1. "Bringing to Presence That Which Is Other": Religious Discourses, Public Pedagogy, and the University Classroom

Seán Henry
Maynooth University

Abstract: The relationship between religion and higher education is often characterized by anxieties around religion in the university classroom. These concerns frequently leverage around the assumption that religion is necessarily contentious for the public university, either because of the need to resist the exclusionary privileging of religions in public spaces, or because of sensitivities around the preservation of traditional religious orthodoxies in increasingly pluralist times. Interestingly, both approaches to the relationship between religion and university education rest on the assumption that religion is fundamentally immutable, incapable of contestation, re-interpretation, or change. With the view to moving past the limits of such perspectives, I suggest that religious language and symbol (as two features of religious discourse) are far more poetic, fluid, and open-ended than is often assumed, and that it is precisely this open-endedness that underscores the possibility of engaging pedagogically with religion in the context of the university classroom. In this regard, I trace the affinities between the open-endedness of religious discourses and the "publicness" of pedagogy, suggesting that both registers open up possibilities for new ways of existing and relating in the world that are at once activist, experimental, and demonstrative. I conclude by reflecting on how these affinities offer resources for recalibrating what we mean by student "becoming" at the interface between religion and the university

classroom. I forward the view that the poetry of religious discourses offers students the chance to "become" in ways that unpredictably expand and disrupt the limits of religious identity and tradition, and in this way undermine the inevitable alignment of religion with either exclusion or preservation in the context of university life. Student becoming, understood in these terms, becomes less a matter of forming students into a streamlined understanding of religious identity in the context of the university, and more a matter of providing spaces for students to relate to such identities in potentially interruptive and public-facing ways.

Keywords: religion, religious language, symbol, open-endedness, publicness, poetry

Introduction

In November 2012, the Loyola Institute was formally launched in the Republic of Ireland. The Institute, which emerged through financial and legal agreements between eight religious congregations and Trinity College Dublin, is part of the School of Religion and is dedicated to engaging "in critical reflection and scholarly research on the Christian faith, social justice and contemporary culture" in dialogue with "the intellectual resources of the Catholic tradition".[1] The launch of the Institute was described as "a milestone in the institutional development of Catholic theology in Ireland", and was understood by the provost of the university as "ideally placed to address religious, ethical and societal questions in an academic forum and public domain".[2] The provost's appeal to the "public domain" in framing the relationship between the Institute and the academic life of the university is noteworthy, particularly at a time when religious involvement in public institutions is seen as an increasing threat to the liberal ideals of many secular democracies.

   Of course, the launch of the Loyola Institute was not without its opponents, with many of the university's staff voicing criticism against the religious orientation of the Institute's curriculum and infrastructure. An anonymous contributor to the university's online student newspaper (*Trinity News*) gave the following account of staff concerns in this regard: "The overwhelming consensus was that the very concept of a faith-based degree ran contrary to

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[1]   "Loyola Institute is Launched at Trinity College Dublin" Accessed February 10, 2020. https://www.tcd.ie/news_events/articles/loyola-institute-is-launched-at-trinity-college-dublin/.
[2]   "Loyola Institute".

[the university's] equal opportunities policy" and that "it posed a danger to academic freedom" that "would compromise the secular ethos of the university".[3] Significantly, questions around the Institute's formation were not limited to the Church's detractors. Indeed, Diarmuid Martin, the Catholic Archbishop of Dublin, also voiced reservations around the launch of the Institute. He emphasized the fact that the "vocation" of a Catholic theologian and of an Institute of Catholic theology is ultimately an "ecclesial vocation" that "cannot be independent of reference to the teaching authority of the Church".[4] Martin suggested that the Loyola Institute, unlike other theological faculties within state universities around the world, did "not fit into the recognized models for Catholic Theological Institutes' on the grounds that it was incapable, given the university's (lack of) relation to the teaching authority of the Church, of contributing to "the teaching of Catholic Theology within the ecclesial community".[5]

For me, what is interesting in both responses to the Institute's launch is the assumptions they betray with respect to the relationship between religion and university education. In both cases, religion is framed as necessarily contentious for the public university, either because of the need to resist the exclusionary privileging of religions in public spaces (as articulated by the anonymous contribution to *Trinity News*), or because of the need to be sensitive to the preservation of traditional religious orthodoxies (as articulated by Martin). Such debates have found echoes across the globe, from concerns around the inclusiveness of Catholic universities in the context of the United States (for LGBTQ students and staff, for example), to criticisms often aired against the privileging of evangelical Christianity in college consortia. While different in terms of how they relate to and prioritize religion, what both perspectives above have in common is the assumption that religions are somehow immutable in character, and because of this, lack the resources to sit (at least potentially) productively within the academic remit of public university classrooms. It is in response to this assumption that this paper arises. I suggest that religious language and symbol (as two features of religion) are far more fluid and open-ended than is often assumed, and that it is precisely this open-endedness that underscores the possibility and value of engaging *pedagogically* with such discourses in the university classroom

