

## Religion, Queerness, and Education: Strategies for Bridge Building in Antagonistic Times

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In recent times, the growing engagement with queer-inclusive programmes in education has garnered much reaction from religious communities, a lot of which has been negative. In January 2019, UK government guidance on queer-inclusive relationships and sexuality education was met with pointed opposition by some members of the UK's Ultra-Orthodox Jewish community, for example. The lawyers of Shraga Stern, an Ultra-Orthodox activist, wrote to the Secretary of State for Education to express the view that many 'members of the [Ultra-Orthodox] community would choose to leave the United Kingdom for a more hospitable jurisdiction rather than comply with such an obligation to mention homosexuality or gender reassignment in a positive context at school'.<sup>1</sup> Anxieties around queer-inclusive school programmes came to a head in the UK again over one month later, where protests to Parkfield Community School's 'No Outsiders' programme featured banners sported by majority Muslim parents with slogans such as 'Say no to promoting homosexuality and LGBT ways of life to our children' and 'Stop exploiting children's innocence'.<sup>2</sup> Shabana Mahmood, representing Birmingham Ladywood as a Member of Parliament for the Labour Party, made a similar claim in a House of Commons debate on the matter, arguing that Muslim parents' concerns were about the appropriateness of such conversations with young children 'in the context of religious backgrounds'.<sup>3</sup> The focus on religion as a basis for resisting queer-inclusive educational programmes is often premised on the more general doctrinal opposition to notions of gender beyond a binary view of man and woman. Indeed, in a June 2019 publication entitled 'Male and Female He Created

Them', the Congregation for Catholic Education forwarded an unambiguous view of relationship and sexuality education as grounded in an 'anthropology' that resists the 'tendency to cancel out the differences between men and women'.<sup>4</sup> For the Congregation for Catholic Education, gender ought to be framed in Catholic educational contexts in ways that oppose the insights of contemporary 'ideologies of gender',<sup>5</sup> including those perspectives that see gender as 'merely the product of historical and cultural conditioning'.<sup>6</sup>

Jeanette Winterson's *Oranges are not the only fruit* is a novel that often comes to me when reflecting on the nature of these kinds of debates in education. The story centres on the semi-fictionalised childhood experiences of the author, who is destined for life as a Christian missionary in Manchester, England, before falling in love with Melanie, another girl at church. Winterson likens the punishments she endures because of her affections (which include being incarcerated and having to undergo an exorcism) to a 'kind of numbness, me in ecclesiastical quarantine, them in a state of fear and anticipation.'<sup>7</sup> Winterson's use of the word 'quarantine' is noteworthy: the image brings with it associations of entrapment, evoking a sense of closure, confinement, separateness. This, combined with how the quarantine subtends the space between 'me' and 'them' in a manner that is both isolating and abusive, frames the relation between queerness and religion in antagonistic terms, beyond healing or transformation. Out of response to stories like Jeanette's, in this paper I think through the possibilities for building bridges between religion and queerness in education, bridges with the potential to offer creative and honest alternatives to the violence Jeanette experiences. Specifically, I argue that in order to build bridges for education at the interface between religion and queerness, educational thinking could benefit from engaging with two interconnecting strategies: first, embracing the material complexities of religion; and

second, being receptive to the queer possibilities engendered by this materiality. The paper concludes with some thoughts on the educational importance of framing ‘bridge building’ in these terms.

### THE ANTAGONISM BETWEEN RELIGION AND QUEER-NESS

The relationship between education and religion has been a longstanding concern in educational thinking, from debates around the legitimacy (or otherwise) of religious schooling, to the place and purpose of religious and theological studies in increasingly secular societies. For those interested in exploring the experiences of queer youth in education, religion has also emerged as a significant theme in educational research, often in ways that position religion as antagonistic to queer experiences and commitments.

