

Een Spoorloos Vrouwspersoon:
Unmarried Mothers, Moral Regulation and the Church at the
Cape of Good Hope, circa 1652-1795

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Part I

On 7 May 1792, Catharina Elisabeth Abrahamse was called to enter the vestry of the Dutch Reformed Church in Cape Town. She no doubt did so with trepidation. Faced with the ministers and elders, the men who made up the church council, the young woman – who is described in the council’s minutes as “evidently impregnated” – had to stand upright while being questioned by the reverend brothers, as the council members liked to style themselves. They wanted to know with whom she had had “carnal knowledge” and whether or not this person would be prepared to “honour” her by entering into a lawful marriage. She testified that a certain Gerrit Ravens had “subjected” her to his will on the assurance that he would marry her. This confession led the church council to deliberate:

... considering the outrageous behaviour which the said Catharina Elisabeth Abrahamse has shown in this [matter] and since it is to be feared that, if similar transgressions of Divine and Human Laws are not prevented and thwarted through the strictness of the punishment to be imposed, it would pave the way for others to debauch themselves in a similar fashion ...

The council therefore decided to impose censure on Abrahamse by denying her, “for the time being”, Holy Communion. Abrahamse was well known to the church council: she was a ward of the Cape Town deaconate (*diaconij*), which meant that she was supported financially by

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the Church's poor fund (she was probably an orphan), as well as a confirmed member of the congregation. Three months later, after Abrahamse had given birth to "a shapely son", the council took up her case again and instituted legal action against Ravens¹ in order to restore the damaged honour of Abrahamse

... lest, by prevaricating in this [matter], the Authority of this Council is injured to the utmost and it is made possible for the said Catharina Elisabeth Abrahamse to withdraw herself as a boundless female person [*een spoorloos vrouwspersoon*] from the authority of her guardians.²

Our attempts to understand the past start with our pondering those aspects of it that seem most foreign or "other" to us.³ Why should an essentially private matter like a woman's pregnancy be so publicly exposed and investigated, and why should it be something that could have such public repercussions, as the reverend brothers feared? Why, then,

1. The case appeared five times before the Council of Justice between September 1792 and January 1793, when both parties "renounced from further productions", in other words the case was dropped – Cape Archives Repository, Cape Town (hereafter CAR): Council of Justice (hereafter CJ) 889, *Civiele Regts Rollen*, 1792, pp 1060, 1203-1204, 1397-1398, 1447 & CJ 890, *Civiele Regts Rollen*, 1793, p 16. The reason for not pursuing the case probably lies in the poverty of Ravens, since he was unable to pay his legal costs. Unfortunately, because there was no judgment in the case, there is no supporting documentation in the relevant Documents in Civil Cases – CAR: CJ 1190-1201, *Civiele Proces Stukken*, 1792, which could have shed further light on the circumstances of Abrahamse and Ravens.
2. *Nederduits-Gereformeerde Kerk Archives*, Stellenbosch (hereafter NGKA): G1 1/7 *Resolutieboek*, 1791-1802, pp 36, 51. The phrase *een spoorloos vrouwspersoon* can be translated as "a boundless [literally track- or traceless] female person", although "boundless" does not sufficiently capture the extreme opprobrium encapsulated by the adjective *spoorloos*. Abrahamse does not appear in the relevant volume of the standard genealogical database, J.A. Heese and R.T.J. Lombard (eds), *Suid-Afrikaanse Geslagregisters / South African Genealogies I* (Human Sciences Research Council, Pretoria, 1986), so nothing is known of her further history or the fate of her child.
3. Often the unusual and the unfamiliar are most revealing of the everyday and the normative; compare R. Darnton, *The Great Cat Massacre and Other Episodes in French Cultural History* (Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1984), pp 12-13; P. Burke, "Cultural History: Past, Present and Future", *Theoretische Geschiedenis*, 13, 1986, pp 190-191. This use of the "normal exception" is particularly apposite in this case since "it opens up history to include a wide range of human experience; and it reveals how the prosecution of certain categories of belief and behaviour serves as a commentary on the values of the master groups in society" – E. Muir, "Microhistory or *microstoria*", in D.R. Wolf (ed), *Global Encyclopedia of Historical Writing* (Oxford University Press, New York and London, 1998), p 616.

the extreme disaffection evident in the church council's reaction to Abrahamse's pregnancy? Why was their discussion couched in such alarmist language? Was this case perhaps unusual in its content and the reaction it elicited, and what may have been the underlying causes for the treatment of Abrahamse? Why, indeed, this concern over preventing her from being "boundless" – in short, how did the Church in Dutch colonial South Africa treat unmarried mothers? Did this treatment change over time, and what does it reveal about the underlying assumptions or ideologies in place in early modern Cape society? Finally, to what extent did the situation at the Cape regarding this most vulnerable group of people, mothers with out-of-wedlock children, reflect wider changes in mentality in the early modern period, especially with regards to issues of religion and morality?

The short cameo about Catharina Elisabeth Abrahamse's experiences and the Dutch Reformed Church's reaction to them, as well as the questions elicited by this incident, reflect several of the issues which are at the centre of current debates about the history of gender relations, patriarchy and moral regulation. A general issue is the position and treatment of single women. As Ruth Karras has shown, single women have for most of Western history lacked a "social space or social identity". In the mediaeval and early modern eras women were classified variously as virgins, wives or widows. Those who could not be fitted into any one of these categories, were invariably lumped with the only other group, namely prostitutes. Single women were almost synonymous with sexual immorality. Yet, as Karras has demonstrated, there was indeed a cultural space for the sexual lives of single women outside of prostitution. Although insights into this aspect of the lived reality of women do not come easily due to the nature of our evidence, there are some traces of single women as "sexual subjects rather than objects".⁴ It is particularly when dealing with the procreation and birth of illegitimate children, that our sources afford us some glimpses into this most private aspect of a woman's existence.

Amy Froide has argued cogently that the main differentiation between women in the early modern period was not between those living with a male or those living alone, but between being or having been married and being never married at all – between, what she terms, "ever-married" and "never-married" women. In early modern England, Froide

4. R.M. Karras, "Sex and the Singlewoman", in J.M. Bennett and A.M. Froide (eds), *Singlewomen in the European Past, 1250-1800* (University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia 1999), p 127.

shows, it was marital status which differentiated women's experiences and which determined how their lives were lived: women who never married were not only economically disadvantaged, but their actions were generally highly conspicuous. Consequently, their behaviour was more scrutinised and their lives subject to outside interference. It was especially in the area of sexual morality, that single women were viewed with the greatest suspicion and disapprobation.⁵

Was this however also the case with single women in the colonial world during this period? A highly significant demographic feature of the society of North-Western Europe in the early modern period was the numerical preponderance of women, with the result that a large percentage of women could never find marriage partners,⁶ yet European colonial expansion during this time was largely a male affair. In addition, the colonial situation was generally complicated by the existence of slavery. This meant that these societies-in-the-making were characterised by the presence of often transient European men, a shortage of marriage partners for those who chose to settle and a situation where the relations between the sexes was deleteriously influenced by the difference in power relations between the free and the unfree. These factors resulted in societies where family lives tended to be unstable, with a high degree of concubinage or temporary arrangements between men and women, resulting in the birth of children outside the formal legal bonds of marriage.⁷

How did the Church react to this situation in the colonial world?
How did it treat unmarried mothers and what was its approach to

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5. A.M. Froide, "Marital Status as a Category of Difference: Singlewomen and Widows in Early Modern England", in J.M. Bennett and A.M. Froide (eds), *Singlewomen in the European Past, 1250-1800* (University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia, 1999), pp 236-269.
 6. J. Hajnal, "European Marriage Patterns in Perspective", in D.V. Glass and D.E.C. Eversley (eds), *Population in History Essays in Historical Demography* (Edward Arnold, London, 1969), pp 101-143; P. Laslett, *Family Life and Illicit Love in Earlier Generations* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1977).
 7. Compare, for example: M. Nazzari, "Concubinage in Colonial Brazil: The Inequalities of Race, Class and Gender", *Journal of Family History*, 21, 2, April 1996, pp 107-124; B.W. Andaya, "From Temporary Wife to Prostitute: Sexuality and Economic Change in Early Modern Southeast Asia", *Journal of Women's History*, 9, 4, 1998, pp 11-34; G. Groenewald, "'A Mother Makes no Bastard': Family Law, Sexual Relations and Illegitimacy in Dutch Colonial Cape Town, c. 1652-1795", *African Historical Review*, 39, 2, December 2007, pp 58-90. The latter article also provides information regarding the demographic composition of Cape society in the period under discussion.

concubinage and sexual relationships between free men and slave or ex-slave women which, by implication, usually meant relationships between people of different races? Was there a *laissez-faire* attitude to the sexual realities of the colonial situation, or did the Church actively interfere and attempt to change the state of affairs? If so, by what means and with what effects? These questions have already, to various extents, been investigated for other colonial slave societies, most notably Catholic Latin America.⁸ The Cape of Good Hope under the Dutch East India Company (hereafter VOC), 1652-1795, affords a unique opportunity to study these themes with reference to the Calvinist Dutch Reformed Church (hereafter DRC). The Cape was the only one of the colonies in the VOC empire where a settler population developed which was, formally at least, Calvinist in confession.⁹ By studying the treatment of unmarried mothers by the Church in this society – an issue which, precisely because it was out of the ordinary, generated much source material – the historian is able to deduce much about the changing role of the DRC in Cape society in general, as well as the relationship between the private and the public – between family and community – in a colonial society which was so marked by differences in power relations.

