

PEDAGOGIES OF DISSENT: BRIDGING THE
RELIGION–LGBTQ DIVIDE

Seán Henry

Department of Secondary and Further Education
Edge Hill University

ABSTRACT. The purpose of this paper is to set out the contours for a pedagogy of dissent, i.e., a pedagogical approach to religion that recognizes the role of dissent in bridging the conventional antagonism between religious and LGBTQ concerns for education. Seán Henry begins it with the view that a pedagogy conducive to this kind of work can be engaged with if the relation between education and religion is framed in radically conservative terms. From here, Henry inquires into the pedagogical commitments necessary for dissent as a mode of bridge-building to occur. These commitments are (1) an orientation toward remembrance, understood less in terms of a commonality of religious identity and more in terms of a “structural condition of the present”; and (2) an embodied attention to the proximity of the other. The paper concludes with some thoughts on the nature of the pedagogical content that could be helpful in enacting these commitments. Henry suggests that pedagogies of dissent require theological content that (1) reworks past traditions, without justifying or downplaying their shortcomings; and (2) is explicit in its rejection of heteronormativity through a sensitivity to the lived experiences of LGBTQ people.

KEY WORDS. dissent; LGBTQ; religion; education; queer theology

In recent times, the growing engagement with LGBTQ programs in education has garnered negative reaction from religious communities. In January 2019, for example, UK government guidance on LGBTQ relationships and sexuality education was met with opposition by members of the UK’s Ultra-Orthodox Jewish community.¹ Tensions around LGBTQ-inclusive school programs came to a head in the UK again one month later, where protests against Parkfield Community School’s “No Outsiders” program 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.”² Religion’s capacity to mobilize resistance to LGBTQ-inclusive education has also found expression in Christian 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 opposes the insights of contemporary “ideologies of gender,” including those perspectives that see gender as “merely the product of historical and cultural conditioning.”³

1. Harriett Sherwood, “Sex Education Rules Could Force Haredi Jews into Home Schooling,” *Guardian*, January 20, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2019/jan/20/ultra-orthodox-haredi-jews-resist-new-sex-education-guidance>.

2. Nazia Parveen, “Birmingham School Stops LGBT Lessons after Parents Protest,” *Guardian*, March 4, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2019/mar/04/birmingham-school-stops-lgbt-lessons-after-parent-protests>.

3. 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: Vatican Press, 2019), 3.

Against this backdrop, reframing tensions across religious and LGBTQ priorities has emerged as a pressing concern for educational research. Scholars such as Mary Lou Rasmussen and Heather Shipley, for example, have problematized the inevitable alignment of religion with conservatism and secularism with LGBTQ progress on the grounds that such characterizations risk streamlining the complexities of religions, while also downplaying the role secular discourses can also have in contributing to heteronormativity.⁴ In their efforts not to let secularism “off the hook,” Emily Falconer and Yvette Taylor, and Yvette Taylor and Karen Cuthbert, have questioned the helpfulness of associating religion only with heteronormativity in education due to the potential this has for rendering religious LGBTQ students invisible within these discussions.⁵ In the context of sex education, Fida Sanjakdar has also mapped the complex, and at times conflicting, deliberations Muslim teachers face in providing a comprehensive sex education around LGBTQ issues that is receptive to theological ideals of tolerance and equality.⁶

This attunement to theological tradition in building bridges between religious and LGBTQ issues is a strategy employed by Clarence Joldersma, who engages with theology to forward an image of Christian schooling that is inclusive of LGBTQ staff and students by allowing for a diversity of faith perspectives to thrive.⁷ I have also previously turned to the value of queer theology in rethinking the relationship between religious and LGBTQ identities for education.⁸ While such approaches are valuable in mapping the affinities between religious resources and LGBTQ concerns, it would also be misleading to suppose that building bridges across this divide is a task that can be easily and straightforwardly achieved. Indeed, building bridges for education between religious and LGBTQ issues is not only about finding common ground between these concerns: it also involves potential moments of *dissent*, where one has to challenge taken-for-granted assumptions

4. Mary Lou Rasmussen, “Secularism, Religion and ‘Progressive’ Sex Education,” *Sexualities* 13, no. 6 (2010): 699–712; and Heather Shipley, “Religious and Sexual Orientation Intersections in Education and Media: A Canadian Perspective,” *Sexualities* 17, no. 5/6 (2014): 512–528.

5. Emily Falconer and Yvette Taylor, “Negotiating Queer and Religious Identities in Higher Education: Queering ‘Progression’ in the ‘University Experience,’” *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 38, no. 6 (2017): 782–797; and Yvette Taylor and Karen Cuthbert, “Queer Religious Youth in Faith and Community Schools,” *Educational Review* 71, no. 3 (2018): 382–396.