André P. Grace and Kristopher Wells, for instance, wrote a paper in response to the decision by the principal of a Catholic secondary school in Oshawa, Ontario to disallow seventeen-year-old student Marc Hall from attending the school prom with his boyfriend, Jean-Paul Dumond.<sup>8</sup> The principal’s reasoning behind this decision is captured in Hall’s assessment of the situation in his interview with Grace and Wells: ‘He said that he talked to our pastor about it as well as the school board. Basically, Mr. Powers said that I couldn’t bring JP [Jean-Paul] to the prom because it was against school policy and the Catholic teachings.’<sup>9</sup> Here, the assumption that the religious school exists as what Yvette Taylor and Karen Cuthbert critically term a ‘problem site’ for queer youth is especially relevant.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, Grace and Wells argue that hostility to queer staff and students is intrinsically a part of what a Catholic school is:

Catholic schooling is marked by perpetual power plays inextricably linked to cultural technologies like heterosexism and tradition

and by codes of obedience demanding acculturation to Catholicised ways of being, acting and expressing oneself in the world.<sup>11</sup>

This is resonant with Tonya Callaghan's assertion that the creation of 'safe spaces' for queer students is 'difficult to achieve' in Catholic school settings owing to the 'panoptic power of Catholic doctrine', a power that 'forms the basis of curricular and policy decisions taken in [Catholic] schools.'<sup>12</sup> The implications of these insights culminate for Grace and Wells in their assertion that institutional churches 'have no business in the classrooms of the nation.'<sup>13</sup> This claim echoes Mary Lou Rasmussen's observation that contemporary discourse in religion, schooling and sexuality often leverages around the designation of religion to the sphere of intolerance and conservatism, and the secular state to the sphere of liberalism and progress.<sup>14</sup>

There are two important (and connected) features of how this antagonism is framed that are worth considering here. First, notice how the opposition between religion and queerness depends on the assumption that the religious school exists to sustain a homogenous conception of religious identity. Consider Callaghan's alignment of Catholic schooling with Catholic doctrine, for instance, or Grace and Wells' claim that the Catholic school is necessarily invested in 'codes of obedience' that demand specifically 'Catholicised' responses on the part of staff and students: those who conceptualise the religious school as a problem site for queer youth often leave uninterrupted the idea that the religious school equates with the preservation of a very particular (and streamlined) understanding of religious identity. Taylor and Cuthbert articulate a strong aversion to this approach. Drawing on Heather Shipley's work, they criticise attempts to position religious schools as inevitably problematic for queer people when compared to, say, non-religious schools on the grounds that such a move lets the

secular ‘off the hook’ by leaving the heteronormativity that crosses varying religious and cultural identities undisturbed.<sup>15</sup> They develop this view further when they write:

Positioning faith schools as ‘problem sites’ with regards to LGBT equality enacts harms of its own: it makes invisible queer youth who are also religious, overlooks the fact that religion can be a source of support against bullying and ultimately reifies the mutual exclusion of religion and sexuality.<sup>16</sup>

For Taylor and Cuthbert, religion is far more complex than is often assumed, and it is precisely this complexity that calls into the question both the neatness and accuracy of inevitably pitting religion and queerness against one another in the context of education.

Callaghan’s focus on ‘doctrine’ and Grace and Well’s attention to ‘codes of obedience’ in understanding Catholic school life brings me to the second significant assumption often underpinning the identitarian divide between religion and queerness in education: namely, that religious identities and experiences are reducible to a propositional account of religion, that is, to a set of truth claims, beliefs or doctrines about the world and/or God. While I think it is important to recognise the significance that propositions have in how we understand religion, I question those assumptions that present religion exclusively, or even primarily, in such terms. Indeed, as David Lewin writes:

... for many religious practitioners, beliefs will be unreflectively adopted or simply part of a background context, and therefore less important than is often assumed ... Many religious practices, in India and China for example ... may have ethical, experiential and material significance for the practitioners; but ask the practitioner about why they perform the rituals they do, and the answer might be suffused with symbolism, or more likely just unclear or irrelevant.<sup>17</sup>

