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Seán Henry

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# 'Why? And how?' Translating queer theologies of sex education

Seán Henry 

Department of Education, Maynooth University, Maynooth, Republic of Ireland

## ABSTRACT

This paper engages with two overarching questions: why is engaging with queer theologies potentially valuable for sex education, and how can we carry out this kind of work without rendering sex education an expression of queer theological commitment? In responding to the first of these questions, I argue that working with queer theologies can offer sex education researchers another way of thinking about, and with, theology – one that resists positioning theology as inevitably heteronormative through its attention to the body, embraces the multiple possibilities of queer subjecthood, and attends to the importance of context in understanding how heteronormativity is both reproduced and resisted. Following this, I turn to the second question animating this paper, suggesting that if we are to avoid sex education sliding into an inevitable expression of queer theological commitment, what is needed is a methodology for the translation for sex education research, in which queer theologies can 'meet' with sex education without at the same time 'merging' with it. I demonstrate how this might be enacted through the symbol of the 'Abrahamic threesome', a queer symbolic device of my own design.

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## Introduction

The relationship between religion and sex education has a fraught history. Curricular developments in English sex education have showcased this in recent years, not least in terms of the perceived resistance of Muslim communities (Parveen 2019) and Jewish communities (Sherwood 2019) to sex education programmes that are responsive to queer questions and experiences. These tensions have been well-documented in the literature at the nexus between religion, queerness and education, with many critiquing the role religion has played in impeding the development of queer-inclusive educational spaces. Grace and Wells (2005), for instance, have argued against the possibility that Catholic schools might offer inclusive environments for queer staff and students in Canada owing to the alignment of such institutions with the heteronormativity of Catholic doctrine. This is resonant with the scholarship of Callaghan (2016) and Bailey (2017), both of whom have suggested that the creation of safe spaces for queer youth is difficult to achieve in Catholic school settings due to the influence of traditional Catholic teachings on curricular and other school policy decisions. In this regard, their work speaks to the observations of Love

and Tosolt (2013), who draw attention to the challenges queer students face in navigating the heteronormativity of all-girls' Catholic schools in the USA. Ferfolja (2005) has shed light on the exclusionary, heteronormative practices affecting lesbian teachers in Australian Catholic high schools, while Neary (2013, 2017) and Fahie (2016, 2017) have attended to the ambiguous challenges queer teachers have experienced in confronting the heteronormativity of religious school systems in the Republic of Ireland.

At the same time, though, the literature has also engaged with the possibility of reframing the relation between religion and queerness more productively for education. Indeed, with regard to queer sexualities in education, scholars such as Rasmussen (2010) and Shipley (2014) have problematised the inevitable alignment of religion with conservatism and secularism with progress on the grounds that such characterisations risk streamlining the complexities of religious traditions, while also downplaying the role secular discourses can have in propounding heteronormativity's social and cultural dominance. In this sense, the sensibility of their work has affinities with that of Scott (2017), who has challenged assumptions around secularism's supposed egalitarianism by tracing how secular discourses have been utilised to widen, rather than narrow, inequalities between men and women. In their efforts not to let secularism 'off the hook', Rasmussen's and Shipley's ideas speak to the works of Falconer and Taylor (2017), and Taylor and Cuthbert (2018), who have questioned the helpfulness of associating religion in education invariably with heteronormativity due to the potential this has for rendering queer students who are also religious invisible within these discussions. In the context of religious studies, scholars such as Kamrudin (2018), Nadar and van Klinken (2018), Seedat (2018), and Yip (2018) have traced the intersections of queer pedagogy and the teaching of religion in community-based and higher education settings, while in sex education Sanjakdar (2013) has mapped the complex, and at times conflicting, deliberations Muslim teachers make in providing a comprehensive sex education around homosexuality that is receptive to Islamic theological ideals of tolerance and equality. This nod to theological tradition in complicating the antagonism between religion and queerness in education is attended to in the works of Joldersma (2016) and McDonough (2016), both of whom directly engage with conventional Christian theological sources in forwarding an image of Christian schooling that is positively receptive to queer staff and students.

