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QUEERING RELIGIOUS AND THEOLOGICAL STUDIES:

PEDAGOGICAL PHILOSOPHY AND PRAXIS

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ABSTRACT

This roundtable explores the intersections of queer pedagogy and the teaching of religion—in and partly beyond the fields of religious studies and theology—in higher education settings. The various contributions present reflections based on innovative teaching and transformative curriculum practices in religion courses and programs, specifically in South Africa and the United Kingdom but—we believe—with wider relevance.[1]

KEYWORDS: curriculum, pedagogy, queer, religious studies, theology

Queering for Social Transformation

One reason the theme of this roundtable is important is that issues relating to LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) identities, politics and rights remain controversial in many

[1] The papers included in this roundtable were initially presented during two research workshops that took place in June 2016 at the University of Leeds, United Kingdom, and in August 2016 at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. We convened these workshops as part of a collaborative project, "Queering the TRS Curriculum: LGBT, Sexuality, and Masculinity Issues in Theology and Religious Studies in South Africa and the UK." Funded under the British Academy's Newton Mobility grant scheme, which promotes research collaboration between academics in South Africa and the United Kingdom on a topic relevant to promoting social welfare, the project sought to address a theme relevant to the United Kingdom and South African context. We believe, however, that the relevance of this topic is much broader. We thank the JFSR editors for the opportunity of sharing the insights developed through the project with a much wider academic audience—that is, the readership of this journal.

parts of the world. In South Africa, despite its progressive constitution safeguarding LGBT rights, LGBT people often face social and political marginalization and exclusion. The same applies to the United Kingdom and other European countries where, regardless of their apparent liberal and tolerant self-image, full LGBT inclusion cannot be taken for granted. Religion is widely considered as one of the major forces fueling negative perceptions about and attitudes toward LGBT people, and particularly in Africa, religious moral claims against sexual diversity are combined with claims that such sexual diversity is "un-African" and a Western import.[2] The veracity of this claim is of course countered by the implicit and explicit promotion of heteronormative and patriarchal gender norms even in the West, as the debacle on transgender toilet use in the United States has demonstrated, with many arguing that the debates about "safety" were actually masking Religious Right moral claims.[3]

While such moral claims to religious truth fuel anti-queer sentiment, it has also been recognized that religious leaders, faith communities, and religious education teachers can play an important role in contributing to social change in this area. This requires a critical interrogation of religion at the intersections of sexuality and gender, in order to destabilize heteronormativity and patriarchy. Especially in the South(ern) African context, discussions of masculinity (stimulated by the devastating realities of the HIV epidemic) have more recently enabled discussions of queer sexualities (see, for instance, Gerald West's contribution to this roundtable), which is why we deliberately included this term in the title of the original project this roundtable is the result of. Yet we recognized that while theories of masculinities may provide helpful entry points into the queering discourse, at the same time it may very well

[2] Adriaan van Klinken and Ezra Chitando, eds., Public Religion and the Politics of Homosexuality in Africa (Abingdon: Routledge 2016), and Adriaan van Klinken and Masiiwa Gunda, "Taking up the Cudgels against Gay Rights? Trends and Trajectories in African Christian theologies on Homosexuality," Journal of Homosexuality 59, no. 1 (2012): 114–38.

[3] Robin Fretwell Wilson, "The Nonsense about Bathrooms: How Purported Concerns over Safety Block LGBT Nondiscrimination Laws and Obscure Real Religious Liberty Concerns," Lewis and Clark Law Review 20 (2016): 1373–1460, esp. 1373.

shore up the dominance of the masculine lens. In all of this, we are forced to constantly negotiate, navigate, and ultimately question the gender binary and its use in the purpose of transformation—even at a curriculum level.

This roundtable is based on the premise that the theology and/or religious studies (TRS) curriculum is a means for training students—future professionals in a whole range of public, social, and political sectors—in understanding and interrogating religious beliefs and practices in relation to LGBT issues and sexuality and gender more broadly. Following from this, it is pertinent to examine how LGBT issues are currently being addressed in TRS programs at higher-education institutions, to explore what changes in the curriculum might be required, and to envision how such changes can be achieved. While change in curriculum may very well be required, we are also cognizant of Mary Hames's cautionary question regarding "how we can teach [about] sexuality and sexual orientation as matters of political interest without pathologising homosexuality."[4] One way to address this concern may lie in the recognition that querying goes "beyond the sexual" and therefore, the act of queering the curriculum is also about teaching as a political act. It is about transgressive teaching:[5] the development of a curious, critical, and interrogative mind that allows students, in Martha Nussbaum's words, to become (or to grow as) "citizens of the world" who are actively concerned with democracy, human rights, and global justice.[6]