This is not to suggest that a sharp boundary exists between religion and propositional belief: Lewin simply seeks to stress that religion cannot be reduced to propositions, and that the pluralities of religious experience encompass so much more than these. As philosopher of religion Mara Keller observes, the equation of religion with a set of doctrines about the world is ‘extremely limiting if one is trying to make sense of religiousness in the contemporary world.’<sup>18</sup> Indeed, feminist critics such as Grace Jantzen and Luce Irigaray have suggested that the preoccupation with beliefs and truth conditions might only reflect a masculine framing of religion that performatively denies materiality, affect, and the body in how religious experiences are interpreted and navigated.<sup>19</sup> It is in light of all this that Lewin argues for the necessity of broadening our understanding of religion with the view to overcoming the focus on belief that has dominated debates in education over the past number of years. He writes:

Expanding our concept of religion to include elements beyond doctrine and proposition will, I think, open new paths of inquiry within the religion and education debate ... Those acquainted with religious traditions will be familiar with something of [their] hermeneutical depth, which does provoke the question of why more nuanced conceptions of religion have been largely absent from debates within educational philosophy.<sup>20</sup>

It is in these terms that I see identitarian accounts of religious schooling and propositional framings of religion as intimately connected and co-dependent: in both cases, religion is divested of its internal diversities and paradoxes, homogenised (and reduced) to an institutional code of conduct incapable of transformation or change. I argue against such a framing of religion in understanding religion in the context of education as it is as a partial consequence of such

monolithic representations of religion that the antagonism between religion and queerness sustains itself to begin with. Indeed, much of the concerns of Callaghan and Grace and Wells arise precisely from the unquestioned assumption that the Catholic school will seek to preserve homophobic practices due to the homophobic nature of Catholic doctrine. In order to productively respond to the dualism often set up between religion and queerness, then, what is needed, I suggest, is a reconstruction of religion's relationship to education that moves away from the idea that the religious school exists to preserve a narrow and homogenous conception of religious identity and experience reducible to a set of hetero- and cisnormative propositions about human behaviour. It is in this regard that I turn to a material account of religion, one that goes against a monological characterisation of religion in solely propositional terms.

#### EMBRACING THE MATERIAL COMPLEXITIES OF RELIGION

Reorienting religion to encompass the material as well as the propositional is an endeavour worthy of several monographs in itself, so it is not my intention in this paper to offer an extended and comprehensive treatment of what materialising religion for education might entail. For the purposes of introduction, however, turning to Karen Barad's work is a helpful starting point. She reflects on the nature of theoretical scholarship and argues that to 'theorise is not to leave the material world behind and enter the domain of pure ideas where the lofty space of the mind makes objective reflection possible. Theorising ... is a material practice.'<sup>21</sup> Reflecting on religion and religious experience in material terms emerges from a sensitivity to Barad's point: that thinking about the world and our place within it is an activity imbricated in the messiness of the world that we share,

in the things, bodies, and emotions that are sensed and encountered in our entangled lives with (human and non-human) others. Indeed, as S. Brent Plate observes ‘religious traditions ... originate and survive through bodily engagement with the material elements of the world.’<sup>22</sup> Tim Hutchings and Joanne McKenzie make a similar case when they argue that the terms ‘religion’ and ‘materiality’ can be largely understood through a network of other interrelated concepts, such as ‘body’, ‘sensation’, ‘thing’, and ‘touch’.<sup>23</sup> They echo, in this regard, David Morgan’s alignment of material religion with ‘ritual, daily practice, imagery, objects, spaces, and bodies’, as well as ‘sensations, things’ and ‘performance’.<sup>24</sup> In this vein, Elizabeth Arweck and William Keenan argue that ‘the idea of religion itself is largely unintelligible outside its incarnation in material expressions’, a claim taken up by Matthew Engelke to its fullest when he writes of how ‘all religion is material religion.’<sup>25</sup>

The significance of a material take on religion has been articulated in the literature largely in terms of what it responds to and, more particularly, resists. Specifically, what the ‘materialist turn’ in religion resists, or contrasts against, is the dominance of the propositional in accounts of religion and religious experience. As Jeremy Stolow argues, the study of material religion has served as a powerful vehicle for exploring a range of ways that ‘religion’ extends beyond the seemingly abstract world of symbols and propositional claims about knowledge and belief.<sup>26</sup> In this way, a material perspective on religion attends to the historicity of religion, insisting that the ‘temporal, contextual, situated, interested, human, and material dimensions of those discourses, practices and institutions that characteristically represent themselves as eternal, transcendent, spiritual, and divine’ need to be recovered and discussed, and their implications for religion and society thought through and sustained.<sup>27</sup>