Significantly, though, none of the scholars mentioned above directly appeal to theologies that reflexively seek to disrupt heteronormativity's embeddedness within theological frameworks: indeed, their analyses are primarily sociological or pedagogical in quality. In the case of Joldersma and McDonough, theology is appealed to, although the theologies drawn upon are presented as unproblematically hospitable to the aim of disrupting religious heteronormativity, despite their roots in traditions of thought with overt heteronormative legacies. In the light of this, the motivations for this paper arise out of a concern for reflecting on the potential role an engagement with queer theologies (as a reverse theological discourse that seeks to dislocate theology from heteronormativity) might play for sex education researchers in the task of productively reframing the religion-queer-education relationship. In this sense, the paper is firstly concerned with the question of *why* an engagement with queer theologies is valuable for sex education research. What is it about the contemporary moment in sex education that makes queer theologies worthwhile for those researching in this field? From here, the paper moves to a consideration of *how* sex education research might work with queer theological texts

and practices in a manner that does not slide invariably into queer theology itself. In other words, is there a tool that sex education researchers can draw from that might allow them to identify affinities between queer theologies and their own research concerns, without at the same time having to align sex education with the veracity of queer theological claims? It is here that I offer the device of the 'Abrahamic threesome' as a useful mechanism for translating the insights of queer theologies for sex education. Before indicating why I think preserving a 'gap' between queer theologies and sex education is important in the midst of such translation, attention to the first of this paper's questions is necessary. It is to this that I firstly focus my efforts.

### **Why is engaging with queer theologies potentially valuable for sex education?**

Queer theologies can be valuable for sex education research in their capacity to respond to three critiques often levelled against education in its engagement with issues of sexuality and sexual identity: 1) that education can take an overly disembodied approach to questions of sexuality; 2) that education risks limiting the contours of queer subjecthood through an over-reliance on narratives of vulnerability in relation to queer sexualities; and 3) that education risks reducing the complexities of heteronormativity to individualised instances of bullying, at the expense of focusing on wider, contextual factors.

The first critique, that education can take an overly disembodied approach to questions of sexuality, has been well-documented in the literature. Allen, Rasmussen, and Quinlivan (2014), for instance, have pointed to students' critiques of sex education on the grounds of its erasure of the body and the sensual in how sexuality is understood. Similar views have been aired by Hirst (2013) and McGeeney and Kehily (2016), both of whom have documented students' complaints that sexuality education does not address embodied dimensions of sexuality, especially those of physical pleasure and desire. Allen (2020) situates this trend within discourses of human reproduction, risk-reduction, and pregnancy and disease prevention that often saturate sex education curricula. She argues that such discourses have the effect of distancing 'students from the sexual and sensual possibilities of human corporeality, while simultaneously dampening their desire and any curiosity around it' (2020, 6). In response to this landscape, I see queer Christian theologies as valuable resources for sex education research, for they espouse an appreciation for the need to theologise in ways that extend and subvert the limits of religious heteronormativity through an attention to the body and its possibilities.

On sketching out what it means to speak of 'queer theology', Althaus-Reid and Isherwood write of how queer theologians 'plunge into flesh in its unrefined fullness in order to embrace and be embraced by the divine. Bodies tell very complex and challenging stories and these now become the stuff of the salvific tale' (2007, 310). Queer theologies are interested less in pinning down a comprehensive theology of God, and more in exposing such theologies to the messiness of our embodied and sexual lives, a messiness through which alternative possibilities beyond the (hetero)norm can be necessitated by, and cultivated for, queer people. Althaus-Reid and Isherwood write of how the divine relates to the flesh by drawing from the incarnation in the birth of Jesus Christ:

That the divine immersed itself in flesh and that flesh is now divine is Queer Theology at its peak. There can be no sanitisation here or something of the divine essence will be lost – it is not the genetically modified, metaphysical son of god that declares the divine-human conjunction, but the screaming baby born amidst the cow shit and fleas, covered in his birthing blood. (2007, 310)