Part II

In the post-Reformation Dutch Republic, the Reformed Church served two publics: its own members and, as the recognised “public church”, society at large. In the latter function, the Church continued to play a role in offering the general the public services which marked an individual’s life in Christendom: baptism, marriage and funeral.¹⁰ These services were

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8. Nazzari, “Concubinage in Colonial Brazil”, pp 111-119; A. Lavrin, “Sexuality in Colonial Mexico: A Church Dilemma” & A. Twinam, “Honor, Sexuality, and Illegitimacy in Colonial Spanish America”, both in A. Lavrin (ed), *Sexuality and Marriage in Colonial Latin America* (University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln and London, 1989), pp 47-95, 118-155.
 9. This is not to imply that there were no other settlers in the VOC empire – there were small free-burgher communities on Ceylon and in Batavia – but the Cape was exceptional in that the majority of the free colonial population were increasingly locally born. Nor do I wish to imply that the DRC was restricted to the Cape – the Church at the Cape needs to be seen in its colonial context, as is increasingly being realised; compare the essays in G.J. Schutte (red.), *Het Indisch Sion De Gereformeerde Kerk onder de Verenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie* (Verloren, Hilversum, 2002).
 10. A.Th. van Deursen, *Mensen van Klein Vermogen Het Kopergeld van de Gouden Eeuw* (Ooievaar, Amsterdam, 1991), pp 291-292; G.J. Schutte, “Between Amsterdam and Batavia: Cape Society and the Calvinist Church under the Dutch East India Company”, *Kronos Journal of Cape History*, 25, 1998/1999, pp 22-23.

available to all members of society – whether or not they were confessed members of the DRC. The Reformed Church considered marriage to be pre-eminently a secular affair – one of the main outcomes of the Reformation was after all the so-called “desacralisation of marriage”, that is, for Protestants marriage was no longer one of the sacraments, as it continued to be with Roman Catholics. The outcome of this was that in The Netherlands, the Church did not hold a monopoly over marriage, which was instead regulated through family law – in this case the *Politieke Ordonnantie* of 1580, amended and supplemented by the *Echtreglement* of 1656¹¹ – and administered by civil servants. Hence couples could marry either before the municipal authorities, or in the church, although the majority continued to go for the latter option.¹² As regards burials, the Reformed Church insisted that this task be the duty of the secular authorities and did not view it as a religious affair, although church buildings and graveyards were made available.¹³ Baptism, however, continued to be the marker of a person’s belonging to Christendom at large, and remained a sacrament. It was expected that all children born in the Netherlands would be baptised – whether their parents were members of a church or not. Thus it happened that the Reformed Church in the Dutch Republic baptised any child brought to the baptismal font – irrespective of the confessional status or moral behaviour of its parents.¹⁴ As the public church, it was the duty of the DRC to perform this service whereby children were publicly confirmed as belonging to Christendom. In this act the private lives of families converged with public expectations and observations in a ritual performed by a religious body. It is in this intersection of private and public, of secular and sacred, where personal choices and morality could clash most visibly with regulating and disciplining forces.

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11. These laws are published in A.S. de Blécourt and N. Japikse (eds), *Klein Plakkaatboek van Nederland* (J.B. Wolters, Groningen and The Hague, 1919), pp 126-132, 275-287. For a discussion of these regulations, see: M. van der Heijden, *Huwelijk in Holland Stedelijke Rechtspraak en Kerkelijke Tucht, 1550-1700* (Bert Bakker, Amsterdam, 1998), pp 45-50.
 12. E. Kloek, “Seksualiteit, Huwelijk en Gezinsleven tijdens de lange Zestiende Eeuw, 1450-1650”, in T. Zwaan (red.), *Familie, Huwelijk en Gezin in West-Europa* (Open Universiteit and Heerlen, Boom and Amsterdam, 1993), pp 113-118, 121-122.
 13. Van Deursen, *Mensen van Klein Vermogen*, p 293.
 14. A.Th. van Deursen, *Bavianen en Slijkgeuzen Kerk en Kerkvolk ten Tijde van Maurits en Oldebarnevelt* (Van Wijnen, Franeker, 1991), pp 135-141. For some exceptions to this general practice, see Schutte, “Between Amsterdam and Batavia”, p 27.

The DRC continued its public function at the Cape of Good Hope during the Dutch occupation – in fact, for most of the period of VOC rule, the DRC had a monopoly of public worship since, despite the large numbers of Lutherans at Cape (mostly German and Scandinavian immigrant men who married into Cape families), a Lutheran Church was only permitted in 1780 after a decades-long struggle.¹⁵ Here too the Church cooperated with the secular authorities in the realisation of marriages: after receiving the approval of the Matrimonial Court, couples were married in the local church. In fact, at the Cape the DRC exerted greater control over this aspect of people's private lives since, unlike the case in the Dutch Republic, purely secular marriages only became possible very late in the eighteenth century.¹⁶ This meant that baptism became a *sine qua non* for the establishment of a legal bond of matrimony, since the Reformed Church as a matter of principle refused to marry couples of whom either member was unbaptised, a principle which was even codified in the secular *Echtreglement*.¹⁷ Baptism, then, in many respects became *the* foundation for the public identity of a free individual at the Cape – it was both a marker of one's position in society and a crucial step in the establishment of a legitimate civic existence. As such, the Church's control over baptism could be seen as a powerful regulating and normalising force, one which determined access to both respectability and legitimacy.

The situation in the Dutch colonies regarding baptism differed from the metropolitan one and was complicated by the presence of slaves.¹⁸ The children of European colonists were baptised as a matter of course (since they were deemed as belonging to Christendom),¹⁹ this was

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15. J. Hoge, "Die Geskiedenis van die Lutherse Kerk aan die Kaap", *Archives Year Book for South African History*, 1, II (Cape Times, Cape Town, 1938). Due to the loss of the requisite sources (the minutes of the church council) for this period, the Lutheran practice cannot be taken into account in this article.
 16. See Groenewald, "A Mother Makes no Bastard", pp 60-64, on the operation of marriage law at the Cape.
 17. De Blécourt & Japikse (eds), *Plakkaatboek*, p 282 (article 51); Van Deursen, *Bavianen en Slijkgeuzen*, p 142. The issues relating to baptism and marriage were much discussed by early modern Reformed theologians – see: H. Bouwman, *Gereformeerde Kerkrecht Het Recht der Kerken in de Practijk II* (Kok, Kampen, 1970), pp 520-525. Only by the 1830s would the local DRC permit marriages between unbaptised persons – see: V.C. Malherbe, "Ten Reasons for not Marrying: Sex and Illegitimacy in Mid-Nineteenth Century Cape Town", *Historia*, 52, 2, November 2007, pp 195-198.
 18. See Schutte, "Between Amsterdam and Batavia", for a good overview of the situation regarding baptism in various parts of the VOC empire.
 19. According to contemporary O.F. Mentzel, *A Geographical-Topographical Description of the Cape of Good Hope I* (Van Riebeeck Society, Cape Town, 1921), p 130: "All Christian children born in this country are baptised and taken into the Reformed Church".

however not the case respecting slave children. This issue still needs detailed investigation for the Cape, but the principle was that where either or both of the slave parents were baptised, their children could be baptised.²⁰ Another option was for slave owners to stand *in loco parentis* of a slave child and to promise raising him or her as a Christian.²¹ The children of Company slaves tended to be baptised as a matter of course, since two VOC representatives always acted as baptismal sponsors. In addition, provision was made for children in the Slave Lodge to receive instruction, including religious instruction, and to attend church services.²² In general it seems as if the Dutch Reformed Church at the Cape of Good Hope followed quite a liberal approach to baptismal practice as regards slaves, at least in the context of the VOC empire.²³ Yet even so, baptism was never an automatic right, but remained a privilege that belonged to Christians: either those who were considered born as Christians (in other words, those with Christian parents), or those of whom it could be certain that they would receive a Christian education.