Queering as Mainstreaming LGBT Issues

Hence, notwithstanding that the subtitle of our initial project suggests that we understood queering the curriculum to be about the inclusion of issues around LGBT

[4] Mary Hames, "Embodying the Learning Space: Is It Okay If I Bring My Sexuality to Class?," Feminist Africa 17 (2012): 62–81, quotation on 66.
[5] bell hooks, Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom (London: Routledge, 1994).
[6] Martha C. Nussbaum, Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012), 79.

identities and experiences in our teaching practices and curriculum design; this relates to just one usage of the term queer as an umbrella term for LGBT and otherwise nonheterosexual identities and communities. From that perspective, as indicated in the title of a recently published volume, queering is about "expanding the circle" and "creating an inclusive environment in higher education for LGBTQ students and studies."[7] One may think a lot of progress has already been made in this area—after all, on most university campuses both in the United Kingdom and in South Africa there are LGBT student societies, LGBT History Month is publicly celebrated, and our own teaching rooms are (we wish to believe) safe spaces for LGBT students. However, whether our curriculum is truly inclusive remains a critical question. In the same way as black students (both in the United Kingdom and in South Africa) have recently asked, "Why is our curriculum (still so) white?," LGBT students may have reasons to ask why their curriculum is still so straight—as reflected in the texts they must read, the topics and themes they learn about, and the essay questions they choose from. Does the presence of one lecture in a module or one (usually optional) module in a program that addresses LGBT issues really reflect true "inclusion"? Furthermore, whether our teaching rooms are really experienced as safe spaces by LGBT students is questionable as well.

Within the LGBT acronym, the experiences of different groups—lesbian women, gay men, bisexuals, transgender people (as well as possibly intersex people[8])—may vary significantly. The levels of knowledge about, and understanding of each of these groups is very different, and hence also the levels of acceptance and inclusion. Transgender and intersex categories, especially, remain surrounded by relatively high levels of ignorance, taboo, and stigma. Moreover, in the rather diverse (in terms of cultural, religious, and

[7] John S. Hawley, ed., Expanding the Circle: Creating an Inclusive Environment in Higher Education for LGBTIQ Students and Studies (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2015).
[8] We are cautious with including the category of intersex under the LGBT(I)/queer umbrella as intersex activists have often resisted such inclusion.

socioeconomic backgrounds) student bodies that make up our classrooms, there exists a variety of opinions about and attitudes toward LGBT issues and people, which again may affect the experience of LGBT students and which also may limit our own ability to make our teaching spaces safe. So, there is a whole set of questions to be asked about further improving the inclusion of LGBT perspectives in the curriculum and in our teaching practices.

Queering as Radical Interrogation

Queering the curriculum in our opinion, however, is not only and maybe not primarily about including LGBT perspectives. In fact, the strategy of inclusion has been criticized by several scholars in queer pedagogy as a form of "assimilationist politics"—a strategy that seeks to expand the definition of normal to include LGBT people instead of "attacking and undermining the very processes by which (some) subjects become normalized and others marginalized."[9] This critique is informed by a second usage of the term queer, in which it is not just an umbrella term for the ever-expanding acronym of LGBT(I/A/Q) but refers to a radical political and theoretical perspective interrogating categories of sexual and gender (and indeed any other) identity and the related normativities and processes of normalization. According to Susanne Luhmann, queer theory in this regard provides an important entry point for thinking through a queer pedagogy:

> Beyond proudly reclaiming a marginal space, against merely adding authentic or likable portrayals of lesbian/gay icons to an otherwise straight—and already overcrowded—curriculum, against claiming normalcy for lesbians and gays, queer theory looks at the process of subject formation (ironically) by asking: How do normalcy and abnormalcy become assigned subject positions? How can they be

[9] Susanne Luhmann, "Queering/Querying Pedagogy? Or, Pedagogy Is a Pretty Queer Thing," in Queer Theory in Education, ed. William F. Pinar (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1998), 143–44.