In other words, it is because of the possibilities that arise from the complexities and varieties of our embodied and sexual lives that the violence of heteronormative doctrines and texts is rendered, not only inadequate, but inexcusable. In the light of this an alternative imaginary for God becomes both necessary and possible, an imaginary Goss (2002) takes seriously when he frames homosexual sexual acts as expressions of theological and Eucharistic communion with God. Queer Christian theologies operate, in other words, within a transgressive and provocative register that is committed to the building up of an alternative, fleshy 'Kingdom of God', one where the hypocrisies and idols of heteronormativity are overcome in and through the pleasures and pains of the body and of desire (Althaus-Reid 2001, 2003). To my mind, it is queer theology's focus on the body as something to be embraced and celebrated, rather than denounced and repressed, that renders it so valuable for sex education researchers, particularly for those interested in foregrounding the body, sensuality and desire in their work.

The second critique, that education risks limiting the contours of queer subjecthood through an over-reliance on narratives of vulnerability in relation to queer sexualities, has recently emerged as a critique held by several scholars including Marshall (2010), Airtion (2013), Rasmussen et al. (2015), Bryan (2017), and Greteman (2018). The basis of their critique lies in their sensitivity to the ambiguous, and potentially pathologising, effects of framing queer youth as inevitably 'at-risk', rather than as complex and multi-faceted human beings. Indeed, Waidzunas (2012) has discussed the looping effects of conflating queer lives solely with narratives of victimhood, vulnerability and suicidality, in which the creation of 'at-risk' queer youth is sustained precisely through the discursive construction of queerness in these terms. Gilbert et al. (2018), while recognising the ongoing challenges and inequities experienced by queer youth in educational contexts, have pointed to the need to reframe how we think about and engage with the stories of queer people. In particular, they emphasise the importance of attending to the 'intimate possibilities' of queer lives, possibilities that create spaces for school communities to move beyond the constraints of 'damage-centred' narratives to stories of empowerment that expand who queer youth are, who they want to be, and what kinds of social worlds they want to build. In this respect, queer Jewish perspectives come to the fore as a potentially fruitful theological resource for sex education researchers to engage with, particularly because of their sensitivity to erotic modes of relation that open up what it means to identify as 'queer'.

Let us consider, as one example, the work of Gleibman, who, through a reading of fictionalised depictions of Jewish study practices, analyses how the emergence of queer subjectivities in Jewish culture is made possible through an attention to theological study rooted in a 'queer hermeneutical strategy of (dis)identification' (2017, 6). Gleibman grounds this strategy in a sensitivity to the potentialities inherent within homosocial Torah study partnerships (called *hevruta*). He explores how the conventional structuring of Torah study through male-and-male partnerships allows for forms of queer selfhood to emerge that point to the place of erotic desire in hermeneutical experience, forms of

selfhood that disrupt conventional boundaries often set up between and within such categories as 'Jewishness' and 'queerness'.

Gleibman suggests that the practice of *hevruta* is indicative of a 'text model' of queer desire, where relationships between men are imagined in all their diversities and beauty, and not reduced simply to acts of phallic penetration or imposed celibacy. In coming together in the *hevruta*, study partners embody a different kind of (potentially, but not necessarily, sexual) relation between men, relations that embrace a spectrum of erotic practices such as watching, contemplating and being looked at; speaking, intoning and listening; touching, near-touching, holding and pressing; dancing and spinning; embracing and kissing (Gleibman 2017, 19). In these practices, Gleibman sees the eroticism of Torah study as enabling aspects of queer subjectivity to emerge that often remain unrecognised in mainstream conceptions of religious and queer identities: for instance, that one can be Jewish and queer, that the intellect has just as much a role to play as passion in the embodiment of (sexual) desires, that 'to be' male need not entail a denunciation of traditionally 'feminine' expressions of intimacy and love, and so on.