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20. CAR: Verbatim Copies (hereafter VC) 603, Notuleboek, 1665-1695, p 111, published in C. Spoelstra (red.), *Bouwstoffen voor de Geschiedenis der Nederduitsch-Gereformeerde Kerken in Zuid-Afrika II* (Hollandsch-Afrikaansche Uitgevers-Maatschappij, Amsterdam, 1906-1907), p 265.
 21. CAR: VC 603, Notuleboek, 1665-1695, p 93, published in Spoelstra (red.), *Bouwstoffen II*, p 256. At first this decision only applied to slave children with European fathers, but from the baptismal records the practice appears to have been wider; compare for example the several dozen such cases noted in the section "Slaven Kinderen der Vrijborgers of Comps. Dienaeren" in CAR: VC 604, Doopboek, 1695-1712, pp 75-88.
 22. CAR: VC 603, Notuleboek, 1665-1695, p 93, published in Spoelstra (red.), *Bouwstoffen II*, pp 256-257. This principle is also borne out by the evidence of the baptismal registers, for example compare the section "Slaven Kinderen der Ed. Comp. waer over de Ed. Comp. als getuijge staet" in CAR: VC 604, Doopboek, 1695-1712, pp 62-74, in which the names of the Company servants who acted as baptismal sponsors are noted alongside other details concerning the baptisms. On the religious instruction of Lodge slave children, see K. Schoeman, *Early Slavery at the Cape of Good Hope, 1652-1717* (Protea Book House, Pretoria, 2007), pp 163-165.
 23. Schutte, "Between Amsterdam and Batavia", p 43. J.N. Gerstner, *The Thousand Generation Covenant Dutch Reformed Covenant Theology and Group Identity in Colonial South Africa, 1652-1814* (Brill, Leiden, 1991), pp 203-214 & R.C.-H. Shell, *Children of Bondage A Social History of the Slave Society at the Cape of Good Hope, 1652-1838* (Witwatersrand University Press, Johannesburg, 1994), pp 330-350, discuss slave baptism at the Cape, but concentrate on the theological aspects with little reference to actual evidence from baptismal registers. J.L. Hattingh, "Beleid en Praktyk: Die Doop van Slawekinders en die Sluit van Gemengde Verhoudings aan die Kaap voor 1720", *Kronos*, 5, 1982, pp 25-42, remains the best discussion, although it only covers the first part of the Dutch period.

At the Cape of Good Hope there seems to have been no impediment to the baptism of illegitimate children. All slave children – whether those belonging to the Company or to private individuals – were *strictu sensu* illegitimate, since their mothers could not legally be married and yet, as has been indicated, many slave children were baptised despite this fact.²⁴ For a long time the names of such children were recorded in the Cape Town baptismal registers, alongside those of legitimate children – all that set them apart is the fact that no father’s name is recorded or, occasionally, a remark along the lines of *de vader onbekend* (“father unknown”) or *de zoogezegde vader* (“the reputed father”) followed by this person’s name.²⁵ There is no record or indication that mothers of such children were in any way prejudiced by the Church or that they were given any difficulty over the baptism of their children. However, a change occurred in this practice in 1724, since from that year onwards, illegitimate children were identified in the baptismal registers with the word *onegt*, and later as *in onegt verwekt* or *in onegt geprocreeert* (“illegitimately procreated”).²⁶ Although this does not indicate formal prejudice on the part of the Church, it did make the fact of illegitimacy a matter of public record which could be checked – as is shown by the occasional amending or alteration of such phrases where parents subsequently married, thereby legitimating their children.²⁷

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24. That slave children were considered illegitimate, is clear from the Church and other records, for example see: Spoelstra (red.), *Bouwstoffen* I, pp 17, 24; A. Moorrees, *Die Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk in Suid-Afrika, 1652-1873* (S.A. Bybelvereniging, Cape Town, 1937), pp 533-534; A.J. Böeseke (red.), *Dagregister en Brieue van Zacharias Wagenaer, 1662-1666* (Staatsdrukker, Pretoria, 1973), p 95.
25. This topic still needs systematic analysis, but for a preliminary investigation, see V.C. Malherbe, “Paternity and Illegitimacy: A Problem for Church and State at Cape Town, to the Mid 1800s”, *South African Historical Journal*, 55, 2006, pp 71-75.
26. The reason for this change in practice is not clear. However, it is probably related to the change in mentality that was occurring at the Cape during the early decades of the eighteenth century regarding the position of free blacks and which resulted in a greater awareness of race – a concern over paternity may well indicate anxiety over miscegenation. Compare A. Biewenga, *De Kaap de Goede Hoop Een Nederlandse Vestigingskolonie, 1680-1730* (Prometheus-Bert Bakker, Amsterdam, 1999), pp 269-276 & Schoeman, *Early Slavery at the Cape*, pp 370-387.
27. See CAR: VC 605, Doopboek, 1713-1742, baptismal entry 13 August 1724 for the first case of the word *onegt* appearing in a Cape Town baptismal register. For the amending of the term *onegt* in the registers upon the subsequent marriage of the parents, for example see the entries for 10 March 1726, 12 September 1734, 8 October 1735, 23 March 1738, 10 April 1740 and 12 July 1742 in the same volume.

For several decades, the situation continued like this, with no official bias towards unmarried mothers as regards the baptism of their children. Then, in August 1781, when the free black Lucas van Bengalen wanted his four illegitimate children baptised, the church council of the Cape Town congregation adopted a new policy: “that when somebody wants to present for baptism a child or children procreated illegitimately, this person will have to address this Council beforehand.”²⁸ This meant that instead of simply informing one of the Cape Town ministers of religion (there were three by this stage) of the intention of having one’s child baptised, the parent(s) of illegitimate children had to appear before the full church council, seeking permission for this act.²⁹ Hitherto, baptismal records were the main source in the Church archives for illegitimate children – a source which by its very nature yielded little qualitative evidence concerning changing attitudes and mentalities, yet this change of policy in 1781 meant that the modern historian has access to more detailed records since these appearances were minuted in the *resolutieboeken* of the church council. What do they reveal?

During the first year of the new policy, only a handful of cases appeared before the church council, but from 1783 onwards virtually every meeting of the council also included some petitions for the baptisms of bastards, reaching its peak in terms of numbers in the late 1780s.³⁰ Between 1781 and 1795, there are 198 petitions in total, involving considerably more than 200 children, since in some cases a parent presented more than one child (as many as five) for baptism at a time.³¹ The actual number of parents involved, is difficult to determine, because of the vagaries of eighteenth-century naming practices, particularly with regard to free blacks, but the maximum number is about 158 – there may well have been fewer than this where individuals’ names

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28. NGKA: G1 1/5, Resolutieboek, 1769-1782, p 378; G1 3/1, Register op de Notulen zedert den jare 1665 tot en met Januarij 1791, p 113 under “Onechte Kinderen”.
 29. From other sources it appears that parents normally sent a letter or approached a minister in person informing him of their intention to have their child baptised. See: CAR: CJ 368, Criminele Proces Stukken, 1757, p 112 for an example of such a letter.
 30. The following presentation of evidence is based on a database file compiled from the details of these appearances as minuted in NGKA: G1 1/5-1/7, Resolutieboeken, 1769-1802.
 31. The number of “petitions” refers to the total number of appearances – it does not reflect the number of parents or children involved.