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3   "The Intrigue of Loyola". *Trinity News*, November 5, 2012. Accessed February 10, 2020. http://trinitynews.ie/2012/11/the-intrigue-of-loyola/.
4   "Statement on Loyola Institute TCD". Archdiocese of Dublin, 2012. Accessed February 10, 2020. https://www.dublindiocese.ie/13112012-statement-on-loyola-institute-tcd/.
5   "Statement on Loyola Institute".

(for example, through the study of sacred texts and prayers, reflections on the significance of religious symbols, engagement with encyclicals, exhortations, religious jurisprudence, etc.). In this regard, I trace the affinities between the open-endedness of religious discourses and the "publicness" of pedagogy, suggesting that both registers open up possibilities for new ways of existing with, and relating to, religion that expose religion's potentially activist, experimental, and demonstrative qualities. In this sense, my turn to the publicness of pedagogy is motivated by an attentiveness to the value of prioritizing the pedagogical in university classrooms: it is in engaging with religious discourses in a pedagogical (rather than, say, deferent) sense that the capacity of religious language and symbol to enact an interruptive and public-facing (rather than an insular and unchanging) orientation arises. Ultimately, I argue that it is in engaging pedagogically with religious discourses out of a concern for public forms of human togetherness that opportunities open up for students to be and become in ways that can expand and disrupt the limits of religious traditions. It is through this kind of pedagogical engagement, I claim, that the inevitable alignment of religious discourses with either exclusion or preservation can be overcome in the university classroom.[6]

The Poetry of Religious Language and Symbol

Anna Strhan offers a compelling reading of religious language that helpfully troubles assumptions around religion's apparent immutability and fixedness. Her focus is on the "poetic" quality to religious language, a quality that dissociates religious language from identity with dogma, and instead understands it in ways that are fluid and open to diverse insights and experiences. In conceptualising the poetic essence of religious language, Strhan begins by developing her understanding of poetry.[7] Following Martin Heidegger, Strhan sees the poetic as a "raid on the inarticulate", by which she means a "pure" language that gains its purity by being neither "an expression nor an activity" of human discourse.[8] Rather than existing as, say, a reproduction of the

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[6] I am conscious that my discussion of religion is limited to religious discourses in this paper. I do not focus, for example, on more embodied and material accounts of religion, and how these might also occasion more spacious, public-facing conceptions of religion in the context of the university classroom. For reflections on the relationship between the materiality of religion and ritual, student becoming, and the publicness of pedagogy, see Henry (2019, 187–216).

[7] Anna Strhan, "Religious Language as Poetry: Heidegger's Challenge," *The Heythrop Journal* 52, no. 6 (2011): 926-938.

[8] Strhan, "Religious Language", 926.

poet's intentions and/or experiences, poetry as pure language is that which is "never exhausted, never closed": the poetic word possesses a "hiddenness" that opens up boundless degrees of interpretation and insight by virtue of its poetic quality.[9] Of central concern for Strhan in understanding the poetic is the manner in which poetic language resists adhering to "the misguided assumption that word and thing fit together in a definite relation that we can grasp".[10] For Strhan, the "veiled" relation that exists between Saying (the act of utterance) and Being (the essence of what is uttered) is typified in poetry, a relation characterized by a mysteriousness exposed in "the strangeness of language" itself.[11] Crucially, it is in this very strangeness, this opacity, that an "opening" or clearing to "the wholly Other"[12] is revealed to the listener. In reaching the limits of language the essence of language itself is revealed, in all its uncontainability. This poetic move towards the wholly Other (this revelation of sorts) is what acts for Strhan as the basis for understanding religious language as an essentially poetic language.