Gleibman sees the activities of the *hevruta* as enacting an exegesis of disidentification for it is in the desire-filled exchanges with the text being studied that the fixedness of the men's identities is queerly resisted, and new, affirmative opportunities for becoming and relationship opened up. In this way, a queer Jewish hermeneutical approach can be read as one implicated in the transformation of (queer and religious) lives beyond narratives of vulnerability or victimhood in and through an attention to the erotic. For me, it is this commitment to opening up possibilities for the queer self that makes queer Jewish theologies so compelling for sex education researchers, for they bring to the fore resources that are sensitive to how queer people are always more complex than how they identify (and, indeed, are identified).

The third critique often found in the literature is the idea that education risks reducing the complexities of heteronormativity to individualised instances of bullying at the expense of focusing on wider, contextual factors. While much of the anti-bullying literature has focused on school-based bullying, for Bryan (2019) such literature could be further enhanced by attention to the sociocultural context of schooling, which is linked to larger social structures such as sexuality that children and youth have to navigate on a daily basis. From a sociological perspective, schools are embedded within larger cultural contexts, with broader social policies, discriminations and legislative scenarios trickling down and impacting the lives of students in schools each day (Wilkinson and Pearson 2009). As such, schools are reflective of wider sociocultural mores and practices that are more complex than efforts at discouraging individual students from bullying their queer peers might suggest. It is in this respect that I see queer Muslim theologies as helpful for sex education researchers, for they seek to engage with Muslim traditions in ways that are attuned to how such traditions perpetuate heteronormativity in and through wider social structures, contexts and discourses.

An example of this can be found in the work of queer Muslim theologian Shannahan (2010), in particular her challenge to the story of Sodom and Gomorrah's destruction, known also as the Lut narrative. For Shannahan, the Lut narrative exists as 'a necessary battleground for queer believers' across Judaism, Christianity, and Islam (2010, 676). Indeed, this text, in its Qur'anic and biblical manifestations, has been positioned across

different traditions as a 'clobber' passage expressly condemning homosexual sex acts (Cornwall 2011). To summarise, the story starts with Allah's calls for monotheism being resisted by the people of Sodom. In an attempt to test the character of the community, Allah sends two angels to the Prophet Lut, who responds by offering them shelter in his home. The townsfolk, angered by the arrival of the angels, accost Lut's home, and in the process attempt to sexually assault them. Lut's response is to continue to persuade them to be fearful of Allah, offering the would-be assaulters his daughters in exchange for the angels. The story ends by the community refusing Lut's offer, and Allah destroying the city of Sodom in punishment.

In an effort to respond to this, Shannahan proposes a theological approach to interpreting these (and other) verses that position context and history as key to any engagement with the Qur'an or other sacred texts. Shannahan's strategy is one that takes sexism and sexual difference seriously in how queer Muslims interpret texts like the Lut narrative – indeed, she claims that any efforts at queering the Lut narrative must also be attuned to the patriarchal history underlying Lut's willingness to exchange his daughters for the angels' safety. With this in mind, she calls for a 'faith-centred, anti-homophobic reading of the Qur'an' that looks 'at the whens and wheres of how divine love has historically been interpreted as only present along straight lines, families, bodies, and love(r)s, and the ways that interpretation may serve and write privilege onto gendered bodies' (2010, 680). Her theological hermeneutic is one that refuses to accept a literalist reading of the Qur'anic verses: the text is not eternal, but a product of its relationship to flesh-and-blood human beings. Because of this, the Qur'an becomes something other than incontestable, decontextualised words on a page. Instead, it has the potential to generate new theological insights and significances for the reader in and through the reader's own active sensitivity to structures of power, privilege, and patriarchy, and how these shape and re-shape the contextual processes of reading and interpreting to begin with. Put differently, the theological significance of sacred texts arises from the reader's historical and contextual interrogation of the Qur'anic stories, and not in their mere acceptance of them. Shannahan demonstrates what this sensitivity could entail by offering some of the kinds of questions a queer theological approach might elicit for the reader of the Lut narrative (2010, 679). For instance, she asks: where does female desire feature in the narrative and in the act of reading it, and how does that contribute to configurations of desire today? If Sodom can be understood as London's G.A.Y. club on a Saturday night, she queries, what ways of being queer remain within the text, and what are their relationships to the myriad forms of union that exist outside it? Interpreting the Qur'an queerly becomes, for Shannahan, a dissident kind of endeavour that subverts and transforms hegemonic interpretations of texts in its receptiveness to forms of wider contextual knowledge that may have been previously hidden or denied.

