recreational aspect of human identity, with accompanying notions about the equality of the sexes and genders. First-century *arranged* marriages comprising mutual responsibilities and obligations were decidedly male-focused and -dominated in all respects, and are foreign to a modern world where sexual relationships flowing from sustained relationships based on love, romantic and sentimental feelings and associations are privileged. And, whereas modern views of what is "unnatural" are established with reference to biology and behavioural sciences and individualist intent, ancient views focused on societal standards and convention informing and informed by the collectivist setting of the day.

Sexual relationships in the ancient world were within the broader social spectrum of life also governed by the "pivotal" values of honour and shame, and "[a]s sexual and social relations were isomorphically conceived, the role of the active penetrator was always essentially honorable".[22] In the context of the biblical world it was in any case sexual *acts* which were categorised, not *people* on the basis of sexual orientation! Sex was not an act of fulfilment but an act that one person *did* to another, which meant that sexual identity was inextricably linked to social and political identity[23] – "the social body precedes the sexual body". In short, "no distinction is made in the ancient sources between gender roles

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18 Schüssler Fiorenza, E 1999. *Rhetoric and Ethic. The Politics of Biblical Studies*. Minneapolis: Fortress, 196.Even when one assumes a more neutral understanding of the socio-historical context of a text, it is still "produced rhetorically through selection, classification, and valuation" (*ibid.*).

19 Nissinen, M 1998. *Homoeroticism in the Biblical World*. Minneapolis: Fortress, 33.

20 The Bible is witness to at least three different kinds of marriage, none of which corresponds to the modern (Western) notion of marriage based on mutual love (Van Aarde in Dreyer, Y 2004. "Homoseksualiteit: Die Kerk, die tradisie en die Bybel – homofobie en sarkofobie en die evangelie." *Hervormde Teologiese Studies* 60(1&2), 175-205 (182-183)).

21 To the extent that masculine power was symbolised in the penis, and attested by public statutes (Crossan, JD and JL Reed 2004. *In Search of Paul. How Jesus's Apostle opposed Rome's Empire with God's Kingdom. A New Vision of Paul's Words and World*. New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 258-266). Androcentrism and patriarchy would have found the passive participants in homoerotic acts even more of a threat to the "fibre of society" than women who are considered to be out of place. Cf. Nissinen (*ibid.* 132) on the perceived threat of homoeroticism and homophobia as having "more to do with issues of masculinity and femininity than anatomy and psychology".

22 "Male honor is symboled in the male sexual organs" (Malina, BJ 1993. *The New Testament World. Insights from Cultural Anthropology*. Rev ed. Louisville: WJK, 135).

23 "[D]escriptions of sexual relations were dominated by a hierarchical polarization based on the congruence of social status and sexual hierarchy" (Nissinen *ibid.* 128).

(man/woman), sexual orientation (homosexual/ heterosexual/ bisexual), and sexual practice.[24] In those sources, erotic-sexual interaction on the part of people of the same sex is not considered a question of individual identity but a question of social roles and behaviour".[25] This meant that sex for the Greeks was no more or less morally problematic than eating and drinking. Regulation of sexual activities existed, in particular to curb harmful effects to society, but no moral codes of licit or illicit sexual behaviour were created.[26]

Failure to understand how these values and notions functioned in the first century is bound to lead to hasty and misplaced even if well-intentioned conclusions.

3.3. On Handling the Bible with Regard to Human Sexuality and its Dignity

A few observations are immediately relevant when we introduce the biblical texts in our contemporary discussions on human sexuality and dignity.

- In the first place, the Bible cannot be offered as simplistic reference manual on human dignity and/or sexuality, with a few, selected texts simplistically quoted as if their meaning has not been culturally informed, as if no hermeneutical input and restraint is required from their modern interpreters, and as if some of the biblical texts do not provide us with major problems in thinking about sexuality in our contemporary communities of faith and beyond.
- Secondly, the failure to deal with the social setting of the biblical texts usually does not result in the Bible being appropriated without any context whatsoever, but more commonly that the particular reader or interpreter's contemporary social location is superimposed on the biblical texts, rendering an inadequate if not disastrous hermeneutical product.
- Thirdly, our terminology for talking about issues related to sexuality in the Bible is anachronistic and is more recently also framed heteronormatively, and in the end does not do justice to the nature(s) or "practice(s)" of sexuality in biblical times.

It is specifically the heteronormativity of the contemporary *glocal* society which poses a great hindrance to our current ability to consider human sexuality in general and "homosexuality" in particular. The next section wants to propose an alternative to the stalemate in which the lesbigay-debate in South Africa finds itself, namely that the dignity of lesbigay sexual orientation need not be benchmarked according to heterosexuality but can be understood differently, and that *Queer*[27] *theory* provides a useful framework for doing exactly that!