> subverted? How can the very notion of a unified human subject be parodied and, jointly with other discourses, radically deconstructed into a fluid, permanently shifting, and unintelligible subjectivity?[10]

With this set of questions, the agenda of "queering the curriculum" becomes broader and more radical than merely including LGBT perspectives. Again, in the words of Luhmann: "If queer pedagogy . . . is foremost concerned with a radical practice of deconstructing normalcy, then it is obviously not confined to teaching as, for, or about queer subject(s)."[11] Queer pedagogy, for Dennis Sumara and Brent Davis, is fundamentally about "interrupting heteronormativity . . . not only to promote social justice, but to broaden possibilities for perceiving, interpreting and representing experience."[12] Arguing that queer theory exposes the sexual—and in fact, "explicitly heterosexualized"[13]—nature of pedagogy and the curriculum, they point out that heteronormative structures are limiting to students and their learning experience. "Interrupting heteronormativity, then, becomes an important way to broaden perception, to complexify cognition, and to amplify the imagination of learners."[14]

Where these queer pedagogy scholars understand "queering" primarily in relation to sexuality—more specifically in terms of sexual epistemologies and structures of knowledge and learning/teaching—"queer" is not necessarily about sexuality. Following David Halperin's famous capturing of the term queer as "a positionality vis-à-vis the normative," queering can potentially entail an interrogation of norms, a critique of stable identities, and a deconstruction of binary structures and systems of thought in any area.[15] From this perspective, in recent years, queer studies has foregrounded intersections between sexuality

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[10] Ibid., 146.
[11] Ibid., 151.
[12] Dennis Sumara and Brent Davis, "Interrupting Heteronormativity: Towards a Queer Curriculum Theory," Curriculum Inquiry 29, no. 2 (1999): 191–208, quotation on 191.
[13] Ibid., 192.
[14] Ibid., 202.
[15] David M. Halperin, Saint Foucault: Towards a Gay Hagiography (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 62.

and such other categories as gender, race, class, and ethnicity. Acknowledging intersectionality is also a way of preventing queer studies, and queer pedagogy, to be (or remain) as white, Western, and privileged as some of its critics have argued it is. One question we like to raise in this context is how the agenda of queering the curriculum relates (or can be related) to the agenda of decolonizing the curriculum. In South Africa, the question of decolonization is on top of the agenda of the higher-education sector, especially after the #RhodesMustFall mass student protests starting late 2015. But the problem of "epistemic coloniality, that is, the endless production of theories that are based on European traditions," as Achille Mbembe puts it, is certainly not a problem for the South African academy alone.[16] Instead of the traditional university, Mbembe calls for a pluriversity—"a process of knowledge production that is open to epistemic diversity . . . [and] does not necessarily abandon the notion of universal knowledge for humanity, but which embraces it via a horizontal strategy of openness to dialogue among different epistemic traditions." Although exploring the relation between queering and decolonizing the curriculum is not the aim of this roundtable as such, various contributions touch on this issue and indicate how queering the curriculum might feed into Mbembe's vision of the pluriversity.

Queering the Discipline

Another question that deserves attention is about the TRS curriculum specifically. Is there anything particular about queering the curriculum in the field of theology and/or religious studies? It seems that the disciplinary field of religion has done very little to queer its curriculum or even think systematically about how to do so. Although there is a body of literature on queer pedagogy dating back to the late 1990s, there is little evidence of

[16] Achille Mbembe, "Decolonizing the University: New Directions," Arts and Humanities in Higher Education 15, no. 1 (2016): 29–45, quotation on 36.

engagement with, and application of, this body of scholarship in theology and religious studies higher-education settings. A seemingly obvious place to find such evidence is the journal Teaching Theology and Religion. Yet only very recently did this journal publish, for the first time, a series of articles addressing questions about teaching sexuality and religion—similar to the ones this roundtable addresses.[17]

One possible explanation for the lack of any substantial body of scholarship on queer pedagogical and curriculum practices in the teaching of religion might be that TRS is a rather conservative academic field. This may be partly correct, especially (but not only) for institutions with strong denominational/confessional links. Yet many higher education institutions teaching religion do not have such links. Moreover, for at least ten to fifteen years, a number of scholars of religion have done original and creative writing in the areas of queer theology and queer religious studies.[18] Apparently, this work has not been systematically related and applied to the teaching of religion. Another explanation would then be that pedagogy and curriculum research more generally are not well developed in theology and religious studies, perhaps because such type of research is sometimes undervalued in the academy due to the problematic distinction between "research" and "teaching" that has become typical of the modern university. Interrogating the latter distinction, this roundtable addresses the overall scarcity of scholarship at the intersections of queer pedagogy and the teaching of religion in higher education.