It is in reflecting on the implications of materialising religion that returning to the purpose and priorities of this paper becomes necessary. What are the benefits of reorienting religion materially in a paper such as this? How does a material take on religion help in building bridges between religion and queerness for education? To my mind, an attention to religion's materiality allows for us to focus on the creative or generative dimensions of religion, on the fact that it is through the 'constant movement, contestation, and hybridity' of material life that possibilities for different kinds of relationship with religion and society open up, relationships with the potential to transcend, without ignoring, institutional orthodoxies and doctrines, and the often antagonistic forms of identity politics allied with these.<sup>28</sup> In other words, the irreducibility of materiality, the potentiality that inheres within the 'givenness' of experience in all its messiness and malleability, points to the fact that there 'will always be a surplus to religion ... that even our most coherent and astute epistemologies will not capture.'<sup>29</sup> Because of this, religion becomes, if you like, something that is 'lived by human beings, not by angels', and in this way can both respond to, and embrace, new and ever-shifting questions, concerns, heresies, heterodoxies, and revitalised cultural and religious formations.<sup>30</sup> On this meaning, attempts to limit religion to a set of hetero- and cisnormative codes of human behaviour fall short, for such efforts succeed only in denying the intrinsic vitalities of religion, vitalities with the potential to transformatively reframe how we think about, embody, and feel religion beyond the identitarian constraints of the religion-queer divide.

Of course, an important question to consider at this point is one of theological and religious accuracy: in building bridges between religion and queerness for education, is it accurate to foreground the material at all? Surely materiality, the fact of our earthliness and finitude, is the very condition that religion seeks to transcend? In empha-

sising the materiality of religion, do I not risk exacerbating the divide between religion and queerness by undermining the quest for transcendence that many religious communities and theologies hold dear? It is in response to these questions that I suggest turning to queer theologies might be a fruitful resource for education, for this is an area of study that neither resists nor seeks to overcome the materiality of experience, but instead depends upon it as a basis for thinking about God, transcendence, and religion queerly.

### THE MATERIALITY OF QUEER THEOLOGIES AND THE TASK OF EDUCATION

Queer theologies, being queer, do not accept that hetero- and cisnormative theologies are the only discourses available to us in coming to understand God and religion. Queer theologies are predicated on resisting the antagonism between religion and queerness, and often set about such resistance by attending to the material grittiness of queer and religious lives, lives (in their complexity) that cannot be reduced to the doctrinal indictment of conservative religious authorities. This concern for the material is enacted perhaps most obviously in the religious symbolism that Marcella Althaus-Reid draws from in outlining her understanding of the work of queer theologians. She equates the task of the queer theologian to an embodied, erotic praxis that entails ‘searching for God’s nipples and soft lips and trying to bite them in oblique ways in order to achieve some oblique transcendence in their lives’.<sup>31</sup> Althaus-Reid and Lisa Isherwood repeat this when they write of how queer theologians ‘plunge into flesh in its unrefined fullness in order to embrace and be embraced by the divine. Bodies tell very complex and challenging stories and these now become the stuff of the salvific tale’.<sup>32</sup>

