

Social Justice Reflection: An Indigiqueer Venture In Catholic Churches and Schools

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EDUC2200: Diversity in Education

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April 4, 2023

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It is well understood that there exist divides in many social contexts, education is certainly not exempt from this phenomenon. In fact, the education system is so aware of this that it offers separate jurisdictions, systems, and boards under which teaching and learning may function. Indeed, Alberta offers “ten options for school plurality and choice, nine of which offer some form of faith-based schooling” (Hiemstra, 2017, p. 95). There are also many ways in which systems overlap and interact with one another, which inadvertently interplays with the wholesome education system in Alberta within which we (educators, pre or in service) are bound to teach. Each pre-service teacher, I believe, feels a calling to a specific system based on their personal understanding, opinion, and predilection. Nonetheless, I feel we may do ourselves a disservice by predetermining the systems in which we feel we will succeed. To the call of placing ourselves in a diverse context with the aim of opening perspectives, I chose to immerse myself in the world of Catholicism—both in churches and schools. While it may not seem ‘diverse’ to others, I find myself deeply conflicted with the ideology and its conventions—regardless of how that manifests—on a daily basis. Namely, as an Indigenous woman who identifies as a part of the 2SLGBTQIA+ community—‘queer’ will hereby be used as a synonym—I take issue with both the apparent discrimination on the queer community, and historical atrocities imparted upon Indigenous peoples, in the name of the Catholic church. I find it equally compelling and challenging to understand that there are people of both communities, 2SLGBTQIA+ and Indigenous, who find solace within, and dedication to, the religion. Therefore, for me, placing myself in this situation necessitates an appreciable amount of risk and courage. In this context, one may draw upon the theory as brought forth by Kaur (2012), who asserts that “race, social class, sexual preferences, and language backgrounds of prospective teachers affects their attitudes towards ‘Others.’” (p. 487). Furthermore, this impacts their “willingness to live near and be part of communities with ‘Others,’ to teach ‘Others,’ and to expect that ‘Others’ can learn.” (Kaur, 2012, p. 487). While Kaur’s argument functions under the umbrella of understanding mostly racial, gender, class, and language differences, the principle behind becoming ‘other’ as a means to understand the ‘other’ remains all-important. We also know that a lot depends on the perspectives,

knowledge, and moral commitments that future teachers bring to their educational practices (Kaur, 2014, p. 487). Accordingly, it becomes increasingly important, and statistically proven as beneficial, to place ourselves in situations where we become the ‘other’ as a means “to interrupt, challenge and change the way teachers think about themselves and ‘Others’” (Kaur, 2014, p. 487). Thus, I embarked upon this journey in an effort to understand what the attraction is to the Catholic faith, and how one may be of both minds in a peaceful way.

Participation, Reaction, and Theoretical Grounds

Catholic Church

I am not a complete stranger to church, some may even call me a ‘Christmas Christian,’ that is, I have gone to church in some capacities throughout my childhood for various—arguably performative—reasons; but never a Catholic Church, and never with the aim to actually *understand*. This time was different, and potentially more discomfoting. It was 4:00pm on a Sunday, the wooden pews creaked under my weight as I sat in the back of the church, the early setting sun shone through the stained glass, and I was welcomed by greeters. The familiar scent of candle wax and incense filled my nostrils, but this time, mixed with a new scent; the scent of vulnerability. I was initially struck by a feeling of otherness. Yet, I soon became conscious of the subtle nods from other parishioners, the priest’s warm remarks, and the sense of community. Although it wasn’t ideal, it was a beginning. My decision to enter this specific Catholic Church was carefully considered. First, the Church itself, St. Mary’s Cathedral, is the church that my mom attended in high school; it is also a part of the St. Francis Xavier Chaplaincy which happens to be the same namesake of the university my mom went to. This somehow felt more approachable, familiar, and safe. Second, and more importantly, I decided to visit this church because the priest, Father Cristino Bouvette, is of mixed Indigenous descent. My main aim here, in the context of this assignment, was to understand his relationship with the Church, especially because his heritage (our shared heritage), is one of the main reasons I have long held closed eyes and ears to Catholicism. While Father Cristino Bouvette respectfully declined an interview with myself, I am able to draw on prior published interviews of his perspective. What I retained from these interviews was, and will remain

incredibly valuable and powerful to my learning, and thereby shift in perspective. Bouvette responds to voices of anger from Indigenous people: “I understand full well where this anger comes from, I have my own anger too, in what I know have been institutional failures” (Global National 2021). Understanding Bouvettes journey in Catholicism requires understanding his relationship to his Kokum (Cree for grandmother). When Bouvette decided he wanted to become a priest, he was deeply concerned with how his Kokum, a residential school survivor, would accept his decision. In response to what Bouvette describes as a “very nerve-wracking moment” his Kokum benevolently said “oh my boy, nothing would make me more proud, I have known many good nuns and priests and I know you would be one of those” (Bouvette, 2021). Bouvette claims this, to him, was a “testament to her greatness, and to her her capacity to forgive.” He goes on to say he took this as both her blessing, and call to action towards honouring both her, and the legacy in the “future of my people, of *our* Indigenous people in Canada” (Bouvette, 2021). Bouvette posits that his Kokum is a “a living example that reconciliation can happen and Catholicism bearing fruit remains possible.” Bouvette then attests that “we cannot have true reconciliation without both the admission of wrongdoing, and willingness to forgive” (Bouvette, 2021). In response to his contribution to the Church, Bouvette states that it is an “objective good that the gospel, the saving gospel of Jesus Christ, has been proclaimed in these lands, and to the peoples who first inhabited them.” Further, he expresses recognition of the “suffering Indigenous peoples have endured at the hands of the church as an institution” and that their “participation in the Indian residential school system will forever be seen as a failure on [their] part” (Bouvette, 2021). Finally, Bouvette states: “my goal first and foremost is to honour and respect my kokum, but I hope I can do that by showing anyone who is willing to listen that there is a sincere desire to continue to work towards healing and reconciliation....I am prepared to spend my life on this” (Global National 2021).