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[24] Of the four different forms of same-sex relationships of which all are attested in ancient sources, transgenerational "homosexuality", transgenderal "homosexuality", egalitarian same-sex relationships, and class-distinguished "homosexuality", only the third category plays a significant role in modern society (Nissinen *ibid.* 131).

[25] Nissinen *ibid.* 128

[26] Cf. Lambert, M and H Szesnat 1994. "Greek 'Homosexuality': Whither the Debate?" *Akroterion* 39(2), 46-63 (52-56). While "active and passive partners match the distinction between male and female roles", "[s]ame-sex sexual contacts were regarded as a voluntary perversion" (Nissinen *ibid.* 128,130). The notion that "sperm contained the origin of human life" and therefore should not be wasted or used inappropriately (Nissinen *ibid.*130-1), should be noted.

[27] The term queer refers to what is outside the normal boundaries of society, and particularly to that which transgresses the rules of gender and sex – contrary to its original derogatory insinuation, in contemporary usage it has been validated as umbrella term for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered as well as other people finding themselves at odds with heteronormativity in terms of sexuality, sexual anatomy or gender identity.

4. The Quest for the Dignity of Lesbigay Sexual Orientations

It has been homosexual liberationist theology and biblical interpretation that has until recently been engaged in the battle for alternative interpretations of the Bible and specifically the six-shooter texts,[28] most commonly and quite often read as so-called biblical directives or injunctions against what was fairly loosely called, "homosexuality". Homosexual liberationists insist on gay and lesbian inclusion from a contemporary premise of the naturalness of "homosexuality" and argue against claims that sex and sexual desire between men or between women is neither natural nor good.[29] More than claiming legitimacy for homosexual orientation, homosexual liberationists posit a radical ethical programme in which fidelity, mutuality and love is refocused, and therefore perceived as more intentional, more open to diversity and more prophetic.[30]

However, within Queer theory scepticism about a strictly homosexual liberation project is related to the "ethical grammar" for gay and lesbian theologies which is determined through conscious opposition to a dominating and hostile heterosexual norm.[31] The concern is that in the absence of these heteronormative categories of "homosexuality" and heterosexuality, that without this binary, the related ethical particularities of each may cease to exist and even become obsolete.[32] It was Halperin who suggested earlier that since the term heterosexuality enters the English language only after "homosexuality";[33] it means, rather ironically, that "normative heterosexual masculinity is only possible in contrast to a constitutive homosexual other".[34]

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28 The Bible is seen as a revolver with reference to six texts (Gen. 19:1-29; Lev. 18:22, 20:13; Rom. 1:18-32; 1 Cor. 6:9 and 1 Tim. 1:8-11) which act as "bullets" directed at lesbigays to kill of their access to the claim to full membership in the community of faith (Germond, P 1997. "Heterosexism, Homosexuality and the Bible." In Germond, P and S De Gruchy (eds.), *Aliens in the Household of God. Homosexuality and Christian Faith in South Africa*. Cape Town & Johannesburg: David Philip, 188-232 (193)).

29 Punt, J 2006b. "Connections in Queer and Postcolonial theory and biblical interpretation." Unpublished paper read at the International meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature, Edinburgh, Scotland: 2-5 July 2006. Gay liberation Christians argue on the basis of justice and in relation to the "essence" of God and creation (Isherwood, L and E Stuart 1998. *Introducing Body Theology. Introductions in Feminist Theology.* Cleveland: Pilgrim, 29ff), for "homosexuality" as a natural variation in human life, and therefore for rereading biblical texts traditionally interpreted to forbid homoeroticism (cf. Nissinen *ibid.*123-28). The prophetic outsider ministry of Jesus is often a focal point in gay and lesbian theologies, focusing on the position and attitude of Jesus towards the marginalised of society, while emphasising the need for appropriate hermeneutical grids for reading the Bible (Punt 2006a).

30 Schneider, LC 2000a. "Homosexuality, Queer Theory, and Christian Theology." *Religious Studies Review* 26(1), 3-12 (8). The prophetic vision in much of gay and lesbian theological thinking for a new world and a claim for the superiority of their ethical discernment is at least partly related to their focus on inclusivity.

31 Queering also impacts on patriarchy as consequence of heterosexual domination and its perception of "homosexuality" as a threat, in questioning its requirement of monogamous security to safeguard the paternity of children, and, women's valuing of the ostensible security of monogamous relationships beyond their own interests (cf. Isherwood and Stuart *ibid.* 29).

