

Book Review/Recension d'ouvrage

Homophobia in the Hallways: Heterosexism and Transphobia in Canadian Catholic Schools

by Tonya D. Callaghan

Toronto, Ontario: University of Toronto Press, 2018, 251 pages

ISBN: 978-1-4875-2267-4 (paperback)

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In the middle of 2017 as part of a response to the mass murder at the Pulse nightclub in Miami, a Jesuit priest, Fr. James Martin, released a short book aimed at rethinking the Church's orientation (pun intended) to the LGBTQ community. Because Martin has some measure of celebrity in the United States—he is the unofficial chaplain of Stephen Colbert's former show, *The Colbert Report*—the book was taken up as a *cri de coeur* in line with Pope Francis' very public “who am I to judge” approach to gay individuals. Still, the work was not radical theology and was more or less in line with the kind of mainstream approaches to ministry of LGBTQ individuals that persist in moderate religious circles. And yet, the reaction from conservative groups was swift and shocking: Martin was declared a heretic by various pressure groups who pushed dioceses and Catholic colleges to disinvite him from public appearances, even when his lecture topics were focused on, say, Jesus and the Gospels. The above matters here because Tonya Callaghan's *Homophobia in the Hallways: Heterosexism and Transphobia in Canadian Catholic Schools* presents readers with a cogent and thorough analysis of “how power operates in

Canadian Catholic schools” (p. 3) and particularly gives readers insight into the ways in which these kinds of “Catholic ‘regimes of truth’ that cast homosexuality as ‘an objective disorder’” might easily produce violent backlash to the simple work of treating LGBTQ individuals as full human subjects.

It’s important to note that there is very little work on or about Catholic schools (or Catholic Education generally) in educational research that engages in the hermeneutics of suspicion. That is: by and large the educational research establishment has more or less ignored Catholic schooling as a site of critical scholarship. There are exceptions, Nancy Lesko’s *Symbolizing Society: Stories Rites and Structure in a Catholic High School* (1988) and Peter McLaren’s *Schooling as Ritual Performance* (1999) come immediately to mind. Callaghan’s book works to fill this gaping hole; a former Catholic school educator herself, the author uses the study to “gain a better understanding of religiously inspired oppression against vulnerable gender and sexual minority groups in publicly funded Canadian Catholic schools” (p. 4). To get there, Callaghan focuses in on three data sources: “life narrative vignettes” (p. 8) from current and former Catholic school teachers and students who identify as LGBTQ or as allies; media coverage of prominent clashes in Canadian Catholic schools and through a close reading of Catholic doctrinal documents in Ontario and Alberta. As a way to make sense of threads of her data, Callaghan draws upon “Gramsci’s notion of hegemony...Althusser’s concept of the ideological state apparatus...and Foucault’s theory of disciplinary surveillance” (p. 165). The text then, is an intricate interweaving of personal narrative, critical media and textual analysis funneled through a somewhat rare mesh of theories of power. Ultimately the work settles on the sense that though Gramsci might be too structural, and Althusser too dismissive of agency and Foucault too vague in the details of the realization of resistance, together, as Callaghan argues them, the theories allow for varied angles into the ways in which through repression, “the existence of ordinary Catholic educators perform[ed] relatively extraordinary acts of resistance and radical change” (p. 193). Though not always.

The throughline of the book is the argument that the Canadian public would do well to attend more closely to the ways in which publicly funded Catholic schools flout the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms from 1982. The author is careful to note throughout that because of their funding sources, “publicly funded separate Catholic schools are accountable to civil, not church, authorities” (p. 6). This isn’t, truth be told,

entirely right, as any Catholic school is accountable to the Church in some manner, but the larger point is that the kind of “doctrinal disciplining” (p. 86) that occurs in the schools is a result of Catholic leaders in Alberta and Ontario Catholic schools choosing to believe that Catholic schools have the denominational right to interpret governmental policy on matters of sexuality through a Catholic lens” (p. 114). This is, also, however, a book that deserves to be read in circles concerned less with the particularized problem of Canadian Catholic schools, and more concerned with the ways in which homophobia affects the lives of students and teachers. To that end we ought, finally, attend to the “in-depth qualitative interviews” (p. 38) converted into “narrative vignettes” for the sake of “transform[ing] educational practice” (p. 39).

For anyone educated in a Catholic school, it will come as little surprise that a student like Jonas responds to homophobic bullying by noting “I just kind of got used to the fact that it was a Catholic school and that they were probably not going to do anything” (p. 65). Nor will it be shocking that teachers have been forced to remain closeted to keep their jobs just as others have lost theirs for being too obviously ‘out’ about their sexuality or gender transitions. What is surprising and hopeful about the book, and this is why it should be read widely not only by Catholic educators, but by educators committed to supporting the LGBTQ community in any school, comes in the sense that, as Abigail, a graduate of a Catholic school notes, “the resistance is already starting to happen...it’s change one day, but we have to change it” (p. 180). One of the ways in which this change happens comes through critical educational research that attends to the unique—troubling but also fulfilling—circumstances of Catholic education in Canada and beyond. Callaghan’s book gives us a ready template for forwarding such work along.

References

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- McLaren, P. (1999). *Schooling as ritual performance: Toward a political economy of educational symbols and gestures (3rd ed.)*. New York: Rowman Littlefield.