Queer Pedagogy and/in Religious Studies

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Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, and queer (LGBTIQ) people exist in all religious traditions. It is very likely that they also exist in most religious studies classrooms as teachers or as students. Queer theory as an academic approach to studying texts, representations, and practices has existed for two decades and has found its way into most disciplines, including religious studies (visible, for example, in the “Queer Theory and LGBT Issues in Religion Consultation” within the American Academy of Religion—one co-sponsor of the panel discussion at the 2009 Annual Meeting in Montreal on which this special issue of the *Bulletin for the Study of Religion* is based). And yet very little has been written about meaningful approaches to teaching LGBTIQ issues within the discipline of religious studies.

Is there something queer about teaching religion? Several of the contributors to this special issue on “Queer Pedagogy and/in Religious Studies” seem to think so. What makes pedagogy queer? How does a queer theoretical approach translate into teaching; specifically, how does it translate into teaching religion? Several of the contributors have wrestled with these questions for many years. Does the teaching of religion change, for example, when we teach from an anti-homophobic perspective, informed by a critical queer pedagogy? Is such an approach to teaching religion completely new, or is it already being practiced in our religious studies classrooms? The following essays are devoted to exploring some of these and related questions.

How does “resistance to heteronormativity,” a hallmark of queer theory, translate in the classroom (which, some might argue, can be a space where teachers are tasked with instructing—or disciplining?—students in the normative

content of a field and where students may often want to conform to just that normativity by trying to “get it right”)? Issues such as the difficulty of resistance (or liberation, within a related paradigm) have been explored under the heading of queer pedagogy in some academic areas, but these discussions lag far behind other scholarly debates in queer studies; indeed, one leading scholar suggests that “The status of queer theory within the academic field of education is an ongoing scandal” (Pinar 2007, 2). Yet some scholars have explored issues of anti-homophobic and queer education, drawing on queer theory’s activist roots and seeking to realize its close relationship to other pedagogical approaches that seek to influence, subvert, or change classroom dynamics (see, e.g., Kumashiro 2002). Others have explored queer issues in specific educational contexts or investigated the role of the teacher’s body (including the queer teacher’s body) in the classroom (Cooks and Lebesco, 2006; Freedman and Holmes, 2003). Some important work in queer pedagogy may be found in anthologies devoted to related topics: for example, the third part of *Black Queer Studies: A Critical Anthology* is devoted specifically to essays engaging the question “How to teach the Unspeakable: Race, Queer Studies, and Pedagogy” (Johnson and Henderson 2005, 249-88). Several anthologies focus specifically on queer theoretical approaches to teaching (Pinar 1998), including recent collections of work analyzing attempts to “queer straight teachers” (Rodriguez and Pinar, 2007) and proposals to interrupt heteronormativity in the classroom (Farrell, Gupta, and Queen 2007).

What it means to think through teaching *religion* queerly has thus far not been explored extensively in academic writing, although some excellent work in queer religious studies is certainly instructive. The essays in this volume emerged out of a panel discussion co-sponsored by the “Queer Theory and LGBT Studies Consultation” and the “Teaching Religion Section” at the 2009 Annual Meeting of the American Academy of Religion. Contributors were invited to produce reflections on teaching religion queerly, teaching religion as a queer thing, subverting conventional definitions of (the) discipline, and teaching religion outside of religious studies departments/programs, among other possible topics.

The essays, like the panel discussion for which they were initially conceptualized, do not offer one authoritative answer to the complex questions they engage. Instead, they engage queer pedagogical topics within various classrooms, from varied experiential perspectives, and with the courage and care necessary to dealing with uncomfortable—but provocative and important—pedagogical challenges residing at the intersections of religion and queer studies. Each of the essays in this issue provides examples of how teachers at various points in their careers and in diverse institutional locales, queer religious studies in their classrooms.