I gesture to these examples across the Christian, Jewish and Muslim faiths in order to showcase the value of queer theologies for sex education in engaging with queer lives and their entanglements with religion. Working with queer theologies can offer sex education researchers another way of thinking about, and with, religion, one that resists positioning religion invariably in deference to heteronormativity through its attention to the body, to the multiple possibilities of queer subjecthood, and to the importance of context in understanding how heteronormativity is both reproduced and resisted. At the same time though, while I see an engagement with queer theologies as valuable for these

reasons, I am also conscious of the hesitation some (if not many) sex education researchers might feel in working with queer theologies. This could be due to their own lack of theological commitment, or because of the desire to safeguard sex education from being acted on by discourses external to it (however queer such discourses might be). In what follows, I turn to translation as a possible strategy for side-stepping these anxieties.

### **Meeting without merging: queer theologies and sex education in translation**

How then can we engage sex education research with queer theologies without rendering the former identity with the latter? In this section, I forward the view that staging this kind of engagement can be achieved through a methodology of translation that establishes and sustains ‘points of contact’ or affinities between queer theologies and sex education, but with an awareness of the ‘risk, asymmetry, and uncertainty’ of translation itself (Bergdahl 2009, 31). For me, this asymmetry is significant as it is through such ambiguity that what is deemed valuable by queer theologies can be rendered continually open to new and unpredictable modes of becoming in and for sex education.

To begin, translating queer theologies for sex education entails sex education researchers abandoning any crude sense of translation as a matter simply of linguistic or conceptual exchange. Indeed, Naoko Saito offers a view of translation as involving ‘an attunement to what happens in the encounter between different languages ... and this inevitability involves ordinarily the experience of a gap – of the incommensurable, of the untranslatable’ (2018, 203). In recognising the element of incommensurability intrinsic to translation, we become implicated in the difficult experience of ‘knowing that we do not know’ (Alfonso and LaRocca 2015, 15). Translation is less a matter of finding identical equivalences between words, images or discourses (it is not, in this case, about sex education representing or channelling the ‘truth’ of queer theologies) and more a matter of performatively reorienting our ways of thinking in the encounter between different discourses. As Standish and Saito (2017) make clear, translation occasions a kind of transfiguration from one form of life to another, a moment of transformation that can be neither predicted nor prescribed. For me this is important as it affords sex education the chance to engage in a more spacious and contestable relation with queer theologies, one that allows for possibilities beyond the currently known or given to emerge. In this way, translating the insights of queer theologies to the concerns of sex education is to locate such engagement at the point at which ‘paths of thought intersect’ between the two registers, to use Saito’s phrasing (2018, 203). It is to create a space where the metaphors, symbol structures and other tropes of queer theologies can speak to the commitments of sex education researchers, without the latter’s priorities being appropriated by, or co-opted within, any wider theological project. Translation, in other words, allows the discourses of queer theologies and sex education to come together in a manner that allows their intersecting concerns to meet, without at the same time merging. While this ‘meeting’ will possibly (and probably inevitably) offer opportunities for new insights in both queer theology and sex education to bear fruit, the ‘gap’ of translation ensures that the potential theological significance of such work need not necessarily find expression in every ‘new’ insight or contribution to sex education that might arise from it.



With this in mind, a question that arises for me is one rooted in a concern for how such translation might be enacted. Translation never occurs in isolation but is instead staged through a common concern for something (a text, an idea, an image, or an experience) and/or someone who mediates the intersecting concerns of those engaging with one another. In translating queer theologies for sex education, a device capable of bringing both registers together could prove useful, one with the capacity to tap into and sustain the points of contact between each, but in ways that are fluid and open-ended enough for translation's incommensurability to be preserved and built upon. It is here that I offer the symbol of the 'Abrahamic threesome' (see [Figure 1](#)), a playful, if irreverent, device of my own conception.

