

Dissenting from heteronormativity: Growing sideways in religious education

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Conflict of interest

- The author declares that he has no conflict of interest.
- The authors have no relevant financial or non-financial interests to disclose.

Ethics approval

- N/A

Consent to participate

- N/A

Funding declarations:

- N/A

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Tensions across religious and LGBTQ concerns have played out in education for some time. In this paper, I make efforts to respond productively to this context by theorising what it might mean for young people in religious schools to dissent from the heteronormativity of religion in religious education (RE). To do this, I survey perspectives across Jewish, Christian, and Muslim accounts of education to claim that there is precedent for dissenting from heteronormativity in religious school settings more generally given these accounts' resistance to a uniform conception of religious identities and traditions, coupled with their sensitivity to pluralism and difference as enriching features of religious communities and experiences. The value of these accounts notwithstanding, I move to identifying two limiting dimensions to some of these perspectives for theorising dissent, namely: 1) an assumed commonality of religious identity in religious school settings, however internally diverse; and 2) an inordinately propositional and disembodied account of religious encounters. With the specific curricular context of RE in mind, I suggest that dissent from heteronormativity can (perhaps more helpfully) be understood as a mode of ethical agency that: 1) attends to that which exceeds identity in people's encounters with religion; and 2) builds on the embodied, material, and affective dynamics of encountering religion in the RE classroom. Put differently, I understand dissent as a mode of 'growing sideways' in RE, where young people encounter alternatives to the limits of heteronormativity within the context of the present.

Introduction

Tensions across religious and LGBTQ concerns have featured in discourses around education for some time. Indeed, several voices have documented the antagonisms that often play out at the interface between religion, sexualities and genders in education, with religion being positioned as a stumbling block for educational and secular approaches that affirm sexual and gender diversities (De Palma and Jennett, 2010; Allen et al., 2014; Neary, Gray and O'Sullivan, 2018; Newman et al., 2018; Nash and Browne, 2021; Kitching, 2022). Research on Catholic schooling, for example, has suggested that affirmative educational approaches to sexual and gender diversities are often hamstrung by acquiescence to heteronormative Catholic doctrines by staff and students (Grace and Wells, 2005; Love and Tosolt, 2013; Neary, 2013, 2017; Callaghan, 2016; Bailey, 2017; Farrelly, O'Higgins Norman and O'Leary, 2017). Indeed, research has shed light on the view among young people that diversifying how sexualities and genders are understood and expressed is difficult, if not impossible, when schooling and religion meet (Page and Yip, 2012; Martino and Cumming-Potwin, 2016), a view also prevalent among teachers (Allen et al. 2014) and wider school staff (Newman et al., 2018).

This research context notwithstanding, several perspectives have recently sought to disrupt the framing of religion, sexualities, and genders in antagonistic terms, positioning collaboration within and across religious and secular communities as being both desirable and possible (De Palma and Jennett 2010; Newman et al., 2018; Taylor and Cuthbert, 2019). Indeed, some have claimed that the foundations for this work are already alive in many schools given the opportunities some children have had in exploring LGBTQ themes in school (Hackman, 2002; Barozzi and Ojeda, 2014). Others, like Falconer and Taylor (2017) and Taylor and Cuthbert (2019), have foregrounded the positive role religion has played in supporting LGBTQ young people navigate school environments, a point also made by Carlile (2020) with respect to teachers' experiences of school life. Interestingly, McDonough (2016), Herriot and Callaghan (2019), Huchting and Fisher (2019), and Davis (2021) have pointed to the capacity of theological and religious traditions to enact an affirmative queer praxis in the contexts of religious schools generally and, in the case of Davis (2021), religious education specifically. This is something that has previously been written about in connection to queer theologies (Burke, 2021; Henry, 2018, 2020, 2021, 2022), while Heyes (2022) has offered broader reflections on the connections between the teaching of diverse sexualities and genders and the work of political theology.

