Chapter 10
The Queerness of Education: Rethinking Catholic Schooling Beyond Identity

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Abstract Catholic education in formalised settings such as schools is often tied to the preservation of multiple modes of Catholic identities, from more traditionalist conceptions of what it means to 'be' Catholic to more plural and open-ended perspectives. The association of Catholic schooling with Catholic identities is often appealed to in responding to the supposed tensions that exist between religion and queerness: what it means to 'be' Catholic is often seen as the reason for either solidifying or disrupting the religious/queer divide as it plays out in school. The purpose of this paper is to take issue with both approaches on the grounds that both continue to tie Catholic schooling with Catholic identity, something which I argue risks sustaining the religious/queer divide through identity's dependence on already existing modes of (religious and queer) identification. With the view to responding to this trend, I argue that what needs to be foregrounded in discussions around religion, queerness, and Catholic schooling is the queerness of education itself, that is, education's role in transforming extant social and religious structures by providing opportunities for students to disidentify from the current state of things. I conclude by reflecting on the implications of this for understanding the 'distinctiveness' of the Catholic school, and the role of 'faith formation' therein.

Keywords Catholic identity · Queerness and catholic schooling · Disidentification · Queer theologies

Introduction

Jeanette Winterson's *Oranges are not the only fruit* is a novel that often comes to me when reflecting on the relationship between Christianity and queerness and its relevance to questions of Catholic schooling. The story centres on the semi-fictionalised childhood experiences of the author, who is destined for life as a Christian missionary before falling in love with Melanie, another girl at church. Winterson likens the

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punishments she endures because of her affections (which include having to undergo an exorcism) to a 'kind of numbness, me in ecclesiastical quarantine, them in a state of fear and anticipation' (2001 p. 171). Winterson's use of the word 'quarantine' is noteworthy: the image brings with it associations of entrapment, evoking a sense of closure, confinement, separateness. This, combined with the fact that the quarantine subtends the space between 'me' and 'them' in a manner that is both isolating and abusive, frames the relation between queerness and Christianity in antagonistic terms, in ways that are incommensurable and incongruent.

Understanding the relationship between queerness and Christianity in this oppositional register has been a longstanding feature of Catholic education. In 1983, for instance, the *Sacred Congregation for Catholic Education* explicitly framed sex education in Catholic schools in heteronormative terms, that is, in terms that valorised (marital) forms of heterosexual sexual expression as normative over same-sex sexual acts and relationships. Furthermore, in 2019 the *Congregation for Catholic Education* responded to the increasing recognition of transgender identities in education in negative ways, arguing that Catholic education ought to be grounded in a 'traditional' theological anthropology that frames gender in purely biological (rather than, say, in socially constructed or affective) terms. Crucially, such claims are rooted in the taken-for-granted assumption that Catholic education (and the Catholic school in particular) ought to exist as a site for preserving a narrowly-construed understanding of Catholic identity, one that is immutable in its deference to institutional orthodoxies, and their attendant expressions of homophobia and transphobia.

Problematising this taken-for-granted assumption is at the heart of this chapter's purpose. To provide context, such a task becomes necessary if we consider, as one example, the 2016 revelation in the Irish context of the use of the gay dating and sex app 'Grindr' by Catholic seminarians. The revelations brought about a great deal of commentary, much of which, to my mind, relied on a discourse similar to that sustaining the quarantine of Jeanette's childhood abuses. Una Mullally, journalist for the *Irish Times* and well-known contributor to queer commentary and politics, wrote the following in response to the story: 'Another question the Church and society needs to ask itself, is why a gay man would enter the priesthood, when the organisation preaches against homosexuality. It certainly is something of a paradox …' (Mullally 2016). Characterising the entry of a gay man to the Catholic priesthood as a 'paradox' rests, as I see it, on a lens that reifies gay identities and Catholic identities as necessarily antithetical to one another: in such instances, the separateness between 'me' and 'them', the essentialised dichotomy that sustains the quarantine of Jeanette's childhood, is preserved.