Strhan opens her analysis of religious language by pointing towards the position the mysteriousness of the relation between Saying and Being holds within this language. Strhan is interested in exposing the degree to which religious language is poetically "pure", in the sense of being sensitive to the elusiveness of language itself, a sensitivity that opens up "a space for wonder" capable of bringing "to presence what cannot be brought to presence, the excess that remains beyond the limits" of what is listened to in its Saying.[13] Significantly, Strhan initiates this part of her discussion by drawing attention to the resistance such an understanding of religious language often faces in religious and theological scholarship, arguing that the "intimacy between hiddenness and revelation"[14] is one at odds with positivist discourses that seek to render language transparent, wholly representative, and thus easily defensible against others. She writes:

> The most likely reason, I believe, for the neglect of Heidegger's views on language in the study of religious language has been because of the desire in theology to say something concrete about the relation between words and the Holy, to pin down the nature of religious language. Implicit has often been the desire to defend theological discourse against claims of meaninglessness stemming from the discourses of logical positivism.[15]

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[9]   Strhan, "Religious Language", 927.
[10] Strhan, "Religious Language", 928.
[11] Strhan, "Religious Language", 928.
[12] Strhan, "Religious Language", 926.
[13] Strhan, "Religious Language", 931.
[14] Strhan, "Religious Language", 932.
[15] Strhan, "Religious Language", 930.

The tendency in more dogmatic religious and theological quarters to erode the open-endedness of religious language becomes a self-refuting exercise by supplanting the unsayable (with which much religious experience grapples) with a definitiveness that closes off its inexhaustibility, thereby making it "dull" and "used-up".[16]

Strhan, in her efforts to rescue religious language from the limits of logical positivism, echoes in many respects the views of Emmanuel Levinas, particularly when he allies religious language with the poetic imagination:

> What the multiple expressions of religious language have in common is the claim to be inexhaustible in reference to the world from which the signification of words, propositions and discourses is woven. How do we open to language the borders of the given reality in which we live? … In the poetic imagination, the unheard can be heard, called out to and expressed … metaphor can lead beyond the experiences which seem to have created it.[17]

Here, the language of religion (its metaphors, symbols, and tropes) sports a boundlessness that performs its own deconstruction, evading an immediacy that would otherwise silo the divine to which it gestures to a very particular (and limiting) type of conceptual thinking. In "God and Philosophy", Levinas states that "God" is what bursts open the "omnipotence of the *logos*, of the *logos* of system and simultaneity".[18] God, in other words, is that which disrupts the totalising tendencies often tied to religious discourses by manifesting a "transcendence as signification, and signification as the signification of an order given to subjectivity before any statement: a pure one-for-the-other".[19] Put differently, the language of religion attends to that which is beyond our totality as human beings, and because of this becomes a "pure language in that it eludes us, while bringing to presence that which is Other as such".[20]

Returning to the motivations of this paper as a whole, then, do these insights on religious language offer us avenues for rethinking how we frame religion in educational research, in ways that avoid aligning such discourses with the uniformities of dogma while at the same time resisting the default assumption that engaging with such discourses in classroom is necessarily contentious for universities? I believe so, particularly when I reflect on what I see

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[16]   Strhan, "Religious Language", 930.
[17]   Emmanuel Levinas, "Beyond the Verse" (London: Athlone Press, 1994), 86.
[18]   Emmanuel Levinas, "Of God Who Comes to Mind" (Stanford: Stanford University Press), 78.
[19]   Levinas, "Of God", 78.
[20]   Strhan, "Religious Language", 933.

to be the nascent open-endedness of religious language. Engaging with religious language is open-ended in the sense that it offers those who listen the chance to step outside the strictures of their own experiences and encounter something wholly different to themselves, that which is strange and opaque. Central to the "calling"[21] of religious language is a kind of interruption of self: the absence of immediacy inherent to poetry pulls the listener of religious language beyond the experiences created by that language, inviting them into relationship with the fault lines of discourse, where all that is comprehendible and identifiable loses its representable transparency and familiarity. My appeal to religious language in educational discourse is motivated, then, by an attraction to its intrinsic fluidity, its poetic humility if you will, through which possibilities beyond what is currently the case can begin to open up.

So much for religious language, then, but what of religious symbols? In addition to this paper's foray into the open-endedness of religious language, I am also interested in exploring the limits (or otherwise) of religious symbolism, and the degree to which these might also elicit opportunities for bringing "into presence that which is Other". An example of a more poetic take on the significances of religious symbol can be found in the work of Paul Tillich, who begins his reflections by noting how every symbol "opens up a level of reality for which non-symbolic speaking is inadequate".[22] On this meaning, the function of the symbol is to expose us to the "hiddenness" of experience: it points us to the fact that what presents itself to us in the world is not all that there is or, indeed, could ever be. About specifically *religious* symbols, Tillich makes a similar point, arguing that religious symbols "do exactly the same thing as all symbols do—namely, they open up a level of reality, which otherwise is not opened at all, which is hidden".[23] In articulating what this "hiddenness" is, Tillich turns to the "Holy": for Tillich, religious symbols expose us to the transcendent, rendering it incarnate, and in this way allowing us to overcome "the remoteness of the divine" in our lives.[24]

In developing this further, I turn to Tillich's distinction between signs (in the form of letters on a page, or traffic signs, for instance) and symbols. He writes of how signs are similar to symbols in the sense that both "point beyond themselves to something else", but are different in that, unlike signs, symbols "although they are not the same as that which they symbolise" nonetheless

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21 Strhan, "Religious Language", 931.
22 Paul Tillich, "Religious Symbols and Our Knowledge of God." *The Christian Scholar* 38, no. 3 (1955): 191.
23 Tillich, "Religious Symbols", 192.
24 Tillich, "Religious Symbols", 195.