32 Schneider *ibid.* 8-9.

33 Historically, the term homosexual and its derivatives were a late nineteenth-century invention referring to a psychologically defined "condition distinct from and parallel to heterosexuality … an abstract construct superimposed upon the widely diverse reality of human experience" (Holben, LR 1999. *What Christians think about homosexuality: Six representative viewpoints*. North Richland Hills: BIBAL, 4). Sex reformer Karl Kertbeny coined the term "homosexual" in 1868, and Swiss medical practitioner Karoly Maria Benkert used it in 1869 in opposition to the expansion of anti-sodomy laws in Prussia (Elliott, A 2003 *Concepts of the Self.* Key Concepts. Cambridge: Polity Press, 122; cf. Holben *ibid.* 6, 258; and Moore SD 1998. "Que(e)rying Paul: Preliminary questions." In DJA and SD Moore (eds.) *Auguries: The Jubilee volume of the Sheffield Department of Biblical Studies*, JSOTSS 269. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 250-274).

34 Holden and Ruppel *ibid.* ix-xvi.

4.1 Queerying and Queering[35] Sexuality

Queer theory pursues the lead of feminist, Foucauldian thinking[36] about the making of the dominant through the erasure of the subjugated and therefore turns the tables on heterosexist thought: "Normative heterosexuality is a social construction that needs homosexuality in order to retain its norm-defining status".[37] More basically, Queer theory challenges the conventional framework[38] for human sexuality that (unwittingly if not unintentionally) produces heterosexuality and "homosexuality", and considers religious ideas as the cultural means of production for that system.[39]

Queer theory renders identity multiple and unstable yet stresses its regulatory function, and therefore celebrates difference for contributing to and not threatening truth.[40] Still, *queer* deconstructs identity as much as gender – and its accompaniments such as power, social roles, and hierarchical locations. This is of particular importance in South Africa, where "representations of (homo)sexual identity as a social position that is always already *mediated* by race, gender, social class, and geo-political spatialization", have to be diversified.[41] As theory it critically analyses social dynamics and power structures regarding sexual identity and social power, by challenging and deconstructing normality especially as supported by essentialist notions of identity. Informed by a constructionist agenda, Queer theory has moved "from explaining the modern homosexual to questions of the operation of the hetero/homosexual binary, from an exclusive preoccupation with homosexuality to a focus on heterosexuality as a social and political organizing principle, and from a politics of minority interests to a politics of knowledge and difference".[42]

The diversity which characterises Queer theory is visible in the underlying theoretical and political differences as well (as in debates about class) which can be summarised with reference to a desire- in contrast to a need-theory.[43] *Desire-theory* builds on poststructural-

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35 This refers to Queer theory's twin foci on gender and sexuality as social constructs (in short, "queering") rather than as essences, as well as on the theoretical and political accommodation of the role of social dynamics and power play in sex and gender ("queerying").

36 Other philosophers like Lacan (also) "theorized that the phallogocentric basis of civilization was erected precisely on the repression of the feminine" (Tolbert, MA 2000. "Gender." In AKM Adam (ed.), *Handbook of Postmodern Biblical Interpretation*. St Louis: Chalice Press, 99-105 (101)).

37 Schneider, LC 2000b. "Queer Theory." In Adam, AKM (ed.), *Handbook of Postmodern Biblical Interpretation*. St Louis: Chalice, 206-212 (211).

38 In typical postmodern fashion, Queer theory also sits with a dilemma regarding the use of queer to refer to what lies outside the norm, because as soon as queer is defined, it becomes domesticated, "rendering queer no longer outside of anything, and so no longer queer – in theory at least." In this way Queer theory then also stands to lose its claim to the outsider position in the heteronormative society and its power arrangements, in particular (Schneider *ibid.* 206).

39 Schneider 2000a, 3; 2000b, 208.

40 Seidman's notion of identity being composite and therefore constituted by different "elements" (such as race, class, ethnicity, nationality, gender, sexual orientation, age, ableness, etc.) is appreciated, but the term "elements" may be dangerous, recalling essentialist images (Cf. Seidman, S 1996. "Introduction". In Seidman, S (ed.), 1996. *Queer theory/Sociology*. Twentieth-century Social Theory. Oxford: Blackwell, 1-29).

41 Spurlin *ibid.* 187.

42 Seidman, *ibid.* 9. In this way, Queer theory ends up asking questions many of which are similar to those of Postcolonial theory, even if the questions resonate differently and within other (aligned?) fields of enquiry. This interaction between the postcolonial and the queer provides us with useful theoretical frameworks for conceptualising and discussing lesbigay sexual orientations (cf. Punt 2006b).