have changed beyond safe identification.³² In only two of the 198 times where petitions were made in person, did both the father and mother of the children appear,³³ and in only five other cases were the mothers able (or willing) to reveal the names of the children's fathers.³⁴ A father appeared eighteen times to request baptism for his illegitimate child, and in only one of these cases was the mother's name mentioned.³⁵ In all the other cases it was the unmarried mother who had to petition the church council – making these records the single most revealing source for this group of eighteenth-century Cape women. The church records do not normally indicate the race or status of these petitioners, but this issue is of far too great an importance for our study of this period to be ignored. In terms of the names of the mothers, one can safely assume that those with toponyms were slaves or free blacks. This would mean that a *minimum* of 47 of the 140 individual women who appeared before the church council requesting baptisms for their children were of slave descent – the real number was most likely considerably higher as it is plausible that several of these individuals adopted patronyms as surnames or took over the names of their partners, making it difficult to identify them with certainty as free blacks.³⁶

It seems that at first the new policy of asking permission for the baptism of illegitimate children was merely a formality. In the first few

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32. Slaves were usually indicated by a first name followed by a toponym, such as *Eva van de Caab*. Sometimes free blacks kept their slave toponyms, but they often adopted the first names of their (putative) fathers as a surname, hence names like *Abrahamse*, *Claasz*, *Willemse*, et cetera. Thus, one cannot know for certain whether or not the “*Maria Magdalena Roelofs*” (a typical patronymic surname) who petitioned a baptism in 1785 was the same as the “*Maria Magdalena van de Caab*” who made a similar request in 1783, though it seems chronologically plausible – NGKA: G1 1/6, Resolutieboek, 1782-1791, pp 60, 97.
33. NGKA: G1 1/6, Resolutieboek, 1782-1791, p 77 and G1 1/7, Resolutieboek, 1791-1802, pp 33-34.
34. NGKA: G1 1/6, Resolutieboek, 1782-1791, pp 113, 245-246, 262, 293-294, 297.
35. NGKA: G1 1/6, Resolutieboek, 1782-1791, pp 17, 60, 62, 72, 86, 95, 106, 113, 121-122, 128, 187 and G1 1/7, Resolutieboek, 1791-1802, pp 72, 102, 109, 113, 130, 132, 153.
36. This number includes those women who are identified in the records as *vrijswartinne* or slave women without a toponym being provided. Given the practice of free blacks to adopt patronyms, it seems likely that the large number of women with patronyms like *Alexander*, *Adams*, *Abrahamse*, *Davidse*, *Jacobse*, *Jurgense*, *Roelofse* and *Willemse* were also of slave descent. In addition, many women were simply indicated by their first name(s) which probably also reveals free black status.

years after 1781, the minutes simply record the particulars of the petitioner(s) along with a stock phrase that the request was granted on condition that two members “of irreproachable behaviour and conduct from this congregation act as baptismal sponsors”. Occasionally it is mentioned in 1784-1785 that the woman in question was “admonished” (*vermaant*) by the minister who chaired the meeting, but nothing more was done to these women and their children continued to be baptised as per usual. However, during the second half of the 1780s, this situation changed and its course can be traced in the increasingly emotional and alarmist language used by the church council when dealing with these unmarried mothers. By 1786 “admonished” made way for “reprimanded” (*gereprimenteert*) which a year later became “sharply reprimanded” (*scherpelijk gereprimenteert*) or “seriously punished” (*ernstig bestraft*) only to abate by 1794 when the qualifications “sharply” and “seriously” stopped being used. Even more revealing is the way in which these women’s behaviour was described. By 1785 some were described as leading a “bad and scandalous life” (*slegt en ergerlijk leeven*) or sometimes simply being called “scandalous and unchristian” (*ergerlijk en onchristelijk*). In 1786 a shift occurred and adjectives like “outrageous” or “excessive” (*buitenspoorig*) and “boundless” or “trackless” (*spooreloos*) started being applied to the petitioners’ conduct and lifestyles, building up to an outburst of moral outrage by the early 1790s with statements of extreme moral disapproval such as “a lifestyle causing great annoyance”, “her immoral and unchristian and completely scandalous behaviour”, “a bad and disgusting way of life”, and “her completely bad and unbecoming behaviour”.³⁷ This rhetoric of opprobrium reveals not only the Church’s growing concern and increasing exasperation over unmarried mothers and their activities, but also the way in which women’s conduct was viewed: it was something that had to be kept in bounds, on tracks (both the words *buitenspoorig* and *spooreloos* indicate a concern with behaviour being kept on a certain preconceived “track”). Where this failed to happen, it caused annoyance, evoked disgust and created scandal – this was behaviour that did not become a woman, hence the need for the church council to reprimand sharply and punish seriously these unmarried mothers in an attempt to prevent them from going off the tracks.

Did the church council however have any real power to punish these women who had the temerity to appear before them during these

37. “... tot groote ergenis streckende levenswijse”; “haar losbandig en onchristelik en allesints ergerlik gedrag; ergerlijk en aanstootelijke levenswijse ...” and “... allesints slegt en onbetamelijk gedrag ...” – NGKA: G1 1/6, Resolutieboek, 1782-1791, p 322 and G1 1/7, Resolutieboek, 1791-1802, pp 3, 57 and 72.

years? As we have seen, for most of the Dutch period, the DRC at the Cape did not object to baptising illegitimate children. Despite the policy of requiring the parents of out-of-wedlock children to petition the church council, the practice continued as before, in spite of the verbal scorn and outrage spewed at the unfortunate mothers. However, this changed in 1789 when three women – Jamila van de Caab, Francina Elisabeth van de Caab and Hester Magdalena Potgieter – requested the baptism of their illegitimate children and were refused. The first two were free black women, and shortly before this event they had been confirmed as members of the Cape Town congregation, on which occasion they had promised to enter into legal marriages with the fathers of their children. The church council worried that if these women's children were baptised, they might renege on their promise and not marry the fathers, which behaviour would "cause the congregation immense annoyance and offence". It therefore refused baptism of the children until such time that the parents had got married. The case of Potgieter differed in that she, also a member of the congregation, had been a repeat offender and was presenting her third illegitimate child for baptism. Since she persisted in "such an abhorrent life" and the council's repeated reprimands clearly did not have the desired effect, the reverend brothers decided to refuse her request in an attempt to exert greater control over, and have a greater impact on those people who continued openly to conduct their lives in such a scandalous fashion.³⁸ In this way the withholding of baptism became a weapon in the moral regulation of women's lives.

From 1789 onwards, then, the church council at times refused to have the children of unmarried parents baptised. This happened on 33 occasions, only one of which concerned a father. However, analysis of the data on the 29 women involved does not reveal a clear pattern: only nine of these individuals were repeat offenders – and the evidence indicates that repeat offenders were not automatically refused when they petitioned for the baptism of a second or later child.³⁹ Twelve of these women were members of the DRC, which strikes one as a high percentage, but this too cannot be deemed a pattern because of the large number of exceptions. Likewise, the percentage of women who are identifiable as free blacks is no higher than that for the period after 1781,

38. NGKA: G1 1/6, Resolutieboek, 1782-1791, pp 251-252. A month later Potgieter's repeated request for the baptism of her child was acceded to, though she was again "seriously punished" (p 259).

39. Wilhelmina van de Caab, for example, appeared five times between 1787 and 1794 before the church council requesting baptism for her illegitimate children and was never refused – NGKA: G1 1/6, Resolutieboek, 1782-1791, pp 169-170, 185, 301 and G1 1/7, Resolutieboek, 1791-1802, pp 9, 135.

so that race was seemingly not a factor. It is not possible, then, to claim that the church council was particularly prejudiced against repeat offenders or exceptionally harsh against members of its own church – although both factors did play a role. It seems, rather, that refusal to award baptism was considered carefully on a number of contingent factors based on the knowledge of the petitioner’s history and behaviour, and that no rule of thumb existed. Yet that refusal to permit baptism was seen as the means to an end, namely to reform the behaviour of boundless women, is once again evident from the remarks the church council left for posterity about these women: they are routinely described in the most outraged language, as “boundless”, “outrageous” and “shameless”.

Part III

It is clear from the preceding section that the Church at the Cape of Good Hope became exceptionally concerned over the behaviour of unmarried mothers during the last decades of the eighteenth century, although it was largely powerless to do much about the situation other than for the church council to raise alarm and verbally reprimand those women who appeared before it. Its only real weapon, namely refusal to grant baptism, was used rather sparingly – only 33 times out of the 89 petitions received between the first refusal in 1789 and 1795. It is plausible that this is related to the public church nature of the DRC – it was part of its duty to dispense baptism and only in the most severe cases could it be refused.⁴⁰ Yet there is one group of people over whom the Church could exert greater control, namely its own members.