"participate in its meaning and power".[25] He continues: "… religious symbols are symbols of the Holy. As such they participate in the holiness of the Holy according to our basic definition of a symbol. But participation is not identity; they are not themselves the Holy".[26] I refer to the fact that religious symbols participate in, *but are not identical to*, the divine, as it is in this lack of identity with the Holy that the scope for a more fluid, expansive, and poetic understanding of religious symbols arises. To my mind, the distinction that exists between, for example, the cross as a Christian symbol, and the "holiness" of the resurrection that it participates in through a person or community's encounter with it, is not insignificant. Indeed, it is precisely through this "gap" that the truth of the resurrection becomes intelligible for Christians across contexts and sensitivities today, without at the same time losing its eternal holiness. Put differently, the "gap" between the cross and the resurrection preserves the ineffability of the transcendent, while at the same time allowing for the cross to *be* a cross, a material intersection of a vertical and horizontal line that is interpreted through, and situated within, the specificities of time, place, and their attendant legacies and traditions. Hence, religious symbols, without losing their divine significance, can be nonetheless reread and reimagined, added to or simplified in a plurality of ways, depending on the interpretations and contexts that inform the divine-human encounter set up by the symbol. In this vein, denying the plurality of religious symbols (say through attempts at preserving one particular account of a symbol's significance over another) would appear to rest on an assumed identity between the symbol and the Holy that Tillich would reject. This has the effect of streamlining the multiplicities of the transcendent in terms of representation and in this way subverts the symbol's performative function, that is its role in communicating the divine's ineffability.

Indeed, against such representative strategies, queer theologian Linn Marie Tonstad argues that the task of the theologian is precisely to "shift"[27] those theological logics that have been conventionally used to justify social, cultural, economic, and political ills. Such shifting is in harmony with intellectual work that subverts attempts at "solidifying" theological categories, concepts, and symbols, reducing doctrine to dogma, and icon to idol.[28] Echoing Strhan's perspectives on religious language, Tonstad makes the case that these

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25   Tillich, "Religious Symbols", 189–190.
26   Tillich, "Religious Symbols", 192.
27   Linn Marie Tonstad, *Queer Theology: Beyond Apologetics* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2018): 84.
28   Tonstad, *Queer Theology*, 78.

"shifting" strategies are rooted in an appreciation for how all religious tradi-tions (and their related discourses, practices, and symbol structures) are prod-ucts of human finitude, and are therefore incapable of appealing to notions of "ultimacy or finality" in how they speak about or image the divine.[29] Thus, a more open-ended and fluid idea of the religious symbol is both conceiv-able and theologically sensitive: it creates new possibilities for understanding, experiencing, and preserving the otherness of the Holy precisely through the embeddedness of symbol within the diversities of traditions and contexts.

For me, this more spacious and poetic conception of religious language and symbol is significant as it gestures to the possibility of engaging with reli-gious discourses in university classrooms in ways that allow such engagement to escape being inevitably aligned with either the preservation of religious orthodoxies, or the exclusion of perspectives and sensibilities that lie out-side more orthodox frameworks. In this sense, I see the open-ended quality to religious discourse as important in terms of highlighting the potential for engaging with religious discourse *pedagogically*, that is, in a way that occa-sions the possibility of the student *becoming* somebody other to who they were through an encounter with discourses that interrupt the totalities of their own experience.[30] At its heart, the pedagogical potential that I identify in religious discourse resides in the capacity of its poetry to both cultivate and sustain the kinds of conditions and encounters needed to alter and transform our current selves and circumstances.[31] I say "circumstances" quite deliber-ately, for the possibility of pedagogical change cannot occur in relation to an atomistic self, devoid of context, but instead always necessarily takes place in a way that can transformatively affect the traditions (including religious tra-ditions) with which we find ourselves in relationship. On this meaning, the experience of engaging with the poetry of religious discourse in the university classroom resists falling into an invariable expression of religious deference (to respond to the anxieties of the *Trinity News* reporter above), but instead can also come to signal new possibilities for human subjectivity that can shift and expand the limits of religious traditions by "bringing to presence that which is Other".