Of course, given the position of the Catholic Church in relation to homosexuality and gender identity detailed above, Mullally's comments are valuable in their commitment to challenging the hetero- and cisnormativity at the heart of the Church's institutional structures. They become less helpful, though, in their inability to offer productive ways forward that move away from generalisations disconnected from the complexities, contradictions, and uncertainties of religious and queer lives, lives that often can and do include Catholic priests who engage in consensual sexual

activity with other men. Indeed, in increasingly polarising times, is it not necessary for Catholic education to begin imagining alternative ways of relating to questions of sexuality and gender that avoid granting legitimacy to ossifying and divisive dichotomies? In this vein, in thinking about the place and purpose of Catholic schooling, has the time not come for us to avoid bracketing off Catholic and queer identities as inevitably this or that? Indeed, is framing these realities in terms of identity helpful at all?

The orientation of this chapter arises out of sympathy with these questions. I suggest that the opposition often set up between Catholicism and queerness is left uninterrupted in Catholic education scholarship when the purpose of Catholic schooling is tied presumptively to the preservation of Catholic identity. I challenge the work of those who seek to bridge the gap between queerness and religious schooling more generally (including Christian schooling in particular), arguing that this work risks being undermined insofar as religious schooling continues to be tied to already existing modes of religious identity.

In this regard, I suggest that in order to radically progress how we conceptualise the relation between Catholic schooling and queerness, what is needed is a move away from matrices of identity in how we think about Catholic education, and a move towards embracing what it might mean to speak of education as a queer political praxis, one that opens up the possibility for transforming extant social and religious structures by providing opportunities for students to disidentify from the current state of things. I conclude by briefly reflecting on the implications of this queer reading of Catholic schooling for understanding the 'distinctiveness' of the Catholic school, the role of 'faith formation' therein, as well as on the degree to which such a thesis speaks to, or undermines, the theological quest for the sacred that many Catholic school communities hold dear.

Queerness and the Religious School: Resisting the Antagonism

At variance to the perspectives offered by the *Congregation of Catholic Education* above, there have been a small number of voices within educational scholarship that have sought to reimagine the religious school beyond the opposition between religion and queerness. Michael Merry (2005), for example, argues for a view of Muslim schooling capable of a liberal engagement with issues around homosexuality. He sets up his argument as a challenge to the work on homosexuality and Islamic education by Halstead and Lewicka (1998), which Merry believes is limited in its reliance on a logic that assumes the inevitable opposition between 'Islam, as a religion, against homosexuality' (2005 p. 23). For Merry, this logic sanctions an 'extremely static view' of Muslim identity that fails to acknowledge 'highly differentiated manifestations of Islam throughout the world'. Merry is resistant to views that 'foist a monolithic reading of homosexuality onto Islam' (2005 p. 25) as such

a tendency is both inaccurate and inimical to the possibility of liberal dialogue in Muslim schools. Merry's view of Muslim schooling, then, is one that has echoes with Stephen Macedo's point that what is crucial about teaching and schooling from a liberal standpoint 'is that no one educational authority should totally dominate; that children acquire a measure of distance on all claims to truth in order to think critically' (2000 p. 238). In this way, Merry proposes a vision of Muslim schooling 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 a similar manner to Merry, Clarence 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 Nicholas 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 queer students, spaces where students' sexual and spiritual journeys can develop in 'intertwined and fluid' ways (2016 p. 43).

Reiterating his previous work on the emergence of Gay-Straight Alliances in Canadian Catholic schools, Graham McDonough (in a similar move to Joldersma) also claims that there is scope within the resources of the Christian tradition to justify Catholic schools taking affirmative stances where queer staff and students are concerned. Drawing on the 'People of God' ecclesiology characteristic of the papal exhortations of the Second Vatican Council, McDonough envisions the Catholic school as a 'public ecclesial space' diverse enough to grant queer identities constitutive weight in understanding what it might mean to identify a Catholic school as 'Catholic' (2016 p. 174).