The Reformed religion in the early modern period was an exacting one. People who were confirmed members of this Church gave up the world and their old ways, and were expected to lead a strict new life in accordance with different rules, those of God. They were measured, and had to measure themselves by different norms from ordinary people. Once a person entered the Church, he or she became part of a community, the body of Christ, and was expected to behave accordingly, otherwise this holy communion would be sullied. Hence the moral entrance requirement for new members was high – only through a holy way of living could the ire of God be averted and the earthly body of Christ be

40. Another possible reason relates to the controversies that raged between the DRC and the Lutheran Church at the Cape during these decades, particularly over who may baptise whom. The DRC claimed that the Lutheran Church could only baptise the children of Lutheran parents and jealously guarded its own role as the public church. See: Hoge, “Geschiedenis van die Lutherse Kerk”, pp 91-118.

kept pure.⁴¹ The result of these exacting personal requirements – and the fact that by becoming a member a person became subject to interference in his or her private affairs by their brothers and sisters in Christ – was that the Reformed Church grew only slowly in the Dutch Republic.⁴² Many people made use of the services of the Church, and were regular attendees, but preferred not to take the final step of becoming full members. These so-called *liefhebbers* (“lovers”) of the Reformed religion were not entitled to partake in Holy Communion, the most important sacrament in the Dutch Reformed Church. This event was symbolic of the nature of Reformed Christianity: it represented the unity of the members who made up the body of Christ – the “community of saints”, as it was often called – and visually demonstrated both their fellowship and their isolation as a group separate from the world and its ways.⁴³

This unity and purity had to be maintained in the face of the evil ways of the world and human nature. The Reformed Church rejected the Catholic system of church courts and canon law, but followed the biblical precept (in Matthew 18: 15-17) that Christians had the right to castigate fellow Christians whose behaviour threatened the unity and purity of the community of believers, especially as it was symbolised in Holy Communion. Consequently church councils, as the representatives of the body of believers, had the right to exercise so-called church discipline or censure over members. The ultimate aim of church discipline was to ensure peace in the congregation, thereby ensuring that all true Reformed members could enjoy Holy Communion with a clear conscience. There were different ways of achieving this, depending on the nature of the sin. Normally a differentiation was made between sins which were of a minor, personal nature and those which could cause public offence. The former were often settled through simple conflict resolution between members, mediated by the minister or elders, and were usually not made public. Those sins which were by nature public – in other words could be noticed by others, especially non-members of the Church – were treated in a public fashion. Offenders were called to appear before the church council, which would try to convince the person involved of his or her sin and determine how repentant he or she was. If a person was placed under

41. Van Deursen, *Bavianen en Slijkgeuzen*, pp 193-195.

42. In the late sixteenth century, only about 10 per cent of the population of the Dutch Republic were confirmed members of the Reformed Church, which by the mid-seventeenth century grew to 37 per cent. Even by the end of the eighteenth century, just over half (55 per cent) of the adult inhabitants of the northern Netherlands were DRC members. See: Van Deursen, *Bavianen en Slijkgeuzen*, p 129; Schutte, “Between Amsterdam and Batavia”, p 23.

43. Van Deursen, *Bavianen en Slijkgeuzen*, p 200.

censure, he or she was not allowed to partake of Holy Communion and the minister publicly announced in church the details of the case and the ways in which it was being resolved. Where sinners showed remorse early in the process, their names were normally not mentioned publicly. Where they persisted, their names were revealed in church for as long as they remained under censure. Finally, where there was no hope of convincing someone of his or her guilt, the church council could excommunicate such a person. Censure thus played an important role in reconciling various oppositions: of belonging and not belonging, of the private and the public, and between the sacred (purity) and the secular (sin and the ways of the world).⁴⁴

Although at the Cape the Reformed Church long held the monopoly of worship, here too there was a disjunction between the public nature of the church and the actual number of people who became formal members. Unfortunately no historian has yet tabulated the complete figures from membership registers, but from the available numbers we know that the percentage of the population that belonged to the Reformed Church was low, especially in Cape Town, although it did grow in the course of the eighteenth century. It was particularly in the interior, noticeably in Drakenstein (Paarl) and Stellenbosch that a large proportion of the inhabitants were confessed members of the Church.⁴⁵ The small number of communicants was something on which visitors to the Cape regularly remarked.⁴⁶ The reason for this may very well lie in the belief that the price one had to pay, in terms of behaviour and subjection to interference from church authorities, for church membership was too high. As Mentzel claimed of the Cape Town congregation in the 1730s, “members or communicants are devout, pious and yet tolerant”.⁴⁷

Was church discipline then also used at the Cape of Good Hope to maintain the sacredness of Holy Communion, and how did this affect unmarried mothers?⁴⁸ Perhaps the most surprising thing about this topic is the absence of censure for so long in the records. Unfortunately the

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44. H. Roodenburg, *Onder Censuur De Kerkelijke Tucht in de Gereformeerde Gemeente van Amsterdam, 1578-1700* (Verloren, Hilversum, 1990), pp 115-124; E. Kloek, *Wie Hij Zij, Man of Wijf Vrouwengeschiedenis en de Vroegmoderne Wereld* (Verloren, Hilversum, 1990), pp 78-79.
45. Schutte, “Between Amsterdam and Batavia”, pp 39, 44-45.
46. Compare the quotations in Gerstner, *The Thousand Generation Covenant*, pp 214-215.
47. Mentzel, *A Geographical-Topographical Description I*, p 130.
48. For a perfunctory overview of the practice of church discipline at the Cape, see: J.D. Vorster, *Die Kerkregtelike Ontwikkeling van die Kaapse Kerk onder die Kompanjie* (Pro Rege-Pers, Potchefstroom, 1956), pp 129-134.

minutes of the Cape Town church council are lost, with the exception of a five-year period in the 1720s, for most of the first half of the eighteenth century.⁴⁹ However, in spite of this loss, we still have detailed records for almost a century of the period of Dutch occupation and the records for other congregations can be used as a measure to determine whether the Cape Town situation was exceptional.

The first case of church discipline in Cape Town only occurred in 1761 and concerned the organist Anthonij Berrange who was denied using Holy Communion because of his alcohol abuse. Two months later, he had shown sufficient remorse to be relieved of his censure and to be welcomed back into the fold of the congregation.⁵⁰ In many ways this is a “typical” case of church discipline: someone’s public behaviour was seen as a threat to the holiness of communion and needed to be corrected. When the person repented, unity and holiness were restored and he could join of the body of Christ again. However, in the history of church discipline in eighteenth-century Cape Town, this is a highly exceptional case: it is the *only* censure case which did not involve sexual morality and one of only a very few which dealt with a man.

The second case only happened in 1778 and with this a pattern was set: Cornelia Roelofse was in her late teens, a member of the Church and a ward of the *diaconij*, meaning that she lived with foster parents who were paid by the Church’s poor fund to raise her until she reached the age of majority (at 20 for women) or contracted a legal marriage. After she became pregnant, the church council interrogated her. She claimed that Johannes Ziedel, the son of her foster parents, was the father and that he had promised to marry her. He denied this when called before the council and the latter decided, in their guise as guardians of Roelofse, to refer the case to the judicial authorities in an attempt to force Ziedel to marry Roelofse. This attempt failed since there was not sufficient evidence to enforce the promise of marriage and Ziedel persistently denied involvement.⁵¹ The outcome of this was most deleterious for Roelofse, by now a teenage mother: the church council informed her, after first

49. The minutes have survived for the following periods: 1665-1695, 1719-1724 and from 1749 onwards. However, an alphabetic register was compiled of the minute books in the late eighteenth century when the records were still complete, which contains verbatim extracts of all the main policy decisions made by the church council – NGKA: G1 3/1, Register op de Notulen zedert den jare 1665 tot en met Januarij 1791.