Exploring both the queerness of the teacher and the subject matter of religious studies in the first essay, Melissa Wilcox explores “what it means to be a freak and a queer in the study of religion and what it means to study freaks and queers.” Drawing on a comparison between the queer religious studies scholar and the mythological chimera, Wilcox demonstrates how interdisciplinary religion scholars and queers encounter abjection because of their failure to “fit” disciplinary norms. Wilcox demonstrates how to teach as and about freaks within religion by offering several compelling examples of responsible pedagogy. A classroom exercise about the Branch Davidians facilitates student learning by approaching non-normative religions not as exotic exceptions but as opportunities for phenomenological and empathetic understanding. Examples from Wilcox’s “Queer Sexualities” class further illustrate the challenge of teaching religion and sexuality critically. Finally, Wilcox queries whether homophobia has a place in the queer classroom, explaining how she has negotiated the classroom in ways that facilitate teaching and learning that takes the abject seriously.

Turning to more traditional religion classrooms and exploring how “the subject” (the teacher, student, and the lesson-material) is queered, Ellen T. Armour reflects on two decades of teaching students about Christianity. Like Ann Burlein in a later essay, Armour helps students de-familiarize their previous knowledge of Christianity. Queerness, she suggests, is not something that needs

to be imported into her survey class as “queerness is already in the room.” Ancient texts and sources of the Christian traditions are already queer in a number of ways: from the Epic of Gilgamesh to the second biblical creation story in Genesis to several queer moments in Augustine of Hippo, Armour’s class discussions becomes conducive to defamiliarizing students’ habitual assumptions. Armour practices, with them, “read[ing] [regimes of sexuality and Christianity] otherwise”. Mindful of the difficulties such un-learning can pose to the teacher as well, Armour ends her essay with helpful examples of best practices for the queer religion classroom, noting that queer pedagogy can be uncomfortable. The temptation (and hope) of teaching, she contends, is that we might change our students’ minds, even as we know that this is outside anyone’s control. Questions pertaining to the goal of queer pedagogy in religion are also addressed in several other contributions to this volume.

Thelathia H. Young opens her essay, “De-Centering Religion as Queer Pedagogical Practice,” with the claim that “the purpose of teaching is to faithfully participate in the process of leading students to a place of new consciousness” and describes her own pedagogy as one of liberation, informed by participatory and social justice directed dialogue and cooperation. Young demonstrates her approach to teaching about race, class, gender, and sexuality in religious ethics by reviewing the pedagogical strategies she employs when teaching high school students in Emory University’s summer Youth Theological Initiative and in offering workshops on gender and sexuality as part of an Ethics and Servant Leadership Forum. Influenced by feminist and womanist ethics and drawing on the work of Freire and Boal, Young illustrates how to queer religion by decentering norms and reconfiguring normative authority within a cooperative teaching and learning context.

Reflecting on pedagogical strategies within the religion classroom on the other side of the U.S., Juan A. Herrero in “‘I Too Could Be Gay, *If I Wanted*’: Misplaced Empathy” picks up the theme of discomfort in queer pedagogy raised by Armour’s contribution. Suggesting that the shift from misplaced to the right kind of empathy is an important goal of teaching about queerness and religion,

Herrero reflects specifically on the psychological and emotional reactions prompted by discussions of homosexuality in the classroom. Herrero explores scholarly studies that can help explain how discussions of sexuality “touch” students, and suggests approaches that may gently shift student reactivity. Wilcox’s reflections on how to preempt or respond to displays of misplaced empathy in the classroom are furthered by Herrero’s discussion of specific strategies and practical examples “from the field”.