How though, can such a perspective speak to concerns around the "publicness" of the university? While the possibility of engaging pedagog-ically with religious discourse might be assured through a sensitivity to its

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[29] Linn Marie Tonstad, *God and Difference: The Trinity, Sexuality, and the Transformation of Finitude* (New York: Routledge, 2016): 217.

[30] Seán Henry, "Queering Religious Schooling: Teachings, Values, Rituals" (PhD diss., Maynooth University, 2019), 119.

[31] Henry. "Queering", 119.

poetry, is it possible to align this pedagogical potential to a view of the university classroom as a space committed to public forms of human togetherness? In what follows, I turn to Gert Biesta's work to claim that it is indeed possible to frame a poetic engagement with religious discourse as one attuned to the sensibilities and priorities of public pedagogy.

Public Pedagogy, Religion, and the University

Action, Freedom, and the Condition of Plurality

Gert Biesta draws extensively from the work of Hannah Arendt in developing his take on the "publicness" of pedagogy, so it is through his reading of her that I proceed. For Arendt, human beings can be understood as active beings, beings with the capacity to act in the world. Biesta notes how she draws a distinction between three modes of active life (labour, work, and action) and likens the last of these to the ability to take initiative, to begin something new, to give rise to something that previously did not exist. Biesta focuses on how Arendt compares the human being to an *initium*, that is both a "beginning" and a "beginner"[32]: with speech and action, human beings are in the business of creating newness, calling "something into being which did not exist before".[33] He cites her in writing: "With word and deed we insert ourselves into the human world and this insertion is like a second birth".[34] Importantly, Arendt connects this understanding of action to freedom: our freedom as human beings is exercised, neither before nor after the creation of a new beginning, but is instead enacted *in* action itself.

For Biesta, the significance of this view of freedom as action in Arendt's work comes to the fore when we consider how, in the moment of acting, there will always be others "who respond to our initiatives and take up our beginnings".[35] To freely engender a new beginning relies on the responsiveness of others, for it is through the presence of others in our lives to begin with that our actions can be taken up in the world. Freedom as action, put differently, rests on our dependence upon others who escape the limits of our own

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[32] Hannah Arendt, Hannah, *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought* (London: Penguin Books, 1962), 170.

[33] Arendt, *Between Past*, 151.

[34] Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 176–177.

[35] Gert Biesta, "Making Pedagogy Public: For the Public, of the Public, or in the Interest of Publicness?" in *Problematising Public Pedagogy*, ed. Jake Burdick, Jennifer A. Sandlin, and Michael P. O'Malley (New York: Routledge, 2013), 19.

comprehension and experience (our totality, to use a Levinasian register). It is because of this that Biesta points to Arendt's claim that "to be isolated is to be deprived of the capacity to act",[36] that is, the capacity to bring something new into the world, and, in doing so, become otherwise. Think of this paper for instance. It could only arise as something new into the world in light of my previous encounters with texts, ideas, and scholars who held perspectives and lived lives different to my own. The freedom I exercise in offering this paper to the world as a new beginning depends entirely on others informing and responding to its content, a relationality through which I can also emerge (or "become") as a subject in the world. In this way, Arendt's insistence upon the "impossibility" of remaining "the unique masters of what [we] do"[37] holds true: freedom as action (the condition of human becoming, if you like) is not a phenomenon of the will, determined by the choices of a private sovereign, but is instead something that is enacted in the flesh-and-blood realities of living with, and depending upon, others.

The import of this reading of freedom for understanding the public character of pedagogy emerges for Biesta in Arendt's reflections on the necessity of a "public realm"[38] as a condition for freedom as action to occur. Biesta quotes Arendt when he argues that the "public domain" is to be seen less as a physical location, and more as that which denotes a particular quality to human interaction:

> The *polis*, properly speaking, is not the city-state in its physical location; it is the organization of the people as it arises out of acting and speaking together, and its true space lies between people living together for this purpose, no matter where they happen to be … It is the space of appearance in the widest sense of the word, namely, the space where I appear to others as others appear to me, where men [*sic*] exist not merely like other living or inanimate things but make their appearance explicitly.[39]

The public domain, in other words, captures the dependence upon others that serves as a basis of freedom as action in our world. Read in these terms, the notion of "publicness" gestures to the fundamental condition of plurality inherent to human freedom: action becomes impossible without the difference intrinsic to human togetherness, for it is in this difference that new beginnings emerge. It is because of this that Biesta offers the idea of

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36 Arendt, *Human Condition*, 188.
37 Arendt, *Human Condition*, 244.
38 Arendt, *Between Past,* 149.
39 Arendt, *Human Condition*, 198-199.