50. NGKA: G1 1/4, Resolutieboek, 1758-1769, pp 81-82, 89-90.

51. See Groenewald, “A Mother Makes no Bastard”, pp 65-67, for the burden of proof in breach-of-promise cases.

“sharply reprimanding her for her misconduct”, that since none of her accusations against Ziedel could be proved, they no longer wished to have any involvement with her whatsoever and that she had to go and seek her “fortune” elsewhere, in other words they withdrew her financial support from the *diaconij*. Moreover, because of her “rash conduct of life”, she was censured and denied Holy Communion until such time as she had promised and shown an improvement in her life.⁵²

The next case of church discipline occurred in 1781, and was the direct result of the newly instituted requirement for the parent(s) of illegitimate children to petition the church council in person for their children’s baptism.⁵³ In fact, only two of the 80 cases of church censure imposed in the Cape Town congregation before 1795 occurred before 1781.⁵⁴ In almost ninety per cent of these cases the person involved was a woman (see **Table 1**). The vast majority of church discipline cases came about as the result of bringing an illegitimate child for baptism. Such a public transgression – and what could be more public than an unmarried mother with a small child? – had to be punished to keep the community of believers pure, but it almost seems as if this concern over women procreating illegitimate children in the 1780s and 1790s spread to other areas of sexual morality as well – one suddenly finds several cases of people, including some men and mostly concerning free blacks, living “in concubinage” being brought before the church council and being put under censure in order to force them to marry – this after more than a century of a *laissez-faire* approach to concubinage at the Cape.⁵⁵ There are also a couple of cases of women who were censured for their “rash” or “offensive” ways of living, which presumably indicated a laxity in sexual morality.⁵⁶

52. NGKA: G1 1/5, Resolutieboek, 1769-1782, pp 261, 263, 265, 275.

53. NGKA: G1 1/5, Resolutieboek, 1769-1782, p 380.

54. By cases, I mean a person appearing for the first time for a specific infraction – subsequent appearances for the same infraction were not counted, but if the same person appeared more than once for different infractions, they were counted separately. Where several individuals appeared at the same time for the same infraction, each person counted as a separate case.

55. Compare NGKA: G1 1/6, Resolutieboek, 1782-1791, pp 252-253, 275, 285-286, 291. On concubinage at the Cape, see: Groenewald, “A Mother Makes no Bastard”, pp 70-74.

56. For example, see: NGKA: G1 1/5, Resolutieboek, 1769-1782, p 397 and G1 1/6, Resolutieboek, 1782-1791, pp 108, 113, 275.

	Women	Men	Total
Procreating illegitimate children	49	2	51
Concubinage	16	6	22
“Rash” or “offensive” way of living	6	0	6
Other	0	1	1
TOTAL	71	9	80

Table 1: Church Discipline in the Cape Town Congregation, 1749-1795.
(Source: NGKA: G1 1/3-1/7).

All in all, these figures strike one as highly unusual. It is true that in general the DRC attracted more women members than men and that there would be a statistically higher number of women offenders than men.⁵⁷ Studies of church discipline for the Dutch Republic have also indicated that women were more often the objects of church censure, though this was by no means a universal phenomenon in the Protestant world of early modern Europe.⁵⁸ The Dutch case may simply be the result of the higher number of female church members. However, the Cape numbers seem highly exceptional and cannot be explained by demographic trends. Likewise, the fact that 79 out of the 80 cases concern sexual morality, is highly exceptional – there is nothing in the Cape of the wide range of transgressions that resulted in censure in the early modern Netherlands.⁵⁹

In an attempt to compare and contrast the Cape Town experience, the historian can study the situation in the neighbouring Stellenbosch congregation. This congregation was tiny in comparison with Cape Town, but its records are complete for the whole of the eighteenth century, even though – because of the long periods during which Stellenbosch went

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57. In the seventeenth century women formed by far the majority in terms of membership of the Reformed Church in the Dutch Republic – Van Deursen, *Bavianen en Slijkgeuzen*, pp 134-135.
58. One should not generalise too much – each location had its own special circumstances. In seventeenth-century Utrecht, women outnumbered men in censure cases in all types of censure, but in Leiden only in cases concerning morality. Compare: F.A. van Lieburg, *De Nadere Reformatie in Utrecht ten tijde van Voetius Sporen in de Gereformeerde Kerkeradsacta* (Lindenberg, Rotterdam, 1989), p 90; Kloek, *Wie Hij Zij*, p 101. In sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Protestant Germany and France, the majority of censure cases involved men, though in general women were more prominent in moral censure, in some cases forming the majority – Kloek, *Wie Hij Zij*, pp 87-88.
59. See Roodenburg, *Onder Censuur*, for an exhaustive treatment.

without a permanent minister – they are at times rather thin (there are years in which the church council met only once or twice). A tabulation of the fifteen known cases⁶⁰ reveals a rather different picture from that in Cape Town (see **Table 2**). In Stellenbosch the offenders were equally divided between men and women, and in all categories as well, including that of sexual morality, and throughout the eighteenth century, not just during the last two decades. Although the majority of cases also deal with sexual morality, there is a much wider spread with only one case being for procreating an illegitimate child.⁶¹ On the other hand, there are three cases of adultery, a category one would expect in most statistics of church discipline cases, yet one curiously lacking for Cape Town.⁶² Most significantly, in Stellenbosch there are also several cases dealing with transgressions beyond the field of morality, issues to do with public behaviour (such as drunkenness) and even, as one would expect, with issues of religious observance.⁶³

	Women	Men	Total
Procreating illegitimate children	1	0	1
Concubinage	0	1	1
Adultery	1	2	3
“Rash” or “offensive” way of living	2	2	4
Other or Unkown	3	3	6
TOTAL	7	8	15

Table 2: Church Discipline in the Stellenbosch Congregation, 1700-1796.
(Source: NGKA: G2 1/1-1/3).

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60. This does not include those instances where members were only warned to improve their behaviour without actually being denied Holy Communion, for example some of the cases in NGKA: G2 1/1, Stellenbosch Notulen, 1700-1727, pp 1-4.
61. NGKA: G2 1/3, Stellenbosch Notulen, 1755-1804, pp 272-273.
62. NGKA: G2 1/3, Stellenbosch Notulen, 1755-1804, pp 117, 195, 198, 266. The second of these cases is the only known case of excommunication at the Cape and concerns David Malan Davidsz, who in 1788 abandoned his wife and eloped into the interior with his slave mistress (with whom he earlier had a child) – N. Worden and G. Groenewald (eds), *Trials of Slavery Selected Documents concerning Slaves from the Records of the Council of Justice at the Cape of Good Hope, 1705-1794* (Van Riebeeck Society, Cape Town, 2005), pp 569-582.
63. For discussion of church discipline in the Stellenbosch congregation, see: A.L. Geyer, “Die Stellenbosse Gemeente in die Agtiende Eeu”, *Annale van die Universiteit van Stellenbosch*, 4, B, 1, Junie 1926, pp 66-69; Biewenga, *Kaap de Goede Hoop*, pp 199-202.

As regards the gender of the objects, the range of “sins” punished and the timing of church discipline, Cape Town seems highly exceptional – not just from trends elsewhere, but even as regards the young Cape Colony. For a long time in the history of early modern Cape Town, it seems as if illegitimacy and unmarried mothers were not issues over which much concern was raised – the Church continued to baptise bastards brought to the baptismal font and did not generally act against their mothers. That is, until the 1780s, at which point the Church seems to have developed a near obsession with births out-of-wedlock and started acting against mothers⁶⁴ in ways that it was able to: firstly by making the requirements for baptism more complex (using, in fact, baptism as an instrument of reform) and, most importantly, by publicly acting against those mothers over whom they had greater control, namely the ones who were members of the Church. The questions that need answers, then, are: why did this happen in Cape Town and why at this particular juncture in its history? Why this drive aimed against women, particularly against unmarried mothers?

Part IV

The stage where all the foregoing was enacted was the room in which the church council met – normally on a monthly basis. The “Church” with which these unmarried mothers had to deal, was first and foremost a small number of men – the ministers and elders of the congregation. They were the ones who interpreted the rules, who made the decisions, passed the judgments and enacted the punishments which the “Church” imposed. It is with them that we must start.