While valuable in terms of disrupting the immediate association of the religious school with, say, deference to hetero- and cisnormative theologies and dogmas, the writers nonetheless build their arguments on the taken-for-granted assumption that the religious school and religious identity are necessarily aligned. The focus on identity underpinning their arguments comes to the fore in the unchallenged assumption that the religious school is somehow invested in the production of religious identities, however diversely affirmative of queerness those identities might be. Indeed, Merry, Joldersma and McDonough all implicitly frame the religious school as somehow connected to developing the religious identities of students, and that it simply needs to do so in a way that is receptive to the spaciousness that already exists within certain understandings of religious identity in order to be queer-inclusive. In calling attention to this, I do not seek to suggest that the *incidental* preservation of religious identity through schooling is problematic for society in and of itself (indeed, in many religious school contexts this will most likely happen). I simply question the alignment of the religious school's purpose with the *intentional* preservation of religious identity (however, diversely conceived) for such an impulse, to my mind, risks losing sight of what is distinctively *educational* about the school by setting certain structural and religious limits upon the school's work.

In expanding on this last point, let us follow Joldersma and McDonough for a moment, and imagine that the Catholic school were to hypothetically re-orient its activities towards the production of queer-positive forms of Catholic identity. While the divide between Catholicism and queerness would, on one level, be overcome in understanding the Catholic school in these terms, what would happen to the opposition set up between religious and atheist identities, for example, or to the oft-cited divide between more traditional and progressive religious identities? By aligning the work of religious schools to preserving and expanding certain (queer-positive) identities, do we not invariably close down possibilities and experiences that lie beyond those factors that inform the religious/queer divide to begin with?

I make this claim on the grounds that identities are always reflective of already existing social and religious structures, and are therefore incapable of tapping into forms of experience and relationship that lie outside the current state of things. In disrupting the dichotomy between Catholicism and queerness, then, would it not be more helpful for us to disentangle Catholic schooling from extant modes of Catholic identity altogether? In thinking about how we might go about this task, I unpack what it might mean to speak of education more generally, and Catholic schooling in particular, as a queer political praxis.

Education as a Queer Political Praxis

Understanding what I mean when I speak of education as a queer political praxis firstly entails developing what I mean by 'queer' itself. Queer theologian Susannah Cornwall points to the difficulty of utilising definitions in relation to queer, emphasising how 'the very concept of queer has built into it from the start an idea of elusiveness, uncertainty, non-fixity, and a resistance to closed definitions' (2011 p. 9). For Cornwall, 'queer' is a term that is necessarily uncontainable, evoking an important sense of unknowability that subverts the neatness of static classifications. In spite of this, there still exists for Cornwall the possibility of us attending to some of the enduring features that have become associated with 'queer', and she sets about this task by indicating queer's 'treble function of noun, verb and adjective' (2011 p. 9). I borrow her threefold understanding of queer in this way as I think it offers a useful route for coming to grips with what queer might mean, without losing its conceptual slipperiness.

First, queer as noun. It is difficult to determine exactly when queer began to be used as a signifier for identity. Indeed, right up to the 1960s queer was typically used as a derogatory insult directed towards those who allied themselves with non-heterosexual forms of sexual and/or gender identity and their expressions. By the 1980s and early 1990s onwards, however, queer positively entered the lexicon of lesbian, gay and bisexual activism. Activist groups such as *Queer Nation* famously sported slogans like 'We're here! We're queer! Get used to it!' in their political work, for instance (Pickett 2009 p. 157). The use of the noun queer in this way became

allied with a deviant form of self-identity (typically along sexual and/or gender-based lines) that refused to comply to the conformities of heterosexual and cisgender society, which many queer activist groups saw as relying on an overly deterministic and essentialist understanding of what it meant to espouse a sexual and/or gender identity to begin with. Queer, in short, was turned on its head from homophobic slur to a positive form of identity that gained its significance in its very refusal to grant heterosexual and cisgender identities a character of an unyielding and inflexible sort.