Speaking to that element of the literature that seeks to productively disrupt the antagonisms between religion, sexualities, and genders in education, what brings me to this paper is an interest in understanding dissent from heteronormativity (that is, the material, cultural, social, and economic privileging of heterosexuality) in religious traditions, particularly in the teaching of RE as a curricular subject in religious school settings. I am drawn to sketching out the contours of dissent from heteronormativity in RE in such contexts for three reasons. Firstly, apart from Davis's (2021) work, research on RE as a curricular area has been slow to take up questions of heteronormativity or LGBTQ experiences, specifically in the teaching of RE in schools governed by, and/or connected to, religious traditions typically associated with heteronormativity (e.g., Judaism, Christianity, or Islam). Secondly, in the literature referred to above, very little attention is given to the theme of dissent, and when it has been explored, for example in McDonough's (2012) work on pedagogical dissent in Catholic schools, the emphasis has mainly been on dissent as an opportunity for expanding students' sense of religious identity (for instance, to

accommodate the inclusion of LGBTQ people), rather than problematising the framing of dissent with identity to begin with. This emphasis, as I argue later, risks shoehorning students' capacity for dissent within already-defined religious structures, which seems inimical to fostering the conditions for students to encounter ideas and experiences outside pre-existing identarian frameworks.

My third reason for focusing on dissent in this paper relates to my interest in thinking through dissent beyond popular characterisations of it in terms of liberal models of argumentation or debate, where young people are equipped with the critical skills needed to expose the errancy of heteronormative religious doctrines, for example. While such critical thinking skills are important for young people, heteronormativity does not only operate on the level of an intellectual engagement with doctrine, but is also, perhaps more primarily, something that affects young people's (particularly LGBTQ young people's) relationships to their bodies, to their emotions, to feelings of pleasure and desire, and so on. Hence, I am interested in foregrounding an understanding of dissent that homes in on young people's embodied, material, and affective encounters with religion. In this sense, I seek to understand dissent, not just as a negation of heteronormative religious doctrines, but also as a productive and transformative mode of ethical agency enacted in and through the embodied, affective, and material vitalities of the present.

To establish the precedent for this work, I firstly map out perspectives across Jewish, Christian, and Muslim accounts of education to claim that a sensitivity to pluralism and difference as enriching features of religious communities and experiences has been a longstanding feature of research on the purposes and priorities of religious schooling. Recognising this is important, I contend, in offering conditions for dissent in RE that are sensitive to local traditions and contexts, without at the same time framing such work in terms of apology or caveat. This value notwithstanding, I then move to identifying two limiting dimensions to these perspectives, namely: 1) an assumed commonality of religious identity in religious schools, however internally diverse; and 2) an inordinately propositional and disembodied account of religious experience. In response to this, I suggest that dissent from heteronormativity in the teaching of RE in religious schools can (perhaps more helpfully) be understood as a mode of ethical agency that: 1) attends to that which exceeds identity in people's encounters with religion; and 2) builds on the embodied, material, and

affective dynamics of encountering religion in the RE classroom. Put differently, I frame dissent as a mode of ‘growing sideways’ with religion, where young people can encounter alternatives to the limits of heteronormativity through the possibilities inherent to the present moment. For this paper, I position RE as a particular curricular site for this work given the key role the subject can play in facilitating students’ encounters with religious traditions.

Some precedents for dissent in religious school contexts

In this section, I survey perspectives across Jewish, Christian, and Muslim accounts of education to claim that there is precedent for dissenting from heteronormativity in the teaching of RE in religious schools, given these accounts’ shared resistance to a uniform conception of religious identities and traditions, coupled with their sensitivity to pluralism and difference as enriching features of religious communities and experiences. While the accounts below do not bring these themes to bear on the teaching of RE as a curricular subject specifically, what they gesture to is an understanding of religious schooling that offers (I argue) the conditions for dissent in the teaching of RE in such contexts.

To begin, Ackerman’s perspectives on the emergent years of Jewish education in the United States is indicative of an attention to the internal diversities of religious identities and experiences, especially when he writes: ‘Jewish education in the United States is rooted in the continued attempts of previous generations of Jews to develop forms of Jewish schooling compatible with *changing* conceptions of Judaism, *new styles* of Jewish life, and the demands of living in America’ (1969, p. 1, emphases added). More recently, Horezczyk and Wolf (2011) have critiqued the basic assumption that Jewish education is a means for strengthening a uniform view of Jewish identity. They argue alternatively for a multifarious approach to the mapping of Jewish identities in schooling, one receptive to the dissonances and varieties that can emerge within and between religious communities. Charmé and Zelkowics (2011) also approach Jewish identity formation in schooling contexts from multifaceted and multiple process formulations, making the case for a shift in thinking around Jewish identities from fixed and uniform to fluid and multiple.