At the beginning of 1781, the Cape Town congregation was served by two ministers, J.F. Bode and J.P. Serrurier, both of whom had been in their posts for more than two decades. They were joined early in that year by the young, recently graduated, Minister Christiaan Fleck, who was South African-born. It seems most plausible that he was responsible for the introduction of the new policy regarding the baptism of illegitimate children which took effect in August 1781, and not the long-serving Bode and Serrurier, who must have been content to let things carry on as before. The continuing *laissez-faire* approach to the baptism issue may well have been the result of these two men’s influence on the church council. However, in 1784 Bode died and was succeeded in 1785

64. The reason why the unmarried mother, and not the father, had to bear the brunt of the blame, is because, as pointed out above, in most cases she alone requested the Church to baptise her child(ren). Whether this was because the fathers were absent, or more a reflection of the mother’s concern over the future of her child, cannot be gauged directly from the source material.

by another recent graduate from the Netherlands, Meent Borchers, who in his turn was replaced in 1786 by the young Helperus Ritzema van Lier.⁶⁵

These dates and names are not without significance – we have already seen above that the language used about unmarried mothers increased in its intensity, even violence, by the mid-1780s and that these were the years during which the Cape Town congregation experienced an unwonted spate of censure cases and even started refusing to baptise some illegitimate children. It is clear now that these developments must be related to the arrival and growing influence of Fleck and Van Lier. Both of these men were influenced by the pietistic movement, which in the Netherlands was known as the “Further Reformation” (*Nadere Reformatie*), and had a longer history in that country than similar movements in Germany and England. Adherents of this movement sought a more personal relationship between the believer and God. This meant a greater obsession with the purity of dogma and an attempt to live a pure and pious life. In short, pietists believed that the Reformation of the sixteenth century was not completed and ought to be carried further. The result was that “they took up the message of covenant theology to emphasize the great gulf between the spiritually reborn and the unregenerate mass of the population, and they did their best to live up to the highest moral standards”.⁶⁶

Although there were small groups and individuals who were influenced by pietism through most of the eighteenth century at the Cape, they languished in isolation and in a religious atmosphere which did not encourage their particular interpretation of Reformed theology.⁶⁷ This changed drastically with the arrival of Fleck, who was influenced by Pietism,⁶⁸ and especially Van Lier whose conversion from a life of Enlightenment rationalism led to a deep identification with the aims of English Evangelicals like John Newton and the Methodist, George Whitefield.⁶⁹ To people like these, the state of the Cape Church

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65. Moorrees, *Die Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk*, pp 271-274; S.P. Engelbrecht, *Die Kaapse Predikante van die Sewentiende en Agtiende Eeu* (HAUM-J.H. de Bussy, Cape Town and Pretoria, 1952).
66. D. MacCulloch, *Reformation Europe's House Divided, 1490-1700* (Penguin, London, 2004), p 391. On the “Further Reformation” in the Netherlands, especially see: Van Lieburg, *De Nadere Reformatie*.
67. K. Schoeman, *Dogter van Sion Machtelt Smit en die 18de-eeuse Samelewing aan die Kaap, 1749-1799* (Human & Rousseau, Cape Town, 1997), is the only study which traces the impact of this movement at the Cape.
68. Schoeman, *Dogter van Sion*, p 276.
69. T.N. Hanekom, *Helperus Ritzema van Lier Die Lewensbeeld van 'n Kaapse Predikant uit die 18de Eeu* (NG Kerk-Uitgewers, Cape Town and Pretoria, no date), pp 38-91.

was shocking: from the mid-1780s they continually lamented the “irreligion” of the inhabitants of Cape Town and the “indifference towards religion, yes, even open hostility towards it, which exists in the conduct of so many”.⁷⁰ Van Lier was not satisfied with only combating this “irreligion” from the pulpit, but actively undertook various initiatives to improve the state of affairs. One of these was that the church council be more pro-active with church discipline in an attempt to keep pure and holy the body of Christ or the “community of saints”, which together held Holy Communion. Another was the institution of more regular pastoral visits to church members in preparation for Communion.⁷¹ Thus those church members whose conduct was less than holy, came under the attention of Van Lier, who was not slow calling them before the church council, leading to cases of church discipline.⁷²

The moral regulation that was sweeping through Cape Town in the 1780s and 1790s however cannot be ascribed merely to the force of Fleck’s and Van Lier’s personalities. Why did the other council members so willingly accede to their suggestions and why did Van Lier, especially, find such a willing audience for his message of reform? The answer lies in the *Zeitgeist*. These were decades when Cape society was in flux and Cape Town was fast changing its nature, with all the concomitant anxieties that accompany rapid change. The catalyst was the Fourth Anglo-Dutch War of 1780-1784. In order to protect the strategic position of the Cape, several foreign regiments were stationed in Cape Town which overnight turned it into a beehive of activity as new buildings and fortifications were constructed. The influx of many new customers and the calling of many more foreign ships at Table Bay during the early 1780s, meant an economic boom and rapid increase in general prosperity for Cape Town’s free inhabitants. This prosperity was however built on false foundations and by the end of the 1780s, depression set in and inflation soared. Moreover, during this same decade, also as a direct result of the war, it finally became clear that the VOC was fast sinking and that difficult times were ahead for its colonies.⁷³

70. Spoelstra (red.), *Bouwstoffen* I, pp 541, 544.

71. See: Hanekom, *Helperus Ritzema van Lier*, pp 158-162, on the reform initiatives of Van Lier.

72. For the example of a number of people being censured for concubinage as a result of a pastoral visit by Van Lier, see: NGKA: G1 1/6, Resolutieboek, 1782-1791, p 291.

73. On the impact of the war on Cape Town and its society, see: G.A. le Roux, “Europese Oorloë en die Kaap, 1652-1795.” MA thesis, Stellenbosch University, 1941, pp 95-119; N. Worden, E. van Heyningen and V. Bickford-Smith, *Cape Town, The Making of a City An Illustrated History* (David Philip, Cape Town, 1998), pp 81-83.

The large number of French soldiers in Cape Town, coupled with its general prosperity, earned it the nickname of “Little Paris” during these years, and a reputation for partying.⁷⁴ When one considers that even in “normal” times, Cape Town in the eighteenth century experienced a gross gender imbalance, the 1780s, with thousands of foreign mercenaries stationed there, probably witnessed great competition for the affections of single women. There must have been numerous extra-marital relationships between members of the foreign regiments and local women. Some of the mothers of illegitimate children who petitioned the church council for baptisms in the 1780s indeed admitted that the fathers were one or the other mercenary soldier.⁷⁵ These reasons caused the local church council to complain to their colleagues in Batavia that the war, instead of having the opposite effect, made the inhabitants of Cape Town “persist in practising injustice ... without regard to the Lord. Pride, pomp, wanton luxury, dissoluteness, [and] contraventions of human and divine laws are gaining the upper hand, rather than decreasing”.⁷⁶

Thus the moral drive initiated by Van Lier *cum suis* in the second half of the 1780s can, in many respects, be viewed as a reaction to the perceived “excesses” of the early years of the decade, and an attempt (since foreign regiments remained present at the Cape until the early 1790s) to curb or at least contain these. The stressful years of the Fourth Anglo-Dutch war, coupled with the sudden changes it brought about in Cape Town society, led to an anxiety and a need to control what could be controlled. In addition, this period did not only experience material and physical changes brought about by the war, it was also a time of immense intellectual, even emotional, fervour brought about by world-wide events inspired by Enlightenment ideas: the American revolutionary war of the 1770-1780s, the Patriot Revolution in the Netherlands during the 1780s and, especially, the French Revolution from the late 1780s into the 1790s. All of these events were closely followed at the Cape,⁷⁷ and indeed

74. Le Roux, “Europese Oorloë”, p 117; compare: I. Glenn (ed), *François le Vaillant, Travels into the Interior of Africa via the Cape of Good Hope* (Van Riebeeck Society, Cape Town, 2007), pp 16-17.

75. For example: NGKA: G1 1/6, Resolutieboek, 1782-1791, pp 29, 293 and G1 1/7, Resolutieboek, 1791-1802, p 72. For an example of how the presence of the Luxembourg regiment caused a change in the behaviour of at least one Cape Town woman, see: G.J. Schutte (red.), *Briefwisseling van Hendrik Swellengrebel Jr. oor Kaapse Sake, 1778-1792* (Van Riebeeck Society, Cape Town, 1982), pp 190-192.

