

The role of biblical interpretation in the construction of sexual identity in Christian Sunday school material for children: A re-reading of Genesis 3 and Matthew 1.18-25 from a feminist and queer perspective



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Abstract

Christian churches have played an important role in socializing its members on how to behave in society. It is in these dynamics of creating Christian identities that a process of sexual socialization takes place. However, teachings about sexuality are not as explicit and common in Church, but instead, it seems to be a silent process where ambiguous ideas have emerged and which could even be in contradiction among themselves. These ideas have unfortunately promoted patriarchal roles of gender, sexual violent relationships and the imposition of a normative sexuality.

In spite of the lack of evident engagement with sexuality that is found in the church, sexual socialization is happening almost inadvertently since very early ages through Sunday school narratives for children.

This research identifies theologies that work on issues of gender, sexuality and body within the biblical faith, and argues that these theologies must be taken into account by the church in order to fill the present lack of engagement and proposes a different way to think sexuality from a Christian perspective. It is through the keystones of African feminist theology, body theology, indecent theology, queer theologies, and the methodology of deconstructive literary analysis, that I intend to show how particular narratives of Sunday school material construct and socialize a normative sexual identity with children.

The relevance of this study remains in its careful analysis of the sexual socialization of children through the narratives of the Sunday school material, and the preoccupation for recognizing the different ways of interpreting and sharing with children the biblical texts. To conclude the research I suggest a new reading of the biblical stories shared in the Sunday school material, a reading that promotes sexual rights.

Key terms:

Children, biblical interpretation, sexual socialization, feminist theologies, queer theology, Sunday school narratives

Declaration

Submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Masters of Theology, in the Graduate Programme in Gender, Religion and Health, University of KwaZulu-Natal, Pietermaritzburg, South Africa.

I, Karoline Mora Blanco, declare that

1. The research reported in this thesis, except where otherwise indicated, is my original research.
2. This thesis has not been submitted for any degree or examination at any other university.
3. This thesis does not contain other persons' data, pictures, graphs or other information, unless specifically acknowledged as being sourced from other persons.
4. This thesis does not contain other persons' writing, unless specifically acknowledged as being sourced from other researchers. Where other written sources have been quoted, then:
 - a. Their words have been re-written but the general information attributed to them has been referenced
 - b. Where their exact words have been used, then their writing has been placed in italics and inside quotation marks, and referenced.
5. This thesis does not contain text, graphics or tables copied and pasted from the Internet, unless specifically acknowledged, and the source being detailed in the thesis and in the References section.

Student Name

Date

Name of Supervisor

Signature

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CHAPTER 1: Introduction

Though the present dissertation has a strong focus on Biblical Studies, the study is located under the interdisciplinary programme of Gender, Religion and Health, meaning that the content of the dissertation is concerned about the intersections between these disciplines. Commonly these three disciplines are understood separately as areas of study isolated from each other; however the interest of the present dissertation is on the very encounter of the three. Because my area of expertise is theology, I will use biblical and theological forms of analysis to intersect these three areas. I will analyse the intersection of gender and sexuality, as well as the intersection of sexual health rights, with the theological discourse taught to children through material of Sunday school.

Due to the above, the critical question that this dissertation seeks to answer is: How are the particular narratives of Genesis 3 and Matthew 1:18-25 used in Sunday school material in order to construct and socialize the sexual identity of children, and to what extent can feminist and queer theologies/hermeneutics offer resources to re-read these same selected biblical texts in a way that promotes sexual rights?

Background of the study

It is my experience that the Christian Church plays a huge role in telling people what it is to behave properly in society. From preaching to formation in seminars in different denominations, it is taught what it means to be a Christian and in what ways Christians differentiate from the non-Christians. It is in these dynamics of creating Christian identities that a process of sexual socialization takes place. However, teachings about sexuality are not as explicit and common in the church as others teachings (for example the memorization of the Lord's Prayer). One may hear statements about abstinence, procreation, adultery, and maybe, in counselling sessions, rape, homosexuality and sexual abuse could be handled. But in regards to the theological discourses and teachings of the Christian Church in relation to the exercise of sexuality, there are several confusing and ambiguous ideas, some of which could even be in contradiction among themselves. As an example I could mention the perception of sexuality as a good part of creation in contrast with the perception of sexuality as sinful and dangerous.

Because of this lack of engagement with sexuality in the church I believe it is important that ‘sexual theologies’ do not remain in the academic sphere but that they actually reach the communities. My interest to do this study is related to this gap; I plan to connect church teaching and the new theologies about sexuality and the body.

I have a special concern with sexual socialization as it happens almost inadvertently in church since very early ages through Sunday school narratives for children. Children are taught about values and worldviews that influence their identities and their relationships with others who may or may not fit in these worldviews. However, these values and worldviews are often questioned, especially for those who experience non-conformity with the identity that it is imposed to them. Nonetheless those who question or bring in new worldviews about sexuality experience rejection, discrimination, and their dignity and health are damaged by the dominant demand to negate their gender or/and sexual identity and to perform another identity accordingly to the teachings given by the church.

Because of the above, this study intends to question the use of biblical texts that encourage particular gender roles and heteronormative sexuality within Christian Sunday school material for children. In addition the study is interested to present other ways of using the same biblical texts without discriminating against different sexual and gender identities but promoting instead sexual health rights of all people.

Rationale and objectives for the study

Being raised as a child in a Christian home and ending up studying theology from a critical perspective helped me to develop a serious consciousness about the significance of religion in children’s life and the implications of it in all areas of their lives . Additionally to this, from personal experience as well as from my study in the academy I gained knowledge about gender inequalities and sexual discrimination in society. These experiences of injustice are not absent in the religious sphere but instead the systems that maintain them are present and re-produce them from the religious discourses and practices. In Christian discourses shared with children, processes of socialization take place, and a dynamic of sexual socialization reproduce a violent patriarchal and heteronormative sexuality.

Because of the above the main objective and the specific objectives of this study are as follows.

Main objective

The main objective is to analyse how the particular narratives of Genesis 3 and Matthew 1:18-25 are used in Sunday school for children to construct and socialize sexuality, and explore to what extent feminist and queer theologies/hermeneutics offer elements to re-read selected biblical texts used by the Sunday school material in a way that promotes sexual rights.

Sub-objectives

1. To describe the categories of analysis offered by feminist and queer theologies/hermeneutics on issues of sexuality.
2. To analyse how the narratives of Genesis 3 and Matthew 1:18-25 are used in Sunday school material for children, using the categories derived from a feminist/queer theologies/hermeneutics.
3. To understand how feminist and queer hermeneutics read the selected biblical texts used by the Sunday school material.
4. To explore how these selected texts might be re-interpreted in a way that they promote sexual rights.

Research design

The study consists of a qualitative research that is interested in a profound understanding of the constructions of meaning within religious discourses around sexuality and their allegations for sexual health rights.

I will use a poststructuralist paradigm. Following Weedon's (1987) and Belsey's (2002) understandings of poststructuralism and applying it to my study, I will analyse the discourses by understanding the relationship between the language used in the Sunday school material and the biblical texts with the meanings it produces, which are learned and reproduced in the church. There is going to be a special attention to the patriarchal interest present in these discourses, and the possibilities to resist them (see Weedon 1987; Belsey 2002). Quoting Lazar, in my work the discourses will be seen as "a site of struggle, where forces of social (re)production and contestation are played out" (Lazar 2007: 4).

Sample and data analysis

My primary sources for the data production are two Sunday school narratives from the Southern Sharing and Learning Together material (SSALT) material and the biblical texts used by this Sunday school material. The SSALT consists of Sunday school resource produced by Scripture Union, a Southern Africa sub-region publication. The Sunday school material is constructed in sets to be use for a period of 4 years, and they contain a diversity of themes elaborated from a particular interpretation of a biblical text. The SSALT material has been published for the Scripture Union, an international movement that originates in London in the 19th century and that is currently organized by regions and countries around the world (Scripture Union International 2015). The Africa region has as one of its services a “Children’s Ministry” which works with different programs, including the production of children’s material (Scripture Union Africa 2015). Among the material produce for the Scripture Union Africa this study will utilize a Southern Africa publication on Sunday school material.

The sample chosen for this study is purposive and the criteria for the selection of the two narratives and their biblical texts were: firstly, that the narratives present ideas and perceptions about gender and/or sexual roles; and secondly, that the two narratives employ meta-narratives that are frequently used to justify and legitimate a normative sexuality. It is important to clarify that the Sunday school material chosen is not representative of Christian children’s education in general, but they are a particular case of relevance because of their common use, especially among independent churches in the African region.

Data analysis

The data will be evaluated through literary analysis. The study will present two levels of analysis. The first literary analysis will be of the two narratives used in the Sunday school material; this is the stories as the SSALT material retold them. And the second analysis will be of the biblical texts of Genesis 3 and Matthew 1.18-25 as they are presented in the NRSV translation of the Bible. The literary analysis of the biblical texts will be done following the guidelines of *narrative criticism* (text-centered), *feminist criticism* and *queer approaches* (reader-centered).

Narrative criticism in my use of the term is limited to the final form (Walsh 2009: xii) of the biblical text as it is represented in a contemporary critical English translation. The analysis is

mainly based on the different components of the texts such as the use of words, characters, plot, setting, and others (Beal, Keffer, Linafelt, 1999: 83). In order to respond to the research questions proposed for this study, I will work with a deconstructive narrative criticism approach, as it will help me to see the inconsistencies, gaps, omissions and internal conflicts present in the texts that could offer the possibility of a new understanding of the biblical narratives (Olson 2010, 19-20).

Feminist criticism and queer approaches refer to the methods that are focused on the reader's interpretation and response to the text from their own location/situation. Feminist criticism is defined by Steinberg (2010:163) as "a form of scholarly inquiry rooted in the awareness that sexism characterizes both the biblical text and the institutions that claim it an interpret it". Therefore, feminist criticism criticizes gender roles and heterosexuality that are presented as a norm (Steinberg 2010:166). In a similar way, queer approaches have as a starting point the homophobic use of the Bible that operates against this community (Goss & West 2000: 3). From the awareness of this marginalized location, new interpretations of the biblical texts are produced.

Chapters outline

Chapter 2: Literature Review

This chapter will explore the conversations around issues of sexuality as a social construction. The chapter will focus on three main sections. In the first section it will explain how gender is understood for the purpose of this study by looking at different authors and their understanding of it. Secondly the chapter will clarify the differences and the relationship between gender, sex and sexuality. And finally in a third section the chapter will relate sexuality and childhood, emphasizing how sexuality is imagined for children and how an 'adult' sexuality is socialized with them from an early age.

Chapter 3: Feminist and queer theologies/hermeneutics engagement with sexuality

This chapter will present the theoretical underpinnings of the study, which are feminist and queer theologies/hermeneutics, and how they engage with the constructions and deconstructions of sexuality. The chapter will expound and make explicit the principles and categories offered by these theologies/hermeneutics.

Chapter 4: Sexual constructions in Sunday school narratives

This chapter will explore the two Sunday school narratives chosen (based on Genesis 3 and Matthew 1:18-25) by analysing the literary aspects of them through a ‘post-structuralist deconstructive literary analysis’ which is based on the method of narrative criticism and a critical approach that deconstructs the discourses present in the narratives. Through this analysis the chapter will show the constructions of sex and gender that are present in the narratives and the mechanisms of socialization or internalization of such constructions.

Chapter 5: A feminist and queer reading of Genesis 3 and Matthew 1:18-25

This chapter will review how the biblical texts used for the Sunday school narratives have been approached in various feminist and queer readings of the biblical texts. The content of the chapter will not be limited to what are the different interpretations around the texts, but it will also pay careful attention to the hermeneutical approaches and strategies worked in the different readings.

Chapter 6: Pro-sexual rights readings of Genesis 3 and Matthew 1:18-25

This chapter will gather the acquired analysis from the previous chapters in relation to the theological categories, hermeneutical approaches, and the different strategies employed by feminism and queer approaches to sexuality and to the particular texts. Drawing from this, the chapter will develop interpretations of Genesis 3 and Matthew 1:18-25 that promote sexual rights.

Chapter 7: Conclusions

This chapter will present the findings of the study, including the limitations of it as well as suggestions for future research.

CHAPTER 2: Literature Review: Construction and socialization of a normative sexuality

The objective of this chapter is to engage with gender and sex theories in order to understand two main aspects: (1) how gender and sexuality are formed and reproduced in society and (2) how such dynamic of construction and socialization works from childhood and from different contexts, one of them being Sunday school with children in a Christian context.

In order to accomplish this purpose, the chapter will review selected literature that guides the discussion around gender, sexuality, childhood and sexual socialization. The literature reviewed comes from different disciplines such as sociology, philosophy, anthropology, pedagogy and theology.

How is gender understood in this study?

At the present time gender is an issue of anxiety and concern in our societies. The sociologist Amy Wharton briefly explains that gender entered into the academic world with the second wave of the women's movement and their consciousness of women's absence in the different disciplines and research in academia (Wharton 2005: 4). This was the start of awareness on gender inequalities within academia, as well as of women's rights and on the consciousness of how gender differentiation justified the superiority of males over females. From these preoccupations different theories of gender have emerged and among them there is dispute and difficulty in agreeing on what gender is and how it functions (Connell 2014: 3).

However, one way to understand gender is through the concept of a "social structure". The Australian sociologist Raewyn Connell explains that this is called a structure because there are patterns and/or repetitions in social relationships which persist forming an identifiable social structure that govern the way society is understood and lived (Connell 2014: 9). In her own words:

Gender is a social structure, but of a particular kind. Gender involves a specific relationship with bodies. This is recognized in the commonsense definition of gender as an expression of natural difference, the bodily difference of male from female. What is wrong with this formula is not the attention to bodies, nor the concern with sexual reproduction, but the idea that cultural patterns simply 'express' bodily difference. (Connell 2014: 9)

Following the previous concept of Connell, gender as a social structure is based on an understanding of male and female bodies; however this understanding remains very limited. What Connell is suggesting is that even though gender pretends to be based on body differences, the social structure of gender actually idealized those bodies as “females” and “males”, evading the real bodies of real beings and their variations and expressions. Gender then becomes “the way human society deals with human bodies and the many consequences of that ‘dealing’ in our personal lives and our collective fate” (Connell 2014:10).

In relation to the simple understanding of gender as the division between male bodies with masculine characteristics and female bodies with feminine characteristics, and the emphasis on the social inferiority of the females, Wharton’s historical explanation tells that, “The sociology of women has gradually given way to a sociology of gender” (Wharton 2005: 5). As a result, nowadays there is more production of literature specialized not just in the inequalities experienced by women, or the differentiation between ‘females’ and ‘males’, but on the differences in the midst of women and in the midst of men (Wharton 2005: 4). Gender as a concept must leave behind its dualistic understanding and add the multiple expressions of gender into its definition, and not limit its concept to those expressions but be open to new ones.

However, in spite of the recognition of differences between groups of men, and between groups of women, and the recognition of a diversity that does not subscribe as either women or men, there is persistence of a ‘hegemonic’ gender identity. A hegemonic masculinity or femininity refers to the way of being a ‘man’ or being a ‘woman’ that is generally appreciated and accepted in society (Wharton 2005: 5). The philosopher Judith Butler also makes reference to this ‘hegemonic’ gender identity when she makes reference to a “hegemonic structure of patriarchy” that implies a subordination of females under males. However as is characteristic of this philosopher, she is actually problematizing the idea of hegemonic or “universal” by making reference to the deviations (Butler 2007: 5).

Then, it becomes clear that the structure that intends to be static is in reality quite unstable, undefined. Connell says that womanhood and manhood are not fixed by nature (Connell 2014: 4), despite the ideas that gender relations are concerned with natural bodies that may be understood as fixed. Nevertheless the participation of bodies in the understanding of gender is an issue of dispute since it becomes problematic to reduce the concept of gender merely to a bodily difference which is commonly understood as binary: there are females and males.

Nevertheless, Connell is careful not to limit this involvement of the bodies with a simple comprehension of “natural difference” but instead she acknowledges that this definition risks to understand that “cultural patterns simply ‘express’ bodily difference” (Connell 2014: 9).

Connell’s (and other authors) definition of gender introduces the idea of a social structure, and within this idea there is a risk to define gender as something fixed or so ‘structured’ that there is no space for discrepancy and nonconformity. Fortunately, this thesis works within a post-structuralist framework that proposes that “the distinctions we make are not necessarily given by the world around us, but are instead produced by the symbolizing systems we learn.” (Belsey 2002: 7). Understanding that structure is ‘fictional’, this study wants to pay attention to exactly those situations of dissidence within the ‘gender structure’ where there may be an imposition to fulfil gender according to the structure. Being aware of the falseness of such systems this study will approach such issues. Summing up, Connell’s definition helps to understand gender as part of a structure or arrangement of society that intends to be true and natural, but that actually fails to reflect reality.

It is important to come back to the binary understanding of gender and see the failure of the structure of gender that was mentioned before. The sociologist Amy Wharton helped to understand the difficulty with this understanding of gender. She explains that the definitions of gender that emerged from feminist movements focused on the differences between men and women, and ignored the differences among men and women (Wharton 2005: 4). Wharton also points out that this binary idea of gender is based on a sex difference founded on chromosomes, physical and sexual appearance, hormones, among other things. Yet these sexual categories of two sexes are still half-true since there is a percentage of human beings that do not correspond with these categories (Wharton 2005: 18), for example intersexed people.

These kinds of gaps are the ones that Judith Butler discusses in her book *Gender Trouble*, and her proposals around gender and sexuality are central to the understanding of gender in this thesis. In her work Butler is aware of the new hierarchies that the gender binary produces and she is criticising the kind of feminism that reinforces “exclusionary gender norms” (Butler 2007: viii). Her work also brings us closer to sexuality, which is, together with gender, the preoccupation of this study. Butler makes a link between gender and sexuality, and she claims that regulating gender is a way to secure the continuation of a normative heterosexuality (Butler 2007: xii). This is the reason why this thesis worries not only about

sexuality, but gender too, since there is close relation between them, and within society one may influence the other (eg. if I am a girl, I live a specific kind of sexuality).

Similar to the previous comprehension of gender, Butler recalls Michel Foucault to explain the concept of gender as a social structure or system, but she actually goes further and evaluates it. She quotes Foucault who says that there are “juridical systems of power” which regulate people through means such as prohibitions and limitations, creating in this way the subject that those systems or structures pretend to embody (Butler 2007: 2-3). But Butler is actually questioning this idea of a fixed structure or system called ‘gender’. On the idea of a social construction/structure she writes that:

If gender is the social construction of sex, and if there is no access to this “sex” except by means of its construction, then it appears not only that sex is absorbed by gender, but that “sex” becomes something like a fiction, perhaps a fantasy, retroactively installed at a prelinguistic site to which there is no direct access. (Butler 2011, xv)

A first critique that she is doing points out to the fact that gender is contextual and therefore “gender is not always constituted coherently or consistently in different historical contexts” and also that “gender intersects with racial, class, ethnic, sexual, and regional modalities of discursively constituted identities” (Butler 2007: 4). This affirmation of Butler shows that gender is much more complex and changing than it is understood to be. There is also a direct critique to the idea of “patriarchy” and the universal notion of it. These evaluations are relevant for this work because Butler is drawing attention to the imposition of Western ideas as universal principles for all contexts. In the following chapters I will analyse a Western production of Sunday school material to be taught in Southern African regions. Even though I am not doing postcolonial work, it is absolutely necessary to be aware of gender impositions and the dynamics of colonization that could be present in the Sunday school material.

Another critique that Judith Butler offers is to the structuralist idea that gender is a *cultural* construction based on a *natural* difference. Remembering the sociological explanations mentioned before, they assert that gender is a social construction based on the understanding of male and female bodies. As was mentioned before by the sociologists, this understanding of gender is limited, but the limitation of it is just mentioned by them and they do not develop the idea. As an alternative Butler takes a post-structuralist position that negates the binary structures and totalizing ideas of gender (Butler 2007: 54). As she suggests, the social structure not only constructs *an idea of gender* (masculine and feminine), but it also

constructs *an idea of sex* (male and female) which construction of gender is based on. She critiques those constructions as she stresses the problems of such logic. These constructions depend on each other to be and they create a fictional understanding of gender and sex. Their fictional character belongs precisely to the state of their social construction, and not to a state of a natural given fact. Similarly to Butler, several authors explain sex as a social and cultural construction (Butler 2011: xii; Isherwood 2000: 20; Weeks 1998: 63-64), which means that sexual practices and notions are related to context constructions. But I will expand on sex and sexuality in the next section.

Summing up, a concept of gender which I will work with is deduced from the authors mentioned, and is one that understands gender as a social structure, meaning that there is a “system of social practices” that create and reproduce a way of being ‘female’ or ‘male’. This social structure also creates a dominant or hegemonic gender identity, and the gender identities that do not correspond to the structure are less valued by society. It is for this reason that this thesis does not define gender, but actually problematizes the concept of gender that operates on and within the Sunday school narratives that will be analysed.

How is sexuality understood in this study?

‘Sexuality’ is not a given, it is a product of negotiation, struggle and human agency.
Jeffrey Weeks

With the previous introduction of Butler’s thinking I introduced the discussion around the double meaning of words such as sex. Understanding the ‘word games’ and definitions that interact and intersect with each other, I will introduce an important differentiation for this study. There is a clear distinction between gender, sexuality, and sex; even though they could be found together, and there are clear relationships among them. However, for the purpose of this study it is important to emphasize the distinctions between gender, sex and sexuality.

Gender does not equal sex, since as it was mentioned before, gender is related to the stereotypes and roles assigned according to the social structures of “femininity” and “masculinity”; but sex is associated with the body’s distinction between males and females (notwithstanding that such an understanding is unable to differentiate the variations in bodies which do not fit into male or female, as is the case with intersexed bodies). Of course in both cases there is the presence of a hegemonic system which reproduces a binary understanding of both gender and sex. Butler writings already call attention to this hegemonic system,

which she calls the “heterosexual matrix” (Butler 2007). The heterosexual matrix is well understood by the feminist theologians when they say that the heterosexual matrix is the fabrication that says that heterosexuality is a natural given identity (Isherwood & Althaus-Reid 2004: 5), meaning that any other expression of sexuality is abnormal and must be questioned.