The paradox of the term as noun is perhaps self-evident: it signifies a dissident form of sexual and/or gender identity that gains its identity in embracing the more general futility of *identitarian* logics. It is because of this that in more recent times a further distinction has been drawn between lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex identities and queer identities: the latter is seen as far more fluid and subversive than the former, specifically in the formers' credence to more fixed or static forms of self-identification (Neary 2017). Up till now in this chapter, queer has been used in this nominal fashion to signal any person who identifies in non-heterosexual and/or cisgender ways. However, as I have been questioning the helpfulness of allying education with identity altogether, it is with a priority to queer as verb and adjective that I frame what follows.

Second, queer as *verb*. Given its roots in the sixteenth century German word *quer* meaning strange or oblique (Bevir 2010 p. 1131), it is perhaps unsurprising that queer has also come to encapsulate a particular style of *doing* something, specifically in a way that characterises the action with a sense of oddness and perplexity. To utilise a queer lens is to interrogate something with a sensitivity to unearthing and/or building upon moments, practices, behaviours, and gestures that disorient how that subject of critique is typically understood, related to, and/or oriented towards (Ahmed 2006). In this sense, queer as a verb signifies a way of relating in the world that gravitates towards the creation of new and untold futures, futures beyond the currently identifiable or permissible. While appearing apparently limitless, this commitment is grounded in a very specific focus: namely, the interruption of hetero- and cisnormativity. Queering something in an interrogative fashion (as an enactment of queer as verb) involves getting under its skin and turning it on its head, making it strange, in order to expose and disrupt the tools of homophobia, biphobia, and/or transphobia that might inform the subject of critique.

It is in this vein that José Estaban Munoz calls for a '*disidentificatory*' politics in queer theorising, where the self is enacted 'at precisely the point where the discourses of essentialism and constructivism short-circuit' (1999 p. 6): on this meaning, queer as verb actively destabilises hetero- and cisnormative logics that seek to reduce people to how they might be socially identified by others. This is not to suggest that I seek to dismiss the positive effects that the discourses of social constructivism and identity politics have had on queer lives and experiences: after all, these have necessitated and galvanised queer activism in many ways. While not denying their influence and significance, I am nonetheless resistant at granting social constructivist discourses of identity ultimacy over our lives in relationship with others. Indeed, my alignment of queer as verb with disidentification arises precisely from a desire to expose and

sustain the possibilities that can arise when we tap into the irreducible complexities of life, an irreducibility that escapes social constructivism, identity politics, and their discursive and structural limits.

Finally, queer as *adjective*. To describe something as queer is to describe that which allies itself with the kinds of political and theoretical practices I have just explored. In this spirit, queer as adjective is often used within academic discourse to draw attention to the disruptiveness of the intellectual work being engaged in. For instance, there are scholars in fields as diverse as queer literary studies, queer hermeneutics, queer legal theories, queer sports studies, queer geographies, queer media studies, queer phenomenologies and queer theologies, as well as in sub-disciplines like queer curriculum studies in the context of educational research.

The types of concepts academics engage with can also be described as queer: from conceptualising autobiography as a queer curriculum practice to the concept of a queer pedagogy itself. Importantly though, in spite of (or, indeed, because of) its disruptive quality, queer as adjective suggests a degree of preservation around that which is being queered, even while the subject of critique is undergoing potentially radical forms of reimagining. Take, for instance, the queer understanding of Catholic schooling that I seek to offer here. Thinking about Catholic schooling in queer, *disidentificatory* terms diverges significantly from how Catholic schooling has been typically theorised up till now: indeed, many might see it as almost entirely antithetical to what Catholic schooling is or ought to be for. And yet, this chapter nonetheless positions itself as engaging with, and reconstructing, Catholic schooling, rather than merely discarding or discrediting it.