43 "[I]f we take 'desire' to correspond [to] ... the 'unnameable yearnings' of the unconscious and 'need' to correspond to food, clothing, shelter, health care, education ... then the confrontational relation of these two modes of thought can be clarified by posing the question: What kind [of] subject can afford to explain politics and the social world strictly in terms of 'desire' except those whose 'needs' are already met?" (Morton, D 1995-1996. "The Class Politics of Queer Theory." *The Alternative Orange* 5(1), 1-8 (3). Online:

ism and postmodernism and is well represented among the more affluent, academic and Western-oriented theorists. It locates the instrument of and stimulus for social change in the unavoidable and purely coincidental and non-teleological effects of the ongoing liberation of (unconscious) desire and the play of the signifier. Desire-theory necessarily avoids all totalities and causalities because it is based on "a libidinal economy of culture", and therefore "produces a politics of isolated localities in undecidable relation to each other", which is "a politics of incommensurate language games" (à la Lyotard).[44] Desire-theory is, at least implicitly, at times believed to have superseded need-theory, which on the other hand, takes its cue from Marxist theory.

Need-theory views social change as a historical and material rather than a textual, representational or semiotic process, and history itself neither as coincidental or playful (à la Derrida), nor as a series of disparate discourses and institutions (à la Foucault), but "as the history of changing modes of production and of modifications within the prevailing mode of production".[45] Social change is perceived to be closely related to the objectively existing binary of base (economics) and superstructure (in the form of politics, religion and so forth), and the binary operates in the mode of determinate causality. Need-theory allows for the explanation of social injustice in the global context, without eliding geographic localities and local social problems.[46]

4.2 Queered Identity and Claimed Dignity: Dignified Hope?

Queer and Postcolonial theories entertain what can be called, in biblical studies parlance, a prophetic vision for the world, recognising the stakes involved in common struggles as well in the specificity and partiality of respective histories and realities.[47] On the one hand, the prophetic vision in much of lesbigay theological thinking is for a new world, characterised by inclusiveness, and a radical ethical programme focussed on fidelity, mutuality and love amidst diversity. Queer theory, on the other hand, emphasises the importance of re-imagining the world, going beyond but certainly including homosexual liberation, along with other concerns.[48] But it is not so much about queer outsiders that are (merely) accommodated in a heterosexually normative communion, since Queer theory is concerned rather about a re-visioned or reformulated world.[49]

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www.etext.org/Politics/AlternativeOrange/5/v5n1_qt.html (13/01/2005). Cf. also Hawley, JC 2001. "Introduction." In Hawley, JC (ed.), *Postcolonial, Queer: Theoretical Intersections*. SUNY Series: Explorations in Postcolonial Studies. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1-18 (6-7).

44 Morton *ibid.* 3.

45 *Ibid.*

46 To what extent globalisation can be considered queer in the sense that it makes the borders of nation-states irrelevant and borders a blur (Hawley *ibid.* 8), is a topic for another discussion.

47 "The greatest promise for a postcolonial queer theory may be in participating, at the level of public discourse, in an ongoing reeducation of desire" (Dayal, S 2001. "By Way of an Afterword." In Hawley, JC (ed.), 205-325 (306)).

48 Caution is advised in considering the option, since it is no simple trade-off: "[L]esbian and gay liberation may be about intense and intimate needs for inclusion, recognition, and identity that are worth the cost of some heteronormativity. Queer theology may be about creative re-imagining of possibilities in which we are no longer recognizable, but in which we no longer beg for recognition either." It is a powerful, creative and dynamic, but also potentially devastating, tension (Schneider 2000a, 9).

49 Queer theory challenges heteronormativity in all its outfits and at different levels in a systematic and comprehensive way, and beyond the important lesbigay resistance against simple intolerance, Queer theory demonstrates how the broader area of normalisation of heterosexuality constitutes a site of alienation, disenfranchisement and violence. Queering means "a radical reconstitution of the panoply of cultural discourse, includ-

It is however not difficult to understand the lesbigay criticism levelled against Queer theory:

> I am suspicious that Queer theory, with its more fluid notion of human – and sexual – identity, marks a defusion and consequent loss of political power in that it supports the generic right to be different rather than standing for the right to be different in any specific way. When space is cleared to be different, some differences – like same-sex love – may still retain their stigma.[50]

From another perspective, though, Queer theory alerts gay and lesbian liberationists who argue for their inclusion and accommodation in main stream society[51] – whether in its social, political or religious and spiritual dimensions – to a dangerous mimesis which entails homosexual inclusion in "a heteronormative communion".[52]