Now, sex understood as bodily sexual characteristics (genitals, chromosomes, etc.) does not equal sex as an act, or sexuality as a form or expression of sexual identity. The historian and sociologist Jeffrey Weeks explains the confusion. He says that the term ‘sex’ could be referring “to an act and to a category of person, to a practice and to a gender” (Weeks 2010:4-5). In this way Weeks introduces the ambiguity that exists around the term. He explains that around the sixteenth century the use of the word ‘sex’ began and it was used to recognize an idea of “basic biological datum”, which is the bodily sexual characteristics mentioned before (Weeks 2010: 5). However, at the present time, since the nineteenth century, the word sex is used to make reference to a sexual act or sexual relation with other sexual being (‘having sex’) (Weeks 2010: 5).

This variation of meaning of the same word in different centuries works as a clue to see how sex, as with gender, is a social construction that changes as societies change. Authors such as Judith Butler and the theologian Lisa Isherwood argue that sex is a social construction and as such it differs with the idea of sex simply as a biological difference (Butler 2011: xi), or as a natural given by God (Isherwood 2000: 20). However as a social construction there are important implications in the way society experiences and socializes sex.

Jeffrey Weeks says that the term ‘sexuality’ makes reference to “personalized sexual feelings that distinguishes one person from another (*my* sexuality), while hinting at that mysterious essence that attracts us to each other” (Weeks 2010: 5). Building on this idea of ‘my sexuality’, sexuality can be understood as the sexual practices and sensations experienced in the body and mind and which are related to sexed bodies, and, I would argue, that could be learned or desired by socialization. The Ugandan academic Sylvia Tamale argues that sexuality is something complex that involves different elements such as “sexual knowledge, beliefs, values, attitudes and behaviours... procreation, sexual orientation... personal and interpersonal relations... pleasure, the human body, dress, self-esteem, gender identity, power and violence” (Tamale 2011, 11-12). Looking at the list mentioned by Tamale, there are several social factors playing a role in sexuality.

At the moment that sex (the biological one) is assumed by any culture, sexuality as a social construct happens. In this way sexuality is always shaped by social forces that influence the way sexuality is understood and lived (Weeks 2010: 20). There are lots of realities that intersect and influence each other. Ethnicity, age, or social class, to give some examples, could influence the way sexuality is constructed in one culture or a specific group of people, and this construction will differ from the one of other culture or societies. In relation to the construction of sexuality Weeks states:

I want to stress that sexuality is shaped by social forces. And far from being the most natural element in social life, the most resistant to cultural moulding, it is perhaps one of the most susceptible to organization. Indeed I would go so far as to say that sexuality only exists through its social forms and social organization. Moreover, the forces that shape and mould the erotic possibilities of the body vary from society to society. (Weeks 2010:20)

Sexuality as something natural is a myth that has been perpetuated within societies, a myth that Christianity sustains through the use of biblical texts. However these ideas around sexuality have a number of consequences in the way human beings relate to each other. Some of the implications of “sex” and “sexuality” as it has been constructed are:

1. There is a preference and social domain of the ‘heterosexual matrix’. This is that society favours and socializes as a biological fact heterosexual sexuality. This is, that there is an idea of “having appropriate’ sex organs and reproductive potentialities”, and the possession of these appropriate organs comes together with a “correct form of erotic behaviour” (Weeks 2010:4-5).
2. Within this heterosexual matrix there is also a “polarization between ‘the sexes’” where males and females are understood as opposites (Weeks 2010:5). This polarization has worked to submit women to men, and feminine features under masculine features.
3. The character of “natural” that is given to sex also reinforces an idea of sex as something mysterious and inevitable that cannot be contained or refrained (Weeks 2010:5). This is a very dangerous idea since sexual injustices such as rape are executed with the excuse of inevitability.
4. There is also the establishment of a hierarchy of sex in which a certain kind of man or woman, with certain sexual behaviour, is more “natural” and therefore acceptable than others. Whatever does not fit this model is categorized as a perversion (Weeks 2010:5).

These implications (and others) are well named by Weeks when he makes reference not only to a social construction but to an *ideology* that justifies certain acts and that produces “sexual minorities” (Weeks 2010:6).

In an attempt to break with this ideology, in this study there is a firm conviction that there are not natural, fixed and unchangeable expressions of sexuality. But that an appropriate way of referring to sexuality will be through the recognition, acceptance and respect of “sexualities” in plural. There is also a firm conviction that the hierarchy of sex is not natural, and not divine. In order to disrupt this ideology within theological discourses and to be able to use a new language of sex, in the next chapter I will introduce feminist and queer theories/theologies that will be used in the analysis. Both theories will question ‘sexual tradition’ and will allow for the production of new knowledge related to sexuality.

Departing from the understanding of sexuality as a social construction and not a natural fixed fact, the implications of the hegemonic sexuality constructed as mentioned before are not only exposed and denounced, but they are counteracted by new “starting points” (Weeks 2010: 20):

1. The idea that sex is an “autonomous realm” is rejected. Sex is no more understood as “natural” and different from “social” (Weeks 2010: 20).
2. There is an awareness of the diverse social factors that influence sexuality and therefore of the different sexual cultures (Weeks 2010: 20).
3. There is an acceptance that sexuality cannot be totally understood or contained, but that sexualities are “produced in society in complex ways” (Weeks 2010: 21).

A last issue that I want to emphasize in relation to sexuality as a social construction is that the hegemonic sexuality that is socialized as the true, natural and therefore correct sexuality is a dominant *Western* sexuality, with the Judeo-Christian and Islamic religion playing a role in idealizing a normative sexuality (Tamale 2011, 18-19). This is a factor that cannot be ignored since there is an imposition of a foreign sexual culture that is presented as true and unquestionable, but actually “reflects realities and experiences outside Africa” (Tamale 2011: 12). Even more disturbing is the fact that it has been through religion that in African contexts a process of refusing the own sexuality has taken place through the rejection of “previous beliefs and values”, and the legitimization of foreign ones (Tamale 2011: 16).

This thesis will not offer a detailed historical account on the colonial processes in which African sexualities were defined as “primitive, bizarre and dangerous” (Tamale 2011: 19), but it will acknowledge that such processes happened and that a hegemonic Western sexuality was and still is being imposed.

Sexuality and childhood: how is sexuality socialized with children?

In order to respond to this question, I will look at different authors who write about children and sexuality from diverse disciplines such as sociology, anthropology and pedagogy within childhood studies.¹

Before referring to sexuality and its socialization with children, it is necessary to clarify the concept of childhood and the implication of this notion in children’s lives. The concept of childhood differs from the one of child, but it influences how a child is treated in our societies. Consequently, a first thing to say about childhood is that this concept does not refer to a “real and material state of being” (Gittins 2008: 26). The idea of childhood is not making reference to somebody of a specific age (under 18 years old) or someone with a specific human body (small and growing body). Instead childhood is a social construction made by adults (Gittins 2008:26; Robinson and Jones Diaz 2006:151) that defines the subjects of childhood as “in opposition to what it means to be an adult” (Robinson and Jones Diaz 2006:152).

Kerry Robinson, who researches on childhood, gender and sexuality says that, “The discourse of childhood innocence plays a critical social function in defining and regulating differences between the adult and the child” (Robinson 2013: 42), and this idea of innocence will be central to the discourses around sexuality and childhood. This distinction between adults and children involves the notion of children as lacking knowledge, not reasoning, possessing some kind of purity, and therefore needing the protection of adults. Consequently, the idea of childhood participates in a game of “power relationships and inequality” (Gittins 2008: 27) that hides behind a discourse of concern and protection.

¹ There is important work done by African scholars on this topic that was not mention in this chapter but that I do acknowledge as important and valid. For example the work of Bhana Deevia who wrote about “Making gender in early schooling” among other texts she wrote on this topic.

The sociologist Diana Gittins wrote an account of the historical construction of childhood, and she makes reference to the participation of the parents' culture in the process of construction of their children's childhood. She expresses it in these words:

...every baby born is born into a social world, a linguistic world, *a gendered world*, an adult world full of discourse, with complex and contradictory meanings. The helpless and totally dependent human infant, without control or language, is given meaning by adults from the first minute its parent(s) start to interact with it in the context of a wider culture.... The concept of 'child' concerns an embodied individual defined as nonadult, while the notion of 'childhood' is a more general and abstract term used to refer to the *status ascribed by adults to those who are defined as not adult*. (Gittins 2008: 26) (emphasis added)

The way Gittins is defining the construction of childhood already gives clues to how sexuality could be socialized with children according to the culture within which these children are born, and to how there is a role of the adult in trying to control this socialization. In relation to the concern of this thesis, it is important to acknowledge that the fabrication of childhood has framed how sexuality has been assumed by society as an adult only thing, and how it has been denied that children possess or act any sexuality because of the appreciation of childhood as a state of innocence and asexuality (Robinson and Jones Diaz 2006:153).

However, when there is so much impetus to maintain an idea such as the one of childhood innocence and asexuality, there is also good reason to suspect the motivation of that insistence. There are actually several issues related to sexuality happening in children's lives. I will refer briefly to two processes that take place simultaneously around sexuality with childhood. On the one hand, the notion of children as non-sexual beings and innocent creatures produces a discourse that mandates that children need protection and this protection must be accomplished by the adults (Robinson 2013: 42). This protection already involves notions and teachings about how to live their sexuality. As an example, I could mention the adult obsession that children should not touch their own sexual organs; this is one of the many ways adults are already teaching them how to perceive their sexual organs and how to interact with them. Robinson explains how in the eighteenth century masturbation in children was something catalogued as pathological, and religion called it sinful (Robinson 2013: 47); as a result of this obsession, interventions were as extreme as "medical campaigns, and restraining devices and surgical intervention" (Robinson 2013: 48). This is why I say that this idea of an innocent creature in need of protection already gives space for sexual socialization to happen.

On the other hand, the notion of children (as asexual beings) hides the normative processes of sexual socialization while it denounces all knowledge or exposure of non-normative sexuality, considering such as dangerous and threatening. In relation to this, Robinson offers an affirmation that allows us to see how sexual socialization teaches a normative form of living sexuality (even for children) and at the same time excludes children from it; he says:

Defining and regulating what constituted normative sexuality in children and diverting non-normative forms became the focus of intervention. The construction of heterosexual monogamy sanctified through marriage became the norm through which all other sexualities were scrutinized and considered peripheral and perverse, including children's sexuality. (Robinson 2013: 48)

With the mention of these two simultaneous processes I am introducing the idea of socialization of children, and more specifically of their sexual socialization. Socialization is something inevitable, it is a social phenomenon that happens every day and everywhere. Socialization occurs in the midst of social activities and interactions with other social beings (Maybin & Woodhead 2003: 8) and central to it are the "values and beliefs" of the culture where the socialization is happening (Maybin & Woodhead 2003: 8). Of course religion is part of those beliefs that plays an important role in the socialization of children, and must be taken into account.

Interestingly, it is believed that children are like sponges that absorb everything, and there is some truth in this. But children are also subjects of their own lives and they can and do question and change some values or practices that have been taught to them; they "explore, question and resist socialization as well as being shaped by it" (Maybin & Woodhead 2003: 27). But what could this mean in relation to sexuality?

Robinson has used the term "pedagogization of children's sexuality" to refer to the different practices where children's sexuality was confined, structured, taught or even denied; and how this pedagogization ends up in social policies and regulations to control it (Robinson 2013: 49). Robinson shows that children develop a sexuality fashioned according to "stereotypical forms of adult sexuality" (Robinson 2013: 61), meaning that their sexuality is informed by "adult (hetero) normative narratives" (Robinson 2013: 61). Therefore, sexuality is negated in children's lives with the logic that sexuality is something that comes with "physiological sexual maturity" at puberty (Robinson and Jones Diaz 2006: 153), but at the same time children are being socialized to perform an adult heterosexuality as soon as they are able to. However, in their own exploration of their bodies and in the ways they relate with other

children, they perform diverse sexualities that do not match necessarily with the hegemonic heteronormative one.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have presented how this study understands gender and sexuality, and how these are socialized in children in order to teach them to perform an ‘appropriate’ heteronormative sexuality. In spite of this, gender and sexuality are social constructions that change through time and that children question and disobey. However, adults insist on controlling children’s sexuality and identity through different means, including the religious and theological. In the following chapters I will look at literature concerning theological discourses and how they work with issues of sexuality. I will also reflect on Bible reading approaches in order to be able to analyse the Sunday school material, considering if there are any traces of sexual socialization happening through this material, and so identifying how adults attempt to control and restrain children’s sexualities.

CHAPTER 3: Theological presuppositions: The theoretical underpinnings of the study

The purpose of this chapter is to present in more detail the theoretical underpinnings of this study, focussing on the theological dimensions. Feminist and queer theologies form the main theoretical frameworks of the thesis. Hence, this chapter will be structured in a way that it begins with a general view of these theologies and then moves to the specific approaches borrowed from them. In a first section a general overview of feminist theologies will be presented. Then, I will proceed to introduce African Feminist Theology and the post-structuralist feminist theologies that will provide part of the framework for the analysis done in the following chapters. In a similar way, I will provide a general overview of queer theologies in order to situate the specific queer approaches that I will borrow for the analysis of the Sunday school narratives and the biblical texts selected for this thesis.

Feminist theologies

In order to start our account about feminist theologies and the hermeneutical tools they will provide for the analysis of the Sunday school narratives and biblical texts, it is necessary to clarify briefly some of their broad characteristics. Therefore, I will discuss here the theory and ideology that helped these theologies to emerge, their particular characteristics and a brief history that leads me to the particular feminist theologies I will use. To begin with these descriptions, I present a modest definition of feminist theory in order to comprehend the set of ideas behind a so-called “feminist” theology.

Feminist theory seeks to analyse the conditions which shape women's lives and to explore cultural understandings of what it means to be a woman. It was initially guided by the political aims of the Women's Movement, the need to understand women's subordination and our exclusion from, or marginalisation within, a variety of cultural and social arenas. Feminists refuse to accept that inequalities between women and men are natural and inevitable and insist that they should be questioned. (Jackson and Jones 1998:1)

Feminist theory has engaged with different aspects of society in order to understand the subordination of women as well as to challenge this situation. According to Mary Evans, feminist theory started to raise questions about religious beliefs and the consequences that religion produces in women's lives (Evans 2014: 131). Evans mentions two important critiques that feminist theory has given of those religions that are based on sacred texts. The first critique concerns the gendered distribution of power in religious institutions based on a

binary understanding of sacred texts (Evans 2014: 132), specifically the organization of these religions under the authority of male figures and the subordination of female believers. The second critique concerns the personification of God as male (Evans 2014: 132). These critiques represent challenges for theological reflection and some women theologians, such as Mary Daly, have taken up these ‘fundamental’ challenges (Evans 2014: 133). As a result of this, other theologians have started to reflect on the range of related challenges that feminist theory raises to theology.

The theologians Lisa Isherwood and Dorothea McEwan define feminism as “a way of looking a society and centring the concerns of society on women and men...(doing) an analysis of (this) society from a woman’s point of view” (Isherwood & McEwan 2001: 9-10). In this way, not only feminist theory but the experiences of women and men informs the way of doing theology in order to be more than just a theology made by women, or a theology that emphasises femininity (Ruether 2004: 3). Instead, they contribute towards a theology with a *feminist perspective* that is able to question the androcentrism and patriarchy of the dominant theology. Consequently, feminist theory is a tool used by theologians to analyse and make visible the inequalities between women and men in society and Christianity in order to challenge them.

Having briefly established the theory behind the theological reflection of feminist theologies, the next step is to analyse some important presuppositions of these theologies. Feminist theologies can be characterized by three main aspects. First, feminist theology is critical; second, feminist theology is always contextual; and finally feminist theology possesses its own feminist hermeneutical approach which focuses on the rhetoric of the texts. These presuppositions are explained below.

Looking at the definition given by Teresa Forcades, feminist theology is basically *a critical theology* which originates from the contradictions that women experience in relation to the ‘actual’ theology (Forcades 2007: 13). In other words, women’s experiences about God are often something different from what they were being taught. The presupposition that feminist theology is a critical theology is important because it indicates that feminist theology is not just about women reflecting about God, because this theology could be a-critical, or as Rosemary Radford Ruether has said, because “women have done theology that does not question the masculinist paradigms of theology” (Ruether 2004: 3). Feminist theology cannot be reduced to theology done by women, but instead should be defined as a “critical stance

that challenges the patriarchal gender paradigm” (Ruether 2004: 3). However, under the umbrella of “feminist theology”, a range of diverse theologies produced by women have been written, and different trends and techniques of doing these theologies have been developed, some of them more critical than others.

Another presupposition of feminist theology is that it is a *contextual theology* concerned with the realities and experiences of its context. Therefore, it assumes a critical position in relation to “contemporary patriarchal and kyriarchal theology” (Isherwood & McEwan 2001: 9-11). In doing a contextual work these theologies value the contribution of every individual (Isherwood & McEwan 2001: 12), and from the engagement of women from different parts of the world, the socio-cultural and political conditions of a given society are valued too.

Feminist hermeneutics is also a distinctive aspect of these theologies. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza defines feminist hermeneutics as the act of interpretation which is interested in women (wo/men according to Schüssler, so as to include women and men oppressed by patriarchy) and that recognizes the “institutional silencing of wo/men in biblical religions” (1996: 99). This hermeneutical exercise analyses the patriarchal and kyriarchal language and culture reflected in the biblical texts, as well as studies how this has been interpreted to oppress women (Schüssler 1996: 99). In addition, feminist hermeneutics works with the hope and encouragement that women often find in the same patriarchal text to resist patriarchy (Schüssler 1996: 99). This exercise of interpretation focuses on the *rhetoric* of the texts, analysing the effects of the biblical discourses in the promotion of misogyny, as well as analysing the production of such discourses.

The theory and presuppositions of feminist theologies has been briefly discussed. Now I will present a brief look at the history of feminist theology that will help to locate the particular feminist approaches that will be used in this thesis. History would take us from the mid-nineteenth century with the first wave of feminism to the women’s rights movements around the world, especially in Europe and the United States (Ruether 2004: 6), or even further. However, I will refer to a more recent history and maybe a more familiar one.

Following Ruether’s description of the “emergence of Christian feminist theology” feminist theology as discipline was first conceived in the United States. Some of its theologians were developing it from the context of a ‘liberation theology’ as they were influenced by their activist experience and Vatican II (Ruether 2004: 9). Also in the United States’ context,

African American, Asian and Hispanic women took up their own feminist reflection, claiming the inclusion of new voices of feminist theologies from their own contexts (Ruether 2004: 10). They differentiated themselves from the dominant white-elite feminism using categories such as ‘womanist’ and ‘mujerista’ (Ruether 2004: 10-11).

To some extent these American feminist theologies (white-elite, womanist, mujerista, etc.) had an influence on other contexts, and these contexts generated their own feminist theologies. The theoretical framework that I am taking from feminist theologies is located within the feminist theologies that were developed in Africa, Latin America and Europe. What they have in common is their identification with Liberation Theology as well as the fact that these theologies intentionally reflect on issues of sexuality and the body.

For an easy comprehension of these theologies I will divide them into two categories. The first one will be ‘African feminist theology’ and I will borrow insights particularly from the biblical/analytical approach called ‘cultural hermeneutics’ of Musimbi Kanyoro. The second category will be ‘post-structuralist feminist theologies’, which represent reflections that analyse gender outside a binary approach (male and female, women and men). This last category will include the work of two women from contexts as different as Latin America and Europe, but who share similar categories and concerns. In the following sections I will describe briefly these categories and I will pay special attention to their hermeneutical approaches, as I will appropriate them in my analysis of the texts in the subsequent chapters.

African feminist theologies

Being that this study is conducted in Africa, and recognizing that feminist work is relevant in questioning sexism in the African continent and in the African Church, African feminist theologies and their hermeneutical methodologies are considered in this research as inputs that could provide important categories of analysis for the development of the study. In order to look at African feminist theologies I am going to limit my research to the work of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians (The Circle), which is committed to do “liberative theology in the African context” (Oduyoye 1996: 112).

A main issue that was recognized as central for reflection and analysis since the beginning of Circle theology was “religion and culture” (Kanyoro 2006: 21), a theme that has been reworked since then and remains a main concern for any African feminist theological

reflection. Therefore, an important achievement of these theologies is the recognition of the African culture as an “authoritative text” for women (Dube 2001a:1; Kanyoro 2001:101-113). Culture needs to be examined in order to rescue the practices that promote equality and reject those that do not (Phiri 2004:17).

Consequently, “cultural hermeneutics” is one of the methods developed within the theological reflection of the Circle by Musimbi Kanyoro (2002), and this hermeneutical tool is what I am going to borrow from African feminist theologies for my own analysis. In the following section this method will be further explained.

Cultural hermeneutics

As mentioned above, culture and religion have been of interest to the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians because in the African context these two dimensions are perceived and lived as one. Culture and religion become fused and they determine different understandings of every-day events, such as power relationships among the social group, roles according to each individual’s position, and meanings of life events, etc. Kanyoro exemplifies this by saying that:

The presence or absence of rain, the well-being of the community, sexuality, marriage, birthing, naming children, success or failure, the place and form of one’s burial, among others, all come under the scope of religion and culture. (Kanyoro 2002: 14).

In this way, the fusion of culture and religion determines and legitimates the organization of a group, for example by clans or families, and it also determines the gender and sexual roles of every individual in the group. Based on this understanding of culture and religion, issues of sexuality such as reproductive rights, sexual orientation, sexual expression, sexual health and others are totally determined by this fusion.

The founder of the method of cultural hermeneutics is Musimbi Kanyoro, who experienced the need for the method in her village in Bware, Western Kenya (2002:1). She realized the power of culture when reading the Bible and therefore developed a methodology that recognizes not only the authority of the biblical text, but also the authority of one’s culture when reading the Bible (Kanyoro 2002). She differentiates her method from that of ‘inculturation theology’, which is also concerned with issues of culture. However, the focus on culture from the perspective of inculturation theology started as a response to colonial

indoctrination and marginalization of African culture (2002: 25). The emphasis of inculturation theology is the postcolonial recovery of African culture. In opposition to inculturation theology, African feminist cultural hermeneutics acknowledges not only the positive aspects of culture, but also those aspects that are oppressive, especially to women. Given the above, cultural hermeneutics functions within a gender and feminist perspective (2002: 27). Kanyoro describes her hermeneutical tool as 'gender sensitive' (2002: 10), and she refers to her method as an "engendered cultural hermeneutics" (Kanyoro 2002: 27).