6. Fida Sanjakdar, “Educating for Sexual Difference? Muslim Teachers’ Conversations about Homosexuality,” *Sex Education* 13, no. 1 (2013): 16–29.

7. Clarence Joldersma, “Doing Justice Today: A Welcoming Embrace for LGBT Students in Christian Schools,” *International Journal of Christianity and Education* 20, no. 1 (2016): 32–48.

8. Seán Henry, “Religion, Queerness, and Education: Strategies for Bridge Building in Antagonistic Times,” *Philosophy of Education* 76, no. 2 (2020): 194–210. See also Seán Henry, “‘Why? And how?’ Translating Queer Theologies of Sex Education,” *Sex Education* (2020): 1–15.

SEÁN HENRY is Lecturer in Education in the Department of Secondary and Further Education, Edge Hill University; email <sean.henry@edgehill.ac.uk>. His current research interests surround questions of religion, gender, sexuality, and education from a philosophical perspective.

and practices. Thus, bridge-building becomes a messy, paradoxical business, where the “narrowing” of the gap between religious and LGBTQ priorities also entails it being widened as bridge-building will necessarily involve dissenting, in various ways, from heteronormative religious beliefs and practices.

Taking this paradox seriously, the paper begins with some thoughts on how dissent might be framed within bridging the religion–LGBTQ divide for education. In particular, it attempts to position dissent as an orientation toward religion that can be both in continuity with, and potentially in excess of, religious traditions. Developing this idea, the paper makes the case that a pedagogy conducive to this kind of dissent can be actualized if the relation between education and religion is framed in radically conservative terms, i.e., less in terms of education necessarily sustaining deference to religious traditions, and more in terms of education conserving elements of such traditions in order to expose them to potentially new and unsettling questions, commitments, and experiences. From here, the paper moves to the implications of this view for how we frame pedagogical encounters with religion in educational spaces: it inquires into the *pedagogical commitments* necessary for dissent as a mode of bridge-building to occur. Two commitments are foregrounded in this regard: (1) pedagogical encounters with religion ought to embody an orientation toward remembrance, understood less in terms of a commonality of religious identity and more in terms of a “structural condition of the present”; and (2) pedagogical encounters with religion call for an embodied attention to the proximity of the other. The paper concludes with some thoughts on the nature of the *pedagogical content* that could be conducive for this kind of work. Specifically, it suggests that pedagogies of dissent that seek to build bridges across religious and LGBTQ concerns require theological content that: (a) reworks past traditions, without justifying or downplaying their shortcomings; and (b) is explicit in its rejection of heteronormativity, though in a way that is sensitive to the multiple lived experiences and attachments of LGBTQ people. Two illustrative examples are examined: queer perspectives on Christian liturgical practices and transgender perspectives on Jewish *mikveh* rituals.

DISSENT AS RADICALLY CONSERVATIVE

Dissent suggests a sense of “pushing back” against something, where what one has previously valued or experienced is left behind in some way, related to differently, or exposed to something entirely new or disruptive. Crucially, dissent is not a simple, uniform process: rather, it involves the intersection of multiple ways of “pushing back” against traditional values and practices. In this way, dissent can entail a kind of paradox, where a bridge (of sorts) is built across the religion–LGBTQ divide through engagement with such traditions, though in ways that also involve distancing oneself from religious heteronormativity. In this sense, building bridges of dissent between religious and LGBTQ concerns is a task not without its conflicts: the complexities of dissent expose the inherent messiness of bridge-building, a messiness that disrupts the idea that bridging the religion–LGBTQ divide involves a simple or standardized response on the part of students and educators. Indeed, dissenting can sometimes involve completely replacing a bridge that was

there before and starting afresh, while at other times dissent can be more about tinkering with the elements of an already existing bridge. Bridge-building, in these terms, is a metaphor that captures the contextual, situated — and therefore spacious and polyvalent — nature of dissent as a set of practices that faces the ambiguities of religious inheritances with a clear sense of the need to at once recognize, resist, and at times escape religion's more damaging dimensions.⁹

In his 2012 book *Beyond Obedience and Abandonment*, Graham McDonough argues for what he terms a pedagogical model of dissent for Catholic education.¹⁰ This model justifies dissent from institutional norms (around such issues as sexuality, gender, and reproductive health) in Catholic schools and classrooms on the grounds that Catholic identity is far more fluid and contested than resistances to dissent suppose. Indeed, McDonough argues that cultivating the conditions for pedagogical dissent in Catholic schools is in keeping with “the needs of those who participate in Catholic distinctiveness.”¹¹ Put differently, McDonough positions pedagogical dissent in harmony with the complex lives of Catholics, who restructure Catholicism through their varied and at times contradictory thoughts and actions. In a later paper on justifications for “Gay-Straight Alliances” in Catholic schools, McDonough develops this further, arguing that the nature and purpose of Catholic schooling is constituted less by assent to institutional orthodoxies, and more by the priorities and experiences of those dissenting to begin with:

The theoretical implication is that to dissent is to say something not only about the issue in question, but also about one's identity as a Catholic and the nature of the space in which that dissent is expressed. A practical application emerges in the particular case of [Gay-Straight Alliances in Catholic schools]. As these student groups place an ethic of care for persons ahead of the prevailing narrow conception of religious rights, and to the degree that they draw attention to the question of what it means to be non-heterosexual and Catholic, they contribute to a restructuring of the ecclesial public space of the Catholic school and the purposes of Catholic education.¹²

In other words, moments of dissent foreground for McDonough the varied ways of “being Catholic,” and therefore reorient Catholic schools as spaces for the intersection of multiple modes of Catholic identity, including modes of identity that resist positioning religious and LGBTQ concerns as inherently opposed.

In its sensitivity to this multiplicity, McDonough's work seems largely in tandem with my framing of bridge-building as a complex and messy business: in both cases, there is a move away from understanding identity as pure or monolithic

9. The need to resist sanitizing religion has been identified in recent research in religious education. See, for instance, David Smith, Graeme Nixon, and Jo Pearce, “Schools and the Sanitising of Religion: Bad Religion as False Religion” (paper presented at the annual conference of the British Educational Research Association, University of Sussex, Brighton, September 2017).

10. Graham McDonough, *Beyond Obedience and Abandonment: Toward a Theory of Dissent in Catholic Education* (Montréal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2012).

11. *Ibid.*, 255.

12. Graham McDonough, “Cultivating Identities: The Catholic School as Diverse Ecclesial Space,” *Philosophical Inquiry in Education* 23, no. 2 (2016): 160–177.

in the context of the typical divide between religious and LGBTQ priorities. Relatedly, there are affinities with my commitment to imagining dissent in plural forms, given our shared sense of the contextual and situated nature of dissent itself. This being said, there remains in McDonough's reading of dissent an assumption around the identitarian limits of dissent that I am uncomfortable with: indeed, McDonough situates pedagogical dissent as desirable for sustaining continuity *within* Catholicism, however diversely perceived or experienced. In his critique of McDonough's treatment of the "intersection of identities" at play in Catholic schools, David Burns makes this point when he writes of how the "boundary between Catholic intersections and those intersections outside of Catholicism persists" in McDonough's account.¹³ My difficulty with framing pedagogies of dissent in terms of a commonality of identity or purpose is that dissent is far more complicated than merely expanding a pre-existing sense of attachment to, or identity with, a particular religious tradition in order to "include" LGBTQ people within its scope. While dissent can sometimes productively involve this connection with a religious tradition, at other times dissent can be far more radical in orientation, where the person dissenting experiences forms of attachment and community-building that "escape" the limits of traditional religion entirely. This multiplicity is perhaps most obvious when we consider how some LGBTQ religious people create spaces for themselves "within" traditional religions (even when staying "within" the tradition does not appear to be the most logical or rational course of action for some) while others form their own communities "outside" these limits. In light of this, we need to think through what it might mean to cultivate the conditions for pedagogical dissent in ways that bridge the religion-LGBTQ divide without at the same time assuming a commonality of identity on the part of students and educators. In other words, we need to map the contours of a pedagogy of dissent that resists religious heteronormativity without being overly prescriptive or decontextualized in the kinds of responses such a pedagogy might engender.

Before pursuing this inquiry directly, we should consider the following foundational question: How are we to understand the relationship between the work of education, on the one hand, and an engagement with religious traditions, on the other, and to what extent does dissent feature within this? If the former is to be seen as allowing for the latter, is education reduced merely to an instrument for restoring the authority of religious traditions, thereby undermining the possibility of dissent at all? Alternatively, if the former is to be seen as a disjuncture from the latter, does education risk becoming a tool for denying religion's enduring legacies upon the present, failing to provide a space for engagement that is contextually sensitive and responsive? Questions similar to these animate the work of Lovisa Bergdahl and Elisabet Langmann, who argue for a view of education's relation to the fostering of liberal democratic values that is at the threshold between past and

13. David Burns, "Catholic Schooling and the Permeation Trap: A Response to McDonough," *Philosophical Inquiry in Education* 23, no. 2 (2016): 178–182.

future, at once conservative and radical.¹⁴ While this paper differs from Bergdahl and Langmann in its concern for explicitly religious inheritances, it nonetheless thinks with them, for their location of education at the threshold between past and future is conducive for framing how education and religion can relate to one another in the task of bridging the religion–LGBTQ divide.