Having tentatively explored what it might mean to utilise the word 'queer', it now becomes necessary for us to think about its relationship to education. In what ways does education enact a queer political praxis? Following the work of Gert Biesta, I argue that the transformative quality of education comes to the fore when individualised notion of the self are put 'at risk'. In other words, I see education as a praxis that entails an 'interruption' of the stability and security of the ego, and the structures and discourses we often use to sustain this security (for example, by aligning human endeavour to already existing structures such as religious institutions and/or discourses). In framing education in these terms, Biesta writes 'I am, however, avoiding certain other words and concepts, most notably the notion of identity—which for me has more to do with the ways in which we identify with existing orders and traditions than with ways of acting and being that are "outside" this' (Biesta 2013 p. 18). By separating his analysis from notions of identity, Biesta preserves education's concern for transforming 'what is desired into what is desirable' (2013 p. 4): through engagement with who or what is other, education becomes capable of opening up alternative possibilities to what the status quo might currently permit or determine.

By transcending the limits of identification, education renders the impossible possible: through the dialogue engendered by our exposure to others, education grants us access to different kinds of relationships that would otherwise escape the limits of how people understand themselves in connection with extant realities. It is on these educational grounds that I also distance myself from logics of identity in

this chapter. What I seek to offer is a view of Catholic schooling that goes beyond the production of identity, for it is in doing so that the limits of religious identities (and their attendant exclusions) can be exposed and interrupted as a matter of educational necessity.

However, an important question to consider at this point is the degree to which queerness truly features within my thesis, for Biesta does not engage with the task of queering education at all. Indeed, does Biesta's dissociation of education from identity hold specifically queer potential? I respond to this question in the affirmative by drawing from Claudia Ruitenberg's (2010) work, who engages with Jacques Rancière in expounding on what it might mean for a school to be engaged in queer politics. She grounds her argument in Rancière's reading of politics, which is distinct from more general understandings of politics as linked, say, to the workings and goals of existing political parties and/or institutions.

Central to Rancière's understanding of politics is his emphasis on 'the distribution of the sensible', that is, those 'self-evident facts' that constitute who or what can legitimately exist as perceptible and intelligible within the fabric of the social order (2004 p. 12). For Rancière, shifting the distribution of the sensible is at the heart of political action, for politics entails opening up spaces where the supposed naturalness of what can be legitimately sensed and perceived in this world is called into question, disrupting in the process the inegalitarianism often created by such logics. In this way, shifting the distribution of the sensible rests on the view that, through such practices, 'any order or distribution of bodies into functions corresponding to their "nature" and places … is undermined, thrown back on its own contingency' (Rancière 1999 p.101). Political work, in short, is committed to exposing and undermining the taken-for-grantedness through which the equality of certain political subjects can be otherwise denied. For Ruitenberg, queer praxis can be read as political in this Rancièrian sense 'when it exposes the contingency of sex, gender, and sexual categories and designations, and challenges the social norm that the proper place of queerness is the private sphere' (2010 p. 623). This echoes my understanding of queer as verb: queer politics enacts its queerness by actively exposing, interrogating, and reimagining those assumptions that confer hetero- and cisnormative conceptions of sex and gender political, economic, cultural, social, and religious dominance.

Importantly, in framing how a queer conception of politics can actively go about shifting the distribution of the sensible, Ruitenberg (much like Biesta) draws a necessary distinction between identification and subjectivity. For Ruitenberg, the latter has political effects, for 'politics is a matter of subjects or, rather, modes of subjectification' rather than of identities and of modes of identification. As Ruitenberg succinctly observes the 'crucial distinction between identity and subjectivity, as Rancière uses the terms, is that subjectivity questions the apparent naturalness of the rank and order implied in identities' (2010 p. 622). Subjectification is inherently disruptive of the fixed limits imposed by identity, as it is in our relationships with others that the limits of the existing order of things collapse, and alternative possibilities (beyond what is currently perceptible or intelligible) emerge.