This method warns against romanticizing culture (Kanyoro 2002: 5), rejecting forms of discourse that legitimize oppressive actions under the umbrella of expressions like 'it is cultural' or even worse 'it is biblical' (Kanyoro 2002: 7); engendered cultural hermeneutics resists any recovery of culture that allows injustice and oppression to self or others in order to keep faithful to a cultural heritage. Instead, the method has to do with the analysis and interpretation of "how culture conditions people's understanding of reality at a particular time and location" (Kanyoro 2002: 9). This step in the hermeneutic precedes the analysis and interpretation of the biblical text (Kanyoro 2002:19). In the author's words, "cultural hermeneutics is a first step toward a biblical hermeneutics... it is a prerequisite to African women's liberation theology" (2002: 19).

In problematizing and analysing culture, the "collective solidarity" that may take place in African communities is problematized too. Kanyoro explains that African culture is what brings communities together and that solidarity is part of it; however, because culture is so central there is resistance to criticism and change (2002: 14). Ironically, within this solidarity and unity that is built through the culture, there comes a "lack of collective solidarity" in the name of "cultural loyalty" (Kanyoro 2001:106). Kanyoro recognizes that African people have suffered a great deal through colonialism and that culture has been the one thing that has remained for communities; therefore, challenging this culture can be seen as a threat to what people consider the only thing left to them (2002: 24-25).

As a consequence, when it comes to the Bible, African culture can easily be validated through the use of biblical passages, as the interpreter cannot escape his or her own values and understanding of the world. Because African biblical interpretation is constantly looking for practical advice, guidance and understanding for daily life, it becomes very difficult to discern what the text can say without escaping "the bias of the interpreters" (Kanyoro 2002: 9). Cultural hermeneutics then acknowledges that biblical interpretation becomes particularly

difficult when the culture of the biblical text resembles the culture of the present context (Kanyoro 2002: 10), as it is the case of many practices in the African continent. As a result, the central question that this method raises is: “What if both the biblical cultures and the culture in question have inherent injustices in them?” (2002: 7). In addition, this method asks: “Who benefits from a particular interpretation of culture and how is the system kept in place?” (2002: 17).

Consequently the questions I want to raise using this hermeneutical tool are: What do African cultures teach about gender and sexuality and what does the Bible teach on the specific passages that I will explore? Are there any cultural impositions in the interpretations? What if patriarchy, heteronormativity and homophobia are cultural validations that the interpreters are bringing to the biblical text, but they are not necessarily part of the text?

In short, I am going to appropriate as a category of analysis this “cultural hermeneutics”, focusing on those aspects of culture that determined how gender and sexuality are understood and how sexual and gender relationships are legitimated within the African context. In relation to sexuality Kanyoro says that:

I have singled out sexuality because it is the foundation for engendering cultural hermeneutics. Many cultural behaviours that are detrimental to women’s health are closely linked to sexuality. Sexuality and fertility are one issue. A whole string of factors are attached to fertility such as value for children, impact of AIDS, female circumcision, polygamy. Many women in Africa testify to the Churches’ fears and suspicious of ‘women’s sexuality’. Sexuality is given as an excuse for denying ordination to women. Not only are women’s bodies seen as symbols of sexuality, but also, and because of that, women are seen to be unacceptable for church leadership. (2002: 29)

In order to follow Kanyoro’s cultural hermeneutics methodology, I will analyse and interpret a general view on gender and sexuality in the African context. To do this I will mention some of the cultural attitudes toward sexuality. African sexualities have experienced changes and challenges through time, one of the most important ones was colonization, where African sexuality was represent as “pathological” (Lewis 2011:200), women and men were categorized as showing “sexual excess, bestiality and bodily deviance” (Lewis 2011:205). As a reaction to this kind of discourses from the colonial times there have been different reactions. One of them has been to reject the representation made by the colonial times and re-elaborate an idea of African sexuality (Lewis 2011:201). However the impact of such discourses persists to this day.

In one hand women's bodies and sexuality has been represented as "hypersexual, as bestial, as close to nature" (Lewis 2011:206), and because of that women have to be control and have be reduced to a lower status. On the other hand, the colonizer's definition of Africans as 'natural' represented them as always heterosexual in contrast with the sophisticated person who could have homosexual desires (Lewis 2011:207-208), therefore the same-sex practices that take part in Africa were denied.

The response toward colonial representations of African's sexuality was not necessarily of complete rejection, but there was a process of complicity between the African culture and the colonizer's culture. even though maybe it was intended that way. And actually these representations have been "central to many present-day taboos, laws and attitudes surrounding sexuality in Africa" (Lewis 2011: 208), as it is the homophobia and the misogyny that is present in the continent. In spite of this complicity between the colonizer and the African culture, the indigenous African cultural ways of experience and live sexuality remain in "folklore, traditional songs, dance, folk art, body markings, clothing, jewellery, names and naming systems" according with Sylvia Tamale (2011, 14).

Therefore, cultural hermeneutics will not only interpret the biblical text, but it will pay attention to this misogynistic and homophobic culture when analysing the Sunday school narratives as well as the biblical stories.

Post-structuralist feminist theologies/hermeneutics

The paradigm under which the study is done is that of poststructuralism. Poststructuralism is understood as a theory that is concerned about the practice of constructing and reproducing meaning (Belsey 2002: 5). This theory is also characterized by its ability to de-construct "settled thrust and oppositions" (Williams 2005: 3) and refute different assumptions (Williams 2005: 4). In accordance to this paradigm, I will present under 'post-structuralist feminist theologies' those theologies that reflect outside the common thrusts and assumptions in relation to sexuality. In other words, I will refer to those theologies that consider sexuality more as a fluid aspect of human beings and less as a normative and fix binary aspect. As it was mentioned in the introduction of this chapter, I will use the category of 'post-structuralist feminist theologies' to refer to a particular feminist work that differentiates itself from that of most feminist theologies, mainly because in their analysis they understand gender as more than a binary system.

‘Post-structuralist feminist theologies’ are theologies done within “post-Christian feminisms”. Post-Christian feminisms are defined by Isherwood and McPhillips as those theological reflexions that emerge from “post-modernism, post-colonialism, post-structuralism, post-feminism and post-biblical discourses” (Isherwood and McPhillips 2008: 1). In accordance with this, post-structuralist feminist theologies become a category that contemplates theological reflection that is aligned with post-structuralist deconstructions and which problematizes essentialisms of gender, sexuality and religion.

Under this category I will present the contributions of Lisa Isherwood and Elizabeth Stuart and their work on ‘body theology’ (2000). This theology will provide analytical tools to examine the power relations that are played out through heterosexual intercourse (Isherwood 2000: 26-28), which is the norm taught from the pulpit and therefore must be problematized. A second contribution will be that of Marcella Althaus-Reid (2002), who provides the analytical tool of ‘indecent theology’ that makes evident that all theology implies a sexual discourse (Althaus-Reid 2002: 22). This awareness will be useful because it contributes a challenge to normative theological discourses.

Body theology²

‘Body theology’ has been developed mainly by Lisa Isherwood, although different theologians have accompanied this journey with their own reflections in relation to the body and theological thinking about it. Even though several authors have written about it, I will focus on Isherwood and Elizabeth Stuart’s description of this theology, as well as some other Isherwood’s writings.

Body Theology was initially presented by Lisa Isherwood together with Elizabeth Stuart in a book published in 1998 called *Introducing Body Theology*. Isherwood and Stuart presented in this book, as a foundation for Body Theology, three main elements: the idea of the incarnation of Jesus, the understanding that sin and redemption are realities within this world, and the notion of body experiences of women (Isherwood and Stuart 1998: 10). These three foundations construct a logic that allows the building of Body Theology. I explain these foundations in the following section.

² Body theology was first born with James B. Nelson who publishes “Body Theology” in 1992. However I am using Isherwood and Stuart’s work as it is a revision and a new form of understanding Body Theology with a different perspective from the experience of women.

Foundations of Body Theology

The first foundation upon which Body Theology is built is the idea of the incarnation of Jesus. The incarnation represents the introduction of the divine into our own reality (Isherwood and Stuart 1998: 10) and this introduction indicates that there is no hierarchy between the divine and the earthly worlds. For that reason there is no a preference for ‘rationality and spirituality’ over ‘matter and flesh’ (Isherwood and Stuart 1998: 16), and instead incarnational faith gives space to an affirmative approach to the body (Isherwood and Stuart 1998: 16).

The second foundation of Body Theology is the particular understanding of sin and redemption. Incarnation has already given a new understanding of reality. This reality does not distinguish between an earthly/historical one separated from a ‘divine’ one, and for that reason sin and redemption cannot be understood as metaphysical realities (Isherwood and Stuart 1998: 10), but instead as concrete events. Indeed, it is through the body of Jesus (God’s incarnation) that redemption came into the world (Isherwood and Stuart 1998: 29). Not only the body of Jesus is recognized as a place of redemption and revelation, but also the notion of embodiment becomes a central element for Body Theology. The authors exemplify this embodiment when they point to Mary’s body as carrying the pregnancy and giving birth, and through the embodied actions performed by Jesus, like healing and touching (Isherwood and Stuart 1998: 11). Consequently, Body Theology understands bodies as places of revelation and redemption (Isherwood and Stuart 1998: 11), and it frees bodies from the control and restriction they have been subjected to by tradition (Isherwood 2000a: 13).

Finally, and in consequence with the above, the experiences of women become central to Body Theology (Isherwood and Stuart 1998: 10) due to the understanding that their bodies have been oppressed under “patriarchal theology” (Isherwood and Stuart 1998: 15). Following the authors’ logic, women’s bodies are places of revelation (Isherwood and Stuart 1998: 11). Their body experiences can denounce sin, and it is in their bodies where redemption can be experienced. Body experiences become a place of knowledge.

Method of body theology

Methodologically, according to the authors, Body Theology is based on three movements within theology. The method takes its principles from work of “process thought”, “liberation theology”, and “feminist theology” (Isherwood and Stuart 1998: 33). Process thought works within Body Theology as a tool to destabilize dualistic thought and the idea of absolutes (Isherwood and Stuart 1998: 34). Instead it introduces a relational understanding of reality in which experience through and by the body is central to understand reality (Isherwood and Stuart 1998: 34-35). Reality is understood as always in process and not as something fixed, and even God is part of this process and cannot be conceived as something finished and resolved (Isherwood and Stuart 1998: 35). In relation to the body, process thought frees it from traditional understandings, and in contrast it lets the body be free to love (Isherwood and Stuart 1998: 36).

The second movement that contributes to the method of Body Theology is Liberation Theology. Liberation theology functions as a tool to acknowledge a demand for justice in the middle of reality (Isherwood and Stuart 1998: 36). The injustices that take place in this world are understood as sin and this must result in action to change reality and stop injustices (Isherwood and Stuart 1998: 37). Within this search for justice in Liberation Theology, the authors recognized that “the church has at times been seen in the role of the oppressor particularly in matters of sexuality and gender” (Isherwood and Stuart 1998: 38).

Feminist theology is a third methodological approach that Body Theology uses in order to redeem gender and sexuality (Isherwood and Stuart 1998: 38). This is possible because feminist theology focuses on experience, and therefore experience of the body. Isherwood explains more about it in her article “Sex and body politics: Issues for feminist theology”, written in 2000, where she deconstructs the understanding of sex. Sex is no longer conceptualized as “natural”, and instead she presents sex as something related to the use of power, especially the power of men or “penises” imposed over women and other men. (Isherwood 2000b: 20)

Female body as normative

In accordance to the method and principles determined by the authors, there is an important presupposition that I will borrow from Body Theology in order to use it in my analysis of the narratives. It is the postulation that female body is going to be normative in the analysis, instead of the male body (Isherwood and Stuart 1998: 9). This reversal of how life is

commonly interpreted (from a male perspective) will work as a tool to resist the “hetero-patriarchal narrative” (Isherwood 2000b: 9). Hetero-patriarchal narrative refers to the discourse that is constructed within heterosexual male archetypes and that intends to be normative to everyone. Body Theology understands that this discourse has the agenda to say “how things should be”, even when it is in contradiction with what the body knows and experiences (Isherwood 2000b: 9). In opposition to this, Body Theology will privilege the knowledge of the body. In relation to the discourses of the hetero-patriarchal narrative, Isherwood says:

This in turn signifies a lack of autonomy, because the female body is always imaged as lacking and therefore in some sense unworthy. If this is to be reversed then women have to challenge the discourses that claim to explain and analyse the body, such as biology, sociology and psychology. Further, we have to reframe the terms in which the female body is socially represented. (Isherwood 2000b: 11)

However, to privilege the body is difficult as everything in society had been determined from a heterosexual and male perspective, realities that condition even the experience of a person’s body. Within Christianity, it is also very difficult to ignore this narrative because hetero-patriarchy has been taught in the church since “the Church Fathers shared the view that it was only possession of a penis that made a person truly moral” (Isherwood 2000b: 10). In contrast with this traditional teaching, Body Theology privileges the female body, and therefore in this approach its experiences are going to be the norm.

Nevertheless, it is necessary to recognize and observe the difficulties of this task. A limitation can be found in how to articulate a new language that permits us to express the female experience. Isherwood warns that knowledge and language have been constructed from the perspective of male dominant bodies, and therefore it is necessary to recognize this knowledge within bodies in order to challenge it (Isherwood 2000b: 11).

Even the language of the body is hard to hear as it has been silenced by generations of theology, philosophy and latterly sexology – male experts declaring the reality of women’s bodies, placing a deep distrust not only in the male psyche but also that of women. (Isherwood 2000b: 12-13)

Consequently, before listening to bodies and raising questions from them, it is necessary to ask in which ways is it possible that hetero-patriarchal discourses are being sustained even by women (Isherwood 2000b: 12). Secondly, it is necessary to ask in which ways is it possible to destabilized patriarchy and let the real female experience and knowledge emerge (Isherwood

2000b: 12). It is after recognizing women's own contribution to hetero-patriarchy and after rising questions to destabilize this hetero-patriarchy, that a more honest and clean space is created to ask questions from a female body. These will be questions about sexuality, procreation, discrimination, abuse, and others.

Indecent theology

Another category within 'post-structuralist feminist theologies' is the one presented by the Latin American theologian Marcella Althaus-Reid, who intertwines aspects of sexual theory, post-colonialism, queer theory, Marxist studies and continental philosophy to develop a "Sexual Political Theology" which she presented as 'Indecent theology' (Althaus-Reid: 2002: 7). Even though her theological reflection contemplates aspects of queer theory, which allows her to break with the binary and essentialist understandings of sex and gender, she still considers herself and her work as one of a feminist liberation theologian, or as she calls herself, "an Argentinian feminist theologian" (Althaus-Reid 2002: 2).

A particular characteristic of this theology is that it is constructed within the Latin American religious and socio-political context (Althaus-Reid 2002: 2); however, this does not represent a limitation in borrowing from her work because the principles and questions indicated by this theology are easily transportable to other contexts within Christianity, particularly those contexts that share a history of colonialism and western theological imposition that reinforce patriarchy.

Presuppositions of indecent theology

Indecent theology discloses the processes between authoritative discourses and the production of new discourses that develop from the encounter between the colonized and the colony (Althaus-Reid 2002: 11). These discourses are called "grand narratives" and they are ideological narratives that explain daily life. These grand narratives claim not to have an ideology in their discourses but instead are presented as containing natural truths (Althaus-Reid 2002: 11). Althaus-Reid claims that there has been an imposition of the "great European meta-narratives" which were full of patriarchal notions, and that these European narratives have correlated themselves with native patriarchal notions (Althaus-Reid 2002: 12). As a way of exemplifying this, the author mentions that "colonisers stripped Africa of its culture, religious and economic systems but kept patriarchal power intact, if not reinforced,

by Christianity” (Althaus-Reid 2002: 13). This reference to the cultural is key to my own analysis.

These grand narratives, full of patriarchal notions, are constructed based on an understanding of sexuality which empowers and reinforces patriarchy, reflecting a heterosexual understanding (Althaus-Reid 2002: 13). Heterosexuality works as a platform of patriarchy because it provides an order of submissions and a clear hierarchy in which patriarchal notions can freely execute its power dynamics (Althaus-Reid 2002: 13). Now, as it was said at the beginning of this section, these authoritative narratives inform all aspects of life giving them a common sense, including the enduring presence of patriarchal notions.

All of this contributes to an understanding of the main presupposition of Indecent Theology, which is that all theology implies a sexual discourse which leads to a sexual practice (Althaus-Reid 2002: 4). This includes, I would argue, children’s theology. Even children’s theology contains a sexual discourse which is socializing children to practice and reproduce a certain type of sexuality. And the kind of sexuality that is present in theology is constructed within an “epistemological foundation based on a sexed understanding of dualistic relationships and its legitimatory role” (Althaus-Reid 2002: 7). Althaus-Reid describes this implication of sexuality in theological production as follows:

Based on sexual categories and heterosexual binary systems, obsessed with sexual behaviour and orders, every theological discourse is implicitly a sexual discourse, a decent one, an accepted one.... theology is still desperately clinging to what gives it an ultimate sense of coherence and tradition: not God, but a theory of sexuality. To challenge God is not as indecent as to challenge the sexuality of theology. Sexual idealism pervades theology, including Theology of Liberation. The liberationist hermeneutical circle has proved to be politically materialist and sexually idealist and is therefore a basic decent discourse. (Althaus-Reid 2002: 22)

The affirmation that the author is making in the quotation above in relation to the sexuality of theology is important. This could be considered a second presupposition of Indecent Theology. Not only does every theology contain a sexual discourse, but, even though they are open to discuss and challenge the God that is represented in theology, they are not open to discuss and challenge the sexual discourse that can be found in theology. And this is the challenge of this study! I will draw from Indecent Theology these presuppositions in order both to be aware of the sexual discourse within the Sunday school material I will analyse as well as to be able to challenge such discourse.

Method of indecent theology

Being a theology within the framework of Liberation Theology, the hermeneutical circle that is characteristic of this theology is considered a method to do Indecent Theology as well. However, there are new insights and suspicions that come into dialogue with this methodology. Althaus-Reid presents her method as a “continuousness of the hermeneutical circle of suspicion”, an extension of the hermeneutical circle that requires “a process of theological discontinuity” in order to acknowledge what has been left out of the theological exercise and bring it back to the reflection (Althaus-Reid 2002: 4). Acknowledging the importance of Liberation Theology, the author’s method calls for a constant act of contextualization that allows questioning about those aspects of the context that have been ignored (Althaus-Reid 2002:5). This is the case of sexuality, which has been disregarded from the theological exercise that is Liberation Theology (Althaus-Reid 2002: 4).

The proposal of Althaus-Reid for visualizing sexuality within reality and within theology is to make them indecent, to pervert them, to make them obscene. The strategy is to recover sexuality in theological reflection as something conscious without maintaining a normative sexual theological discourse.

Her strategies are basically two. The first one which is necessary in order to make theology indecent is to establish the “sexual option” of this theology, which is usually considered as “God’s position” (Althaus-Reid 2002: 47). This is made through analysing the sexual acts or the sexual images that can be found, or that are absent, in the divine representations of theology (God, Virgen Mary, Jesus). In relation to this Althaus-Reid says that:

The heterosexual matrix of Systematic Theology is permanently under threat of dislocations of divine gender identities, because Christian gods are also the products of sexual fears and misconstructions organised under gender characteristics. (Althaus-Reid 2002: 82)

In order to analyse the sexual positions/options in theological representations, the “citational techniques” must be recognized. These citational techniques refer to the repetitions of sexual models within theological construction (Althaus-Reid 2002: 53). The author exemplifies this citational technique in Mariology, where the citation of Mary as virgin and as mother permits

this image to become so natural that the unrealistic nature of the situation, a mother who is virgin, is ignored. But the theological process of citation “gives human coherence to Mary, a humanoid symbol” (Althaus-Reid 2002: 53). Indecent theology interrupts this citational process as it recognizes its oppressive implications for everyday life.

The second strategy to make theology indecent is to take these “versions”, the accepted theological representations, and make per/versions of them. This is to modify them, interrupting the unchanging and unquestionable identity that has been produced and reproduced in theology, and to be allowed to imagine new possibilities. This is the process of making theology indecent, “a process of coming back to the authentic, everyday life experiences described as odd by the ideology” (Althaus-Reid 2002: 71). About this, Althaus-Reid states that:

Hermeneutically speaking, a per/version of something is a way, a path chosen or a turn taken in the journal of everyday life. Indecenting Mary is therefore the act of per/verting a religious symbol, choosing another path of allowing fixed identities to be, as life is, more imprecise and mutable. (Althaus-Reid 2002: 69-70)

Accordingly with the description of Indecent Theology, as a point of departure I am going to take for granted that the Sunday school narratives and the biblical texts that I will analyse contain a sexual discourse. This sexual discourse is reconciled with the normative understanding of sexuality and it needs to be challenged in order to liberate the theology from sexual oppressions. In order to do this, I will borrow this indecent method that contextualizes the hermeneutical circle of suspicion, bringing the reality of sexuality and sexual socialization into theological reflection, and identifying the sexual discourses that are present in the narratives in order to make per/versions of the sexual representations that can be found or ignored in them.

Queer theologies

The theology presented by Althaus-Reid already introduces a new theoretical framework for this thesis. It is the theoretical framework contributed by queer theory and queer theologies. From these theologies I will appropriate hermeneutical tools in order to analyse the Sunday school narratives and the biblical texts that constitute the case study of the thesis. In order to do this, I will proceed to explain the theory that is at the base of queer theologies and the specific insights that queer theologies provide to the theological realm.

Queer theory is a very recent field of study. It is based on the work of different philosophers and sociologists who have elaborated on theories of sexuality and gender (Schneider 2000: 206). One of the first writers whose theory is essential for the construction of queer theory is the French philosopher Michel Foucault, who provided notions that enabled us to problematize how knowledge and sexuality are understood (Schneider 2000: 206; Stuart 1997: 3; Cheng 2011:6). Some contemporary authors whose work is also fundamental for queer theory are the North American philosopher Judith Butler and the Welsh sociologist Jeffrey Weeks, (Schneider 2000: 206; Stuart 1997: 3; Cheng 2011:6).