a "citizenship of strangers"[40] as a helpful lens for thinking through what human togetherness demands of us. Sustaining the "public" quality of our relationships with others involves preserving and pursuing plurality, for it is only through an embrace of others' "strangeness" to me that the freedom of human action is maintained, and the "newness" of our becoming enabled. The "citizenship of strangers" that acts as a foundation of Biesta's appraisal of Arendt can be seen as valorizing a view of the public that rests on a "mode of human togetherness which is not after a common ground but rather articulates an interest in a common world".[41] Understanding "the public", through this lens, becomes less about keeping intact an identitarian sense of sameness, and more about recognizing (and preserving) a mutual sense of dependence upon each other in the face of our inevitable and necessary differences. Given pedagogy's investment in the beginning of something new (in freedom as action, it seems), Biesta sees Arendt's work as highly appropriate for reflecting on what it means to speak about the public nature of pedagogy, understood in three modes. Below, I briefly outline these three modes before turning to how his thesis relates to my previous discussion around the poetry of religious language and symbol.

Public Pedagogy in Three Modes

Biesta critiques two conventional approaches to public pedagogy in educational thinking and practice: a pedagogy *for* the public, and a pedagogy *of* the public. Biesta characterizes a pedagogy *for* the public as a mode of instruction that sees the world "as a giant school".[42] Read in this way, a pedagogy for the public is invested in "educational agents" (such as teachers) instructing the citizenry on what to think, how to act, and what to be, with the view to upholding and sustaining a particular understanding of public life. A pedagogy for the public manifests itself in interventions that aim at students being "tolerant", "law-abiding", or "respectful", for example, often in ways that are moralistic and/or in tune with the demands of the nation state.[43] A pedagogy *of* the public resists this former approach to public education in the sense that it conceives of the teacher as a facilitator, rather than instructor. A pedagogy of the public aims at the generation of critical consciousness, achieved through

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[40] Gert Biesta, 2012, "Becoming Public: Public Pedagogy, Citizenship and the Public Sphere", *Social and Cultural Geography* 13, no. 7 (2012): 690.
[41] Biesta, "Becoming Public", 690.
[42] Biesta, "Becoming Public", 691.
[43] Biesta, "Becoming Public", 692.

what is learned as a result of the collective experience of students studying the world and its injustices together. Biesta is critical of both accounts of public pedagogy on the grounds of their elision of certain pluralities within the educational encounter, pluralities from which the "publicness" of education (in the Arendtian sense) derives and depends.

In terms of a pedagogy for the public, pluralities are eroded for Biesta in its erasure of those differences that fracture the limits of what might be deemed acceptably "public" for the nation state: instructing the citizenry to behave or to think in certain ways necessarily closes off possibilities that transgress what is expected of the public. With respect to a pedagogy of the public, Biesta acknowledges that room exists for a more pluralistic account of education to emerge, specifically in this pedagogy's attention to resisting the privileged position of the teacher as an authoritarian voice. Its limits, though, present themselves in its tendency to frame the generation of critical consciousness in terms of what can be collectively *learned* by students: for Biesta, learning is not quite as open-ended as is often assumed, and can have the effect of closing down as much as it opens up. He writes:

> … unlike what is often assumed, learning is not some kind of open and natural process that can go in any direction, but is actually a very particular and specific "regime" … a regime, moreover, that demands a particular relation of the self to the self, that is a relation of awareness, reflection and conclusion.[44]

As Biesta notes elsewhere,[45] a focus solely on learning can have the effect of closing down certain existential possibilities in education: if education is to be read solely in terms of what we can learn about our world, the world becomes reducible to what the student can determine and grasp. Biesta writes of how the reduction of education to learning:

> … means that in a very fundamental sense my existence "occurs" before the existence of the world: I assume that I am there first in order then to start making sense of the world. It also means that I assume that the world exists for me, that is, that the world is in some way at my disposal as an object for me to make sense of and construct knowledge about.[46]

Plurality is denied here through a conception of education that has, as its starting point, the centrality of a self that exists prior to the world: on this

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44   Biesta, "Becoming Public", 692–693.
45   Gert Biesta, "Freeing Teaching from Learning: Opening Up Existential Possibilities in Educational Relationships", *Studies in Philosophy and Education* 34 (2015).
46   Biesta, "Freeing Teaching", 238.

meaning, the generation of critical consciousness in a pedagogy of the public depends upon a view of the world as "a giant adult education class in which educational agents perform the role of facilitator".[47] For Biesta, plurality is lost here as such a view of public pedagogy is not sufficiently "interruptive" enough: a pedagogy of the public opens up possibilities for transformation, this is true, but only within the terms of what the student can comprehend, understand, and/or reflect upon.