In a similar vein to Althaus-Reid and Isherwood, Jacob J. Er-

ickson frames theology from the vantage point of the sensed nature of experience in order to free the body and creation from the limits of hetero- and cisnormativity. He writes of how queer theology ‘attempts to reopen or stir afresh the clogged senses of queer wonder in the world’ with the view to reorienting theologies towards ‘the actual textures of planetary, earthly life’.<sup>33</sup> In this regard, he argues that queer theological endeavour is invested in a ‘fragile, playful hope that queer bodies, queer failures and pleasures, and queer play and hope might offer some distinctive imagination’ to the texts and teachings of theology, beginning from the assumption that divinity is not something sacrosanct, pure, and unsullied, but rather something that ‘intra-acts’ and ‘performs with the deep materiality of the becoming of the world’.<sup>34</sup> Indeed, he writes of how ‘divinity bursts and becomes in the most unexpected, elemental places, stirring up new possibilities for relationality, speaking back in scorched spaces, and seducing creatures in a fleshy display of queer play’, and argues that it is in response to this bodily and creaturely potentiality, with its implications for transforming our lives in ever-shifting processes of becoming, that the work of queer theology arises and is necessitated.<sup>35</sup> On this meaning, queer theologies expand and subvert the limits of religion, beginning, not from the supposedly hallowed grounds of doctrinal conservatism, but from the midst (to use a Christian example) of ‘the screaming baby born amidst the cow shit and fleas, covered in his birthing blood’ in Bethlehem.<sup>36</sup> In terms of overcoming the antagonism between religious and queer identities, this sensitivity to the vitalities of the material holds much promise, for it calls education to engage with questions of religion and spirituality from the vantage point of the particularity of living with others as thinking, feeling and sexual beings, a particularity too messy and unwieldy for constrictive accounts of identity (with their related oppositional logics) to capture. In moving forward, then, it is worth

reflecting (however briefly) on the educational necessity of this kind of strategy: what is it about education that renders the task of bridge building between religion and queerness a worthwhile endeavour?

To my mind, understanding what ‘education’ means requires a focus, less on abstract conceptual definitions of education in a detached sense, and more on the nature of those encounters, practices, and experiences that are often described as ‘educational’. In other words, understanding education starts by paying attention to the characteristics or qualities of educational moments, lived out in the specificities of experience. It is from this vantage point that Sharon Todd begins. She argues that education is largely experiential, in the sense of depending upon what it means to experience living with, and relating to, others in our world. Taking this relational quality to human experience seriously, she writes of how it is ‘through our encounters with others (human and non-human alike)’ that ‘we shift the borders’ of our self-understanding, and that it is precisely through this transformational dimension of our relationships that education gains its significance.<sup>37</sup> On this meaning, education happens when opportunities for the possibility of change or transformation are created and sustained for students, opportunities that are offered and experienced in and through the challenge that comes through an encounter with difference, be that another person, group of people, text, idea, or practice.<sup>38</sup>

Gert Biesta posits a view of education that is much in harmony with Todd’s perspectives as his similarly rests on a conception of education that arises from a sensitivity to the transformative potential of the relations we have with others. He allies education with the emergence of human subjectivity, understood, not in natural terms, that is, as part of a unique essence, but rather in ‘existential terms, that is as a quality of our relationships with what or who is other.’<sup>39</sup> He sees

such relationships as allowing for the possibility of ‘bringing something new into the world, something that did not exist before’, and it is from this basis that he distances education from notions of identity.<sup>40</sup> He writes the following in this regard:

I am, however, avoiding certain other words and concepts, most notably the notion of identity – which for me has more to do with the ways in which we identify with existing orders and traditions than with ways of acting and being that are ‘outside’ this – and also the notion of individuality – which tends to depict the human subject too much in isolation from other human beings.<sup>41</sup>

By distancing himself from notions of identity and individuality, Biesta frames education in terms of generating alternative possibilities to what the status quo currently permits or determines. By transcending the limits of identification, the educational encounter grants us access to new modes of being, feeling, acting, and relating in this world, modes with the potential to transcend the limits of already existing social structures and discourses.

It is on this basis that my disruption of the antagonism between religion and queerness is built. Taking Todd and Biesta seriously calls for us to foreground the educational as it relates to religion and queerness, and for me this entails engaging with religion in ways that refuse to streamline or foreclose our students’ futures. Indeed, we are (queer or straight, religious or atheist) more than how we identify, and, indeed, are identified, and it is this that renders the materiality of religion so promising for education in the task of building bridges between religion and queerness. If education is interested in transformation, in creating opportunities for personal and social change to occur, then that demands cultivating a greater degree of spaciousness in how we frame religion in our bridge building, a spaciousness attuned

to the queer and subaltern voices both within and beyond religious traditions. For Jeanette's sake, and for the sake of those in religious communities currently facing these kinds of educational questions, it is my hope that this paper offers some provocative strategies for beginning this ever-complex and materially messy work.