In relation to the term 'queer' some authors have used it to refer to certain categories of sexual orientation such as 'homosexual', 'lesbians', 'transgender', 'bisexual', 'intersex' and other "non-normative sexualities and/or gender identities". This is the case of Patrick Cheng, who uses the term to refer to the people that conform to these communities (Cheng 2011:3). Despite the common usage of the term, queer theory denies the construction of such categories, as they keep working on an "exclusionary nature". Instead, the challenge of queer theory is to maintain these identities as open and unstable (Brintnall 2013: 51). Therefore, queer theory and queer theology differentiate themselves from 'gay/lesbian' writings that contain issues of exclusion and justice within these communities. In contrast to this, queer theory goes beyond these exclusions and these identities and deals "with the system of meaning that produces" those categories in a first place (Schneider 2000: 208). Consequently, this framework is not limited or defined by the defence of some specific sexual identity, but it works as a framework to de-construct and question the production of sexuality as a whole, and in this thesis, the production of children's sexuality in particular.

In short, queer theory can be defined as a theory that denies the fixed notions of sexuality and gender, and that rejects the assumption that sexuality is something 'natural' or a 'medical fact' (Cheng 2011:6). Instead, through a post-structuralist approach, queer theory argues that sexual identities are socially constructed (Schneider 2000: 206; Cheng 2011:6-7). These social constructions of sexuality work within a system of power (Stuart 1997: 3) and control that classifies people in different groups (Cheng 2011:7), being the heterosexual norm, the one that dominates and oppresses other sexualities. The recognition of sexuality as a social construction also acknowledges the fluidity of it; this means that sexuality is constantly changing, transforming, being shaped by and shaping its own context (Cheng 2011:6), instead of being something fixed. This fluidity of sexuality is relevant for this study because

it allows for children to possess and enjoy their sexuality, and accepts that this sexuality may be different for the one that the same individual would perform years later.

Therefore, queer theory is a resource that queer theology uses to undermine the ‘hetero-patriarchal’ discourse within Christianity (Cheng 2011:8). Queer theology is concerned about the social constructions of sexuality within theological discourses (Stuart 1997; Isherwood & Althaus-Reid 2004), and its reflection is based on deconstructing and trespassing on what is normative in society (Cheng 2011:9). Following the theory that is behind it, queer theology questions not only the binary categories of sex, but also the essentialisms about other sexual identities (Schneider 2000:208), which include lesbian and gay theological assumptions (Isherwood & Althaus-Reid 2004: 3).

Another important contribution of queer theology is its capacity to refute the traditional idea that sex and gender are creations of God, that they are ‘natural’ and that categories such as ‘homosexual’, ‘heterosexual’, ‘female’ and ‘male’ are fixed (Cheng 2011:8). I may add to this list the category of the ‘sexually innocent’ that has been accredited to children and that helps to ignore so many sexual realities experienced by them. In relation to the assumption of a natural sexuality given by God, Isherwood and Althaus-Reid say:

Somehow, queering theology requires us to challenge the existent link between theology and sexual domestication. Queering theology requires courage... we face here the challenge of renouncing beloved sexual ideologies, systems of belief that even if built upon injustice have become dear to us, especially if associated with the will of God. (Isherwood & Althaus-Reid 2004: 3)

Queer theology takes up the challenge described above. As a result, it exposes the “exercise of the authority of the metanarratives of heteronormativity” (Isherwood & Althaus-Reid 2004: 5). These metanarratives are those big chronicles that acquire a character of universal truth and that tell the story of heterosexuality as the norm and the natural state for human beings. The authority of these metanarratives claim that there is no truth outside them, only deviations from the truth. Queer theology recognizes these metanarratives within Christianity and initiates a process of reviewing and de-constructing the traditional understanding of heterosexuality that the Christian metanarratives insists on (Isherwood & Althaus-Reid 2004: 5). Consequently, queer theology removes the perception of sexuality and gender as given from God (Isherwood & Althaus-Reid 2004: 5), created by ‘Him’ in a binary mould, as unchanging, predictable, and as consisting of complementary identities.

As has been shown above, the first assumption of queer theology is that sexuality is not a fixed aspect of life given by God which is contained on a heterosexual ‘divine’ matrix, but a social construction that is legitimated through the Christian metanarratives. Together with this, a second assumption of queer theology is that love is at the basis of both Christianity and queer theory, and this love is characterized by being radical (Cheng 2011: x; Isherwood & Althaus-Reid 2004: 1). The radicalism of this love eradicates boundaries such as those of normative sexual and gender identities and those of a human in contrast to a divine nature (Cheng 2011: x). These boundaries have functioned to construct hierarchies where the male heterosexual is at the top with women and diverse sexualities arrayed beneath, while what is considered divine or spiritual has been above all that is considered material and ‘fleshly’. Queer theology then looks at the structures of the Church, questioning the praxis of love that is present or absent, and looks to create a theology that promotes “a loving style of relationship” (Isherwood & Althaus-Reid 2004: 1) without hierarchies or exclusions.

Finally, queer theology represents continuity in the way of doing theology, on one hand, and a discontinuity on the other. Queer theology represents continuity with the traditional way of doing theology because it works with the four sources of theology: scripture, tradition, reason and experience (Cheng 2011:11). But at the same time, it represents discontinuity in its approaches to these sources. The way of doing theology can be described as trespassing or disrupting what has been taught and internalized for many centuries. Cheng describes the way of doing queer theology as a “transgressive action” that deviates from societal norms, especially those related to sexual and gender identity (Cheng 2011:5). Following Shore-Goss’s words, Cheng says that “the act of queering traditional discourse in theology has a ‘prophetic edge’” (Cheng 2011:6).

Conclusion

In this chapter I have presented the theological frameworks and the theories behind them that inform the analysis of my study, which looks for ways of analysing the constructions of sexuality within selected Sunday school narratives and the biblical texts used to elaborate that material. These frameworks have been presented within two main theological trends. The first one has been ‘feminist theologies’ and the second ‘queer theologies’.

From the first theological trend, the one on ‘feminist theologies’, I looked at two categories. These categories were ‘African feminist theology’ and ‘post-structuralist feminist theologies’.

African Feminist Theology provided important insights for the analysis since it is concerned about issues of religion and culture. Through its cultural hermeneutics it has revealed how issues of sexuality are determined by the fusion of culture and religion in the continent, and it provides the lenses to analyse not only the biblical text but also how this text is interpreted and shaped by contemporary cultural beliefs. For this thesis, cultural hermeneutics provides the method that allows seeing the cultural understanding of sexuality mirrored in the Sunday school narratives.

On the other hand, post-structuralist feminist theologies provided two theological instruments that leave behind the traditional feminist struggle of gender and problematizes essentialisms of sexuality and religion. Through Body Theology and its centrality in the incarnation of Jesus (the divine into our reality), it becomes central for this analysis of the experiences of bodies. In the analysis of this thesis, Body Theology works as a theological tool that allows analysing the narratives through the eyes of a “female body”, what raises different questions when compared to the classical male perspective and its hetero-patriarchal discourse. Through Indecent Theology I take as a point of departure that all theology contains a sexual discourse. As well, through its strategies of ‘per/verting’ or ‘indecenting’ theological authoritative discourses, I plan to identify the sexual options of the theological discourses of the Sunday school material, which are accepted theological representations, to make per/versions of them by asking ‘indecent’ questions of these narratives.

Finally, the second theological trend considered in this study, which is related to the first one, is ‘queer theologies’. This framework works in two directions. The first one comes from its idea of de-constructing the diverse constructions of sexual identities, and therefore will be implied to the necessity to de-construct the sexual identity that is associated with children. The second trend is its approach to the de-constructions of sexuality within theological discourses, as it happens with the case study of the thesis. The extent to which this is possible will be explored in the next chapter where I will present the methodology employed and the analysis of the Sunday school narratives.

CHAPTER 4: Sexual constructions in the Sunday school narratives

The purpose of this chapter is to present and analyse the data obtained from the two Sunday school narratives of the SSALT material and the biblical texts used by this Sunday school material.

The SSALT material consists of Sunday school resources produced by Scripture Union, a Southern Africa sub-region publication. The Sunday school material is created as an adaptation from Scripture Union UK's Children's resource material. There are 3 age-groups of books that are produced by this Sunday school resource: a first group of books for pre-school or non-readers children, a second group for lower primary or early reader children, and the upper primary or advanced reader children. Each group of books are composed of 12 books with lessons that cover the New and Old Testament, and each age-group material runs over a 4 year period.

In order to analyse the Sunday school material I will explore two case study narratives, one from the Old Testament and one from the New Testament, by looking at the literary aspects from a critical approach, supported by the theory that is at the base of this thesis. In the first section I will present the method used to analyse the narratives, following this I will present the actual analysis of the two narratives and a deconstructive reading of these narratives that allows me to see the sexual constructions that are socialized through the Sunday school material.

Method: Post-structuralist deconstructive literary analysis

In accordance with the design of the research and its poststructuralist paradigm which seeks to analyse discourses and the meanings that are produced by them, as well as in accordance with the theoretical underpinnings of the study and the search for the constructions of sexuality within the religious discourses, I adopt narrative criticism as the method that will allow me to analyse the narratives in detail and critically judge their dynamics in the construction and socialization of a particular kind of sexuality.

It is important to clarify that narrative criticism differs from other methods of literary analysis that have focused on the historical context of the literary sources, the actual sources behind a text, and/or the process of redaction of a determined text (Malbon 1992: 24). Unlike these methods, narrative criticism is a literary approach under what has been called ‘New Criticism’, which represented a shift from how literary analysis was traditionally done. New Criticism left behind the concerns for the historical information about the author and the context, and instead proposed that a text must be understood within its own internal dynamics (Malbon 1992: 23; Olson 2010: 17). Following this trajectory of literary analysis, I focus my own study on the selected narratives (the two narratives from Sunday school and the two biblical texts this material is re-telling) using a non-historical approach through narrative criticism. This means that I do not address who the original authors were, their contexts and sources; instead I focus exclusively on the narrative production of meaning. Consequently, I will focus on the different elements of a literary text that narrative criticism studies, which are the “narrative structure, selection and ordering of episodes, plot conflicts, image patterns and repetitions, keywords, thematic emphasis, point of view, and character development” (Olson 2010: 18), among others.

The narrative text is understood firstly as a story and secondly as discourse (Malbon 1992: 26-27). The text as story is characterised by Jerome Walsh in a profound but simple way when he says that, “It is most convenient to imagine this as a ‘world’ (the world of the story), a realm where individuals live (characters) and things happen (events) in particular circumstances (settings)” (Walsh 2009:7). Different from the story, but related to it, is the discourse or the way the story is articulated (Malbon 1992: 27). Within the discourse it is possible to see the ‘ideology’ of the story. By ideology I refer to the set of ideas that construct a way to seeing and understanding the world and which can serve the interest of a certain group (Clines 1995: 10).

Following this understanding of the narrative, as story and as discourse, I proceed to explain the different elements of the story in the next section. After explaining the elements of the story, I will present in a different section the ways of seeing and making evident the discourse of the narrative.

The narrative as story: elements of narrative criticism

The narrative approach that I use to understand the Sunday school and biblical narratives is guided by the inputs of different scholars who work with the narratives of the Bible; those who influence my method are Dennis T. Olson (2010), Jerome Walsh (2009) and Elizabeth Struthers Malbon (1992). Following their analyses I present some important elements of the story that narrative criticism explores, and which I will use in the analysis of the Sunday school narratives and the biblical texts.

Plot (structure)

Plot is constructed by a series of events which can be identified as different scenes or episodes of the story that the narrative is telling (Walsh 2009: 14). Put in simpler words, ‘plot’ is the ‘what’ and the ‘why’ of the narrative. Or, as Malbon states it, “What happens? Why? Then what happens? Why?” (Malbon 1992:32). Walsh indicates that plots are usually made up by a movement between a ‘relative stability’ to a ‘tension’ to a new ‘relative stability’ (Walsh 2009: 14).

For the analysis of the Sunday school narratives and the biblical texts, plot will allow seeing the narrative in its different moments, and by doing this a possible intention on how the plot has been presented can be perceived. In relation to what was said above, Bar-Efrat argues that plot functions to capture the attention of the reader according to how the author organized the events and at the same time to give meaning to those events (Bar-Efrat 1989: 93).

Characters / characterization

Characters are those individuals that are constructed by the author to “inhabit” the world of the story and who are presented as “real people” (Walsh 2009: 23). The portrayal or characterization of these individuals could be through the direct action or speech of the character or through what other characters say or do in relation to them (Malbon 1992: 29). Commonly, characters are described as ‘flat’ or ‘round’ according to the complexity of the character (Walsh 2009: 24; Malbon 1992: 29). Flat characters are presented in a simple way and can be very consistent throughout the narrative (Malbon 1992: 29). They are usually described by one or two attributes which do not change during the plot (Walsh 2009: 24). In contrast, round characters are described by several attributes which can be in conflict with each other (Walsh 2009: 24). Round characters are presented as more “complex or dynamic” people who can mutate during the narrative (Malbon 1992: 29).

There is also a difference between main characters and secondary characters. Main characters are the ‘important’ people in the plot, those individuals that are given more attention within the narrative and therefore could be perceived as more complex characters (Walsh 2009: 24). On the other hand, secondary characters are those individuals who have a function in helping the narrative to make sense or to foreground the main characters (Walsh 2009: 24).

Repetitions

The repetitions of words, phrases or ideas can be understood as “a stylistic feature” (Bar-Efrat 1989: 211) in the text, and these repetitions can function in two ways. One function of repetition is as a “convenient or economical way” of describing the story (Walsh 2009: 81); here is no major significance to the repetition; it is just a simpler way to say something. Another function is to communicate a deeper meaning through the emphasis that is transmitted by the repetition (Walsh 2009: 81). Sometimes there is even variation in the repetition, and this could lead to new aspects of the meaning (Walsh 2009: 81).

There are different techniques in the use of repetitions in a narrative, and different authors categorize these techniques under titles such as “duplications”, “key words”, etc. (Bar-Efrat 1989). I will mention a simpler categorization provided by Walsh, who comes down to two forms of describing the different kinds of repetitions that could be found in a narrative. He describes them as “strict repetition” and “other repetition” (Walsh 2009: 82). The first one refers to “the same event, speech, or piece of information” repeated in one narrative; and the second one refers to “instances where a repeated word, phrase, or idea establishes a link between two otherwise separate and distinct story elements” (Walsh 2009: 82), almost like an evocation of other story elements outside the narrative under analysis.

Implied author and implied reader

As it was mentioned in the introduction to the method, I do not care to understand the historical authors of the narratives or their contexts and sources. However, there is a kind of “author” that I am interested in, and this is the “implied author”. The implied author is not necessarily the same as the real author who wrote the narrative, but the author that is presented in the narrative itself. Malbon defines it as “a creation of the real author that is implied in his or her text” (1992: 27). It is the kind of author that the text is trying to present, someone with the “requirements of knowledge and belief presupposed in the narrative”

(Malbon 1992: 27). In other words, it is a fictional construction of an author with the authority to write and who writes with full veracity. In some narratives the implied author could be equivalent to the narrator.

Very similar to the implied author, the “implied reader” is a construction of the real author. The real author writes with an idea of who is going to read the narrative, and this idea or reader is labelled as the implied reader. Similarly to the way that the implied author is a fictional construction, the implied reader is imagined with fictional characteristics that fit with the idea of the real author (Malbon 1992: 27). Malbon defines the implied reader as “the one who would be necessary for this narrative to be heard or read” (Malbon 1992: 27).

Finally it is important to notice that these narrative elements of implied author and implied reader are part of the discourse (Malbon 1992: 28) within which an ideology could be found. It is the implied reader who is “invited to admire, judge, or identify with the characters” (Malbon 1992: 28), meaning that it is the ideal reader that is in mind of the real author, the one who the author is trying to persuade to belief, approve or disapprove something in the narrative.

Points of view and rhetoric

Under this point I am referring to two different but related elements in the narrative analysis. The first one is the point of view offered by the author of the narrative. Walsh describes the point of view in the narrative in terms of ‘angle’ and ‘distance’ (Walsh 2009: 44). He says that the angle is what permits us to see something as central or as peripheral (Walsh 2009: 44). In this way the narrator guides the reader to what he or she considers is important in the narrative. The narrator even decides what information of the story to show and what to leave unknown. The distance, similarly to the angle, has the ability to show some element of the story in detail and with intensity, provoking a reaction from the reader, or showing an element of the story in a more general way (Walsh 2009: 47). How the narrator uses these strategies allows us to know the point of view that he or she is trying to create.

For example, it can be said that a narrative is showing a dualistic point of view when the narrator presents two very clear and opposite sides, one good and one bad. Similarly, it can be said that a narrative has a patriarchal point of view when everything is shown from the

eyes of a man, and the information of the story that is relevant and given in detail is related to the male characters of the story.

Rhetoric, on the other hand, is “the art of persuasion” used in the narrative (Malbon 1992: 34). The biblical scholar Hans de Wit shows the relation between point of view and rhetoric when he affirms that rhetorical criticism is concerned about the analysis of the strategies employed by the author (consciously or unconsciously) in order to persuade the reader to convert to the point of view given in the text (de Wit 2002: 362). Due to the persuasive role found in a text, there is an exercise of power that is played from the text, and rhetorical analysis will focus on that power relationship (de Wit 2002: 367). There is also a link between rhetoric and ideology, as both are trying to convince and even manipulate (de Wit 2002: 370).

This last element of narrative criticism is getting closer to the narrative as discourse, and leaving behind the narrative as story. Therefore, in the next section I will explain briefly my notion of narrative as discourse.

The narrative as discourse: constructive and deconstructive readings

As has been said, I am using narrative criticism as my method to analyse the narratives of the Sunday school material as well as the biblical texts these narratives are referring to. And within this method, the narrative is understood firstly as a story which is analysed with the narrative elements described above, and secondly, as a discourse. The narrative as discourse makes reference to the ‘fashion’ in which the story is told and the possible influence of an ideology (values and ideas) that the author is trying to communicate.

Therefore, in this section I will make reference to two procedures of reading a narrative and making visible the discourse of such a narrative. These procedures are a “constructive reading” and a “deconstructive reading” of narratives. My interest is in a deconstructive reading of the narratives, as this fits most appropriately with my theoretical orientation, but in order to do this, both readings (constructive and deconstructive) must be understood and employed.

Constructive readings

A constructive reading of a narrative looks for the coherence and structure of the text. This kind of reading follows the given narrative ‘clues’ of texts, “demonstrating a basic unity of purpose and meaning in the texts” (Olson 2010). Here a fairly simple communication model is assumed, imaging a “sender”, a “receiver” and an “object” or message that is sent (Malbon 1992: 25). Within a constructive reading this model is never questioned; there must be always the presence of these three elements of communication in a text and the supposition that these three elements function perfectly.

Important for a constructive reading is to find the meaning of the text through the given structure of the text. It can be even said that “structuralists search not so much for the meaning of a text as for the structures and patterns that make meaning possible” (Beal, Keffer and Linafelt 1999:81). And this is the kind of constructive reading I will be doing, initially, a reading that allows me to see the structure and patterns of the narratives in order for me then to look more closely for other possible meaning(s) in a second moment.

A constructive reading hopes to avoid the subjectivity of the reader; it is assumed that an objective reading of the text is something conceivable (de Wit 2002: 335-336). This is not my assumption, and that is the reason why after doing a constructive reading of the text, which will provide important insights to the understanding of the narratives, it becomes necessary to acknowledge that my findings, following this kind of reading, are not objective and are not sufficient or satisfactory for the study. Therefore, a deconstructive reading is going to take place too.

Deconstructive readings

As with a constructive reading, a deconstructive reading “is not a method of interpretation” (own translation) but a certain way of reading a text that can borrow from different methods of exegesis (de Wit 2002: 450). The French philosopher Jacques Derrida was a central author on what is known as de-constructivism (Moore 1992: 84; Olson 2010:19; de Wit 2002: 450). Derrida said that his reading was not focused on what was intended to be central to a text, but that he looked for what was secondary, for the marginal or less important points. These points, said Derrida, provided information about how the text functions in general (Moore 1992: 85), and therefore it allows us to see the gaps, veiled intentions and contradictions within a text.

Different authors make reference to Derrida's work, explaining deconstructive reading as a reading that wants to "re-construct what was prohibited, or rejected, or postponed in a text" (own translation) (de Wit 2002:452). Deconstructive reading is described as a reading that does not remain in the structure and supposed 'stability' of a text, but a reading that recognizes meanings outside the structure. In this sense a deconstructive readings is a post-structuralist reading. Olson exemplifies this by saying that:

Deconstruction involves teasing out and highlighting those details of a text that promote meanings and commitments that are in fundamental conflict with meanings and commitments that may appear at the surface of a text. The potential conflict in meaning demonstrates that any given text is unstable in meaning and open to a variety of interpretations that reflect the ideology of the reader. (Olson 2010, 20)

Finally, an important attribute of a deconstructive reading is its value of justice. It is a reading "with an eye and ear extended for the excluded, the marginal, the blind spot, the blank" (Moore 1992: 86). The potential conflict of meaning within a text exposes the danger of how authoritative texts can be interpreted in a way that promotes the interest of the powerful and the oppression of those who are disempowered (Olson 2010: 20).

An interest of this thesis is to provide a reading of the narratives, both the Sunday school narratives and the biblical narratives on which they are based, that seeks justice for what has been ignored or excluded, exposing the ideology that could be present in the narratives and providing new insights from the biblical texts that unmask these intentions.

The analysis of the narratives

I have presented in the first part of this chapter the method I am using in order to analyse the Sunday school narratives, as well as the analysis of the biblical texts that are re-told in the respected Sunday school narratives. In the next pages of this chapter I will present the actual analysis and the findings after employing the method. For this purpose I will present first one of the Sunday school narratives followed by the biblical text that corresponds with it; and then the second Sunday school narrative followed by the biblical text used for it.

First Sunday school narrative: "A Dream"

Before presenting the analysis of the Sunday school narrative, I present the Sunday school narrative transcribed as it is found in the Sunday school material, using its titles and exact order. I am just adding numbers to differentiate each paragraph.

After the narrative I proceed to present the analysis following the narrative elements discuss in the method above.

Bible Focus

1 You know how it is. Things are going really well, all your plans are coming together, life looks good ... and then something totally unpredictable happens. You are about to have the holiday of a lifetime, and the person you're going with gets the measles; you're engaged to someone, then the wedding looks as if it's off.

Bringing on the champion!