AT THE THRESHOLD BETWEEN PAST AND FUTURE

Bergdahl and Langmann's location of education at the threshold between past and future, old and new, is a response to the "crisis of traditions" brought about in Western democracies by the Holocaust. The "crisis of traditions" to which Bergdahl and Langmann refer relates to Hannah Arendt's assessment of the failures of liberal democratic values to prevent, and respond to, the atrocities of the Second World War. For Arendt, since Western humanism failed to prevent the unthinkable from occurring, the values of the past can no longer automatically guide our judgments in making political or ethical decisions, nor can they be seen as constituting an absolute, shared moral ground for society. Developing this idea, Bergdahl and Langmann argue that this context necessitates a radical approach to traditions and values in education that resists reducing experience to the mere adherence (or otherwise) to fixed or universal moral codes. As they make clear, to engage with values in a way that does not pay due regard to the ambiguities inherent to the crisis of traditions is to reduce morality merely "to rule abidance, that is, to the following of social conventions and abstract ethical rules. Hence, and as a consequence, the possibility of making meaningful moral choices and judgements in concrete and lived cases [becomes] thwarted."¹⁵ This approach is inadequate for it fails to recognize our embeddedness already within the lived traditions of the world, an embeddedness characterized by ambiguities (embodied, affective, material) that need to be engaged with if we are to avoid the absolutism that characterized the atrocities of the Second World War.

Bergdahl and Langmann therefore suggest that the most appropriate route to take in engaging with values *educationally* is one located at the threshold between conservatism and radicalism, what Arendt refers to as a "radical conservatism." Their approach to the fostering task of education is conservative in the sense that education always entails an engagement with a shared cultural heritage: values such as solidarity, justice, emancipation, and peace, for instance, are longstanding principles that continue to inform the traditions we live by and embody. The conservative dimension to this element of fostering continuity lies in the teacher's efforts at preserving that which society has deemed valuable or worth keeping (and thus something to be passed on). Rather than ignore the past (for this would deny the ambiguities of history), the teacher instead listens to what the past has to offer and sustains it by inviting students to take up its

14. Lovisa Bergdahl and Elisabet Langmann, "Time for Values: Responding Educationally to the Call from the Past," *Studies in Philosophy and Education* 37, no. 4 (2018): 367–382.

15. *Ibid.*, 370.

values (at least temporarily) through study and contemplation. At the same time, though, Bergdahl and Langmann express sympathy with a radical approach to traditions and values in an effort to move away from the rigidities of modernist thinking critiqued above. They ground this radical emphasis in what Arendt calls the “natality” or newness that each generation brings to the world, a natality necessitated by the ambiguities of living traditions, the fact of their being always works-in-progress through our embodied and affective lives. Read in this way, fostering the values of traditions to the coming generation is less about sustaining an unchanged commitment to such traditions, and more about offering the time, space, and freedom for that generation to renew or recreate those values afresh, responding to the ambiguities of traditions as they are lived out in the messiness of our lives each day. It is in this vein that they conclude that

the fostering task of the teacher is neither to strengthen nor to break the next generations’ ties with the past and tradition, but to let children and young people remain at the threshold between past and future by critically engaging in those values that previous generations have cherished and found valuable to pass on.¹⁶

The fostering task of education is not simply a matter of being loyal to or defecting from shared inheritances: rather, it entails being in-between loyalty and defection at one and the same time, for it is in the in-betweenness of this threshold that the old and the new can come together in ways that preserve the riches of the past, while also opening up possibilities for new futures.

As mentioned, while Bergdahl and Langmann’s analysis pertains to the fostering task of education in terms of passing on liberal democratic (rather than exclusively religious) values, the educational basis for their claims nonetheless makes their work apt for thinking through the relation between education and religion as the backdrop to bridging the religion–LGBTQ divide. This aptness comes to the fore in fostering a recognition of the ambiguous nature of the traditions in which we find ourselves in relationship, an ambiguity that provides the conditions for the birth of the new even while something of the old remains (even temporarily) intact. On this meaning, the relation between religion and education in the task of bridging the religion–LGBTQ divide becomes one that (a) resists instrumentalizing education for narrowly construed religious ends, and (b) is committed to exposing traditions to the possibility of new (and even heterodox) cultural and religious formations by virtue of their embodied and affective incompleteness. Situated alongside such priorities, the task of building bridges between religious and LGBTQ concerns thus becomes one for which the register of dissent is appropriate, for dissent (understood as a dimension of engagement with past traditions) can also be seen as occupying a sense of in-betweenness, specifically in its *transformative* responsiveness to religious heteronormativity, without inevitably falling into defection as such (though this possibility remains of course). Dissent, in these terms, opens up the future by attending to the past. How, though, can this transformative kind of responsiveness be achieved pedagogically? Against the backdrop

16. Ibid., 372.

of the threshold between past and future, are there particular pedagogical commitments needed for dissent's potential enactment in a way that builds bridges across religious and LGBTQ concerns? In what follows, I explore how the transformative dimension to dissent can be pedagogically achieved, with reference to Roger Simon's reflections on remembrance in pedagogy.