Significantly, Ruitenberg writes of how this work opens up a subject space 'where anyone can be counted since it is the space where those of no account are counted'

(Rancière 1999 p. 36). Queer politics shifts the distribution of the sensible when it enacts forms of human togetherness that disidentify from the limits of extant (hetero- and cisnormative) social structures and discourses, and for Ruitenberg it is this that characterises the work of the school. Ruitenberg argues that in order for the school to live out a 'sharply political' praxis, it needs to sustain, rather than conflate or downplay, the gap between identity and subjectivity, for it is precisely through this gap that the queering of hetero- and cisnormative modes of identity can be enacted.

In this respect, what I offer in this chapter, then, is an invitation for Catholic education to embark on what some might read to be a very radical departure from how Catholic schooling has been typically understood. I do this out of a commit-ment to disrupting the divide between Catholicism and queerness, but in ways that fundamentally shift the *identitarian* terms of reference that are typically used in engaging in this kind of work. In light of what I have argued for, faith formation in the Catholic school, for instance, would become less about confirming or assuming alliance to religious identity on the part of our students, and more about exposing the traditions of Catholicism to the formative possibilities created by their own potential self-effacement. What would make the Catholic school distinctively 'Catholic', then, would be less about identifying the school's students, staff or activities *with* Catholi-cism, per se, and more about creating spaces for both the beauty and the ugliness of Catholicism and its heritage to be exposed to the multiple queer futurities engendered by the 'disidentificatory' quality of the educational encounter.

Of course, many might argue that what I am suggesting risks disrespecting the quest for the sacred that many Catholic school communities hold dear. Indeed, is my argument, in its resistance to identity, fundamentally anti-theological? Or, alter-natively, are there theological and religious resources at our disposal that speak to my refigured alignment of the Catholic school with queer, 'disidentificatory' praxes? To my mind, there are. I am thinking, for instance, of the ever-expanding field of queer theologies, which can be understood as particular styles of thinking and feeling theology that have as their aim the interrogation, reconstruction, and reimagination of theological tropes, images, arguments, and traditions with the view to overcoming the damaging legacies of religiously-inspired hetero- and cisnormativity. Queer theolo-gies, being queer, are necessarily unorthodox in the sense that they deliberately move away from traditional and/or canonical conceptions of God-talk, conceptions which have (for the queer theologian) been framed for too long in terms of a heterosexual and/or cisgender take on divine-human experience.

Jeremy Carette and James Bernauer's take on what it means to queer religion (in the sense of queer as verb) goes some way to illustrating the affinities between recent trends in theological scholarship and the praxis argued for in this chapter

> 'Religion becomes queer when it breaks up the desiring self, when it refuses to confess an identity, when it refuses to say who we are, and acknowledges a plural self with polymorphous desires. To queer religion is to queer the foundations of theology, its monotheism, its mono-sexuality and its monopoly of truth.' (2004 p. 225)

Queer theologies, in other words, expand our understanding of what religion means, in ways that destabilise those fixed notions of identity and belonging that

sustain the oppositional relation between religion and queerness. On this meaning, queer theologies disrupt 'unified' conceptions of God and religion, serving, as Catholic Latin American queer theologian Marcella Althaus-Reid argues, as 'an example of high theological doubting or queering, irreverent in the sense that [they tend] to desacralize what has been made sacred for the sake of ideological interests' (Althaus-Reid 2001, p. 58). Can this not be a purpose of Catholic education and schooling? To desacralize what has been traditionally made 'sacred' in order to understand the very idea of sacredness more fully? To disrupt, rather than solidify, our sexual, gendered and theological imaginations?

For me, if education is interested in changing lives and futures, in creating opportunities for personal and social transformation to occur, then this demands cultivating a greater degree of theological spaciousness at the interface between religion and queerness in the Catholic school, a spaciousness that transcends the strictures of identity and its limits (Henry 2019). For Jeanette's sake, it is my hope that this chapter opens up some queer possibilities for beginning this work.

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