2 Joseph must have felt that his life was going pretty well. His bride-to-be was from a good family. They had come successfully through the engagement year, and now they were into the second stage: they were pledged. This part of the agreement could not be broken, except by divorce, and at the end of this year they were to be married.

3 A devout Jew, Joseph probably went to the religious festivals in Jerusalem regularly, travelling south from Galilee with friends, looking forward to the time when he would have his wife beside him. There would have been plenty of talk among the young men: corruption in the government, crippling taxes paid to Rome, the scandalous behaviour of the Herod the king, who was not above killing his own family to further his political career. Now, if ever, was the time for God to send the Messiah! The promised one had been expected for centuries: a warrior king from the family of David. Heads would shake regretfully, beards would tugged thoughtfully. There had been no word of prophecy for more than three hundred years. Had God forgotten His people?

A cosy future?

4 Suddenly Zechariah, one of his fiancée's own kinsmen, has a vision in the temple (Luke 1:22) and hope begins to stir. Might Joseph have prayed to be a part of that hope? He himself was one of David's descendants. He could expect to have sons of his own...

5 Then Mary tells him she is pregnant, and Joseph's life is thrown into turmoil. Mary claims she is with child by the Holy Spirit (Matthew 1:18) but that's unbelievable. Joseph knew he had not touched Mary, but somebody has, and according to the law the punishment for both guilty parties was stoning (Deuteronomy 22:23, 24). To death.

6 Joseph has a decision to make. In the circumstances, he could not go on with the marriage. That leaves him with two choices: he can deliver Mary to the punishment demanded by the law, or he can divorce her quietly – and he has to think about this.

7 Then comes the dream, and all of Joseph's careful considering, his ideas about the Messiah and his plans for his own future are turned upside down. God has reached straight into his life, and nothing will ever be the same again.

Who wants mediocrity?

8 What do you expect from the coming Messiah this Christmas? Whatever you anticipate, you should not be hoping for a comfortable existence. From the very time of Jesus' conception there was uproar, trouble and disturbance. Christ will bring you, if you let Him, peace that you can cut with a knife, a life more real than you have ever known and the deepest joy you can imagine. In times of trouble He Himself will comfort you, but He won't give you a comfortable life. He did not come to make us happy; He came to give us a life of eternal quality.

Plot (Structure)

It is very easy to find a structure of stability-tension-stability in the narrative offered by the Sunday school material. According to the order of paragraphs that the narrative presents I suggest the following structure:

Paragraph 1: Introduction of the narrator

Paragraph 2 and 3: Joseph and his context

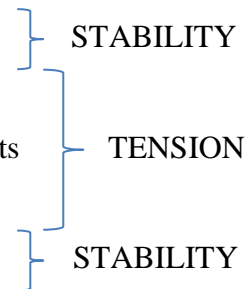
Paragraph 4: Unexpected events

Paragraph 5: Climax of unexpected events

Paragraph 6: New reality of Joseph

Paragraph 7: The Dream

Paragraph 8: Moral of the narrative



In Paragraph 1 the narrator is introducing a human reality of the unpredictable and unanticipated. The narrator does not worry about explaining what this reality is or why it happens, but only evokes an image of the unexpected presenting in someone's life through some examples of this kind of reality. This introduction is not referring yet to the story that is going to be told, but it introduces the reader to the notion of the unexpected in life.

In Paragraph 2 the retelling of the biblical story begins. This paragraph introduces the character of Joseph and the fact that he is engaged and how far the engagement process has proceeded. Using similar words ("life was going pretty well") to the ones used in the Paragraph 1 ("things are going pretty well"), the narrator is re-calling that reality of the unexpected, known by the readers due to their own experience of humanity, and introducing the story of Joseph as something the reader could identify with. Paragraph 3 provides more information about Joseph and his context from a hypothetical account of what Joseph and his friends could have talked about (the socio-economic and political context of their people). In the brief description of this context the narrator introduces his own voice to remember that in the middle of such context a Messiah was expected and that it has been many years without any prophecy.

In Paragraph 4 the unexpected in the story starts to happen. The narrator refers to a different story that is found in Luke 1:22, linking the story of Zechariah with Joseph's own life. After reporting that it has been a long time of silence from God, now the narrator is presenting

Zechariah's vision. The narrator does not go into detail of what the vision was, but he/she seems to establish a connection between Zechariah's vision, the birth of a child and Joseph's life.

Paragraph 5 constitutes the climax of the Sunday school story. In this paragraph Mary communicates to Joseph that she is pregnant from the Holy Spirit, but Joseph being aware that he "had not touched Mary", affirms that "someone" has touched her and the law calls for a punishment of death as she is his property. The law that is mentioned says that a virgin that is engaged and lies with a man, even in case of having being violated, is guilty and must be punished. Following the structure found in the story, and looking at the climax in paragraph 5, it is possible to say that this is the main event, the important event of the story to which the reader should pay attention.

Paragraph 6 is clear that Joseph is the one who has the power to take a decision in relation to the pregnancy of Mary. Despite the fact that the law is straightforward in establishing the punishment for the situation that Joseph believes he is experiencing; in the story he could obey the law or look for a different solution, to divorce her quietly. The narrator uses this paragraph to expound what Joseph is thinking about these two choices he has.

In the next paragraph Joseph has a dream and his decision and careful thinking on the situation change due to God's intrusion. Even though the Sunday school narrative carries the title of "A Dream", paragraph 7 is very short and concise. The narrator mentions that Joseph had a dream but does not give any detail on what the dream was about. The only information that is given is that his careful thinking on the situation is overturned due to this dream.

The final paragraph consists of the narrator's conclusion in the form of a moral after this story. The moral is directed to the contemporary reader in the time of Christmas; the lesson given by the narrator is to reflect that what is expected or anticipated at Christmas time is not always what is going to happen. The narrator concludes by talking about what Jesus' conception represents in the life of the reader. He is a comforter, but that does not mean that he gives a comfortable life.

Characters/ characterization

In the Sunday school narrative the characters can be identified and grouped in the following manner. As main characters I identify three: Joseph (who is the focus of the story), Mary (his

wife to be) and God (who is presented in different ways in the story – as someone, as Holy Spirit and as God). I also identified the following secondary characters: Joseph's friends (young men) and Zechariah.

The narrator portrays Joseph as the central and complex character of the story. Joseph is presented as experiencing different events (political-religious-personal situations) in his life. He is introduced as someone with a good life, who is engaged to a good woman, who is devout to his people and their religious traditions, someone who is friendly (he has friends) and a descendent of David. He is also someone in power to make decisions in relation to the future of his wife to be.

Mary on the other side is portrayed by the narrator only in relation to Joseph. She is the "bride to be", his "wife", his "fiancée". However in paragraph 5 she has a voice, she is the one who informs Joseph of her pregnancy, and she is the one who claims that her pregnancy is the work of the Holy Spirit. Despite the fact that Mary is able to talk, she is not in power to decide about her pregnancy and her future.

Finally God is a character who has no voice, and whose acts are presented by the other characters or by the narrator, but God is a character that plays an important role in the story and because of this I categorize God as a main character too. The narrator does not describe this character, but there is an idea constructed for the implied reader about this character that the narrator is presenting. In paragraph 3 the narrator says that it "was time for God to send the Messiah", and he (it would seem) raises the question, "Had God forgotten His people?". God is again presented in paragraph 7 when Joseph had a dream and the narrator only lets us know that "God has reached straight into his life".

Now, before commenting on the secondary characters, it is important to notice that in paragraph 5 there are references to "God" in an indirect way. The first reference to God is made by Mary who claims that the child is from the Holy Spirit (implying God). However this "intrusion" of "God" in Mary's life is not presented in the same way as it is presented with respect to Joseph (as a life changing event). The second mention of God could be identified in that "someone" who has touched Mary.

In relation to the secondary characters there is not much information about them. They are present in the text as resources to develop the story and to point to certain details. For

example the narrator uses Joseph's friends/young men to narrate the political situation of Joseph's context. Zechariah on the other hand is brought in to narrate that in the middle of the difficult situation and God's silence, there is hope, and maybe even that Joseph's own expectations are part of that hope.

Repetitions

Following the categorization of repetitions that was presented in the method, I am looking at two strict repetitions, this is the same words repeated in the story; I also pay attention to three repetitions of another kind, in this case the evocation of elements of other biblical narratives different from the biblical narrative on which this story is based.

Strict repetitions

The first repetition is found in paragraph 1 and 2. The words are not exactly the same, but the effect that they produced is as if they were the same because they are referring to a common situation. The words of paragraph 1 are "Things are going really well", and the words found in paragraph 2 are "life was going pretty well". As was mentioned in the plot, this repetition functions as a link between a common human reality and the reality of Joseph, and this link helps the reader to feel identified with the main character of the story.

The second repetition is found in paragraph 3 and paragraph 4. Once again the repetitions do not follow the form of an exact repetition using the same exact words, but it is a repetition of the same idea. In paragraph 3 the narrator mentions the idea of a Messiah sent by God referring to "a warrior king from the family of David", and paragraph 4 says that Joseph "himself was one of David's descendants". In both paragraphs the narrator is invoking the descendants of David with the idea of the Messiah in mind. The function of the repetitions is to clarify that Joseph is a descendant of David, and because of that he could be part of the event of the Messiah sent by God.

Other repetitions

The narrator also re-calls other narratives, in this case from the Bible. The first repetition of this kind is found in paragraph 4 where the narrator is remembering the text of Luke 1:22. In this case the text of Luke is telling the story of Zechariah's vision, where an angel appeared to him to announce that his wife Elizabeth was having son, named John. It is the

announcement of the birth of John the Baptist. However the narrator is evoking this story as part of the hope for the birth of the Messiah.

22 When he did come out, he could not speak to them, and they realized that he had seen a vision in the sanctuary. He kept motioning to them and remained unable to speak.

Luke 1:22 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

A second evocation to another narrative is found in paragraph 5. In this case the narrator is pointing to a verse of the same biblical text that this Sunday school narrative is trying to retell. The evocation to this biblical verse is to say with authority that Mary “is with child by the Holy Spirit”.

18 Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah[a] took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit.

Matthew 1:18 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

Finally in paragraph 5 too, the narrator tells about the punishment of the law and the evocation of the actual law that he/she is referring to is cited in brackets. It is the text of Deuteronomy 22:23-24 that makes reference to the punishment of an engaged virgin and a man in the town who lies with her. The offense, even in case of violation, is to the man she is engaged to, and not to her. This is an interesting point to be analysed and discussed later in this study.

23 If there is a young woman, a virgin already engaged to be married, and a man meets her in the town and lies with her, 24 you shall bring both of them to the gate of that town and stone them to death, the young woman because she did not cry for help in the town and the man because he violated his neighbor's wife. So you shall purge the evil from your midst.

Deuteronomy 22:23-24 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

Implied author/implied reader

The narrator that is implied in the text is someone who can speak directly to the reader, and who therefore knows the reader. Is someone who makes statements like, “You know how it is” or “What do you expect from the coming Messiah this Christmas?”. The implied author is also someone who already knows the biblical story of Matthew 1:18-25 and who knows the story so well that they are capable of retelling the story to the implied reader (listener).

The implied reader (listener) is the children of different churches that are in an upper primary age. It is implied that the reader (listener) also knows already the biblical story of the birth of Jesus, and because this is an already known story the narrator is free to re-create the story without needing to go into detail with specifics; for example in the Sunday school narrative the dream is not really presented by the narrator, but it is implied that the reader (listener) already knows what the dream was about.

Point of view and rhetoric

Following Walsh's explanation about point of view (2009: 44), to discern the point of view of the narrator in a story it is necessary to identify what is presented as central and what is presented as peripheral to the reader. In the case of the Sunday school narrative it is very obvious that Joseph's life is what is central in the story. All the paragraphs of the story (except the introductory and the conclusive ones) are about Joseph, and even when there are other characters or situations (Zechariah or Mary) the importance of these intermissions are the effects of such situations in Joseph's life. When analysing this point of view a little more, it becomes noticeable that the story is centered on male control; in this case male control over Mary's sexuality.

Surprisingly, even though Mary's pregnancy is situated in the climax of the story, the details of Mary's life and Mary's thinking are not presented, it is something peripheral, regardless of the fact that God has acted directly in her life. As was mentioned before, when everything in a story is presented from the perspective of a man and the relevant information in the story is the related only to the male characters, it is possible to say that the narrator's point of view is patriarchal and that this patriarchal point of view has a very strong effect on the reader. This is that the narrator is using strategies in the story to persuade (rhetorically) the reader to share this patriarchal point of view.

Another strategy that is found in the text is the use of particular forms of language. When referring to Joseph's life, the narrator uses a triumphalist and honourable language that presents him as a good man. However the narrator is giving information that is not in the original story and because of that he/she is using a language of condition or probability to present such information ("Joseph must have felt", "Joseph probably went to", "He could expect to"). On the other hand Mary is not truly present until paragraph 5, but since the

beginning of the story the narrator is referring to her as Joseph's possession ("His bride to be", "his wife").

Mary's pregnancy seems to be compared, due to the rhetoric used by the narrator in paragraph 1, with what it means to "get the measles". Using the narrator's words, the pregnancy of a young woman fits into the category of the unexpected, into the category of the un-planned and therefore to return to stability this unexpected event must be controlled by the masculine figures in the story.

Summing up, every element in the narrative seems to work for the same purpose. When giving a structure to the plot it becomes obvious that stability in the story is equal to times of male control not only over a person, but over female realities which are alien and mysterious to men. The analysis of character and the repetitions in the narrative also shows an insistent interest in the male characters who are portrayed as in power to decide about their own life and the one of "their" women. Finally the point of view and rhetoric used in the narrative let us see the patriarchal ideology in it, ideology that wants to be taught as the norm to the reader.

Second Sunday school narrative: "Opportunity Lost"

As with the first Sunday school narrative, I have transcribed what I found in the Sunday school material, using its titles and exact order. In order to be able to present the analysis of the narrative, I have added numbers to differentiate each paragraph.

After the narrative's text, I proceed to present the analysis following the narrative elements discussed in the method above.

Bible Focus

1 Hindsight is a wonderful thing! How often have you heard that excuse when things go wrong and people let you down? When professionals are involved, isn't it their job to have a bit of foresight over whether their products are safe or their actions will cause disaster? Shouldn't we all, as members of a species who have created incredible technology and put men on the moon, be capable of some foresight – not the fortune telling variety, but the kind that weighs the facts and the 'what-ifs', and makes sound judgments? Ok, sometimes is not easy. We can't foresee every eventuality, and sometimes it really is only by looking back later that we become aware of lost opportunities. We can even be tempted to blame God for not forewarning us.

Foresight supplied

2 That's not the situation that Adam and Eve faced in the Garden of Eden. God had clearly spelled out the consequences of eating from the tree of knowledge of good and evil. It would bring death not because knowledge was bad in itself, but because they were meant to come to it through their relationship with Him. Knowledge acquired apart from God, without any reference to the source of divine good, would inevitably take on the twisted power to cause misery and evil. That was the truth of the situation, and into the story comes Satan himself described as a snake worming his way into Eve's confidence by telling half-truths and making evil seem daring and attractive. Do you know the feeling? 'Don't pass up this amazing opportunity! Take no notice of what you've been told. The forbidden fruit's not only delicious, it will set you free! You'll be able to take control of your life! And there won't be negative consequences. How can there be, when it will feel so good?' Isn't that similar to the message given today about things like drugs or sexual freedom?

True hunger

3 Whether it's the snake with Eve, or a drug pusher today, or the mate in the pub tomorrow who asks what's wrong with drinking and driving, they're all preying on some of our most basic instincts – hunger, power and the desire for excitement.

4 Hunger is a God-given, biological necessity. That's why God provided all the other trees in the garden for food. But hunger's also necessary on a spiritual level. We all have an inbuilt hunger for God, for a loving relationship with Him, for His wisdom and care and His presence an inner longing to be with Him. The two are intertwined, because we are creatures of body and soul together. That was what Satan played on. He deceived Eve and perverted her hunger for God, and he's still trying to do that today, offering us a deadly cocktail, poison sweetened with a lie. So let's take a real look at those 'too-good-to-be-true' opportunities out there. Do they compare with the truth of Christ? Because as Adam and Eve discovered, what they lost was the greatest opportunity of all- eternal life with God.

God's foresight

5 But that's not the end of the story it's only the beginning, because God's foresight is perfect. He hasn't barred the way to the tree of life forever. He just planted it somewhere else – not in Eden, but where Jesus died at Calvary. And as Christians, with God given hindsight, we can share His foresight as we read the Bible in the light of Jesus' death and resurrection that restores eternal life to us.

Plot (Structure)

The structure of the narrative is easily identified by the different moments or themes that the narrator is mentioning in the different paragraphs. In the case of this narrative, “Opportunity Lost”, there is not a plot in the same sense that there is in the other narrative as there is not a series of events related to a series of characters and a movement in the story (beginning-middle-end). Rather, the narrator is reminding the reader of the story of Adam and Eve, but only in order to comment on the themes that he/she is interested in. There are some events and characters, but they do not constitute a story in the narrative; rather, there is an evocation of it. Having identified the moments and themes presented by the author, this is the structure that I propose for the narrative:

Paragraph 1: Introduction of the narrator

Paragraph 2a: Adam and Eve, and the tree of knowledge

Paragraph 2b-3: Analogy (knowledge outside God)

Paragraph 4: Physical hunger and spiritual hunger

Paragraph 4b: Analogy (Eve’s hunger)

Paragraph 5: God’s foresight

Looking at the structure, the story of Adam and Eve does not constitute the centre of the narrative, but the importance of the narrative is found in the analogy and theology that is constructed by the author in paragraph 2b until paragraph 4a. In the next few paragraphs I present a brief comment on each paragraph of the structure.

Paragraph 1 introduces the reader to the theme of “Foresight”. In other words, the narrator is talking about the ability to think ahead, anticipate and plan, which is a good capacity of human beings, but this human capacity is not always used accurately. The way the narrator introduces this theme is from the perspective of “Hindsight” or seeing things in retrospect. The narrator is presenting hindsight as something negative, not as a way to learn from our experiences, but as an excuse and as something that makes us lose opportunities.

In paragraph 2 the narrator introduces the theme (Foresight) into the story of Adam and Eve. And he/she tells us that in the case of Adam and Eve, God had supplied a foresight of what would happen if they eat from the tree of knowledge, the consequence of it being death. The narrator then comments on a second theme related to the story, the theme of knowledge. The

narrator presents two kinds of knowledge, the one that comes from God and the one that is acquired without God. In case of the last kind of knowledge (acquired apart from God), the knowledge (that is not something bad in itself) has a perverse form to serve to what is wrong. Finally, the narrator comes back to the Adam and Eve story to say that this is what happened to them, Eve acquired some knowledge from Satan and this knowledge was perverted.

Paragraph 2b leaves behind the story of Adam and Eve and the themes in the story and shows a movement into the reader's context as the narrator speaks directly to him/her. The narrator is unfolding an analogy for today in relation to the story of Adam and Eve (a story that is not told but which is evoked). It is imagined that the reader experiences something similar to Adam and Eve, that the reader has received certain knowledge that promised to give freedom, control and that does not bring consequences. The analogy ends up with the assumption that this knowledge that is twisted is knowledge related to drugs and sexual freedoms in the reader's world. Paragraph 3 finishes relating today's experience of knowledge acquired apart from God with a third theme, the theme of "our most basic instincts".

In paragraph 4 the narrator elaborates on the theme of "basic instincts", reducing it to the word "hunger" and introducing a dualistic or "spiritual" interpretation of it. There is a physical hunger and spiritual hunger. Hunger is something given by God, and therefore God supplies for it. Finally the narrator mentions that the two types of hunger are interwoven as body and soul is one creature.

In paragraph 4b the narrator comes back briefly to Adam and Eve's story to create another analogy to exemplify the third theme of the narrative. In this paragraph the narrator lets us know that it was from Eve's hunger that Satan took advantage, it was from her God-given nature that she was tempted. The situation experienced by Eve is applied to the readers when the narrator comments about today's offers of knowledge that are not "the truth of Christ". In a warning tone the narrator is inviting the readers to be aware of this, reminding us that Adam and Eve lost the opportunity of an eternal life with God.

Finally paragraph 5 returns to the theme of Foresight, but this time it is about God's foresight in relation to the lost opportunity of an eternal life. The narrator uses the image of the "tree of life forever" that is in Eden, and he/she says that God's plan was that, in order not to lose eternal life, to plant this tree in Jesus when he died at Calvary. Now there is a kind of

hindsight that is not negative, and it is the hindsight that is obtained when reading God's foresight in the "Bible in the light of Jesus".

Characters/ characterization

In the re-telling of the story of Adam and Eve, the characters of Adam, Eve, Satan and God are brought into the text. However it is difficult to identify these characters as main and secondary because all of them are playing a role of helping the narrative/narrator to make sense, with all of them are playing an auxiliary role. So I will call them secondary characters because they are used by the narrator to exemplify the themes he/she is trying to communicate. Very briefly what follows is a short description of each character.

Adam and Eve are presented as a collective character to whom God communicated the consequences of eating from the tree of knowledge and who realized the great opportunity they lost at the end of the narrative.

After introducing Adam and Eve as a collective character, now the narrator proceeds to present part of the story with only a focus on the character of Eve. She is presented in a passive way; she does not act but Satan acts in her. What is implied is that Satan succeeds in getting "into Eve's confidence", turning her belief to lies as he plays with her instincts in order to trick her.

Satan is described through his actions as a deceiver, an impostor. And this impostor is presented as the one who acts with Eve in the past, and who is still deceiving today.

God is portrayed through his actions too; nothing is said about his personality. However through the themes that are exposed in the narrative, the actions of God seem to make clear that God controls everything and his foresight is perfect.

Repetitions

Looking back to the definition of repetitions provided in the method, repetitions could be found as repeated words, phrases or ideas; and they may have different functions. In the case of this Sunday school narrative I found an idea that is reiterated in the text, a form of strict repetition. There also can be found an evocation to Adam and Eve as the narrative is based on the story that is told in Genesis 3.

Strict repetitions

The idea that is reiterated in the text is the idea of being able to anticipate. And there is a lesson to learn from Adam and Eve's lack of precaution and ability to foresee. This lesson must be used in the new context in order not to lose opportunities as important as an eternal life with God. The words "foresight" or "foresee" are mentioned in paragraph 1 and 5, but the idea is reinforced through the entire narrative.