THE COMMITMENTS OF A PEDAGOGY OF DISSENT

In this section, two interrelated commitments are positioned as valuable for engaging with a pedagogy of dissent in the task of bridge-building across religious and LGBTQ concerns. These are (a) an orientation toward remembrance, understood less in terms of a commonality of identity and more in terms of a "structural condition of the present"; and (b) an embodied attention to the proximity of the other. Roger Simon's work on remembrance in education is particularly instructive in understanding these commitments.¹⁷

Simon writes of how his pedagogical concern for remembrance in and through education arises out of a sensitivity to "the problem of what it could mean to live historically, to live with an upright attentiveness to traces of those who have inhabited times and places other than one's own" (*IWN*, 46). Like Bergdahl and Langmann, Simon positions education as necessarily attentive to a call from the past: its interests are in practices that "might embody a sensibility through which an encounter with the testament of another is lived within an ethics of responsibility" (*IWN*, 46). Simon's interests in remembrance are framed not simply in terms of contributing "to knowledge of the past" in ways that might underwrite "a claim to group or communal membership." Instead, his interests are in the capacity of acts of remembrance to exert "a transitive function; that is, they may be conceived as actions that 'pass over' and take effect on another person or persons" (*IWN*, 46). In short, Simon's commitment to remembrance stems, not in the identitarian significance such practices might have for people, but rather in the capacity of memory to engender change in some way, in and through what one learns from an encounter with the past, with difference.

Central to Simon's understanding of remembrance in this regard is hope, seen less in terms of an ever-deferrable future ("a desired 'not-yet' always still to come"), and more in terms of a "structural condition of the present," by which he means a condition "rooted in a conception of what it means to be positioned in the present" (*IWN*, 47). In other words, remembrance involves attuning oneself to the past *in order* to expose and change the present, and in this way open up alternative futures that are responsive to past and present at one and the same time. Read in this way, the hopefulness of remembrance becomes, for Simon, a "transformative recollection," a "practice of unsettling the present" by rendering it "exposed, vulnerable" (*IWN*, 49). The hopefulness of remembrance allows for "a way of naming the present's inherent incompleteness," one that exposes "an opening, a

17. Roger Simon, "Innocence without Naivete, Uprightness without Stupidity: The Pedagogical *Kavanah* of Emmanuel Levinas," *Studies in Philosophy and Education* 22, no. 1 (2003): 45–59. This work will be cited in the text as *IWN* for all subsequent references.

learning, a moving beyond that which is recognised as a concern of the present" (*IWN*, 49). The "opening" of the present that is enacted through remembrance is initiated for Simon by a "rending," a "tearing of continuity" with tradition in those moments when continuity with tradition becomes inadequate for responding to what the incompleteness of the present demands. Hence, remembrance becomes less about guaranteeing or preserving a shared sense of identity in the context of pedagogy and more

a social process within which a collectivity considers how and on what terms we can admit accounts of the past into our contemporary moral community such that they possess an active claim on our present and future actions in ways that do not reduce the terms of this admittance to projections of our own identities and desires. (*IWN*, 49)

Remembrance, on this meaning, commits pedagogy to opportunities for the untold and unpredictable to come to the fore, opportunities necessitated by an attentiveness to the present and to the need and interests of those existing in the present.

This latter point speaks to the second commitment needed for a pedagogy of dissent to occur: an embodied attention to the proximity of the other. In detailing what this might involve, Simon turns to the notion of *kavvanah* in Jewish ritual practice. *Kavvanah*, *kavannah*, or *kavana* literally translates as "intention" or as the "sincere feeling" informing the "direction of the heart" as one prays or engages in ritual acts.¹⁸ For Simon, this involves a "form of presencing, a being-for-another": *kavannah* is a concept that captures and sustains a "proximity, not as a state, a repose, but a restlessness, a movement toward the other" (*IWN*, 53). *Kavannah* points to how, in their remembrance of past inheritances, rituals entail a disposition necessarily open to discontinuity and change, to the transformation of the structures of the present in the face of those who are other. On this meaning, *kavannah* demands an attention to the world, its failings and shortcomings, so as to enable "the possibility of a 'social practice,' a relationality within which one might enact the very cracking of fate, fate understood here as the necessities of the present" (*IWN*, 55). In this sense, *kavannah* emulates an orientation toward remembrance that Simon frames as pedagogically important because of its commitment to becoming "self-present to, and responsive toward, an existence beyond oneself, signaling problems of answerability and address" (*IWN*, 51). *Kavannah*, in other words, is grounded for Simon in a pedagogical orientation to "alterity, to a difference not ever ethically reduced to the terms of one's own self-understanding" (*IWN*, 51).