### ***The Abrahamic threesome***

The Abrahamic threesome is comprised of three elements: the cross (conventionally Christian), the star of David (conventionally Jewish), and the crescent (conventionally Muslim). Each symbol is selected in an effort to expose and expand those intersecting concerns that I believe queer Jewish, Christian, and Muslim theologies and sex education could share, namely: 1) a concern for the body (foregrounded through the cross); 2) a concern for broadening the contours of queer subjecthood (foregrounded through the star of David); and 3) a concern for the wider contextual factors that inform how heteronormativity operates (foregrounded through the crescent). My arrangement of these different elements together in a single symbol is an attempt to communicate how these three points of contact can mutually depend upon and inform one another. They are necessarily interconnected so as to emphasise their non-ultimacy, that is, the fact that these have neither a fixed nor discrete monopoly over the affinities between queer theologies and sex education. Indeed, having the three symbols collectively constitute something entirely new and different to what they would otherwise have achieved is



**Figure 1.** The Abrahamic threesome.

done to acknowledge how points of contact can exist between queer theologies and sex education that can go beyond any of these three initial concerns. In this sense, the use of the Abrahamic threesome as a device to mediate between queer theologies and sex education is premised on how symbols are not exhaustive, but ever-shifting and signifying poetic devices open to their own self-effacement through the myriad other commonalities and dissonances that they can point to and develop across both registers.

Developing the reasoning for the name of this device more fully, I have termed the arrangement of the cross, star of David, and crescent a 'threesome' for two reasons. Firstly, I have done so to gesture to how such processes of translation aim at building upon, rather than denying, the implications they might have on how the relation between religion and queerness is conceptualised in sex education. Indeed, by bringing the religious and the (transgressively) sexual together, the Abrahamic threesome performatively embraces how the antagonism between religion and queerness can be interrupted through the engagement it stages for sex education research. Secondly, I have called this a threesome to draw attention to how religion, queerness, and sex education are so complex, so diverse, that when they productively engage with one another there will always be the possibility of something (or someone!) unexpected knocking on the door, much like the third party who arrives late to the *ménage à trois*! Furthermore, the fact that threesomes are typically condemned within traditional forms of Christian, Jewish and Muslim ethics adds to the seemingly transgressive possibilities such translation might allow for and enact for sex educators. Relatedly, in the blurry distinctions between each element of the threesome's structure, I take liberties, not only with the conventional symbolic limits often set up between the cross, the star of David, and the crescent, but also with the identitarian limits often demarcated between the traditions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam themselves. This is deliberate, for it is through this identitarian 'slipperiness' that the different elements of the threesome can be played with, added to, edited, or rejected in a manner that is attuned to the traditions of concern in this paper, but in ways that can also attend to traditions that lie both between and outside these (to the point that the adjective 'Abrahamic' may no longer apply). In this way, while the Abrahamic threesome is conceptualised for this paper with the view to engaging sex education with queer traditions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam, its openness to being re-created anew offers sex education researchers the possibility for engaging with other queer religious or spiritual traditions.

Having detailed the rationale behind the naming and design of this device, I now intend to map how the cross, star of David, and crescent can help in translating those intersecting concerns identified in the first section of this paper. In practical terms, I am suggesting that when sex education researchers sit down to 'think with' queer theologies, they could bring the Abrahamic threesome (with its different elements) to the forefront of their minds as a lens for highlighting and reinterpreting those dimensions of queer theological texts and practices that could prove worthwhile for sex education scholarship. Indeed, they could reflect on the collective and/or individual significances (and limits) of each of the threesome's elements, attending to what they *do* to the theological texts and practices under study, how this frames their thinking differently, and why this might be important for the development of sex education into the future.