Without trying to dissolve all the tensions generated by the opponents of Queer theory, or to minimise its challenge to assume political responsibility, its political commitment has to be acknowledged: "Hope for a queer future is not purely hedonistic, it is also political".[53] Amidst accusations of not being specific about any goal in particular, the broader range of Queer theory's political impact also needs to be recognised. "The deconstruction of identity is not the deconstruction of politics; rather, it establishes as political the very terms through which identity is articulated".[54] However, a particularly prominent danger to avoid is the imposition of Western defined queer theory as the master narrative for local, historical, and particular situations[55]; on the other hand, there is great advantage in sharing a geo-political epistemological framework for considering lesbigay sexual orientation and identity. In short, Queer theory offers us the advantage of a new vocabulary to consider and discuss human sexuality, sexual orientation and sexual practices.[56] Without eschewing the gender component, or indeed issues of race, class and social status, Queer theory offers a framework for rethinking sexual orientation without predispositions towards creating a new insider-outsider rhetoric.

5. Conclusion: The Need for a New Hermeneutic and Vocabulary

In the very young and fragile *new* South Africa the importance of human dignity amidst a vast range of social problems cannot be emphasised enough and in this regard the church and the Bible can play an important role in the difficult process of restoring peace, human values and dignity in the South African community.[57] Posing "homosexuality" as "white

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ing the discourse of sexuality as well as aesthetic or socioeconomic theory of medical (and more generally) scientific discourse" (Dayal *ibid.* 306).

50 Long, RE 2005. Review of *Michael Foucault and theology: The politics of religious experience. JAAR* 73(4): 1189-1192.

51 Tolbert (*ibid.* 104 referring to Butler) cautions that feminism is also prone to taking the heterosexual bias of a simple bipolar system of gender for granted.

52 Spurlin 2000a, 4.

53 Isherwood and Stuart *ibid.* 31.

54 Butler, J 1990. *Gender Trouble. Feminism and the Subversion of Identity.* Thinking Gender, vol. 2. New York: Routledge, 148.

55 Spurlin 2001, 192.

56 And many other helpful, theoretical spin-offs, such as reckoning with corporeality, gender and to some extent even race as important considerations in thinking about identity and dignity!

57 During his presidency, Nelson Mandela challenged the church to become involved in the rebuilding of the South African society and more recently both president Mbeki and provincial premiers have urged the church to assume what they perceive as its role in halting the moral decay of society.

disease" and lesbigay identity as un-African,[58] the danger of a homogenising tendency towards Africa and its people which fails to account for the diversity of its citizens and cultures, becomes all too real,[59] and essentialism returns under cover of racial stereotyping. Human dignity cannot be considered in a piecemeal way, and therefore it is appropriate to ask:

> Can attempts at nation re-building, democratization, and national reconciliation in South Africa, for instance, be fully understood without an analysis of the sexual, just as any analysis of the sexual needs to be theorized within specific material conditions?[60]

The gist of my argument is that if we want to do justice to sexual orientation and identity in our contemporary world, to the dignity of a range of sexualities and orientations, and if we want to make the Bible (at least if not more than) a conversation partner, we need new or different categories to think about – conceptualise, if you want – human sexuality, since the binary of hetero- and "homosexuality" has been found wanting in different ways. In this regard Queer theory provides useful alternatives in a number of ways, allowing us to rethink our current terminology which with predominant focus on homo-this and hetero-that, fails to address a number of important matters.[61] In particular, as long as the heteronormativity of our society including our churches and its role in sustaining patriarchal patterns, are not acknowledged, but maintained and even encouraged, we will fail to address the spectrum of human sexuality, heterosexuals as much as homosexuals, bisexuals as much as the transgendered – and their human dignity!

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58 Contrary to the claim of people such as the president of Zimbabwe, neither "homosexuality" nor homosexual behaviour is either a disease or particularly Western. E.g. Baum found evidence of three types of homosexual activities in Africa: Egalitarian, trans-generational, and trans-gendered (Baum, RM 1993. "Homosexuality and the Traditional Religions of the Americas and Africa." In Swidler, A, (ed.) *Homosexuality and World Religions*. Valley Forge: Trinity, 1-46).

59 Spurlin 2001, 196-198.

60 *Ibid.* 199.

61 And even more importantly, "to posit queer struggles as less urgent ... and not to recognize the transformative power of the erotic, irresponsibly trivializes the demands of lesbian, gay men, and other sexual minorities, defers retheorizations of nation, citizenship, sexuality, and identity, and enables heteronormativity, as a normalizing regime, to perpetuate its own ideological longevity" (Spurlin 2001:200).