Contested Privates in Public Debate: The Polarization of Homosexuality and Religion in Contemporary Discourses

Chairs: prof. dr. Ruard Ganzevoort (VU Amsterdam) and prof. dr. Anne-Marie Korte (Utrecht University)

Abstract
In many European countries we currently witness clashes between traditional religious constructions of homosexuality on the one hand and the public visibility of individual sexual preferences and increasing acceptance of sexual diversity on the other. These clashes between ‘imagined communities’ reflect changing public perceptions of sexualities, while simultaneously indicating shifting boundaries between ‘the secular’ and ‘the religious’, and between public and private spheres in modern western societies. This panel attempts to unpack the ‘polemics of knowledge’ that these oppositional pairings consists of. Central to our analysis is the interpretation that the shifts and tensions observed reflect not only changing public perceptions of sexual diversity, but also new positions toward the place, role, and rights of religion(s) in modern, multiform societies. The three papers discuss cases of public debate on religion and homosexuality in Dutch society in the second half of the twentieth century, contemporary Swedish society, and contemporary Dutch society.

Outline
In contemporary public debates an oppositional pairing of religion and homosexuality figures prominently. This panel attempts to unpack the ‘polemics of knowledge’ that this pairing consists of. In many European countries we find repeated clashes between traditional religious constructions of homosexuality on the one hand and the public visibility of individual sexual preferences and the increasing acceptance of sexual diversity on the other. These clashes between ‘imagined communities’ reflect changing public perceptions of sexualities, while simultaneously indicating shifting boundaries between ‘the secular’ and ‘the religious’, and between the public and the private spheres in modern western societies. Conservative religious groups have made the struggle against equal acceptance of homosexuality an important identity marker. Conversely, LGBT rights movements have traditionally critiqued monotheistic religions for their patriarchal, colonial and homophobic tendencies, and often positioned themselves as secular. In the Netherlands, right wing nationalists call for a ‘defence of homosexuals’ against ‘religious fundamentalist attacks’ and claim the acceptance of sexual diversity to be essential for Dutch citizenship (‘homonationalism’).

In this panel, we explore some of the complex social, political, cultural, and spiritual dimensions of framing religion and homosexuality as polarised constructs. We use an integrative approach that acknowledges the interrelatedness of the religion-homosexuality conflict with constructs of gender and nationalism, assuming that these tensions in the public constructions of religion and sexuality denote a fierce renegotiation of power positions. We acknowledge that in these ‘culture wars’, homosexuality and religion easily function as ‘identity markers’, articulated at the intersection of identity/alterity, marginality/dominance, privilege/exclusion, and connection/alienation. In effect, they lead to the rhetorical creation of ‘imagined others/intruders’ and to the formation of collective national, cultural, and religious identities.

Central to our analysis is the interpretation that the shifts and tensions observed reflect not only changing public perceptions of sexual diversity, but also new positions toward the place, role, and rights of religion(s) in modern, multiform societies. We start from the observation that in recent decades the public perception of both religion and sexual diversity has changed fundamentally. While religion is increasingly considered to be a private matter, sexual diversity has gained public importance. And whereas religious identity, long accepted as a matter of course, steadily has become contested in its
public and most characteristic manifestations, acceptance of sexual diversity is now often presented as a prerequisite for modern citizenship.

In the public discourses discussed in this panel, important questions will be addressed regarding visibility, naturalness and authenticity: Are religion and/or homosexuality seen as belonging exclusively to the private sphere or as deserving also public expression and political support? Are religion and homosexuality primarily seen as naturally given or as personal choice? To what extent do expressions of religious convictions and of sexual preference – notably the expression of objections to religion or to homosexuality – make a claim to ‘authenticity’?

After a general introduction by the chairs, the three papers discuss cases of public discourse on religion and homosexuality in Dutch society in the second half of the twentieth century, contemporary Swedish society and contemporary Dutch society.

Abstract paper 1

"“We, in the land of Anne Frank”: Sexuality, Secularism, and the Dutch Nation’

Dr. David Bos (VU Amsterdam)

In the Netherlands, as in other North-Western European countries, institutionalized religion lost much of its societal prominence during the 1970s. Simultaneously, the visibility and respectability of non-heterosexual men and women dramatically increased. In public debates, these two phenomena have often been rhetorically linked – both by opponents and by proponents of ‘sexual diversity’ and ‘secularization’. This paper will trace the genealogy of this commonplace, by analyzing public upheaval about religion and homosexuality in the Netherlands – notably the 1977 ‘Miami Nightmare’, an Amsterdam benefit concert, attended by a choice of Dutch celebrities, in protest against the ‘homophobic’ campaign of US evangelical Anita Bryant. It will be argued that this highly publicized event projected an image of Dutch (or European) culture that has stayed in place until the present day – be it now not so much in opposition to Americans as to Muslims.

Abstract paper 2

“A Cancerous Tumour”: Conservative Religious Interventions in Debates on Homosexuality in Sweden

Mariecke van den Berg MA (University of Twente & VU Amsterdam)

The research interest of this paper concerns the strategic and ideological assumptions (interests, stakes) and affective resonances of present-day constructions of homosexuality and religion as opposites in public debates on religion and homosexuality. How do these constructions simultaneously shape and limit public discourse? This paper investigates, by means of two case-studies, how conservative religious convictions are enacted and reacted upon in these debates in Sweden. It does so by disentangling, first, the media debate that followed Pentecostal pastor Åke Green’s arrest after calling homosexuality a “cancerous tumour” in Swedish society (2004) and, second, the formation and role of the conservative Christian group bevara äktenskapet (Protect Marriage) in the national debate on the introduction of same-sex marriage (2009). The paper investigates the discursive strategies and othering-practices through which both the “appropriate” public expression of religion and acceptable (e.g. liberal, accepting of LGBT-rights) Swedish citizenship are constructed.

Abstract paper 3

The ‘Homophobic’ and the ‘Gay-Friendly’ Pope: Dutch Responses to Statements of Pope Benedict XVI and Pope Francis I on Homosexuality

Marco Derks MPhil (Utrecht University)

This paper analyses how statements on homosexuality and the family made by Pope Benedict and Pope Francis are interpreted and evaluated in Dutch society and whether the arguments and sources they use
are conceived of as reliable knowledge. In this respect the difference between the two popes seems to be mainly one of style: whereas Benedict made several rather polemical and highly conceptual statements in official addresses and writings on defending heterosexual marriage against liberalism, Francis has taken a more ad hoc and irenic approach by answering questions from journalists or phone-calling a young Catholic gay man. Dutch responses to the statements by the previous pope and his successor seriously differ – they almost thank God for this new pope. Why do statements from the Vatican still cause such heavy debates in a secular society? Why do people appreciate the way Francis responds to questions regarding his attitude towards homosexuality?