Given that queering is not necessarily about sexuality but is about interrogating binary constructions, we would like to suggest that one of the boundaries we may have to queer is

[17] Teaching Theology and Religion 20, no. 2 (April 2017).
[18] See, for instance, Marcella Althaus-Reid, The Queer God (London: Routledge, 2003); Gerard Loughlin, ed., Queer Theology: Rethinking the Western Body (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2007); Donald L. Boisvert and Jay Emerson Johnson, eds., Queer Religion, Vol. 1, Homosexuality in Modern Religious History (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2012), and Donald L. Boisvert and Jay Emerson Johnson, eds., Queer Religion, Vol. 2, LGBT Movements and Queering Religion (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2012).

the long-debated distinction between theology and religious studies.[19] In most accounts, this distinction is based on a somewhat simplistic insider/outsider notion that can be critically questioned from queer perspectives.[20] Queer theory (alongside feminist, postcolonial, and other critical theories) has fundamentally challenged and interrogated claims to academic objectivity and neutrality. Indeed, we agree with Kate Ott and Darryl Stephens when they contend that "teaching about sexuality and embodiment implies some normative commitments, as does the decision not to teach about these aspects of human experience and religious practice."[21] This applies to theology and to religious studies equally, and some of the contributions to this roundtable, such as by Rachel Muers, demonstrate how the boundaries between "theology" and "religious studies" become blurred as soon as queer perspectives are taken into account. Our suggestion is not simply to ignore different approaches toward and within the study of religion but to explore how the boundaries between those approaches called "theology" and those labeled as "religious studies" could be engaged more critically, creatively, and more productively from queer perspectives. This could be done by foregrounding perspectives that acknowledge the embodied, relational, and indeed sexual and erotic dimensions of learning as well as of knowledge production and exchange. One possible strategy for accomplishing this is employing sexual and religious biographies in teaching settings.[22] Doing so builds on a longer tradition in queer pedagogy of using autobiography as a queer curriculum practice; after all, from a queer perspective, autobiography interrogates "predictable, stable, and normative identities and curricula" and

[19] In addition to this "distinction" there is also an apparent "discrimination" especially in the South African context where the study of Christian Theology is given preference to the study of other faith traditions. Faculties, academic societies and even academic journals in the South African context reflect this imbalance.
[20] After we have queered our curriculum and have trained our students accordingly, one essay question we may want to pose to them is whether being an "insider" in queer studies is the same as being an "insider" in the study of religion.
[21] Kate Ott and Darryl W. Stephens, "Embodied Learning: Teaching Sexuality and Religion to a Changing Student Body," Teaching Theology and Religion 20, no. 2 (April 2017): 106–16, quotation on 108.
[22] Kent L. Brintall, "Sexual and Religious Autobiography," Teaching Theology and Religion 20, no. 2 (April 2017), 148.

instead enables "a consideration of "selves" and curricula as sites of "permanent openness and resignifiability."[23]

In addition to querying the boundaries between disciplines, we may even consider that querying requires rethinking the boundaries between academic and nonacademic spaces. Describing the experiences of some lesbian, gay, and transgender students at the University of the Western Cape in South Africa and "the deployment of pedagogical approaches that are applied outside the formal academic project," Mary Hames has argued that

> the academic project rarely appreciates the fundamentally important roles that non-academic spaces within the university context may play in the development and implementation of innovative pedagogical methods, which may teach very difficult concepts concerning the complex realities of students' lives . . . it is often in these marginalised places (units on HIV, disability, student welfare, or—in our case—gender equity) where cutting-edge research and teaching take place. . . . The link between academic departments, research units and institutes and civil society should not be under-estimated. . . . There is a continuous and symbiotic relationship between academy and civil society. Such relationships may include ideas on the design of curricula, and suggest particular pedagogical approaches.[24]

In other words, queering the curriculum is not something that takes place in the ivory tower of academia but is rather a process that emerges at the junctures of social activism, political engagement, critical thought, academic research, and higher education. In this respect, community-based pedagogy (for example, Kamrudin's contribution to this roundtable) is as important as the pedagogy in our academic classrooms.

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[23] Janet L. Miller, "Autobiography as a Queer Curriculum Practice," in Queer Theory in Education, ed. William F. Pinar (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1998), 367.
[24] Mary Hames, "Embodying the Learning Space,": Is it Okay if I Bring My Sexuality to Class?," Feminist Africa 17, (2012), 62–63.

Finally, notwithstanding our commitment to an understanding beyond the sexual within the queer curriculum discourse, to one that embraces a "troubling of the binary," we want to assert that queering binaries does not necessarily mean erasing them. We recognize the importance of the binary for political ends and the fact that feminist theorizing has taught us a great deal in this regard. The materiality of the experiences (particularly when they are violent) of those socially constructed as "women" is not lost on us in this exploration of the queer curriculum. In this regard, the benefit of strategic essentialism as a heuristic tool within queer theorizing of the curriculum is most significant.[25]

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[25] Gayatri Spivak, In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics (1987; repr., New York: Routledge, 1998).