Foresight is talked about in relation to the readers who must ask the "what-ifs" when taking decisions despite the fact that as human beings they do not always have the capacity to foresee something. Foresight is also talked about in relation to Adam and Eve who received some kind of foresight or warning from God, but who were (through Eve) deceived by Satan and ended up suffering the consequences for that. Finally, foresight is also talked about in relation to God. The narrator finishes the story saying that God's foresight is perfect and because of that Adam and Eve, as well as today's readers, are not outside of the possibility of a life time with God, as God prevented this with Jesus' death. He/she also says that Christians can have some kind of foresight through reading the Bible in the light of Jesus death.

Other repetitions

Different from the first narrative analysed (where the narrator is re-telling the story of Joseph), this narrative is not necessarily retelling the story of Adam and Eve in Genesis 3, but the narrator is evoking their story to narrate a new story about God's foresight in Jesus. It is easy to see that the narrator is not retelling the story of Adam and Eve when looking at the structure of the narrative. In the structure, the introductory and conclusive paragraphs, as well as the centre of the narrative, are not about this story.

In paragraph 2a and 4b the story of Adam and Eve is re-told. However the details of this story are told in the Sunday school material differently from what is found in the Bible. In paragraph 2a the narrator seems to imply that God had communicated the consequences of eating from the tree of knowledge to both Adam and Eve. However, in the biblical text it was a command that God gave to the man in Genesis 2:15-17 before the woman exist, but that command is of knowledge of the woman in Genesis 3:3. These are the biblical texts that are evoked:

¹⁵ The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it. ¹⁶ And the Lord God commanded the man, “You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; ¹⁷ but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die.”

Genesis 2: 15-17 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

³ but God said, ‘You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the middle of the garden, nor shall you touch it, or you shall die.’”

Genesis 3: 3 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

However, the narrator is not just recalling these texts, but he/she is also adding an interpretation of the texts. In paragraph 2a and 4b, the narrator adds an interpretation about knowledge. There is a clear comparison between knowledge that comes from God (divine good) and knowledge acquired apart from God, one is knowledge that is true and the second one is half-truth or deception. This commentary operates in paragraph 2a as a link to say that Satan works as a source of knowledge for Eve. In this case the narrator is evoking Genesis 3:4-5 and adding his/her interpretation:

⁴ But the serpent said to the woman, “You will not die; ⁵ for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God,[a]knowing good and evil.”

Genesis 3: 4-5 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

Implied author/implied reader

Very similar to the first narrative analysed, there is an implied author who speaks directly to the reader as knowing their reality, and who presents himself/herself as part of that reality through the use of the subject we (“we can’t foresee” or “we can even be tempted”). Similarly the implied author knows about the story of Adam and Eve and presents a theological interpretation of it that moves out of the biblical story to a Christian interpretation that involves Jesus’s death. However when referring to the Adam and Eve story or to Jesus, the narrator shows his/her point of view: God is in control!

The implied reader (listener) is again children of different churches that are in an upper primary age and who probably already know the story of Adam and Eve as well as the story of Jesus, and because of this previous knowledge they are capable of understanding the Sunday school narrative.

Point of view and rhetoric

The angle used by the narrator seems to imply that his/her point of view is dualistic. There is in the entire narrative a sense of contrasts. These contrasts are found in the text between what is good (God) and what is evil (Satan); what is human (can't foresee, can be deceived) and what is divine (God's foresight in Jesus); what is physical (biological necessities, basic instincts) and what is spiritual (hunger for God). And the dualism comes to be problematic since both contrasts come to be together in humans ("The two are intertwined, because we are creatures of body and soul together.")

This is what is central in the narrative: the dualistic reality of humans and their need for God due to this. This dualistic theology is very clear in the paragraphs that constitute the centre of the narrative (paragraph 2b to paragraph 4a). Within this dualism it is very easy to identify that there is a hierarchy and because we are human, our physical reality is well below the metaphysical reality of good and evil spiritual beings. Our bodies, our desires, are not seen in a very positive way.

Summarizing, the different elements of the narrative show how the narrator is evoking the story of Adam and Eve in order to teach a dualistic theology which says that it is necessary to doubt our bodies (basic instincts) and the knowledge we could acquire from them (Interestingly, in the story the body from which to doubt is the one of the woman). Instead, this theology is teaching that only God and spiritual reality is trustworthy. And finally, it teaches that God is always in control, even when one does not act according to his commands.

An invitation to "pervert" the narratives: Deconstructive readings engaging with the theory

In the analysis of the narratives I have worked with the literary elements of the texts and I have found the themes and point of view shared by the two authors. Through looking at these last elements of the story I began to perceive the discourses that the authors of the narratives were developing.

In this section I will analyse these discourses using the strategy of a deconstructive reading, and I will link them with the theological presuppositions provided by the theory I explained in the previous chapter. As it was explained above, a deconstructive reading focuses on what

seems to be secondary, the gaps, contradictions, intentions, and the meanings that can be found outside the main structure. Finally a deconstructive reading re-constructs from what has been ignored or postponed in the text.

By following the theory, I will do this deconstructive reading, probing for the similarities between the reader's culture and the culture mirrored in the text. I will ask for the bodies' experiences and pay attention to the body as a place of revelation. I will look for the grand narratives and their sexual discourse that is implied in the narratives. I will also deny that there is decency in such discourses, recognizing that they are constructions influenced by a particular ideology.

Joseph had a dream, what about Mary?

From the narrative analysis of the Sunday school story, the centrality of Joseph as a main character and his capacity to evaluate his (and Mary's) situation and take decisions about it is very clear. However, in a marginal space in the story are Mary and all the implications of her pregnancy in her life and body. The story does not say how much agency she had or did not have. The story does not say if she was hoping to be part of the messianic hope or if she even thought about it. The story does not say if she was experiencing something pleasurable or disgusting in her body. Neither does it say if she was preoccupied, anxious or afraid to tell Joseph about it. Even more striking for me, the story does not say if her pregnancy was something she agreed with, or something that was imposed. Was it a violation or an honour for her? What was the experience in her body? How did the Holy Spirit 'get' her pregnant, how was she inseminated? How does she interact with the pregnancy she was carrying in her body?

Very interesting and much hidden in the story is a possible confrontation between two kinds of masculinities or patriarchs in the story. The first patriarch is Joseph, who in the patriarchal hierarchy is in possession of Mary and specifically of Mary's sexuality. The second patriarch is God/Holy Spirit, who becomes the other who has touched Joseph's property, and who has the power to get her pregnant. God in this story is represented as a male figure at the top of the patriarchal pyramid. Additionally, even though the story in the Sunday school is not very clear about Joseph's dream, it looks like God's patriarchal position is above Joseph when Joseph's decision is directed by God through the dream.

After uncovering these kinds of questions, the following disturbing ‘meanings’ emerge from outside the main structure of the text:

1. God is patriarchal, ‘he’ can impose himself on everybody (women or men);
2. Women’s bodies are the property of someone else, someone within the patriarchal system;
3. Men are in power and have the right to treat women as their property (fiancée, wife);
4. Men must compete with other men in order to ensure that his property is his.

These are the ‘decent’ sexual constructions that the Sunday school material is socializing in children, teaching them that the world works under a patriarchal order where only two kinds of people (male-female; powerful-powerless) exist. The material is teaching and constructing a God who, far from being incarnated into our reality, far from being a God in solidarity and a loving God, is a masculine controlling patriarch.

Is it possible to speculate that girls are learning that their sexuality is subject to someone else (God and man), while boys are learning someone else’s sexuality is to be controlled by them? Suspecting that this is the case, in chapter 6 I will look for mechanisms of ‘indecent’ that allow another theology in Matthew 1:18-25 to ‘resurrect’.

Opportunity gained!

The literary analysis of the second Sunday school narrative shows that the narrative is focused on the theme of ‘foresight’ and ‘hindsight’. Much information is given in every paragraph but none of it is explained in detail because all the information is pointing to the predetermined main theme of the narrative. However, in these pieces of information there are relevant implications for the construction of an accepted/acceptable sexuality within the Sunday school narrative.

Looking at what seems to be secondary in the story is the phrase “Isn’t that similar to the message given today about things like drugs or sexual freedom?” Even though it seems to be something peripheral in the narrative, it has lots of significance since it can imply that what could separate from God is what is related to drugs and sex. This piece of information is not only secondary, but it constitutes a gap since the reader must assume what the message is for today. The assumption may be that ‘drugs’ and ‘sex’ are bad things, whatever their manifestation.

Adding to this piece of information is also the reference to “some of our most basic instincts-hunger, power and desire for excitement”. Once again not much is explained about what these basic instincts are, how they work and why evil could take advantage of them. The contradiction is also present, as an instinct (which is often understood to inform us about something important, for example that the body needs food to keep working) is presented as a dangerous thing, something human beings must mistrust.

The narrative presents reality in a dualistic way, creating two different but related facts: ‘biological necessities’ and ‘spiritual necessities’. The narrative elaborates on the spiritual necessities, but despite this emphasis on the spiritual needs, much is said in the silence about the biological needs. The most obvious and dangerous thing that is taught in the narrative about biological or physical needs is that they are not as important as the spiritual needs, and this is why they are not elaborated in the same way as the spiritual needs.

The narrative shows these two conflicting realities (biological and spiritual) as both given by God and both satisfied by God (“God provided”). However in the story God’s provision of these necessities was not enough. Similarly God’s perfect foresight seems to fail as God did not prevent the deception that Eve experienced from the serpent and that caused such an important consequence for Adam and Eve.

After looking at these pieces of information, I ask if there is a deficiency in what God provides for human beings. Why is knowledge apart from God a bad thing? Should human beings live in conflict with their bodies and necessities, wondering which instinct is good or bad? Should human beings live without looking for relevant knowledge that could help them but that is not provided by God? What about sex, from where should human beings inform themselves about their sexual physical necessities?

Looking at the secondary in the narrative, the gaps and contradictions, I present the following possible ‘meanings’ that can be derived from the Sunday school lesson:

1. Human beings instincts desire drugs and sex, but is not clear if these are totally bad things;
2. Human beings must live in a constant conflict between their biological necessities and their spiritual necessities, prioritizing the spiritual ones;
3. Biological necessities are at a lower level, human beings must suspect them;

4. Evil (and the devil) could take advantage of our instincts to separate human beings from God.

These meanings that I discern in the discourse of the text could be understood as part of what Althaus-Reid calls the 'grand narrative' in Christianity, an authoritative discourse that pretends to be neutral and true. However the 'grand narrative' is informed by patriarchy and it produces a sense of normativity in the patriarchal order. In the case of the Sunday school narrative what is evident is its dualistic ideology that is presented as an unquestionable truth, as well as the hierarchy that is constructed within this dualistic perspective.

Is it possible to speculate that children are learning that the body and some of their physical desires and necessities are a bad thing? Can children understand that girl's instincts are lower than those of boys because it is of Eve's basic instincts that the serpent took advantage? Could it be possible that children are learning that basic instincts are limited to drugs and sex, and that this is something normal to have as an instinct (meaning someone who does not desire drugs or sex is not normal)? In chapter 6 I will look at the original text in Genesis 3 and look for a way to read and understand the text that trespasses these normative discourses that have been imposed to the text.

Conclusions

In this chapter I have developed the method I use to analyse the Sunday school narratives that are the case study of this thesis, and I then proceeded to present an analysis of them as a story (using narrative analysis) and as a discourse (using a deconstructive analysis). These two steps of analysis worked to uncover important features of the narratives that have led me suspect that children may be taught about aspects of gender and sexuality through these narratives. I found important elements in the narratives that worked within a patriarchal and dualistic perspective, and which support the reproduction of a normative sexuality and gender roles.

In the next chapter I will present some other ways in which the biblical texts used in the Sunday school material have been read from a feminist and queer perspective.

CHAPTER 5: Feminist and Queer readings of Matthew 1:18-25 and Genesis 3

This chapter will review how the biblical texts used in the Sunday school narratives have been interpreted by selected feminist and queer readings of the biblical texts. The content of the chapter will not be limited to the different interpretations of the texts, but will also pay careful attention to the hermeneutical approaches and strategies used in the different readings in order to apply them in the reading I am going to present in the next chapter.

Readings of Matthew 1:18-25

The interpretation of Matthew 1:18-25 that is presented in the Sunday school narrative, as it was analysed in chapter 4, showed some findings that coincide with a common reading of the text, meaning a reading that enhances male characters and their positions of power. Different from that, feminist, gender and queer perspectives look for new ways of reading the biblical texts, looking to those aspects of the text that have been ignored, and denouncing those that have been used to oppress and discriminate because of gender and sexual preference. In the following section I will present an overview of some feminist and queer readings in relation to this text.

Rejecting positions of power within the patriarchal family

Amy-Jill Levine, in the “Women’s Bible Commentary”, sets out to enrich her reading of Matthew by looking at the evangelist’s “attempt to eliminate all relationships in which one group exploits or dominates another” (Levine, 1998:339). In her interpretation, Levine argues that women are presented in a positive way in this gospel, where they play “active roles” and represent service and fidelity (Levine, 1998:340).

Levine’s observations on the biblical text used in the Sunday school, Matthew 1:18-25, is analysed together with the genealogy that is found at the beginning of that chapter of the gospel. She groups the genealogy and the nativity narratives together to present one interpretation from these verses, meaning that for this author the genealogy is necessary in order to understand the rest of the chapter.

A first thing that is established by this author is its rejection of two common readings of the text where sexuality is an issue. The first reading that is rejected is the one that says that “the

focus on extramarital sexual activity was intended to combat Jewish charges of Jesus' illegitimate birth" (Levine, 1998:340). On the other hand, the second common reading rejected is the one where women are looked at as sinners in relation to their sexuality (Levine, 1998:340). Leaving behind these kinds of interpretations, the author argues that the genealogy's presentation of Tamar, Rahab, Uriah and Ruth is to provide examples of "higher righteousness". Levine also says that these characters are presented in the genealogy as "recognition of those removed from positions of power" (Levine, 1998:340).

In this commentary, it is also argued that the women presented in the genealogy are not fulfilling a traditional role, meaning that they are not required to be married in order to be righteous (they were widows, prostitutes, or separated from their husband). However, the role of Mary in the nativity text, which is the one I am interested in, is a passive role. The author of the commentary claims that the reason why Mary is a passive character is to "undercut the privileged position she acquires by being Jesus' mother" (Levine, 1998:341).

In the case of Joseph, the righteous man, his righteousness is also against the orthodox interpretive tradition. Joseph's actions did not conform to the law, neither to social expectation. Joseph is understood as a man that transgresses the social expectation of his time, who goes ahead, marrying Mary and "adopting" her son. In conclusion, the author of the commentary is suggesting two things. The first one is that women in Matthew's gospel have a positive and active role; and the second one is that the traditional model of family is not the one present in the gospel because Joseph is not the "male head of the house" (Levine, 1998:341).

Finally, in relation to the virginity of Mary, the commentary points out that the text is alluding to the prophecy of Isaiah 7:14 where the text is referring to a young woman (not necessarily a virgin one) (Levine, 1998:341). In addition, the author also emphasizes that the text does not say anything else in relation to Mary's sexual activity after she gave birth to Jesus, breaking off with the idea of the eternal virgin (Levine, 1998:341).

Summing up, the "Women's Bible Commentary" is reading the text from a feminist perspective where the role of women is highlighted and the traditional model of family (a patriarchal one) is not imposed on the text. Instead, the author recognizes the rarity and peculiarity of the different characters in relation to their roles as mother, husband, and so on.

Rescuing the female character within a patriarchal text

Different from what has been said by the “*Women’s Bible Commentary*”, that there is a positive and active role of women in the gospel, the position of Janice Capel Anderson in her gender reading notes that the text is full of patriarchy. She points out that the “genealogy is patrilineal and the birth story centres on Joseph” (Anderson 1983, 7).

I consider this awareness of how patriarchal the biblical text is as a vital step in order to engage seriously with it, even though when doing a liberating reading of the text, the usual action is to reject patriarchy as the norm ‘accepted’ or ‘commanded’ by God. However, Anderson’s reading when doing a liberating reading is instead to denounce patriarchy as oppressive. An attentive reading of the text does not deny what is present in the text, but it looks at the dissonant voices present in it, searching for the gaps and contradictions within the text.

In relation to Matthew 1:18-25, Anderson notices that “Patriarchal marriage and inheritance practices are assumed” (Anderson 1983, 7). However, Anderson presents a feminist reading of Matthew chapter 1, arguing that despite the fact that Joseph is the main character in the story, he does nothing in relation to the Messiah’s birth. It is Mary that gets pregnant without male assistance, and who gives birth (Anderson 1983, 10). Her character looks passive but her role as the carrier of God’s son gives her a particular position that cannot be ignored.

Anderson’s reading is rescuing the female character and the distinction of females that have the capacity of carrying a child in their bodies and give birth to them. But she keeps acknowledging the prevalence of patriarchy in the gospel and does not deny that “Joseph’s role in the birth story incorporates Jesus back into the male sphere” (Anderson 1983, 10). However, the fact that Jesus is not the son of Joseph but the son of Mary is interpreted as an action of God outside of how patriarchy works (Anderson 1983, 10).

Absence of feminist interpretation

Surprisingly, in the article of Martina S. Gnadt that is found in the “*Feminist Biblical Interpretation*”, the first chapters of Matthew are not commented on. Instead, the author is concerned to establish the sociohistorical context of the community of Matthew as a critical step to interpret the Gospel (Gnadt 2012, 607). Even though the commentary is not presenting any interpretation of Matthew 1:18-25, I consider it important to mention this

example because this is an important feminist resource and it demonstrates how some feminist work does not even deal with this text.

Remembering what has been said in chapter 3 in relation to the variety of feminist theologies, there is a range of feminist theologies and some are more critical than others. My suspicion is that the feminist work found in this compendium belongs to the feminist trend that only focuses their work on biblical texts that have a clear benefit to their feminist project. So in this case this text would appear not to be redeemable, even though others have struggled to liberate this text by recognising, deconstructing or denouncing the patriarchy in it. From my perspective, the Sunday school material makes it clear we must engage this text, even if it does not obviously lend itself to a feminist reading.

The righteous- queer Joseph

In the “Queer Bible Commentary” there is an article written by Thomas Bohache, who analyses the Gospel of Matthew. Before interpreting the text, Bohache establishes his own context, being himself a North-American white male who is gay and has a queer consciousness, therefore, somebody on the margins in a heterosexually dominated world. After establishing his context, as have the two feminist authors discussed above, Bohache provides historical information on Matthew’s community, showing that both communities (his and the gospel’s one) share an experience of “imperialism, colonialism, subjugation and domination” (Bohache 2006: 490). Consequently, the author does a reading of the gospel following the methodology of liberation hermeneutics, utilizing a hermeneutics of suspicion, remembrance and proclamation for the queer community (Bohache 2006: 488, 492).

In relation to Matthew 1:18-25 he does similar to the others, analysing chapter one as a whole. When interpreting the genealogy (which is not part of the biblical text used in the Sunday school), Bohache highlights the inclusion of the women in it, arguing that the four of them are ‘queer’ because they break with the heteropatriarchal system, and yet are not discriminated against (each occupying a place in the genealogy of Jesus). Additionally, Bohache claims that the fifth queer woman in the text is Mary (Bohache 2006: 494).

In relation to the text used in the Sunday school, the author notices that the story is told from the perspective of the Joseph’s character, instead of Mary’s, recognising in this way the passivity and patriarchal victimhood of Mary (Bohache 2006: 495). However the story does

not escape the fact that Joseph is not the father of the child; he is only the husband of Mary (Bohache 2006: 495), and Mary is the mother of the Messiah.

Nevertheless, though the story is centred in Joseph's character, in his analysis Bohache looks at the queerness of Joseph's actions, the righteous man who does the unrighteous. The author points out that Joseph did not act according to the law, exposing Mary and her child to death, but instead he did the 'unrighteous' and queer thing by marrying her even when it looks like she was unfaithful to him (Bohache 2006: 495-496). This queer action, according to Bohache, is called by the biblical text as righteous!

God's Messiah is born because of a man who acts outside of his heteronormative role. Joseph, by not doing what his society expects of him, can be a model for queer people of faith who, following God's directive, choose to act contrary to society's demands – by marrying illicitly, by having children in non-traditional ways, by forming intentional, non-biological families. (Bohache 2006: 496)

Even though the story in Bohache's analysis is also centred in Joseph's character, the content and rhetoric of such narrative would be different to the one of the Sunday school narrative because Bohache's emphasis is on the 'unrighteous' and therefore 'queer' dimensions of this character. Joseph is exalted for not following the law and the social norm.

He is just a man!

Justin Glessner does a gender reading of Joseph's character by looking at three different biblical texts, and I will look at his reading of Joseph in Matthew 1. Glessner, in his thesis, comments on Matthew 1:18-20 in two different chapters, both of them looking at the masculinities portrayed in the text.

The first portion of the text that is commented on is Matthew 1:18-20a. The author comments on issues of how a "masculine honor contest... plays out on Mary's body" since Joseph suspected another man of impregnating her (Glessner 2014, 57). But similar to Anderson's reading, Glessner recognizes that the text gives him elements to analyse it from a gender perspective looking at issues of sexuality, in spite of the androcentric contours of the text. Glessner expresses it in this way:

I think there is something to be gained in our reading of a biblical androcentric text by employing as a heuristic lens contemporary anthropological discussions concerning the symbolic relations between masculine honor, male sexual competition, and female purity/chastity. (Glessner 2014, 57-58)

Glessner points out that the Mary that is found in the text is a-sexual, but that her asexuality is not an impediment to using Mary's body as the object of competition between males (Glessner 2014, 59). Commenting on ancient masculinity, the author explains how masculinity was performed in public through different abilities, such as the capacity to fight in war or the use of rhetoric to persuade (Glessner 2014, 59-60). Among the different acts of performance, being the head of the house and ruling it was one of the things that gave honour to a man (Glessner 2014, 59-60). Therefore, as women were the property of a man, his honour was related to the control and protection that this man exercise over his property.

Looking at the biblical text, Glessner states that Joseph was responsible for Mary and if another man touched her, his honour (Joseph's) was in jeopardy (Glessner 2014, 64). Different from a feminist reading that pays special attention to female characters, Glessner is presenting a gender reading that emphasizes how destructive patriarchy is for the male characters in the story. The author is referring to how male relationships are conditioned by patriarchy and how they experience the "contradiction of male bonding and battling" (Glessner 2014, 62). However, in this story Joseph does not fight the other man, but performs another "masculine ability", the ability of "self-mastery" (Glessner 2014, 62).