To begin with the cross, which I see as being capable of translating queer theology's concern for the body. The cross in the Christian imaginary, with its intersecting horizontal

and vertical axes, can bring with it associations of bodily intensity fused with evocations of bodily release and other-worldliness. In the spirit of Luther and his theology of the cross, my reading of the cross's embodied significance stems from the story of Christ physically tortured on the cross at Golgotha (Kolb 2003). The cross can be read as teaching us of our (horizontal) limits as embodied creatures, reminding us of our fragilities and vulnerabilities as finite and material beings, combined with the importance of recognising the active effects of the divine within the here-and-now of lived experience. Simultaneously, though, the evocations of release I draw reference to gain their significance from the bodily resurrection that acts as the climax of the Easter story. The symbol of the cross can orient our focus towards the verticality of embodied life in its refusal to accept that what is in front of us in this world is all that could ever be. The verticality of the cross understands bodily life as a transitory thing, forever open to new and unexpected possibilities. In this sense, the horizontal and vertical dimensions of the cross offer sex education researchers with a mechanism for connecting with queer theologians' commitment to the fleshy messiness of queer lives, lives that embody alternative ways of being and becoming in the world through their birth amidst the 'cow shit and fleas'.

Next, the star of David (also called the *Magen Dawid*), which I see as having the capacity to translate queer theology's expansion of how queer lives are framed and understood. One of the most famous engagements with the star of David can be found in the work of Rosenzweig (1971). Rosenzweig utilises the image of the star of David to shed light on the relations between God, humanity and the world, and the implications of these for our understanding of redemption. For Rosenzweig, the top-most apex of the upward-facing triangle of the star is ascribed the assignation of 'God', with the vertices to the bottom left and right of the triangle relating to 'the world' and to 'human beings' respectively. Superimposed on top of this is a downward-facing triangle labelled 'creation', 'revelation', and 'redemption'; the point of this configuration is to illustrate how the revelation of God is made manifest in the lives of human beings as they relate in the world, lives made better in their immediacy to others. Indeed, as Reinhard explains:

For Rosenzweig, love of neighbour is not merely the first step on the path to redemption, the good deed that might help make the world a better place in some hypothetical future, but its realisation now, the immanent production of its transcendental conditions. The nearness of the neighbour materialises the imminence of redemption, releasing the here and now from the fetters of teleology in the infinitesimal calculus of proximity. (2005, 21)

The star of David can gesture sex educators to the fact that redemption is not the culmination of a nebulously unattainable future but is instead that which arises within the here-and-now of our relations with others. In this way, the star of David captures something of the relationality that Gleibman refers to in his queer analysis of *hevruta* study partnerships: queer and religious subjectivities emerge and expand in and through the disidentifying erotics of being with others. As Strhan observes, it is the proximity of the neighbour, and their embodied closeness, that demands attention, loving action and response (2012, 41). In this sense, the star of David offers a device that can heighten sex education researchers' awareness of those dimensions to queer theologies that expand the contours of queer subjecthood, in and through the star's attention to the (erotic?) closeness of the other, a proximity that disrupts the totalities of identity. In reflecting upon and enacting the significances of the star of David in 'thinking with' with queer theologies,

sex educators are offered a tool that can help them see how queer theologies can allow for queer subjecthood to transcend all-encompassing narratives of queer vulnerability, without at the same time having to subscribe to an affinity with those theologies themselves.

Lastly, an emphasis on context and history can be read as a characteristic feature of the rich symbolism of the crescent moon of Islam, also referred to as the *hīlal*. The crescent moon takes on the ability to translate this emphasis for sex education research when we consider the symbol's roots within the founding story of Islam, where the expansion of the religion was dependent on merchants traversing their wares across desert trade routes by night (hence, the moon) (Clark Northrup 2003, 539). The association of the *hīlal* with Islam's founding story can highlight for sex education researchers the importance of attending to queer theology's focus on the contextual nature of heteronormativity when we consider that it was through such trade that the Muslim community emerged. This is significant as it allows for the crescent to symbolise how modes of relation in communities are always contextually-bound: social relationships (with their normative limits and transgressive possibilities) are not statically self-producing, but instead develop unpredictably in response to the historical contingencies of people living lives with others. Shannahan's queer hermeneutic finds strong resonance in this regard, for she too positions queer theological engagements with the Qur'an in terms of a commitment to reshaping queer and religious lives through a focus on the contemporary legacies of patriarchal and heteronormative histories. In signifying the importance of context and history, the crescent can provide sex education researchers with an in-road for what they focus on in engaging with the resources of queer theologies, an in-road attuned to how social relations (and their attendant normative frameworks) are always bigger and more complex than what individualised instances between people might suggest.