Returning to a pedagogy of dissent, these commitments are valuable because by resisting the desire to sustain inevitable continuity with already-existing religious traditions, we can open up possibilities beyond the historical legacies and limits of the religion–LGBTQ divide. On this meaning, Simon's reflections on *kavannah* are important in foregrounding the kind of relation to religion that a pedagogy of dissent requires: one that seeks to explicitly break continuity with

18. Pinchas Giller, *Shalom Shar'abi and the Kabbalists of Beit El* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 20–21.

the heteronormativity of religious traditions, but in ways that constructively return to and face the limits of those traditions head-on, and in multiple ways (sometimes by working “within” traditional religion, and at other times working “outside” it). In this sense, dissent is not about abandoning religious traditions for abandonment’s sake; rather, it is about engaging with such traditions in a manner that is attentive to the multiple ways in which such traditions can be taken up or reworked by and for LGBTQ people. Such an approach seems particularly appropriate in light of Simon’s emphasis on attending to the proximity of the other: to me, such attentiveness requires engagements with religious traditions that are necessarily spacious, for people’s attachments to religious traditions (emotionally and otherwise) are so complex that it becomes impossible to standardize how “best” to dissent from the realities of religious heteronormativity. Below, I point to queer perspectives on Christian liturgical practices and transgender perspectives on Jewish *mikveh* rituals as two examples of the sort of classroom content educators might engage with in enacting this kind of pedagogy.

THE CONTENT FOR A PEDAGOGY OF DISSENT

Taking on board the commitment for a pedagogy of dissent above, building bridges between religious and LGBTQ concerns can be seen as requiring theological content in the classroom that (a) reworks past traditions, without justifying or downplaying their shortcomings; and (b) is explicit in its rejection of heteronormativity in ways that are sensitive to the multiple lived experiences and attachments of LGBTQ people.

Siobhán Garrigan’s work on queering Christian worship is particularly provocative as an example of theological content that enacts such commitments.¹⁹ For Garrigan, bringing a queer perspective to bear on questions of Christian liturgy and worship arises from the “need for a [ritual] space that can ‘queer’ supposed norms of power and play in this world in favour of an emancipatory vision” of human experience (*QW*, 225). In this sense, worship’s queer potential presents itself in the “perennially counter-cultural” quality of ritual acts, which she conceives as sites through which the “endlessly changing divine–human alliance is established and developed, contested and investigated in this world” (*QW*, 225). Worship, read in this manner, become less about reproducing fixed identitarian narratives, religious orthodoxies, or modes of belonging, and more about offering participants the chance to grapple with, tease out, and actualize a commitment to “the undoing of any and every site of supposedly established worldly power” in connection to God or the religious inheritances of the past (*QW*, 225).

Importantly, Garrigan’s “queering” does not end at a simple counter-cultural framing of Christian worship: indeed, she writes of how “it is not enough to talk about how Christian worship queers the pitch of a consumerist culture or even to

19. Siobhán Garrigan, “Queer Worship,” *Theology and Sexuality* 15, no. 2 (2009): 211–230. This work will be cited in the text as *QW* for all subsequent references.

rely on a self-satisfied queer ritual ethic ... that is to spin the word 'queer' out too poetically, if not to wholly (mis-)appropriate it" (QW, 226). She makes the case that Christian "worship cannot truly be queer in this culture unless it integrates sex, unless it stems from the life experiences of those whose sexed lives entail their acceptance of the label queer (whether happily or as an imposition) in this culture" (QW, 226). She continues,

LGBT dating and union-making, threesomes, bathhouses, periodic celibacy, open relationships, adoptive families and self-insemination need to be talked about, just as straight-dating and marriage, monogamy, nuclear families, nursing-home romance and immaculate conceptions(!) are. (QW, 226)

Read in these terms, Garrigan's queer account of Christian worship both demands and engenders a disruptive flexibility and inventiveness that arises from, and integrates, the particularities of LGBTQ people's lives. Worship becomes both theologically vibrant and socially disruptive here when it opens itself up to the possibility of effacing its own limits, in and through a positive responsiveness to the embodied lives of sexual and gender minorities.