76. Spoelstra (red.), *Bouwstoffen I*, p 541.

77. Worden, Van Heyningen & Bickford-Smith, *Cape Town*, p 82.

inspired here a similar desire and drive for greater acknowledgment of the rights and privileges of ordinary burghers.⁷⁸

How did all of this worldwide change affect women? Both positively and negatively, according to the historian Ruth Bloch. She has traced a change in attitudes about the place and role of women in the upbringing of children.⁷⁹ Throughout most of the early modern period, women in Protestant Western society were deemed to be less rational and more subject to their emotions than men, which in the opinion of the day made them less fit for any public role. In family life, this explained why wives needed to defer to their husbands, but it also affected their parental status: because women were the “weaker vessels” and prone to emotionality, too excessive an influence over children by them could be harmful. Children needed to be taught the correct theological views and trained in industry and discipline – rational masculinity was eminently suited for this, and so fathers were elevated over mothers. These views, however, slowly underwent change and by the last decades of the eighteenth century a new conception of motherhood developed which challenged the traditional one. Under the influence of Pietistic and evangelical religious movements – which stressed a close and emotional relationship with God – what was formerly deemed as women’s weaknesses, plus the belief that they were innately more pious, now seemed to make them eminently suited to child rearing.⁸⁰ The primary role of a woman was now seen to be that of a mother, not a wife, with the result that motherhood “became a powerful vehicle through which women wielded broad social influence”. Women were considered by their very nature to be more virtuous than men, and with their influence over forming the characters of children, they were increasingly viewed as the “conservators of morals” in a society.⁸¹ This exaltation of the role of women came, however, at a price: it provided “the ideological justification and incentive for the contraction of female activity into the preoccupations of motherhood”⁸² This “rise of the moral mother” also meant that there was a greater observance and regulation of the moral lives of mothers, with of course deleterious effects on unmarried mothers.

78. See: C. Beyers, *Die Kaapse Patriotte Gedurende die Laaste Kwart van die Agtiende Eeu en die Voortlewing van Hul Denkbeelde* (J.L. van Schaik, Pretoria, 1967).

79. R. Bloch, *Gender and Morality in Anglo-American Culture, 1650-1800* (University of California Press, Berkeley, 2003), pp 57-77.

80. It is no coincidence that these movements found particular adherence among women.

81. Quotes from: Bloch, *Gender and Morality*, pp 72-73.

82. Bloch, *Gender and Morality*, pp 76-77.

Single women, because of their status, were always much more conspicuous than married women – when they had children, particularly by the late eighteenth century, they stood out glaringly, not only for having contravened the laws of society, but also for endangering the exalted role of the moral mother.

All of these ideas affected the praxis of the Church at the Cape when its leaders dealt with unmarried mothers. The turmoil and social disruption caused by the Anglo-Dutch war of the early 1780s, in addition to broader changes in mentalities and ideologies created by the Enlightenment, caused an anxiety about the state of society, and particularly those potentially most disorderly and least controllable of groups: single women.⁸³ Into this situation stepped the charismatic Van Lier, steeped in the ideas of the Enlightenment and deeply impressed by the new Sentimentality emerging from the Anglo-American world in the last decades of the eighteenth century.⁸⁴ What was happening with regard to unmarried mothers in late eighteenth-century Cape Town should not be seen purely in materialistic terms – while factors like race and the fast-changing economic situation may certainly have played a role, issues of mentality and attitudes appear much more important (though they are not to be divorced from the socio-historical reality, as we have seen). Moral regulation projects, as Alan Hunt has remarked, “are concerned to effect changes in the conduct and ethical subjectivity of individuals” – moral regulation is as much about governing others as it is about governing selves.⁸⁵ When the church council in 1792 called Catharina Elisabeth Abrahamse’s conduct “outrageous” and worried that – unless they act swiftly to keep her in bounds – it might “pave the way for others to debauch themselves”, it was employing a moral discourse which constructed a moralised subject (the Church) and a target (this “boundless” woman) on whom they acted through moralising practices, such as imposing church discipline and controlling access to baptism – hoping thereby to keep the woman “in bounds”.⁸⁶ This discourse, as this article has demonstrated, partook in many elements which came together at the Cape of Good Hope in the closing decades of the eighteenth

83. Compare Froide, “Marital Status”, p 241: “Single women might well have been the early modern patriarch’s worst nightmare – encompassing multiple characteristics of disorder at once”.

84. On Van Lier’s knowledge of (and original admiration for) both the French Enlightenment authors and the English Sentimentalist writers, see: Hanekom, *Helperus Ritzema van Lier*, pp 73-82.

85. A. Hunt, *Governing Morals A Social History of Moral Regulation* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1999), pp 9, 17.

86. Compare Hunt, *Governing Morals*, pp 6-7.

century: the Reformed Church's theology about the holiness of its sacraments, anxieties about a fast-changing world which threatened to overthrow the existing order and Enlightenment ideas about improving society and the role of motherhood. Whether or not the Cape mothers who entered the vestry of the Church would find any of this comforting, the historian cannot know. How this affected their children, however, is a topic that still awaits its historian.

Abstract

This article explores the treatment of unmarried mothers by the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC) at the Cape of Good Hope during the VOC period (1652-1795) in the belief that by concentrating on this exceptional group of people, much is revealed of normative practices. For most of its history at the Cape during this period, the DRC was not overly biased against unmarried mothers and their illegitimate children, continuing to baptise such children and never acting against the mothers. This changed in the 1780s when the Church started to deny access to its two sacraments – baptism and Holy Communion – to illegitimate children and their parents. Through a detailed exploration of baptismal petitions for illegitimate children and censure cases involving unmarried mothers, this article reveals the growing obsession with regulating the conduct of single women. It is suggested that the origins of this movement lie both in local Cape developments, namely the socio-economic upheavals caused by the revolutionary wars, and – perhaps primarily – in changing attitudes towards motherhood created by Enlightenment ideas and Pietistic religion. At the Cape this new ideology was disseminated by the DRC minister H.R. van Lier, who used existing Reformed dogma about the sacraments to regulate the morals of unmarried mothers.

Opsomming

**“Een Spoorloos Vrouwspersoon”:
Ongetroude Moeders, Morele Regulering en die Kerk aan die
Kaap de Goede Hoop, circa 1652-1795**

Hierdie artikel is 'n ondersoek na die behandeling van ongetroude moeders deur die Nederduits-Gereformeerde Kerk (NGK) aan die Kaap de Goede Hoop gedurende die VOC-tydperk (1652-1795) met die veronderstelling dat 'n mens deur op 'n groep buitengewone mense te fokus, juis heelwat oor die algemene normatiewe gebruike van die tyd kan aflei. Vir die grootste gedeelte van sy geskiedenis gedurende hierdie tyd, was die NGK nie juis bevooroordeel teenoor ongetroude moeders

en hulle buite-egtelike kinders nie. Dit het sulke kinders bloot gedoop en nie teen die moeders opgetree nie. Die houding het in die 1780's verander toe die Kerk begin het om toegang tot sy twee sakramente – die doop en Nagmaal –aan buite-egtelike kinders en hulle ouers te weier. In hierdie artikel word die groeiende obsessie met die regulering van die gedrag van enkelopende vroue deur 'n gedetailleerde ondersoek na doopaansoeke vir buite-egtelike kinders en sensuurgevalle aangaande ongetroude moeders aangedui. Daar word geargumenteer dat die oorsprong van hierdie beweging beide in plaaslike Kaapse ontwikkelinge, naamlik die sosio-ekonomiese omwenteling wat deur die revolusionêre oorloë veroorsaak is, én – miskien primêr – in die veranderende houdings tot moederskap wat weens die idees van die Verligting en die Piëtisme ontwikkel het, te vinde is. Hierdie nuwe ideologie is aan die Kaap deur die NGK-predikant H.R. van Lier versprei, wat bestaande gereformeerde dogma oor die sakramente gebruik het ten einde die moraliteit van ongetroude moeders te reguleer.

Key words

Baptism; Cape Town (1652-1795); church discipline; concubinage; Dutch Reformed Church; Enlightenment; Fourth Anglo-Dutch War; free blacks; gender; H.R. van Lier; Holy Communion; illegitimacy; marriage; moral regulation; morality; motherhood; Pietism; privacy; race; single women; slavery; Verenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie (VOC).

Slutelwoorde

Buite-egtelikheid; bywywery; doop; enkelopende vroue; gender; H.R. van Lier; huwelik; Kaapstad (1652-1795); moederskap; moraliteit; morele regulasie; Nagmaal; Nederduits-Gereformeerde Kerk; Piëtisme; privaathed; ras; sensuur; slawerny; Verenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie (VOC); Verligting; Vierde Anglo-Nederlandse Oorlog; vryswartes.