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1 See Harriett Sherwood, "Sex education rules could force Haredi Jews into home schooling", *The Guardian*, January 20, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2019/jan/20/ultra-orthodox-haredi-jews-resist-new-sex-education-guidance>.

2 See Nazia Parveen, "Birmingham school stops LGBT lessons after parents protest", *The Guardian*, March 4, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2019/mar/04/birmingham-school-stops-lgbt-lessons-after-parent-protests>.

3 See Parveen, "Birmingham school stops LGBT lessons after parents protest".

4 The Congregation for Catholic Education, *"Male and Female He Created Them": Towards a Path of Dialogue on the Question of Gender Theory in Education* (Vatican City: 2019), 3.

5 The Congregation for Catholic Education, *"Male and Female He Created Them"*, 5.

6 The Congregation for Catholic Education, *"Male and Female He Created Them"*, 3.

7 Jeanette Winterson, *Oranges are not the only fruit* (London: Vintage Books, 2001), 171.

8 André P. Grace and Kristopher Wells, "The Marc Hall Prom Predicament: Queer Individual Rights V. Institutional Church Rights in Canadian Public Education." *Canadian Journal of Education/Revue canadienne de l'éducation* 28, no. 3 (2005): 237-270.

- 9 Grace and Wells, "The Marc Hall Prom Predicament", 244.
- 10 Yvette Taylor and Karen Cuthbert. "Queer religious youth in faith and community schools." *Educational review* (2018): 1-15.
- 11 Grace and Wells, "The Marc Hall Prom Predicament", 260.
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- 20 Lewin, *Educational Philosophy*, 54.
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23 Tim Hutchings and Joanne McKenzie, "Introduction: The body of St Cuthbert." In *Materiality and the Study of Religion: The Stuff of the Sacred*, edited by Tim Hutchings and Joanne McKenzie, 1-13 (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2017), 4.

24 David Morgan, *Religion and Material Culture: The Matter of Belief* (London: Routledge, 2010), 8.

25 Elizabeth Arweck and William Keenan., "Introduction: Material Varieties of Religious Expression." In *Materialising Religion: Expression, Performance and Ritual*, edited by William Kennan and Elizabeth Arweck, 1-20 (Hampshire: Ashgate, 2006), 2-3. Matthew Engelke, "Material religion." In *The Cambridge Companion to Religious Studies*, edited by Robert Orsi, 209-229 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 209.

26 Jeremy Stolow, "Introduction: Religion, Technology, and the Things in Between". In *Deus in Machina: Religion, Technology, and the Things in Between*, edited by Jeremy Stolow, 1-24 (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012).

27 Bruce Lincoln, "Theses on method" *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 8, no. 3 (1996): 225-227.

28 Manuel Vásquez, *More than Belief: A Materialist Theory of Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 1.

29 Vásquez, *More than Belief*, 6.

30 Vásquez, *More than Belief*, 5.

31 Marcella Althaus-Reid, *The Queer God* (London: Routledge, 2003), 49.

32 Marcella Althaus-Reid and Lisa Isherwood, "Thinking Theology and Queer Theory." *Feminist Theology* 15, no. 3 (2007): 302-314, 310.



- 33 Erickson, “Irreverent Theology”, 63, 60-1.
- 34 Erickson, “Irreverent Theology”, 60, 72.
- 35 Erickson, “Irreverent Theology”, 73.
- 36 Althaus-Reid and Isherwood, “Thinking Theology and Queer Theory”, 310.
- 37 Sharon Todd, “Between Body and Spirit: The Liminality of Pedagogical Relationships.” *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 48, no. 2 (2014): 231-245, 232
- 38 Seán Henry, “Queering religious schooling: Teachings, values, rituals” (Maynooth University: Ph.D. diss., 2019), 61.
- 39 Gert Biesta, *The Beautiful Risk of Education* (Abingdon: Oxon, 2013), 12.
- 40 Biesta, *The Beautiful Risk*, 11.
- 41 Biesta, *The Beautiful Risk*, 18.