Significantly, it is the specificity of queer experiences (coupled with the "incompleteness" of heteronormative accounts of religious ritual and its exclusions exposed by those experiences) that act as the vantage point from which ritual can be queerly reimagined. Rituals are not, for Garrigan, sacrosanct or exclusivist practices that exist to hallmark the supposed purity and homogeneity of traditions and communities. Indeed, she emphasizes the importance of transcending this incompleteness by viewing rituals as being "shaped by [participant] experiences and needs, their symbol-structures and language-games as much as by anybody else's" (QW, 228–229). In this regard, worship becomes a practice only ever in progress, enabling forms of remembrance that dissent from the exclusions and hierarchies of the present:

Queer worship, like all genuine worship, is a work only ever in progress: that's why it's called "liturgy." As many liturgics teachers remind us, the root "urg" means work in the sense of being wrought, and just as ore is wrought from iron in metallurgy, so 'lit', the people, is what is wrought by the work of liturgy. But, unlike the ore analogy, worship is a time and space in which we are only wrought, never completed and held up as a finished product. (QW, 228)

If liturgy is that which is wrought by the people, then it becomes possible for the values and dispositions of those across varying religious, ethical, and sexual positions (among others) to have a constituting and creative role in how Christian worship is shaped and conceived. Garrigan's view allows for the multiplicity of experiences and priorities of the present to be remembered, "taken up," and responded to with full honesty and seriousness, in ways that go beyond such perspectives being merely "tolerated" or assimilated within larger, heteronormative religious structures or narratives. In these terms, Garrigan's sensitivity to multiplicity ensures that avenues for dissent that may arise from a pedagogical engagement with this kind of content are suitably non-prescriptive; being "of the people" ensures that queer accounts of worship expose possibilities for dissent from religious heteronormativity that are polyvalent and heterogeneous, thereby

situating bridge-building across the religion–LGBTQ divide in a suitably fluid and messy space.

Another scholar whose work points to the kind of theological content conducive to a pedagogy of dissent is Sonia Crasnow, who brings transgender perspectives to bear on Jewish *mikveh* rituals.²⁰ *Mikvaot* (singular, *mikveh*) are ritual baths traditionally used in Orthodox Jewish circles to mark, through ritual immersion in water, important transitions in the life of a person, from menstruation to marriage. Historically, *niddah* — the monthly ritual immersion after menstruation — has been the most common use for *mikvaot*, traditionally formulated as a “purification” practice for women seven days after the end of menstruation before re-engaging in sexual activity with their husbands (*FGS*, 179). The practice has garnered much critique from progressive theological voices within Judaism. For example, given the fact that *niddah* has persisted for women but not for men (to retain purity after seminal emission, for instance), many have read it as sexist and outside the realm of egalitarian Jewish practice (*FGS*, 179). Indeed, this imbalance, combined with how immersion in *mikvaot* is typically segregated along gender lines (with men immersing with men, and women with women), has led to the rejection of *mikveh* rituals by many Jewish denominations, particularly those in certain American Jewish communities.

Yet, perhaps surprisingly, *mikveh* rituals have recently experienced a rebirth in Jewish theologies and practices, particularly among theologians and faith community members who are transgender. Crasnow relates this development to the growing need among the transgender Jewish community to ritually celebrate pivotal moments of transition in their lives, for instance if transgender people “come out” to others as trans, or if they undergo gender confirmation surgery. Crucially, these moments of transition include those “that have not traditionally been observed through *mikveh* ritual”: transgender engagements with immersion practices have therefore been accompanied with an impulse to change and re-create *mikveh* spaces so that they reflect feminist and queer sensibilities (*FGS*, 180). Indeed, Crasnow writes of how these reclaimed *mikveh* practices “allow the ritual creator and/or participant to imagine and engage in a queer Jewish world – built on queer theologies and hermeneutics – that affirms their queer and trans identities within Judaism” (*FGS*, 197). An example of such reinvention is the ritual’s reliance on immersion as a symbol of transitioning into a new (differently gendered) life, a newness brought about by the uncertainty signified in the coming together of body and water. For Crasnow, the immersive ritual of the *mikveh* acts as a celebration of ambiguity and paradox, which she relates to the ritual’s healing capacity to performatively disrupt the certainties of heteronormativity and its rigid binary accounts of gender. In this regard, she writes of how ritual immersion in the *mikveh* “does not serve to cleanse the (queer/trans) body of its own essential impurities,

20. Sonia Crasnow, “From the Gay Synagogue to the Queer Shtetl: Normativity, Innovation, and Utopian Imagining in the Lived Religion of Queer and Transgender Jews” (PhD diss., University of California, Riverside, 2017). This work will be cited in the text as *FGS* for all subsequent references.

rather it has been reconceptualized as a method for healing the queer/trans body from the toxicity of [religious] hetero- and cisnormativity" (FGS, 187–188). She continues,

In these rituals the tradition of immersion in the *mikveh* has been restructured to frame gender transition as a miraculous act of perpetual queer becoming, and of queer world-making, in which the ritual becomes God's partner in the task of creation. This ritual moment allows queer Jews to glimpse a utopian future: a queer Jewish world where queer and transgender lives are not condemned, ignored, or even simply included, but celebrated. (FGS, 197)