Catholic School

In an effort to bridge understanding between Catholicism as it relates to education, I chose to visit a Catholic school, with the particular aim to speak with an educator who identifies as a part of the 2SLGBTQIA+ Community. Before I begin, I would like to take a moment to explore the jurisdiction of

Catholic schools in Alberta and how they handle queer matters. This helps me answer a question in my planning: “is the system generally inclusive or non, of other identities?” Alberta permits school boards to host fully financed “alternative schools” that are free to preserve unique cultural, linguistic, pedagogical, or religious approaches (Banack, 2015, p. 937). Further, Alberta has maintained a fully funded independent Catholic system since 1905 (Banack, 2015, p. 937). In 2012, a clause stating that all educational programmes and materials in Alberta “shall honour and respect the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms and the Alberta Human Rights Act” was lobbied to be removed from the new Education Act. This initial clause raised concerns for thousands of religious parents about potential interference with their freedom to educate their children in accordance with “biblical principles, especially those revolving around Christian sexual ethics” (Banack, 2015, p. 938). In response to this, many leading Albertan Catholic bishops wrote open letters denouncing mandatory GSAs (Banack, 2015, p. 939). Therefore, there is much evidence to believe that the Catholic school system is not fully devoted to ending homophobic bullying and that it does not properly appreciate kids who identify as sexual and gender minorities (Bialystok, 2014, p. 8). Thus there exists a clear “private–faith” versus “public–secular” divide (Hiemstra, 2017). This leads one, such as myself, to wonder why an individual who identifies as a part of the queer community, may work within, and contribute to that system; a system which “offers the same Alberta curriculum, but infuses it with Roman Catholic values” (Hiemstra, 2017, p. 99) In other words, how can someone be queer and work for a board that views homosexuality as a sin? Moreover, how might they reconcile with that intrinsically. The educator who I interviewed in regards to this has chosen to remain anonymous, and will accordingly be referred to as Ava (pseudonym). In the beginning of our discussion, Ava started by saying: “yes, it might seem odd that I, an openly queer person, work at a Catholic school. But, I consider myself to be Catholic by cultural standards because I grew up in a Catholic family.” Ava further asserted that she *used* to question the ways in which anti-queer policies and beliefs had been “institutionalized.” Much to my surprise, the reasoning Ava gave beyond this and in response to my questions was far more pragmatic than my initial biases led me to believe. In response to the question, what is the most beautiful thing about your religion? Ava stated “a sense of

community with like minded people striving to be the best people possible, and always feeling loved by an indescribable benevolent force.” This was such an impactful testament to her faith. In response to the question, what is your perspective and experience of the Catholic faith, and Catholic school, as an 2SLGBTQIA+ member? Ava claimed “being a Catholic and comprehending how my faith influences who I am presents additional difficulties on top of already difficult circumstances associated with being queer in Alberta...I try not to think about it.” Ava has potentially accepted an ideology of tolerance of which she says she “rarely” tries to reconcile with. I felt it pertinent to ask Ava how she felt about the policies denying homosexual teachers in a Catholic school the opportunity to move up within the career (e.g. become principal), to which she said “I’ve just grown to accept it.” Finally, when asked what she saw the benefits of working in a Catholic school to be, Ava simply said “when teaching jobs were hard to find and keep, being Catholic offered me an in into an entire other system.” First, it became clear to me that this is maybe one of the first times Ava had been asked to deeply grapple with such conflicting ideals in a public way. As such, her answers may have been either the first reckonings, or intentionally pacifistic. Second, it became clear to me that her involvement in the Catholic school is founded on a specific basis; the basis of faith and devotion. Perhaps it also stems from apparent convenience and stability in a career.

Denouement

Overwhelmingly, my experiences brought about a great deal of emotion, understanding, and an entirely new set of questions. I feel that this experience would not have been possible without serious reflection. First, recognizing that not all Catholics may reflect the beliefs and values as the Church as a whole helped me approach the experiences with an open heart and mind; and second, that I was participating with the intention to learn, not change. Although I did not have a chance to speak with Father Bouvette personally, I do feel that my consciousness has been raised in ways I never would have imagined. Namely, I felt a warm and loving presence both within the walls of the church, and in hearing Bouvette speak; I don't think I would have even been open to this type of surrender in the past. In regards to my conversation with Ava, I maintain that I respected a lot of what she had to say about the faith itself. Conversely— while I appreciate having my assumptions challenged—my conversation with Ava left a lot

to be desired and left me feeling slightly pessimistic towards the Catholic school system. Specifically, much of what she said was reaffirmed by beliefs that the Catholic school system is not a fully inclusive or safe space for 2SLGBTQIA+ students or faculty. However, there are individuals that can accept this in the name of remaining devout. Ultimately, both of my experiences underscored the idea that I may show compassion, respect, humanity, and grace, to an ideology that conflicts with my own. Moreover, purging myself of prejudice and hatred towards this ideology was an incredibly liberating experience. My opinion and predilection against Catholic school has not experienced a major shift, nonetheless, it has experienced a shift towards empathy and understanding. Finally, the ideas of love, community, forgiveness, and higher power, remain as the centerpieces to this experience. These sentiments were echoed by both the Church and teacher. Despite the fact that they were not what I had anticipated, I remain grateful that such beautiful sentiments are what I am able to walk away with.

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