This perspective on Jewish schooling is reiterated by Alexander in the Israeli context, particularly in his assertion that ‘Israeli schooling requires a vision of goodness broad enough to encompass competing conceptions of Jewish life espoused by the majority as well as non-Jewish orientations affirmed by various minorities’ (2000, p. 491). Here, Alexander expresses a view of Jewish schooling that resists what he refers to as the ‘parochial politics’ of more conservative manifestations of Judaism, a resistance built upon the conviction that ‘every point of view is limited and every framework fallible’ (2000, p. 504). This philosophy for Jewish schooling reaches its arguably most radical heights in Woocher’s (2012) work, where he calls for an openness to a form of Jewish education and schooling that is ‘free from the constraints of time and place’ and is characterised by qualities of a ‘pluralistic’, ‘transdenominational’ and even ‘postdenominational’ kind. These insights together point towards ways in which the literature around Jewish schooling has responded to questions of pluralism, concerns also taken up by scholars interested in Christian identity and its relationship to schooling.

McDonough, for instance, offers a theory of the Catholic school that refutes the assertion that religious schooling invariably leads to segregated and inward-looking institutions incapable of cohering with other religious or cultural groups. Writing specifically about dissent in relation to gay-straight alliances in Catholic school settings, McDonough describes the Catholic school as a diverse ecclesial space where dissent from religious and institutional dogma is an intrinsic possibility. For McDonough, Catholic schooling is predicated on a view of Catholic intellectual and ecclesial social identity that is comprised of ‘the coordinated intersection of multiple Catholic identities’, identities contestable enough to allow for an encounter not only with non-Catholics, but with non-Christians too (2016, p. 172). This sensitivity to pluralism is mirrored in Joldersma’s work on LGBTQ inclusion in Christian education. Joldersma argues that Christian identities are far less uniform than is often suggested, and that it is possible to utilise resources from the Christian tradition to make the case for Christian schools adopting ‘a welcoming embrace of LGBT students’ (2016, p. 33), an embrace that moves away from a language of ‘them’ to a language of ‘us’ (2016, p. 44). Drawing on Wolterstorff’s (2004) reading of the Hebrew Bible (in particular the image of God as a redeemer for the oppressed and marginalised) Joldersma argues that a Christian school is characteristically Christian when it creates safe

and secure spaces for LGBTQ students, spaces where students' sexual and spiritual journeys can develop in 'intertwined and fluid' ways (2016, p. 43).

Such insights have also found affinities within scholarship on Muslim education and schooling. Channelling the frustrations of Faour and Muasher (2011) with a lack of education for democratic citizenship in the Arab and Muslim world, Waghid and Davids call for a reimagining of Muslim education, one framed along a 'pluralist imaginary of citizenship' (2014 a, p. 343). In this vein, they articulate the need for a pedagogy within Muslim schools 'that contests exclusionary and hierarchical social relations' and embraces a diversity of Muslim identities (Waghid & Davids, 2014 a, p. 343). They refer to this pedagogy as a 'pedagogy of encounter', characterised by an openness 'not only in terms of listening to others, but also in terms of an openness of identity and being, since we are always living and acting inter-subjectively with others and our environment' (Waghid & Davids, 2014 a, p. 350). Waghid and Davids collaborate again in offering a perspective on the 'imaginative madrassah' that espouses a multicultural vision for education grounded in an attentiveness (*khabr*) 'towards the other – an attentiveness that can counteract the looming dangers of dogmatism, denial of the other, and injustices' (Waghid & Davids, 2014 b, p. 125), and is motivated by a desire to create conditions for 'human coexistence' across varying identarian differences (2014 b, p. 126).