Crucially, it is from a recognition of the specificity of queer and trans experiences that the creative theologies underpinning the reimagination of *mikveh* arise: *mikveh* rituals are here shaped as malleable modes of response to particular personal and theological needs, rather than as set codes of practice within and around which people must invariably (and, in some cases, inauthentically) fit and structure their lives. This last point brings me to the helpfulness of Crasnow's work as an example of the kind of content that is needed for a pedagogy of dissent: indeed, it is a theological desire to dissent from the transphobia of Jewish traditions that informs how *mikveh* is understood, engaged with, and recreated in Crasnow's account. Crasnow's sensitivity to the diverse experiences of queer and trans Jews within her reworking of *mikveh* provides pedagogical content that is appropriately open-ended: dissenting from the transphobia of certain Jewish traditions is not a uniform task within Crasnow's account, which avoids assuming a commonality of identity or singularity of response for engaging in the task of bridge-building.

CONCLUSION

Polarizations at the interface between religious and LGBTQ concerns have been a perennial mainstay in discourses around religion and sexuality or gender, not least in connection to education. Over the course of this paper, I have made efforts to respond productively to this context by reflecting on what it might mean to build bridges across the religion–LGBTQ divide. I have claimed that framing the relation between education and religion in radically conservative terms is foundational to this task, i.e., in terms that see education as a site for engaging with (and, in this sense, conserving) religious traditions and practices, but in a fashion that also exposes such traditions to new possibilities. Central to this task, I have proposed, is a commitment to pedagogical practices of dissent that embody an attention to the proximity of others, a form of remembrance that exposes the ambiguities and incompleteness of religious traditions in ways that are potentially transformative for LGBTQ people. However, given the complex and contradictory relationships with, and attachments to, religion that people have, I have also suggested that this kind of pedagogy needs to veer away from the assumption of a shared sense of religious identity among students: in this sense, creating a classroom space conducive to a pedagogy of dissent needs to be open to the diverse ways in which people do dissent from religious heteronormativity (from mild theological irreverence to more radical forms of structural change that "escape" the bounds of traditional religion). The theological examples explored at the end of this paper are helpful in indicating the kind of pedagogical content required for bridge-building across

the religion–LGBTQ divide: examples that are explicitly committed to resisting heteronormativity, but spacious enough to engender diverse ways of enacting this.

This last point around pedagogical content leads me to the very practical question of “What next?” Having mapped out some of the conceptual contours of a pedagogy of dissent, what are the practical steps educators can follow for starting to build bridges across religious and LGBTQ concerns? One step in this direction would be for educators to recognize the internal diversities within religious traditions: pedagogies of dissent emphasize that religious traditions are not uniform, static, or monolithic entities, but are rather ever-evolving and living traditions constituted by a plurality of perspectives and experiences. On the levels of school policy and classroom practice, this point is significant as it exposes both the limits of articulating school policies in deference to narrowly defined religious or institutional codes, as well as the inaccuracy of classroom resources that represent religion in purely heteronormative terms. In this way, building bridges across the religion–LGBTQ divide would require religious school administrators to expand how religion is framed in the context of admissions criteria and school enrollment protocols, and it would also require educators in those schools to diversify how religion is represented in classroom resources and discussions. Relatedly, exploring the pluralities of religion in the classroom space would require providing students and educators with opportunities for discussing, expressing, and embodying their religious, sexual, and gendered identities and experiences in ways that are open, sensitive to others, and affirmative of difference. In this sense, pedagogies of dissent that resist religious heteronormativity would be dependent on classroom and school communities collectively promoting the conditions necessary for honest and potentially difficult conversations and experiences.

Finally, one last practical step toward bridging the religion–LGBTQ divide would be for educators to resist framing this kind of work through the lens of “quick-fix” solutions. Religious traditions have always been works in progress and always will be; as such, there is no “pure” or “perfect” solution to how students and educators can best dissent from religious heteronormativity. Instead, I think it would be more worthwhile and more productive for educators to begin discussions and activities around religion and LGBTQ identity from the vantage point of where their students find themselves, and then to work supportively with them to explore other ways of being and relating in the world.

Therefore, it is important to avoid framing the ideas of this paper as universal “blueprints” for bridging the religion–LGBTQ divide. Indeed, the conventional opposition between religious and LGBTQ priorities is so complex and contextually specific that any desire for completely reconciling it becomes impossible to satisfy. Pedagogies of dissent cannot seek to completely erase the religion–LGBTQ divide: rather, educators should seek to expose it, with a view toward sustaining new and multiple ways of understanding and experiencing religion in the world that are empowering for LGBTQ people. In this fashion, pedagogies of dissent build bridges, but bridges that are necessarily incomplete and always open to new reworkings and formations.