Following the logic of male honour, Glessner also suggests that Joseph's decision to divorce her quietly does not indicate necessarily an act of righteousness (Glessner 2014, 64). The author explains that this action could be motivated by the danger that Joseph had of suffering "public defamation" (Glessner 2014, 64).

In the second part of the text (Matthew 1:20-24), Glessner analyses God's and Joseph's masculinities. In relation to the common male experiences in the Bible, men do have dreams, but annunciations tended to happen to women who were asking God to restore them from their infertility (Glessner 2014, 70). Interestingly, in Matthew's gospel, Joseph experiences a dream-annunciation. Glessner comments that Joseph also had a 'plight': "Joseph's plight over what to do with his impregnated betrothed and her ostensibly illegitimate child" and "indirectly with Mary's plight" (Glessner 2014, 71).

Glessner also has a different understanding in relation to Joseph's fear mentioned in the dream: "do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit" (NRSV). He says that this fear was not related to experiencing the presence of the supernatural but to the implications of his situation in relation to the "homosocial

‘bonding and battling’ mentioned before (Glessner 2014, 71-72). It is at this point that Joseph realized that the “other man” is God himself; besides, taking Mary as his wife would not remove the public disgrace.

I think that this last point that Glessner is mentioning, the public disgrace due to suspicion of rape or premarital sex, offers us potential to talk about this same reality today. Definitely it is a point to consider when teaching about this text, and reproducing or breaking with the constructions of sexuality that are present in it.

The feminist (some identify as gender) and queer readings presented in this section show different interpretations of Matthew 1:18-25. Levine’s contribution already breaks with interpretations in which women could be interpreted as on a lower level to that of men, and it recovers the non-traditional actions of Joseph. This point is also emphasised by Thomas Bohache, who describes Joseph’s actions as ‘queer’ and who notes that all characters in the story break with the heteropatriarchal system. Contrary to this, Anderson points out that the text is fully shaped by patriarchy, but that even so, the story cannot deny that the birth of the Messiah has nothing to do with Joseph but everything to do with Mary. Glessner’s reading looked at masculine honour and the relationship of Joseph and God as the two males related to Mary, showing how Mary’s body becomes a site of masculine contestation. Finally we have also noticed that some feminist work does not deal at all with this text. In each case, as I have indicated, each of these readings provides some important insight. For example, Levine comments on Mary’s sexuality breaking with the idea of women’s sexuality as sinful and the idea of an eternal virginity. Glessner’s interpretation foregrounds the male sexual competition and the female purity that is present in the story. All these contributions will be taken into account when re-writing the Sunday school narrative in the next chapter. For now we turn to our other biblical text, Genesis 3.

Readings of Genesis 3

In chapter 4 I analysed the Sunday school narrative based on Genesis 3; such analysis showed how the Sunday school narrative presented a dualistic perspective of life, and rejected knowledge of bodies and physical necessities. In this section I will present some feminist and queer readings of the same text, readings that hopefully will break with a dualistic and patriarchal understanding of the text.

The irruption of social roles and sexual status

Susan Niditch's reading of Genesis 3, in the "*Women's Bible Commentary*", accentuates that this text is referring to a moment of change from a fixed world to a new order (Niditch 1998, 17). This new order brings the awareness of social roles and sexual status, with the woman's and man's relationship being constructed by these social roles (Niditch 1998, 17).

Niditch points out that it is the woman who is the one who produces this new order and also that she is the one who is able to "house life within her" (Niditch 1998, 17). She also makes the clarification that Eve was not seduced and deceived by the serpent, but instead that she made a conscious choice for knowledge (Niditch 1998, 17).

Within the new order, Niditch says, with social life and culture come the establishment of hierarchy and "the author's male oriented worldview" is reflected in it (Niditch 1998, 17). Finally, Niditch's reading ends with the idea that woman and man, both, share responsibility. In addition, she concludes that the woman possesses "the most earthly and the most divine of roles" as she is the one who conceives, contains and nurtures the new life (Niditch 1998, 17).

Niditch is actually breaking with the two ideas that were strongly taught in the Sunday school material. The first one is that she is presenting Eve's decision for knowledge as a thoughtful decision, instead of reinforcing the idea of Eve as being 'seduced' (Niditch 1998, 17). Niditch's proposal, therefore, leads readers to the conclusion that it is not necessary to distrust ourselves, considering there is a divine knowledge superior to any kind of knowledge we can produce or acquire. The second idea that this reading avoids is the idea of rejecting our physical bodies and the way they work. Instead, this author recognizes the 'earthly' and the 'divine' within the body of the woman, breaking with any kind of dualism that would denigrate the body.

Analysing the Hebrew of Genesis 3.16

In the "*Feminist Companion to Genesis*" there can be found several articles in relation to Genesis 3. In spite of this, most of them are commenting on a bigger portion of Genesis (for example Gen 1 to 3, or Gen 2.4b to 3.24). Because of the interest of this research, I will review only one article that focuses on one aspect of chapter 3, this is Genesis 3.16, which has been interpreted as a curse to women. I would have liked to find in this article a comment

on the whole of chapter three; however the author focuses only on this very controversial verse, and so I will follow her focus.

Adrien Janis Bledstein does a short review of the Hebrew that is used in this verse, pointing out three main things that I summarise as follows. First, God did not curse the woman placing her in a lower position under the man (Bledstein 1993, 142). The author of the article asserts that the only ones cursed in the text are the serpent and the earth (Bledstein 1993, 142). But in verse 3.16 what God does to the woman is to remind her that she is not a goddess, as the serpent told her she would become, but instead that she remains a human being and therefore she is capable of procreation (Bledstein 1993, 142). She is also reminded that she will suffer pain in birth to differentiate her from a goddess (Bledstein 1993, 142-143). It is interesting that Bledstein highlights that these words were told to “this particular woman” because she was hoping to become a deity (Bledstein 1993, 143); this understanding of the text gives space to reflect on how tradition has taught that all women are cursed and should suffer pain as an inherited punishment from this first woman, a teaching that is not necessarily coherent with the text.

Second, in relation to the words “yet your desire shall be for your husband” (NRSV), Bledstein makes the clarification that the word translated as ‘desire’ is parallel to the desire for sin that is mentioned in the Cain story in Genesis 4.7 (Bledstein 1993, 142). Then the meaning of the word could be understood as ‘desirable’ instead of ‘desire’, altering the common understanding of this verse (Bledstein 1993, 143). Now, the way this portion of text is interpreted by Bledstein releases all women from the inevitable fate of desire that throws them at the feet of men. According to Bledstein what we have here refers to a characteristic of women to be desirable to men.

Third and finally, in relation to the text that is translated as “and he shall rule over you” (NRSV), Bledstein argues that the reason of these words is related to the charm that the woman possesses; God cautions her because of this “sexual allure” and tells her that the man has the capacity to dominate her, but this does not mean that he has the permission or the authority to do it (Bledstein 1993, 144). This liberates the text from a traditional understanding that allows men to control and govern women, and even emphasizes the power that women could have over men.

By focusing on this verse the author is focusing on the verse that has worked as an inevitable burden to all women due to a common and patriarchal understanding of the text. Even though the author is quite technical in her analysis of the Hebrew and the myths of the ancient world, this commentary is of help to clarify the meaning of the text and should be considered when writing a new Sunday school narrative of the story of Genesis 3.

Sexuality in Genesis

In the “*Queer Bible Commentary*”, Michael Carden writes an article focused on the book of Genesis and sexuality. The first thing that Carden recognizes is that the binary systems of sex and gender are Western constructions and that they are not present in the book of Genesis (Carden 2006: 23). Instead, gender and sexuality in Genesis work within a “hierarchical continuum” based on penetration (Carden 2006: 23). Carden also reminds us that in the ancient world “reproductive sexuality was understood in agricultural terms”, meaning that women were considered fields to grow new humans; therefore, similar to possessing several fields a man could possess several women (Carden 2006, 24).

In order to analyse the current text of Genesis, Carden divides this book into sections. The first section he is commenting on is Genesis 1:1-6:8. In this section Carden affirms that Genesis 3 is a type of ‘puberty story’ which is about the origins of sex and death (Carden 2006: 28). The author’s understanding of sexuality in Eden is insightful, this since the author notes that there was an original “egalitarian vision of sexuality” which only changes after the eating of the tree (Carden 2006: 30); it is at this moment when sexuality becomes a utilitarian act where one is dominated and owned by the other (Carden 2006: 30). This is sexuality within a hierarchical order of patriarchy, which the author calls an “economics of procreative sexuality” (Carden 2006: 30).

Carden argues that the woman in the story is strong and responsible. For Carden she is a very active character in contrast to the man who is passive and does not take responsibility for his actions (Carden 2006: 29). Yet Carden explains that this centrality of the woman’s character as part of the ‘puberty story’ is due to the fact that she is the one who stopped being a girl to become a woman, who menstruates and is being able to get pregnant and have a husband (Carden 2006: 29).

Finally the author says that “the shift from a mythic realm of Eden to the world of the everyday, the mythic androgynous realm, remains as a dangerous memory critiquing, challenging the patriarchal procreative hierarchy of seed, field and womb” (Carden 2006, 30). This is a very important critique, since sexuality should not be understood and socialized as an act of procreation only; a very common understanding in the Christian Church! But this memory of Eden actually works to declare that the sexuality that is assumed as ‘natural’ and God-given is actually a corrupted sexuality. This memory allows for an interpretation of the text that an egalitarian sexuality is actually what God intended for human beings.

Reality as it is!

Very similar to the reading presented in the “*Queer Bible Commentary*”, the “*Feminist Biblical Interpretation*” contains an article by Schüngel-Straumann where she analyses Genesis 2 and 3 as parallel stories. One story is telling of God’s plan for his creation (Gen. 2) and the other is telling of the reality of humanity (Gen. 3) (Schüngel-Straumann 2012: 4). This reality is described by Schüngel-Straumann as an unjust relationship with God and with one another, which is relevant for this study since, “Trust between the sexes has been ruptured” (Schüngel-Straumann 2012, 5).

Along with the parallel stories, this author also interprets the text as an analogy where the woman represents the people of Israel, who used to “listen to other voices than YHWH’s” in the same way that the woman listens to the serpent (Schüngel-Straumann 2012, 5).

Reminding us that this reading assumes that the text is narrating reality as it was, Schüngel-Straumann rejects the interpretation that reads God’s words after the humans have eaten from the tree as punishments (Schüngel-Straumann 2012, 6). Instead, she explains that the narrator of Genesis is explaining how reality was, and the experiences human beings had, such as pain when giving birth and hard work to harvest the earth (Schüngel-Straumann 2012, 6).

Finally, in relation to Genesis 3.16, Schüngel-Straumann points out that translation has ignored the meaning of the words when translating that childbirth will be with pain. Schüngel-Straumann (2012, 6) argues that the meaning lacks the ambivalence of the experience of childbirth; this is that pain is accompanied by joy. However, as the author says, the translation shows a male perspective (Schüngel-Straumann 2012, 6).

Questioning the heterosexual contract

Here I focus on an article that is found in the book “*Take back the word*”, where several efforts are made in order to come back to those texts that have been used against queer communities, or that queer communities were not reading because of their traditional interpretation and its consequences for them.

In this book, Ken Stone writes about the two creation stories (Gen 1 and Gen 2-3); his preoccupation with both stories is directly related to the way they have been used to legitimate the binary of sexual differentiation (Stone 2000: 58). In order to work on this preoccupation, Stone presents the purpose of his article as follows:

I will argue that the structure and content of these accounts makes them especially attractive as *rhetorical supports for the heterosexual contract*... I will argue for the importance of a reading that focuses upon the instabilities and incoherence of this textual foundation. While such rereading can never turn Genesis into a queer manifesto, it may reveal potential openings for queer contestation of the heterosexual contract or, in any case, of biblical justifications given for that contract. (Stone 2000:59) (emphasis added)

I will not look at his analysis of the first story, Genesis 1, since this is not the text that this study is interested in. Instead, I focus on his analysis of the second story, particularly his analysis of Genesis 3. Stone points out the incoherence that the text presents in order to support the ‘heterosexual contract’. He comments on the fact that in Genesis 3.16b it must be stipulated that the ‘desire’ of the woman will be toward the man (Stone 2000: 63), leaving space to wonder if it was different before and that she may not have had ‘desire’ for the man; or allowing for an understanding of this ‘desire’ as punishment and not necessarily something natural and fixed.

Stone considers the understanding of the woman’s ‘desire’ as a “result from the pair’s transgression” (Stone 2000: 63). Stone is pointing out a potential gap here in one of the most controversial verses of Genesis 3.

In these selected feminist and queer readings of Genesis there are a number of different approaches to the text, and therefore different understandings of it. Some of the readings are pointing out the patriarchal discourse present in it, and other readings emphasize exactly the opposite. Several authors have commented about a change from a stable word to a new reality where human action modifies the previous order. For Susan Niditch it is about a change to a new one with designated social roles and status. Similarly Michael Carden mentions the change from an egalitarian sexuality to a utilitarian one; and Schüngel-Straumann describes

the change as passing from God's plan to an unjust reality of relationships, with hierarchies based on a patriarchal order (a male centre order). Important also is to notice that these interpretations do not understand God's words as punishments or curses, but as descriptions of an unjust reality or an acknowledgement of a possibility. For example, Bledstein explains that the capacity of the man to dominate is acknowledged, but that this does not mean that he has permission to dominate the woman. Briefly, these interpretation help to liberate the text from a common understanding of a fatal destiny for men and women; instead, such readings helps us to see the change in relationships and be able to reflect on such changes.

Conclusions

In this chapter I have presented several readings of Matthew 1:18-25 and Genesis 3. The readings represent examples of feminist and queer appropriations of these two stories. In the process of gathering different feminist and queer commentaries on these two stories two things in particular were noticed.

First, lots of feminist work in the field focuses on rescuing the female characters, and so still needs to dare to be more critical and to work with the biblical texts as texts in which the female character is not necessarily the heroine or the good woman. This was specially noticed with the text of Matthew 1:18-25, since this story is ignored and feminist readings prefer to focus more on the story of Mary's pregnancy that appears in the Gospel of Luke, where Mary is exalted. Second, it is clear that the queer community is making efforts to re-read the Bible; however, there is little material that is found in order to look for queer approaches to particular biblical texts, such as those in my study. Though the "*Queer Bible Commentary*" offers an array of resources, it is hard to find relevant sexuality oriented commentaries on the particular stories analysed in this study.

Finally, in relation to the content of the readings, they have provided new information and understandings of the texts in order to re-write the Sunday school narratives. There are significant overlaps, but also considerable diversity of interpretation. For the next chapter these readings will offer resources for the analysis of chapter 4, enabling a tentative construction of a new Sunday school narrative that cares for the right of all children to live their sexual identity, even when this identity does not conform to the norm.

CHAPTER 6: Pro-sexual rights readings of Matthew 1:18-25 and Genesis 3

This chapter will gather the acquired knowledge from the previous chapters, including the theological categories, the hermeneutical approaches, and the different strategies employed by feminist and queer approaches to analyse sexuality and interrogate the particular texts studied in the Sunday school material. Drawing from this, the chapter will develop my own interpretations of Genesis 3 and Matthew 1:18-25 that promote sexual rights. In order to do this re-reading of the biblical text, I will present a literary analysis, similar to the one done in chapter 4, but instead of analysing the Sunday school narratives I will be looking at the actual biblical stories and their literary dynamics. After that I will present an alternative narrative as a way to tell the story to children in Sunday school with the objective that this narrative could be aligned with the promotion of sexual rights.

Re-reading the biblical texts

In order to provide a different reading of the stories found in Genesis 3 and Matthew 1:18-25, I will use the method of literary analysis, a method that was explained in chapter 4. The method of literary analysis will work as a tool that will allow me to see the different components of the text, and how they relate to each other to produce meaning. Together with the method, I will bring into conversation the theological underpinnings of the research in order to be able to ask questions of the texts guided by the insights of these theologies that were explain in chapter 3; and finally, I will provide an actualization of the text for today's reality of exploitation and sexual oppression, this through a new narrative for Sunday school derived from this analysis.

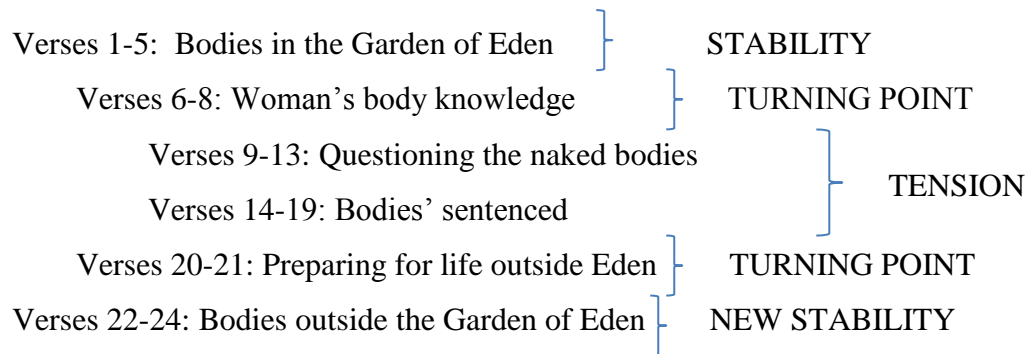
Literary analysis of Genesis 3

In order to analyse the biblical story of Genesis I will use the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) of the Bible, and I will pay attention to the translation this accurate and popular translation Bible is offering. I will present the text as it is in the NRSV, after that I will show the literary analysis done following the narrative elements that were explained in chapter 4. The biblical text according to NRSV is read as seen in the following box:

3 Now the serpent was more crafty than any other wild animal that the LORD God had made. He said to the woman, "Did God say, 'You shall not eat from any tree in the garden'?" ²The woman said to the serpent, "We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden; ³but God said, 'You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the middle of the garden, nor shall you touch it, or you shall die.'" ⁴But the serpent said to the woman, "You will not die; ⁵for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, ^[a] knowing good and evil." ⁶So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate. ⁷Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves. **8** They heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden at the time of the evening breeze, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God among the trees of the garden. **9** But the Lord God called to the man, and said to him, "Where are you?" **10** He said, "I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself." **11** He said, "Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?" **12** The man said, "The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit from the tree, and I ate." **13** Then the Lord God said to the woman, "What is this that you have done?" The woman said, "The serpent tricked me, and I ate." **14** The Lord God said to the serpent, "Because you have done this, cursed are you among all animals and among all wild creatures; upon your belly you shall go, and dust you shall eat all the days of your life. **15** I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will strike your head, and you will strike his heel." **16** To the woman he said, "I will greatly increase your pangs in childbearing; in pain you shall bring forth children, yet your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you." **17** And to the man^[b] he said, "Because you have listened to the voice of your wife, and have eaten of the tree about which I commanded you, 'You shall not eat of it,' cursed is the ground because of you; in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life; **18** thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you; and you shall eat the plants of the field. **19** By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread until you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; you are dust, and to dust you shall return." **20** The man named his wife Eve,^[c] because she was the mother of all living. **21** And the LORD God made garments of skins for the man^[d] and for his wife, and clothed them. ²²Then the LORD God said, "See, the man has become like one of us, knowing good and evil; and now, he might reach out his hand and take also from the tree of life, and eat, and live forever" — ²³therefore the LORD God sent him forth from the garden of Eden, to till the ground from which he was taken. ²⁴ He drove out the man; and at the east of the garden of Eden he placed the cherubim, and a sword flaming and turning to guard the way to the tree of life.

Plot (Structure)

According to the interest of this re-reading of the text (to promote sexual rights) I am reading it through the lenses of feminist and queer perspectives. When reading the text from these perspectives I have found that it can be structured following the different moments or movements of the bodies in the story. The structure that I am suggesting is as follows:



It is important to notice that this story began in the previous chapter of Genesis, and that the first 5 verses of Genesis 3 are related to the previous narrative. In verses 1-5 the narrator is presenting a dialogue between the woman and the serpent; in it the reality of the Garden of Eden is presented as hosting different bodies coexisting and sharing diverse bodily experiences; what is pictured there is the reality of God's creation. From this perspective of the body, the text offers considerable information that captures our attention. First, there is a remarkable reality where humans and animals are able to relate as equals, being able to talk to each other and share ideas. Second, there are trees with fruits to nourish woman and man. Among the trees there is one that God has prohibited to eat from or touch, but in spite of this the serpent lets the woman know that the tree will nourish her and Adam with knowledge of good and evil. This means that the reality of the Garden of Eden was composed by bodies without consciousness or capacity to differentiate between good and evil. Even though this reality lacks knowledge of good and evil, the Garden has been understood as the perfect place where human beings relate in harmony with God and with each other.

Yet this Garden of Eden, with a crafty serpent, with prohibitions and perhaps lies from God (as they do not die because of the tree), and with relationships lacking the ability to differentiate good and evil, has been always been understood as the utopian place of total order and perfect harmony. Eden has been considered a place made perfectly by God. Maybe God's 'perfect harmony' works inside this ingenuous reality where there is no comprehension of what is good and evil, and where therefore there are no judgements!

In verses 6-8, ironically, Eve is able to understand that “the tree was good for food”. She is living in the Garden of Eden and it is in this place of perfect order where she is able to know through her body. The exact words in the text are that what she saw was “a delight to the eyes” and that “the tree was to be desired”. It is important also to note she shared with the man this fruit, presumably because it had a good taste. Her body guides her.

In verses 9-19 is the complication of the narrative. I have divided this portion in two parts. First in verses 9-13 there is a dialogue between God and the man and God and the woman. More than a dialogue, God is questioning them for having eaten from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. The man answers him evasively by throwing the responsibility of his action to the woman. In contrast to the last section, the form in which the man responds to God portrays the man as weak and a coward. Contrary to this, the woman answers God directly, instead of saying, “The serpent gave me the fruit” (similar to the man’s answer) she says, ‘The serpent tricked me, and I ate’, without negating her part in it.