This perspective is resonant with McDonald's (2014) Deobandi-inspired reading of Islamic education within Muslim institutions, which she claims can be conceptualised as spaces in harmony with the development of postsecular forms of citizenship. Through their emphasis on reading, writing, and the discussion of matters of common interest, McDonald sees Muslim schools as nascently demonstrative of a relationship with the public sphere that is deliberative, dialogical, and engaged. Similarly, Waghid and Smeyers, driven by a commitment to the view that 'the ownership of goodness is not the reserved property of any single group of persons, whether Muslim or non-Muslim' (2014, p. 551), offer what Waghid (2011) has also elsewhere referred to as a 'maximalist' reading of Islamic education in Muslim schools, whereby socialisation (*tarbiyyah*), learning (*ta'lim*), and goodness (*ta'dib*), are nurtured in a cosmopolitan environment of acceptance and hospitality to those of varying religious and social identities.

Finally, Merry's (2005) work at the nexus between Islam and sexuality education likewise demonstrates a commitment to resisting homogenous conceptions of Muslim identity, bringing this to bear in exploring the relationship between Muslim education and discussions on homosexuality. Merry argues against the inevitable opposition between 'Islam, as a religion, against homosexuality' (2005, p. 23) on the grounds that such a perspective legitimises an 'extremely static view' of Muslim identity that fails to acknowledge 'highly differentiated manifestations of Islam throughout the world'. Merry avoids 'foist[ing] a monolithic reading of homosexuality onto Islam' (2005, p. 25) as such a tendency is both inaccurate and contrary to the possibility of liberal dialogue in Muslim education. In this way, Merry proposes a vision of Muslim education grounded in a 'critical distance' capable of bringing the fluid religious identities of Muslim schooling in harmony with an encounter with those of gays and lesbians.

In addition to establishing the precedent for dissenting from heteronormativity in religious traditions, these accounts offer much for thinking about pluralism and difference as inescapable dimensions of school life, from which the very possibility of dissent arises, whether that be from heteronormativity, sexism, racism, classism, ableism, etc. In this sense, the accounts surveyed thus far offer an important starting point for questions of difference and religious schooling, one that moves away from efforts to ringfence the varieties of identities navigated within traditions. As I have mentioned, these accounts are also helpful in terms of setting a precedent for dissent in the specific context of the RE classroom in religious schools: in this sense, the accounts offer a way to theorise dissent from religion in RE in terms that are sensitive to the religious traditions informing local contexts, without at the same time having to begin such work from a position of apology or justification. Acknowledging this value, I nonetheless identify two potentially limiting dimensions to some of these accounts that I will unpack as a basis for moving my understanding of dissent forwards.

The first dimension that I seek to tackle relates to the connections drawn by some of the accounts above between religious schooling (and I infer, the teaching of RE therein) and religious identities, however internally diverse these identities might be. As has been identified elsewhere (Henry, 2020), the self-concept of religious schools is often linked to religious identity; indeed, we often speak, for instance, of some students in Anglican schools

identifying with the Anglican faith. While not seeking to downplay the ongoing sociological influence that identity has in religious schools on the ground, I nonetheless query the theoretical helpfulness of this connection given how the logic of identity is often tied up with already existing institutions, practices, and social groups with which one identifies. As Biesta (2013) makes clear, this logic is educationally limited in that it risks foreclosing possibilities for ways of relating to and experiencing the world that lie beyond pre-existing structures. For me, an openness to that which exceeds identity is an educationally important part of what dissenting from heteronormativity in religious traditions might entail, as it is often through the logic of identity that oppositions across religious and LGBTQ concerns are perpetuated and differences reified (for instance, through assertions that identifying as both lesbian and Muslim is a contradiction in terms). Indeed, it is because of this that queer-informed traditions of scholarship (from queer theory in cultural studies, to queer theologies and religious studies) often problematize identity as a basis for disrupting heteronormativity. In addition to this, an identarian framing poses further challenges when we consider the provision of RE as a specific curricular subject: in most liberal democratic contexts, the provision of the subject in local and national syllabuses is often understood and justified without assumptions being made about staff or students' particular religious identities, even (to varying degrees) in religious school settings. My framing of dissent in the section to come will therefore be attuned to other ways of understanding dissent beyond identity.