Biesta's response to the limits of both of these is to propose a third mode of public pedagogy, one understood as an "enactment of a concern for "publicness" or "publicity", that is, a concern for the public quality of human togetherness and thus for the possibility of actors and events to become public".[48] Returning to his reading of Arendt, Biesta's proposal entails "keeping open the possibility of a space where freedom can appear". A public pedagogy is one that exposes, sustains, and builds upon the pluralities upon which the generation of "newness" arises in our world, the basis from which a new kind of "becoming" can be enacted. Interpreted thus, the teacher (or, in the context of the university, the tutor, lecturer, or professor) becomes neither an instructor, nor a facilitator, but rather someone who "interrupts" the students' world with the view to cultivating those encounters with difference through which the freedom to become otherwise can be enacted. In this third mode of public pedagogy, education becomes less instructive and learning-focused, and "more activist, more experimental, and more demonstrative". Activist in the sense of creating real alternatives for human togetherness that reclaim opportunities for "public relationships-in-plurality". Experimental in the sense of inventing new possibilities for being and becoming in the world. And demonstrative in the sense that such a pedagogy demonstrates, in its publicness, that alternatives are always possible, and that things can always be done differently. For me, if we are to frame university education as a site where this mode of public pedagogy is valorized and enacted, then it is with an orientation towards pluralistic forms of human togetherness that are at once activist, experimental, and demonstrative that the value and pedagogical significance of religious discourse as poetry needs to be assessed.

I see the accounts of religious language and symbol offered by Strhan and Tillich as speaking directly to Biesta's concern for activism in its creation of the possibilities for new modes of human togetherness, of relationships-in-plurality. This is so through the resistance of religious discourses to the limits of logical positivism, an opacity and fluidity that allows for the

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47   Biesta, "Making Pedagogy Public", 22.
48   Biesta, "Becoming Public", 693.

language and symbol structures of religion to be related to in ways that break, to quote Levinas, religion's "closed circle of totality".[49] On this meaning, engaging with religious discourses in the context of the university classroom side-steps the impulse to safeguard or preserve a sacrosanct sense of orthodoxy, and instead becomes invested in *actively* creating occasions to engage with religious texts and symbols with the view to opening these discourses (and, most significantly, those who engage with them) up to new kinds of relationship with religion, religious experience, and religious institutions. In other words, a concern for the activism of public pedagogy is achieved when the poetry of religious discourses enables the possibility of the student "becoming" something or someone "new" in relation to those discourses, whether that be through a maverick interpretation of a biblical verse on the part of the student, a reconfigured perspective on a symbol's history and significance, an epiphanic moment of spiritual affection, an expression of religious disillusionment or apostasy, a reaching out to the religious other with friendship rather than suspicion, etc. The supposed homogeneity and immutability of religious discourses collapses in the pedagogical moment itself, fostering the potential for new modes of human (and non-human) becoming in and through the unexpected connections and affinities, dissonances and tensions, that the student might experience when the rigidities of logical positivism are disrupted. These potential relationships-in-plurality become, in other words, *experimental* possibilities for the student, possibilities with the scope to *demonstrate* the potential for subversion and reinvention as intrinsic to the nature and orientation of religious discourses themselves. Read in the way that I have proposed, religious discourses become sites of pedagogical possibility and becoming for the student, in and through their resistance to monolithic representations that would otherwise streamline the contradictions, tensions, differences, and expansiveness of religion and its complexities. I argue here that if we attend to the pluralities that inhere within the discourses of religion, its relationship with a concern for publicness in the university becomes far less contentious than is typically assumed: in fact, it opens up a space for such discourses to actively contribute to the very publicness that many hold dear in valorizing the university's purpose. Religious discourses come to hold a "public-facing" orientation, if you like, towards which the work of public pedagogy is committed, and from which the dynamism of student becoming can begin.

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[49] Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969), 171.

In drawing this paper to a close, I turn to developing more fully on how the affinities of religious discourses with the publicness of pedagogy offer resources for recalibrating what we mean by student becoming at the interface between religion and university education. I forward the view that the open-endedness of religious discourses offers students the chance to become in ways that unpredictably expand and disrupt the limits of religious identities, and in this way undermine the inevitable alignment of religion with either the exclusion of secular priorities or the preservation of religious orthodoxies in the context of university life.