By way of summary, then, the cross, star of David and crescent moon fuse together in the Abrahamic threesome to provide a mechanism through which queer theologies can be translated for sex education research. The benefits for sex education researchers in thinking with the performative significances of the threesome lie in the symbol's capacity to find common ground with queer theologies but in ways that allow these commonalities to shift and transform by virtue of the incommensurability of translation itself. Of course, as alluded to above, it should be noted that the Abrahamic threesome is but one example that researchers can draw from in their theorising at the interface between queer theologies and sex education: it claims to be neither exhaustive nor representative. My design of the threesome is offered, not to establish a fixed 'blueprint' for translating queer theologies for sex education, but rather to gesture to the foundations of one approach that could be expanded on, reframed and/or dismissed in relation to other contexts, commitments and traditions.

## Conclusion

Literature at the nexus between religion, queerness and education has taken to reframing the relation between religion and queerness in more productive, and less antagonistic, terms in recent years. This desire has emerged in response to research that has documented the ongoing difficulties queer staff and students face in navigating heteronormativity at the interface between religion and education. Efforts at achieving this

reframing have varied, from problematising how notions of the secular are utilised in understanding queer and religious experiences, to appeals to theology and its diversities as a basis for reconceptualising religious school spaces as welcoming and inclusive. No attention has been given, however, to the role queer theology (as a reverse theological discourse that separates theology from heteronormativity) might play in such discussions, particularly in the context of sex education. It was from this that this paper chose to engage with two primary questions: the first, why is engaging with queer theologies valuable for sex education; and the second, how can we carry out this kind of work without rendering sex education an expression of queer theological commitment?

In responding to the first of these questions, I argued that working with queer theologies can offer sex education researchers another way of thinking about, and with, theology, one that resists positioning theology invariably in deference to heteronormativity through its attention to the body, to the multiple possibilities of queer subjecthood, and to the importance of context in understanding how heteronormativity is both reproduced and resisted. I positioned this as particularly significant in relation to research into education and sexuality, a field with three critiques often levelled against it: 1) that education can take an overly disembodied approach to questions of sexuality; 2) that education risks limiting the contours of queer subjecthood through an over-reliance on narratives of vulnerability in relation to queer sexualities; and 3) that education risks reducing the complexities of heteronormativity to individualised instances of bullying, at the expense of focusing on wider, contextual factors. Having established the value of queer theologies for sex education, I then suggested that if we are to avoid sex education sliding into an inevitable expression of queer theological commitment, then what is needed is a methodology of translation for sex education, where queer theologies can 'meet' with sex education without at the same time 'merging' with it. I demonstrated how this might be enacted through the symbol of the 'Abrahamic threesome', a device that sex education researchers can situate at the forefront of their minds when exposing and developing intersecting concerns between queer theologies and sex education.

As a parting word, the at times antagonistic terrain between religion, queerness and education is complex, indeed too complex for queer theologies alone to remedy. In suggesting why queer theologies are valuable for sex education, and how these might be engaged with, this paper does not seek to sugar-coat or downplay the inevitable tensions such work will continue to expose for sex education research. Rather, it offers its perspectives with the hope of expanding how we navigate questions of religion and sexuality in education. Such expansion takes the heteronormativity of religion seriously, while at the same time refusing to grant such logics an all-encompassing status in how we understand, embody and imagine religion moving forward.

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## ORCID

Seán Henry  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-8873-0726>

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