The second dimension to some of the above accounts that I will address is what I see to be an inordinate focus on the textual and the propositional as a basis for problematizing the inevitable alignment of religion with deference to heteronormativity. Think of Joldersma's appeal to Wolterstorff's reading of the Hebrew bible, for instance, or Alexander's appeal to differing, 'competing' Jewish visions of the good life. In both cases, propositional truth claims about the world, grounded in the textual traditions of relevant religions, are used to justify other ways of engaging with pluralism. While this certainly has a place within wider practices of disrupting the heteronormativity of religious traditions, I query the helpfulness of framing this work solely in these terms given the frequency with which texts and propositional truth claims are appealed to in reproducing religious heteronormativity (for instance, through Christian references to so-called 'lobber passages' indicting same-sex sexual acts, like Leviticus 18:22 or 1 Corinthians 6: 9-10).

Furthermore, as I have mentioned above, LGBTQ people's experiences of heteronormativity in religion are as much embodied and material as they are intellectual and propositional: counselling research on the experiences of LGBTQ people in religious communities often foregrounds how, for some, internalized homophobia and transphobia manifest themselves as much in a sense of shame with the body and with sexual pleasure as it does with an intellectual understanding of heteronormative religious teachings (Beagan & Hattie, 2015). This inordinate focus on the propositional, then, risks losing sight of the embodied, material, and affective realities of encountering religion in RE, realities that, in their contextual specificity and vitality, can be reclaimed to expose the inadequacy of doctrinal approaches to sexualities and genders that are limited to a disembodied and heteronormative worldview. In sketching out the contours of what dissent from heteronormativity might entail for RE in religious school settings, in the section to come I will foreground the embodied, the material, and the affective as key.

Dissent as a mode of 'growing sideways' with religion

In understanding what it might mean to dissent from religious heteronormativity in ways that: 1) escape the limits of identity; and 2) are attuned to the embodied, affective, and material nature of religion, I engage with the image of young people 'growing sideways' in their encounters with religion in RE.

'Growing sideways' has roots in the work of queer theorist Bond Stockton (2009), who employs the image to subvert heteronormative conceptions of childhood that position children as inevitable arbiters of innocence and as mechanisms through which social norms (around sexuality, gender, etc.) can be reproduced. For Bond Stockton, growing sideways is an image that refuses to understand childhood in socially reproductive terms; it is 'something that locates energy, pleasure, vitality, and (e)motion in the back-and-forth of connections and extensions that are not reproductive' (2009, p. 13). In this sense, growing sideways is an effort at representing the lived realities of children's lives, the majority of whom do not innocently experience the world as that which should be inevitably sustained: '... the figure of the child,' Bond Stockton writes, 'does not fit children – [it] doesn't fit the pleasures and terrors we recall' (pp. 5-6). Put differently, growing sideways recognises the non-linear ways in which children live, a non-linearity that stalls the inevitable reproduction

of social norms by virtue of how children often ‘approach their destinations, delay; swerve, delay; ride on a metaphor they tend to make material and so imagine relations of their own’ (2009, p. 15).

Kitching’s work is a useful starting point for translating these ideas to questions of religion and dissent from heteronormativity, as he engages with the image of ‘growing sideways’ to theorise children’s (and young people’s) encounters with religion in education, including in the context of RE in religious schools. While his study speaks to childhood specifically, Kitching is clear that his insights connect with the experiences of young people more broadly, given the more fundamental resistance to linear-developmental models of social reproduction that partly steers his work (2020, p. 209). For Kitching, mobilising the image of growing sideways to understand children’s encounters with religion is to foreground a plural conception of the child and their becoming, one that exposes the ‘differential experiences of knowing, not-knowing, enjoyment, pain, belonging and exclusion’ that characterise children’s encounters with the world more generally, and religious traditions specifically (p. 22).