Religious Identity, University Education, and Student Becoming

Scholarship at the interface between religion and education is often grounded in education's relationship to religious identity formation: education is seen as a site where the religious identities of students ought to be nourished and emboldened. This is particularly true of research into religious forms of schooling provision, where the religious school (across Jewish, Christian, and Muslim traditions, for instance) is often tied to the preservation of a sense of religious affiliation and/or community belonging.[50] This emphasis has also found resonance in discussions around religion and higher education, where the importance of attending to students' religious identities (for instance, through on-campus prayer and Bible-study spaces and the like) is often cited.[51] This focus on identity has its shortcomings, though, particularly if one is interested in creating opportunities in university classrooms for students to grow and "become" in ways that are responsive to the poetry of religion.

I gesture to the limits of identity on the grounds that identity invariably assumes identification with extant social, political, and religious structures, and in this way risks closing off pedagogical engagement with religious discourses from those modes of relating that lie outside what identity alone can capture or represent.[52] This echoes the point I have made elsewhere: namely, that student becoming ought to involve entering into dialogue with different kinds of experiences that would otherwise escape the boundaries of how we

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[50] Henry, "Queering Religious Schooling".

[51] Damon Maryl and Freeden Oeur, "Religion and Higher Education: Current Knowledge and Directions for Future Research", *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 48, no. 2 (2009).

[52] Gert Biesta, *The Beautiful Risk of Education* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2013).

understand ourselves in our already existing world.[53] In a paper interested in preserving the publicness of pedagogy, my hesitation towards identity as a frame for understanding student becoming in relation to religion arises out of a concern for creating possibilities for students to engage with religion in a manner that resists reproducing static and homogenous conceptions of religious adherence. In this sense, my difficulties with identity are rooted in Biesta's conception of a "citizenship of strangers" detailed above: for me, it is by resisting the urge to understand a pedagogical engagement with religious discourses in terms of a commonality of identity or belonging that opportunities for untold, unpredictable, and pluralistic kinds of relationships and experiences can begin to emerge for students. In arguing for the need to recognize and respond to the pedagogical value of religious discourses in a way that is attentive to a concern for publicness, the dissociation of student becoming from religious identity becomes necessary for me, for it is through such dissociation that the fault lines of religious discourses can be interrupted, their poetry sustained, and opportunities for freedom as action enabled.

Let me concretize this claim by returning to the anonymous student's anxieties around the Loyola Institute that were discussed at the beginning of this paper. Their worries centred largely around threats to academic freedom that the university's alignment with the Institute might pose. The belief that the academic freedom of the university (and its attendant "secular ethos") might be threatened by its connections with the Loyola Institute would appear to rest on the assumption that the scholarship taking place at the university (or at least in the Institute) needs to identify with the teachings and beliefs of the Catholic Church in order for this alignment to "make sense". For me, this example demonstrates the potential limits of bracketing off conversations around religion and education within the terms of religious identity, for such a move risks reinscribing the very logic that progressive perspectives on university education would ordinarily seek to avoid: namely, that identification with the discourses of institutional religion can act as the only basis from which the value of academic scholarship (particularly scholarship occurring in religiously-affiliated contexts) can be judged. Indeed, anxieties around this potential seem to characterize a lot of the anonymous student's concerns, but I wonder whether these concerns risk enacting their own fulfilment precisely through the strategy of granting identity with the Church monopoly in how the activities and scholarship of the university is to be understood? In terms of understanding the significance of student becoming within such conversations, the need for moving away from an assumed

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[53] Henry, "Queering Religious Schooling", 66.

identity with already existing religious structures is thus crucial for me, as it is through such a move that the poetry of religious discourses can be built upon in ways that avoid pigeon-holing who, or what, students can become through an engagement with religious texts, religious symbol systems, and so on. By reflecting on student becoming in a way that does not presume identity with religious structures as its starting point, we sustain the commitment that who or what students might become through a pedagogical engagement with religious discourses is theirs alone to claim, arising, not from deference to the pre-defined limits of religious identity, but instead from the pluralities and possibilities that inhere within the complexities of religious discourse as poetry.

In this paper, I have drawn attention to the affinities between the poetry of religious discourse, the publicness of pedagogy, and the university classroom. I did this with the view to creating spaces for students to become in ways that transcend the strictures of religion and the identitarian limits and exclusions often connected to these. Student becoming, understood in these terms, becomes less a matter of assumed identity with religious institutions, and more a matter of providing spaces for students to relate to religious discourses in potentially interruptive, creative, and open-ended ways. "Bringing to presence that which is Other" is, by way of conclusion, a helpfully productive, public-facing orientation for framing the complex terrain of student becoming at the interface between religion and the university classroom. This seems especially appropriate at a time where the influence of religious discourses continues to shape the contours and priorities of public life.

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