After the questioning comes the second part of the tension in the plot. It is the climax of the story, when God judges the serpent, the woman, the man and the earth. Their bodies are sentenced in this section. The serpent’s body is sentenced to go on his belly and eat dust; the woman’s body is sentenced to suffer pain in childbirth; the man’s body is sentenced to work hard to be able to eat; and the body of the earth is cursed because of him. The apparent harmony that is found in the first verses is now lost. The serpent and the woman will not talk freely and will not relate to each other, but contrary to this, they will be enemies. There is no more innocence in the humans, who now must work hard to flourish (to re/produce life and food) because of the acquisition of a type of knowledge that generates categories of good and evil.

In verses 20-21 there is a turning point that informs us about the new situation that will be presented next. Two sets of data are given; the first one that the man called the woman with a name that represents her as the mother of all living. The second one that God clothed them so they would not be naked anymore.

Finally, in verses 22-24 there is a new reality. In verse 22 it is interesting that God is worried about the man taking from the tree of life, maybe as a way to ensure what was said in chapter 2 (that they will die). In order not to let the man take from this tree, God sent him out of the Garden and placed a guard so that the man cannot enter the Garden again. This new stability

is not described in detail, but is just mentioned. The text does not give any information about how life was outside the Garden, but it only lets know that they (he) were expelled.

Characters/ characterization

There are 4 characters present in the story: the woman, the serpent, the man and the Lord God. The serpent is a secondary character as it only speaks at the beginning of the story and its presence is short. It could be said that it is an important character because it is because of s/he that the complication in the story comes about. However, I understand the serpent as a secondary character that functions as a medium to develop the story but it is not important as a character (even though it also receives a punishment). God is evidently the character with power to do and to punish; nevertheless, I consider the Lord God also as a secondary character, used by the narrator to correct the life of the bodies of the main characters.

The main characters, those who speak, act and receive actions from others are the woman and the man. The woman is portrayed as friendly (she speaks to the serpent), secure (she takes decisions and she answers directly to the Lord God), logical (she reflects before acting) and generous (she shares with the man what she saw to be good). On the other hand, the man is portrayed as docile (the woman gave him the fruit and he ate), afraid (that is why he hides), and a coward (he blames the woman for his actions).

Repetitions

When looking at the repetitions of words or ideas in the story of Genesis 3 it becomes obvious to me that eating is central to the story. There is an emphasis on what to eat and what not to eat. At least 17 times the verb “to eat” is present in the text, and is used in relation to fruits, trees, dust and bread. Contrary to a dualistic understanding that separates body and soul, in the text what is found is just one reality. This reality is the bodily experiences of creatures and the Creator (also bodily present as the text presents Him walking in the Garden).

There is a constant questioning in the text about what is good to eat, or what consequences will be provoked by eating from a certain tree. God uses images of food and eating in the formulations of punishment for the serpent (“dust you shall eat all the days of your life”) and for the man (in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life”). These are very similar.

At the end of the story, man and woman are removed from the Garden of Eden, not as a punishment, but as a precaution so that they do not eat from the tree of life.

Despite this obvious emphasis in eating (a physical action), eating is not taken up in traditional interpretations; instead, there is a focus on words such as “because you have listened to the voice of your wife” or “I will greatly increase your pangs in childbearing”. As we have seen in the Sunday school lesson, these words have been interpreted in a metaphysical way.

But it is not only an emphasis on eating where we find the centrality of the bodies in the story, but also with reference to nakedness and suffering pain (in childbirth or in sowing the land). Though this is a ‘simple’ story (that’s why it is easy to tell it to children), there is resistance to understanding it as it is (because it doesn’t make sense to certain discourses that are present in the church). Because of this, there is an insistence on interpreting the text using perspectives such as dualism.

Implied author and implied reader

The implied author in the text is presented as someone different from the characters, who knows everything and whose authority is not questioned. The text reflects a dynamic of convincing an implied reader of the goodness of the body and the harm of categorizing good and evil, which creates divisions, where the harmony of relationships is broken.

Looking at the implied author and her/his ideas, it is easy to imagine the implied reader as people who were familiar with the realities told in the story. The implied reader could be a group of people convinced that God created reality as they experience it. They must think that God created them to work hard, to suffer pain, to live in conflict with each other, fighting with the purpose to dominate one another. They were probably asking why God created this reality as they experience it. And so the implied author sets out to refute this idea by telling a story in which God creates a reality of harmony and beauty, but that certain actions then change the way things were before.

Points of view and rhetoric

The author of the text brings a tale (a myth) to explain the reason for the un-peaceful live reality, reaffirming that the bodies’ freedom experienced in the Garden was a good thing that

has been lost. The story is confronting the readers/hearer by letting them know about a different way to live, a different reality, a previous way of relating to each other and to creation. If the life in the Garden was good, why should we conform to life outside Eden? Is it possible to return to the way life was experienced before? The point of view of the narrator is that the reality of suffering and divisions was not always this way, neither was the intention of God for it to be like that.

The discourse found in Genesis 3

After going through the different elements of the text I draw a discourse or meaning from the story told in Genesis 3. The message, shaped by my interest in gender and sexuality, that this story is transmitting is letting us know about the origin of hard work, of the struggle to be able to eat, and the origin of divisions among man and woman. The story does not explain this reality as created by God, but instead as a consequence of using the knowledge of good and evil to differentiate, and of the lost energy worrying about these differences (for example Adam who was afraid to be naked and hide).

Also, the text informs about reality as God planned it to be in Eden. In this reality the good relationships were above any other thing. In the Garden the only matter that matters was the harmony of relationships and the enjoyment of the bodies.

Following these elements of a new reading, I will present at the end of this chapter a new narrative to be used in Sunday school.

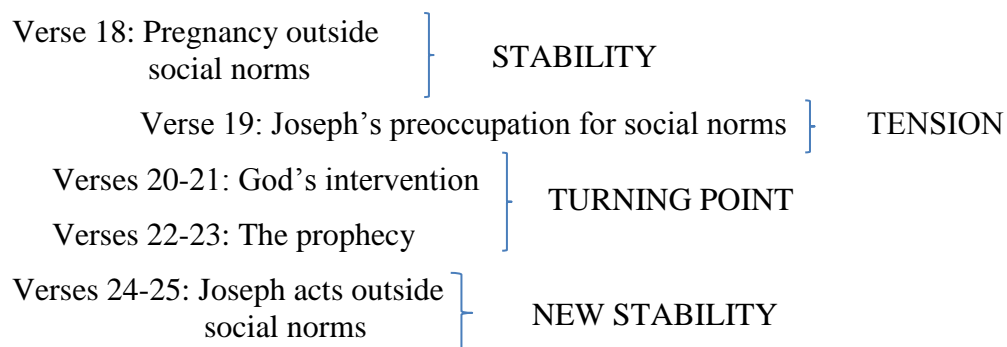
Literary analysis of Matthew 1:18-25

In the same manner that it was done above, I present the biblical story as it is translated by the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) of the Bible. In the literary analysis I will examine the different elements of the narrative and later I will use this analysis to provide a new reading-understanding of the text. The biblical text as the NRSV has it looks as seen in the following box:

¹⁸ Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah[i] took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. ¹⁹ Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. ²⁰ But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. ²¹ She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." ²² All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: ²³ "Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel," which means, "God is with us." ²⁴ When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, ²⁵ but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son;[j] and he named him Jesus.

Plot (Structure)

According to the interests of this re-reading of the text, I identify the following structure:



In verse 18 the situation is presented by the narrator, who is very concrete and gives the information without the need to explain too much about it. However, in the brief information she or he is providing, the text lets us know that an unmarried woman is pregnant, that her pregnancy is not from her fiancé, and that she is going to be the mother of Jesus the Messiah. There is no judgment about it from the narrator, as there is no worry from him to see this in a negative way, but to the contrary.

In verse 19 the character of Joseph is introduced, and he is portrayed as showing a preoccupation with how to manage the situation described in the previous verse. Joseph was worried about what was 'right' in his society and how to deal with the situation that is happening to him and his fiancé.

That is why, in verses 20 and 21, God interferes by sending an angel to tell him that the situation is not wrong in God's eyes, that it is acceptable to marry her even if she is pregnant from the Holy Spirit. God's messenger even requests Joseph to be part of this 'queer' family by doing the fatherly action of naming the child.

In verses 22 and 23 the narrator recalls an old prophecy as an authority to create acceptance of the situation of Mary's pregnancy. Another piece of information that works outside the traditional understanding of a pregnancy is given: the woman who is carrying a child is called 'virgin'. It seems like the idea of virginity in the text is different from the one that has been commonly understood. The Greek term used is '*parthénos*' which can be translated as 'girl' or 'virgin'. It is important to understand that the term has experienced an evolution of meaning; what was understood as a young woman, meaning a girl sexually mature but who has not yet experienced her first childbirth, has come to mean 'virgin', meaning a woman who has not had sex with a man. Either way the text is affirming that a girl or virgin could be pregnant despite the fact of being married.

Finally in verse 24 the stability of the story is re-established because Joseph did not dismiss Mary, but instead he married her. In verse 25 the text says that even though Joseph married her, he did not have 'marital relations' with her. This last verse could be understood in different ways. One possibility is of an asexual couple, meaning a couple that 'loves' or is committed to each other but do not practice sex. Another possibility is to pay attention to the 'but' with which this verse started, opening up the possible understanding that the first part (taking Mary as wife) is what God commanded him, but the second part (not having marital relationships) is not something that God asked for.

Characters/ characterization

In the biblical text, as in the Sunday school narrative, Joseph remains the main character. However, the characterization that I found in the biblical text is very different. Joseph, instead of being a righteous man, is portrayed as a fearful man, someone who is looking for ways of getting out of an uncomfortable situation, someone who does not want to face the circumstances in his life that differ from what is socially acceptable.

As secondary characters are the angel and Mary. Mary is not characterized at all; the narrator only lets us know that she is pregnant from the Holy Spirit and that the child she is carrying is

the Messiah, but there is no information about her, or how she thinks and acts. The angel acts also as secondary character, he is just the medium used by God to give his message to Joseph

Repetitions

In this story there are no strict repetitions (reiteration of certain words or ideas) as this is a short and concrete story. But there is another kind of repetition; this is the use of an Old Testament prophecy that is used by the narrator to support his story. In verse 23 the narrator re-calls the words of Isaiah 7:14, where they are pronounced in a different context; however they work as a prophecy that is fulfilling the pregnancy of Mary.

Implied author/implied reader

The implied author is an omniscient narrator that knows the most intimate information; for example, she or he knows that Joseph and his wife did not have ‘marital relationships’ before Mary gave birth. This implied author is telling the story of the birth of the Messiah and giving authority to the queerness of such a pregnancy. The author insists that God said that the strange situation of Mary’s pregnancy and marriage is acceptable.

The implied reader may be someone similarly to Joseph, who is worried about the strangeness of Mary’s pregnancy that operates outside the social norms of marriage and the conventional idea of family (the patriarchal family). The implied reader is someone that needs to know the acceptability of this situation.

Point of view and rhetoric

In the Sunday school narrative the life of Joseph was central and the tension of the narrative was located in Mary’s pregnancy. However in the biblical text Joseph’s life is not as central as the uncommon situation of the couple. Looking at the previous elements of literary analysis, I consider the author’s point of view as in favour of sexuality and family identities outside the patriarchal and heterosexual norm.

In relation to the rhetoric or the strategies used by the narrator to persuade the reader, it could be noticed that the authority that speaks in favour of the uncommon situation of the couple comes from the divine. The author uses not one, but two elements to emphasize this. The first authority that the narrator presented is the “angel of the Lord” followed by “what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet”.

The discourse found in Matthew 1:18-25

Having analysed the literary elements of Matthew 1:18-25, the analysis of them have led me to a new reading of the text. The different components of the story show a conflict between what is 'right' in society and what God sees as right. There are laws and traditions that could be taken as divine or acceptable to God, but the discourse and rhetoric employed in the biblical text is actually teaching that God does not see these social norms, and actually works outside them.

In spite of God's acceptance of situations outside the norm, the story also lets us know that God's acceptance does not erase the opposition or judgment of society. It took an act of bravery for Joseph to leave behind his fears and his preoccupation with social pressure, and finally to act outside social recognition and approval.

In the next section I present a new narrative for Sunday school material of both texts analysed in this thesis: Genesis 3 and Matthew 1:18-25.

New Sunday school narratives of the biblical stories

I have looked at the Sunday school narrative offered by the material of the Scripture Union through a literary analysis. In the same way I have looked at biblical text used by this material and done my own literary analysis of it, using feminist and queer perspectives. Finally, having done all of this, the final step is to re-write a narrative in the format used in the Sunday school material. In the following paragraphs I present two new Sunday school narratives of the biblical stories as they might look after incorporating the aspects of narrative analysis and queer/feminist theologies.

Actualization of Genesis 3

The challenge presented by the Sunday school narrative of this text was to resist a dualistic ideology. Sexuality and biological needs were presented as things that human beings must distrust and fight with all their lives. After the literary analysis and the deconstructive reading of the Sunday school narrative, it was shown that the narrative was constructing sexuality as something dangerous and lower than 'spiritual' matters. The body was viewed with distrust and as always in conflict with what is good and divine.

The feminist and queer commentaries helped to start critiquing and deconstructing these ideas found in the Sunday school. For example, these commentaries showed that the text was about a change to a new world with social roles and hierarchies, a change from an egalitarian sexuality to a hierarchy according to whom penetrates whom, and a change that interrupts the trust between sexes.

All the resources above helped to construct the literary analysis done in this chapter. This new interpretation was done with a concern for and a commitment to the sexual rights of children, recognizing the socialization of a normative sexuality among children. After all this work, I have created two new Sunday school narratives which I present in a similar format to the Sunday school material.

Knowing good and evil

This is the story of the Garden of Eden, a place made by God for his creatures to live together in harmony among themselves and with Him. In this place there was no notion of good and evil, and therefore nobody was able to judge others for things like, for example, being naked. In spite of the problems that may have existed, what was important were the good relationships.

The only knowledge that the man and the woman had was the knowledge obtained through their bodies, that let them know when they needed to eat or sleep. This is how Eve recognizes that the fruit of the tree of good and evil was desirable for food, and why, after the invitation of the serpent to eat from it, she considered doing this. In this way Eve sees the good of the tree and eats from the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, and then she shares it with the man.

However, after eating from the fruit of the tree of good and evil they started to recognize differences and they started to categorize things as good or bad. They then considered that it was a bad thing to be naked, and so they covered their bodies with leaves.

After this change in the woman and man's life, God approached them and talked with them. God was not angry with them because they were naked or because they ate the fruit. But because God knew the consequences of knowing good and evil, and knowing how much their lives were going to change, He told them the consequences of this new life. Now, instead of the harmony of the Garden of Eden, they would be exposed to things like pain, to have to till the land, and to give birth to offspring. They would also be exposed to potentially unjust relationships, in which one could dominate the other.

When God finishes warning them about their new reality, they were thrown out of the Garden in order that they would not take the fruit of the tree of life and live forever. Finally, they started to live outside the Garden of Eden, now knowing that they were exposed to good and evil.

This is the reason why it is so important to ask God for the wisdom not be affected by evil and not to create unjust relationships with friends and family. It is important to remember life in the Garden of Eden and try to experience relationships with creation and other humans in harmony, enjoying our bodies and their different realities. It is important to remember this story so that we do not focus only on the hard work required in order to eat, but that we enjoy work and are always committed to not participating in the construction of exploitative work. We must also remember that in birth not only pain is experienced, but also the joy of bringing new life into the world. Let's be conscious of the consequences of being exposed to the knowledge of good and evil, and let's focus our forces and thoughts on what is good.

Actualization of Matthew 1:18-25

The challenge presented by the Sunday school narrative based on Matthew 1:18-25 was to break with the idea that the ‘unpredictable’ (using the Sunday school language) was something bad. Through the deconstructive reading I showed how this narrative presented an image of God and Joseph as patriarchs who own Mary’s sexuality, and who must compete as the two male characters for the control of the female character. The text also reflected the conflict and competition among masculinities (God’s and Joseph’s) as something natural.

In chapter 5 of the thesis I analyse how feminist and queer commentaries deal with issues of gender roles, social beliefs and the model of the traditional family. These commentaries provide tools to unmask certain aspects of the text, for example the meaning of naming Joseph a ‘righteous man’ and the possible meaning of Mary’s passivity in the text. Even though these commentaries did provide a range of resources for re-reading this text, it was noticed that there was not much feminist and queer work on this particular text, and that where there was work on this text, the focus tended to be on a dualistic concern: who was most important Joseph (the righteous man) or Mary (the mother of the Messiah).

Notwithstanding these limitations, I presented a literary analysis of the biblical text that allowed me to see other features of the text. After this work I have written a new narrative for use as Sunday school material in which there is no construction or reinforcing of a ‘normative sexuality’ but instead a narrative that gives space to talk about sexual rights. In the box below I present the new narrative.

Celebrating the uncommon this Christmas!

It is very common to understand life according to the norms and rules that shape our societies, and in the midst of everyday life forget that God does not create or adopt such rules. This is what happened to Joseph, the husband of Mary the mother of Jesus. The story begins when Mary was engaged to him, but not yet married. At that time she became pregnant, but her pregnancy was not Joseph's. Instead Mary was pregnant from the Holy Spirit. However people were used to judge this kind of situation, because what was acceptable in society was that a pregnant woman must be married to a man and the pregnancy must be from his man.

Given this situation, Joseph remembered the social norms of his society. His wife-to-be should be judged and punished by death; his honour would be questioned because he had not been able to control his fiancé's body. The law guided him in one direction and his fear of the public disgrace guided him in another direction. Finally he decided to divorce her quietly so that she would not be killed and he would be exposed to disgrace. Joseph was dealing with Mary's pregnancy according to the customs and rules that reigned in his society, but not necessarily according to God's.

But God does not follow these social norms. So God sent an angel to say to Joseph that his situation was okay, that he did not need to worry about the law or what is socially acceptable. God's messenger said to Joseph that it was okay to marry Mary and to be the father of the child that she was carrying, even if the child was not from him. God affirmed this uncommon family.

God does not judge the way humans sometimes do. God's plan was bigger, and God had already announced through the prophets that there would be this uncommon birth. He used this uncommon family to bring salvation to all. Fortunately for us, Joseph listened to the angel and acted according to God's norms, not worrying about the social stigma. He married Mary and he named the child Jesus.

In Christmas we are not only celebrating the birth of the Messiah, but we are also remembering that God is wise and acts outside the order we humans have established in our societies. It is time to remember not to judge what is different. It is time to be free and live in peace with those situations in our lives that do not conform with the popular way of doing things, but that do bring good and salvation.

Conclusions

In this chapter I have presented a literary analysis of the biblical texts of Genesis 3 and Matthew 1:18-25, stories used in the Sunday school material analysed in this thesis. The different elements of the literary analysis helped me to see different interpretations and intentions of the texts. After the literary analysis I took these findings, together with the findings of chapter 4 and 5, in order to re-write the Sunday school narrative. This time the narratives were written with the preoccupation to promote sexual rights and to stop constructing and reinforcing a normative sexuality.

In the next chapter I will bring together the key aspects of my work, analysing the thesis as a whole.

Chapter 7: Conclusions

Summarizing my findings

In this thesis I have referred to a set of different yet related issues that come together in order to understand and to be able to analyse how the narratives of specific Sunday school material for children take part in the construction of a particular idea of sexuality, which I found is based on gender binary roles and heteronormativity.

One of the main purposes of this work has been to create awareness about children's experience and knowledge of their own sexuality or of sexuality in general. Children have been deprived of their right to be informed about their sexuality, this is due to the discourse of children's innocence and adult protection of the child, both of which actually keep them in a bubble far from reality. However, in the middle of this invisible bubble that society constructs to discourage children from understanding sexuality, children do receive several messages about sexuality – for example, the prohibition to touch their own bodies as if there is something wrong with their sexual organs – and therefore they do engage, partially, with what they are taught.

Drawing resources from disciplines such as sociology, anthropology and pedagogy, this work shows how the parents' culture influences the socialization of children and their constructions of an identity. Because of this, the main analysis of this thesis is concerned about 'Christian culture', which uses as resources of socialization forms of Christian education, including Sunday school material. At the moment of analysing such material it was found that, first, the Sunday school intended to teach a biblical narrative, but actually invented a different story from that one found in the biblical text in order to instruct children. These rewritings of the biblical text in the Sunday school narratives probably derives from the idea that children are not mature enough to know and understand. The second finding is that the Sunday school narrative is moulded by the interest of the culture behind it, which in this case is concerned about teaching:

1. That God is a patriarchal God who can be imposed on everybody (women or men)
2. That women's bodies are the property of a male within the patriarchal system (father, brother, husband)
3. That men have the power and the right to treat women as property

4. That men should fight with other men to ensure their property
5. That it is necessary to distrust our human bodies, and specially the female body
6. That there is a constant conflict among two worlds, one corporal/material and the other spiritual
7. That the spiritual world should be privileged
8. That physical necessities must be viewed with suspicion
9. That evil could take advantage of our unreliable bodies

However, the feminist and queer consciousness taken into consideration in this study, together with the deconstructive methodology and a poststructuralist perspective, allow for a re-reading of the same biblical text, reconstructing the narratives in a way so that the heteronormative socialization of gender roles and the depreciation for the human body and its necessities are directly engaged. Through this re-reading of the biblical texts this study recognizes other components of the texts, where there is no dualistic or patriarchal ideology; on the contrary, this new readings finds a reaffirmation for human experiences and the human body, and so a recovery of sexuality.

Limitations of the study and suggestions for future research

A limitation of this study is the lack of a ‘childhood’ theological approach that accompanies the feminist and queer theological frameworks. This is not only a limitation of this thesis, but a missing theology in academia. There are some writings about theology and childhood, however, a clear theological framework still absent. As a suggestion for future research I could mention literature such as the articles found in the “*Special Collection Theology disrupted: Doing theology with children in African contexts*”³. In this publication it can be found articles about doing theology with the children, about children as agents of biblical interpretation, or a postcolonial perspective when doing theology with children.

In addition, the thesis lacks a detailed postcolonial analysis because it was already working with different perspectives (feminist, queer, post-structuralist). However for future research in this topic the postcolonial analysis could be of much help.

³ *Hervormde Teologiese Studies*, Vol 72, No 1. (2016)

A last suggestion for future research is in relation to possible “fieldwork”, including interaction with actual children who are learning from the Sunday school narratives and their feedback to the researcher in relation to what they learn and think from the Sunday school material that is being analysed.

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