These differential experiences (which ‘don’t fit’ narrowly developmental accounts of childhood, to paraphrase Bond Stockton) challenge binary categories like majority/minority and secular/religious, and in this way enable us to think about children’s encounters with religion in cross-cutting and interdependent ways (p. 22), i.e., in ways that see such encounters as sites of interconnection between the human and the non-human, the embodied and the disembodied, the affective and the rational, the material and the transcendent. For Kitching, exposing these interconnections renders growing sideways key to any educational project committed to social justice, as it is through such exposure that alternatives to divisive and majoritarian social norms can be recognised and sustained (p. 47). In this sense, growing sideways enables the pluralities of our encounters (with religious traditions in RE, but also more generally) to be reclaimed from conservative efforts to streamline these complexities for heteronormative, racist, classist, ableist, or sexist ends.

Significantly for Kitching, to image children’s encounters with religion in terms of growing sideways is not to reify, for example, heterodoxy over orthodoxy. He emphasises how ‘growing sideways with human and non-human others [does] not create ideal forms of

emancipation’, where, for example, the image of the soon-to-be liberal, rational, and secular child is positioned as somehow more ‘enlightened’ or more ‘fully developed’ than the child who reaffirms orthodox worldviews (p. 208). Indeed, he writes of how growing sideways into differential experiences of knowing may well lead a child to reproducing particular social norms; the difference, though, is that growing sideways precludes the *inevitability* of such reproduction, in and through the ‘constant formation and transition’ of children’s encounters themselves (p. 46). Thus, growing sideways opens, rather than closes, possibilities for children through the very flux that characterises their encounters with religion, irrespective of whether these lead to social reproduction or not:

Children’s encounters with the world may foster reproductive desires by remaking personal commitments to an organised worldview. That is not necessarily problematic ... Or they may creatively make new, unnamed orientations ... despite the appearance of linearity in growing up, children have ‘zigzagging’ encounters with persons, objects, images, ideas and places ... (p. 46)

In other words, it is the ‘range and span’ of interconnections (human, non-human, embodied, disembodied, affective, rational) that inhere within children’s non-linear encounters with religion that moves us ‘beyond any notion that children ... simply reproduce or fail to reproduce particular organised worldviews’ (p. 209). Through these relationships, children exercise agency ‘that may ordinarily be cast as not of their generation, or something they are not capable of’ in complex and multifaceted ways, and it is this that the image of growing sideways brings to the fore (p. 46).

In theorising dissent from the heteronormativity of religion in RE, I see the image of growing sideways as valuable in that it offers productive inroads for addressing my earlier concerns with religious identity, and with the inordinate focus on the propositional often characterising the religion-education nexus. With respect to exceeding the limits of religious identity, the image of growing sideways allows for dissent from heteronormativity to be enabled, less because of the ‘permissibility’ of this within pre-existing religious structures and/or norms in school contexts (though this might, incidentally, be the case), and more because of the myriad interconnections already coalescing in young people’s encounters with religion in the RE classroom (through, for example, encounters with texts, ideas, ritual practices, and so on). The myriad nature of these interconnections is crucial, I feel, as it is through this that the plurality inherent to young people’s embodied, affective, and material

encounters with religion in RE can be exposed, and the absolutism often characteristic of heteronormativity in religious contexts undermined as a result. In this sense, dissent as a mode of growing sideways positions it as a practice enabled by, and attentive to, resources otherwise ‘untapped in the present’ of encountering religion in RE, i.e., resources like desire, imagination, excitement, pleasure, and pain that are so often overlooked in absolutist heteronormative religious discourses and practices (Braidotti, 2014, p. 262).

By way of summary, to think of dissent as a mode of growing sideways in RE is to think of it, not as a goal to which young people should inevitably aspire, but as an ethical practice attentive to the intricate interconnections of thought, feeling, and experience that constitute young people’s encounters with religion in the RE classroom already. Dissent from heteronormativity, in these terms, is less a teleological end point for RE in religious schools, and more an opportunity for young people to become attentive to the complexities of their encounters with religion in the present. For RE teachers, cultivating and sustaining the conditions for young people to be attentive to these intricacies is a pedagogical challenge for sure. But a challenge worth pursuing, I would argue, if RE teachers in religious school settings are interested in expanding how questions of religious traditions, sexualities and genders are navigated by religious school communities in our present moment.

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