Further theorizing the productive tensions that can be engaged within the classroom, Kate Lassiter and Andrea Tucker explore the space of the divinity classroom as itself already queer in “‘It’s Queer Up in Here!’: Excess, Experience, and Performance in the Divinity Classroom.” Neither solely committed to inner-theological debates nor entirely placed within the academic study of religion, the divinity classroom contains elements of both. Thus it is perhaps chimerical in Wilcox’s sense. For Lassiter and Tucker, the de-familiarizing impulse of queer theory, especially when combined with teaching students to see the relevance of religious tradition, opens up incoherence as a productive site of learning. Lassiter and Tucker spell out some elements of a queer pedagogy that pays attention to incoherence and ambiguity. Opting for the value of unsanitized narratives that do not avoid but embrace excess, the authors offer personal reflections from several (perhaps even contradictory) sides of a conversation that look both within and outside the traditionally defined religion classroom.

Moving from divinity school back to “secular” universities, the last two essays explicate how religion might itself be “a queer thing” within the humanist university’s enterprise. What is queer in or about religion can thus be observed in many contexts that might not initially seem to be (about) religion. Like the preceding essay, Fred Roden’s contribution explores the queerness of the classroom—in his case, a literature classroom. In “Writing Rites: Religion and Queerness in the Literature Classroom” Rhoden contends that being a scholar of religion in an English department seems often “much queerer” than investigating topics of sexuality within literary studies. The great “ambivalence of the secular

humanities academy over the study of religion” enables Roden to claim the queer potential of his location. Teaching religion can become a queer exercise of teaching critically about identity and narrative. Addressing the theme of queer pedagogical goals raised by Armour and Young, among others, Roden claims that his “goal in teaching about religion is to convert.” Because he teaches topics that do not immediately appear to be “about religion,” Roden may be said to practice the “stealth queering of religion” that Armour addresses in her essay. His classes on “Literature and the Spiritual Journey” and “Holocaust Literature” bring students’ religious identities to the forefront of class discussion.

In the final essay, Ann Burlein extends the critical queering of religion’s proper disciplinary location further by “looking for religion in all the wrong places,” namely outside of religion as “tradition.” Complicating the relationship of the religious and secular, both within and outside of the study of religion, Burlein describes her integration of a careful study of Foucault’s extensive work in the teaching of religious studies. She gives examples of specific teaching strategies that enable students to discover often unexpected sites “where religion happens.” Like some of the previous authors, Burlein’s pedagogical strategies are aimed at defamiliarizing students’ assumptions, and discovering different orientations toward embodied practices and cultural habits. As a result, students can learn to critically draw on, but also subvert normative understandings of, their own lived practices.

Taken together, the essays in this issue exemplify queer approaches for the classroom, including for classes and topics perhaps not initially recognizable as studying “religion” (Burlein’s teaching of Nietzsche or Foucault or Roden’s reflection on teaching autobiography in an English class.) Queering religion thus shifts our assumptions of what “counts” and what has to be taken seriously (as Wilcox demonstrates in her classroom exercise when teaching New Religious Movements.) Even within the “traditional” religious studies classroom (as Armour and Lassiter/Tucker demonstrate in their reflections on teaching Christianity), queer moments abound and can be used to shift what counts as valuable within the study of religion and sexuality.

The contributors in this issue go beyond simply describing coming out in the classroom (not that there is anything simple about it), but they explore how sexual (and other) identities function within the religion classroom and how a responsible pedagogical approach can challenge normative ideals while also aiming to protect those vulnerable as a result (see for example Wilcox, Young, Herrero).

Grappling with the intentionally disruptive or subversive implications of a queer approach, several of the essays explicitly discuss the intentions and purpose of our teaching. Is it to “convert,” as Roden puts it, and if so, from or to what, exactly? Is the goal of queering the religious studies classroom to facilitate resistance, or liberation (as Young’s projects with high school students and young people interested in religion suggests), or is it to teach and model becoming comfortable with ambiguity (as Lassiter/Tucker and Burlein, but also most other authors seem to suggest.)

Taken together, the essays in this volume can begin to help us examine how studying and teaching religion can be(come) a queer practice in a public university, where challenges to the secular-religious binary raise troubling implications regarding claims about reason, which are at the center of the modern Western intellectual enterprise.

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