

# Anti-“Heterosexist” Education and the Stigmatization of Some Roman Catholic Beliefs

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Article abstract

I address some tension between Roman Catholicism and the anti-“heterosexist” education within some of Ontario’s regular, public schools. In particular, I argue that the anti-“heterosexist” education within the Peel District School Board (PDSB) and the Toronto District School Board (TDSB) stigmatizes some Roman Catholic beliefs, however incidentally. I then offer a proposal for how this stigmatization could be extinguished without abandoning an effort to prevent bullying against students with same-sex sexual inclination.

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# *Anti-“Heterosexist” Education and the Stigmatization of Some Roman Catholic Beliefs*

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M. JORDAN

## **PDSB’s and TDSB’s Anti-“Heterosexist” Education**

The Peel District School Board has publicly aligned itself against seven different ideas or practices that it identifies as “oppressions” or “isms.” The board identifies “heterosexism” as one of these alleged oppressions (n.d.-b, para. 5). It defines “heterosexism” as a “belief that heterosexuality is the only normal and acceptable sexual orientation, and is superior to other orientations” (n.d.-a, para. 1). The PDSB also defines “heterosexism” as the “individual, institutional and societal/cultural attitudes and practices based upon the belief that heterosexuality is the only normal and acceptable sexual orientation” (2002).

The Peel board states further that, “[w]hether or not most of us consciously recognize it as a problem, we live in a society that deems heterosexuality as the norm. We are therefore all subjected to homophobia every day” (2002). That last quoted sentence uses the word “therefore,” a conclusion indicator; hence, that last sentence is plausibly an inference. Thus, the author likely infers that we are all subjected to “homophobia” from the proposition that society views heterosexuality as the “norm.” For the PDSB, then, it seems that the societal view of heterosexuality as the “norm” is sufficient reason to infer the subjection of “homophobia.”<sup>1</sup>

From the last two paragraphs, we can safely presume that the PDSB opposes heteronormative beliefs pertaining to the norm of human sexuality and sexual practices, particularly if such beliefs are institutional or affect public life. The PDSB even goes so far as to say that such beliefs are oppressive and can be “homophobic.” Thus, whatever else it believes about “heterosexism,” it is fair to say that the PDSB publicly views “heterosexism” as a bad thing, something that it encourages its staff and students to oppose. “Heterosexist” beliefs are therefore stigmatized by the PDSB. With that conclusion established, let us now consider the Toronto District School Board.

In a document entitled *Challenging Homophobia and Heterosexism: a K–12 Curriculum Resource Guide*, the TDSB defines “heterosexism” as the “social, systemic, and personal assumptions, practices, and behaviours that assume that heterosexuality is the only natural and acceptable sexual orientation” (2011, p. 208). The TDSB also states that “homophobia” and “heterosexism” are harmful, and that this harm serves as a basis for it to challenge “heterosexism” and encourage its student body to do likewise (pp. 2–5).

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<sup>1</sup> At this juncture, readers might question why I use scare quotes with the words “homophobia” and “heterosexism.” I intend no insult. I only mean to distance myself from their use because these words are often vaguely understood, persuasively defined (a fallacy), or used in ways that beg important questions (Colwell, 1999; O’Donohue & Caselles, 1993). Hence, I do not want to further their use, choosing to just mention these words, or use scare quotes.

Given the content and title of the TDSB's document, we can safely presume that the board is not neutral toward "heterosexism," believing it to be harmful and that it should be challenged. Hence, it is fair to say that the TDSB publicly views "heterosexism" as a bad thing and something to educate its students to oppose. "Heterosexist" beliefs are therefore stigmatized by the TDSB, too.

In summary, then, the PDSB and TDSB's definition of "heterosexism" seems to encompass heteronormative beliefs that are institutional, particularly those beliefs with political, social or moral implications for people with same-sex sexual inclinations. Thus, it is fair to commit both the PDSB and TDSB to this proposition:

- (1) All beliefs that are both heteronormative and institutional are "heterosexist" beliefs.

But as we have seen, the PDSB and TDSB depict "heterosexism" as something oppressive, wrong, bad, harmful, or "homophobic," that it is something in need of challenge. Therefore, it is also fair to commit both the PDSB and TDSB to a second proposition:

- (2) All "heterosexist" beliefs are bad or are social ills.

By way of logical inference, propositions 1 and 2 entail a third proposition:

- (3) All beliefs that are both heteronormative and institutional are bad or are social ills.

Thus, if the boards are committed to propositions 1 and 2, as I believe they are, then they are also committed to proposition 3. But a commitment to proposition 3 might have an unwanted implication for the boards, particularly because it leads to the stigmatization of some heteronormative Roman Catholic beliefs. Here, I describe those beliefs and then explain how the stigma obtains.

## Heteronormative and Institutional Roman Catholic Beliefs and Their Stigmatization

The Roman Catholic Church claims that homosexual *acts* are both contrary to natural law and intrinsically disordered (1994, para. 2357).<sup>2</sup> The Church also affirms that homosexual acts lack the finality appropriate and objective to human sexuality (Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, 1975). Consequently, for the Church, these acts cannot be approved and are rejected as bad. We also know that, for the Church, same-sex sexual *inclination* is inferred to be an objective disorder, for the inclination itself is thought to be ordered toward an intrinsic moral evil (same-sex sexual acts). Thus, though it is true that same-sex sexual inclination itself is not immoral or sinful, provided it is involuntary, this inclination is *not* understood as a good or neutral thing (Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, 1986). Instead, same-sex inclination is understood to be more like an affliction; it is something which, if it were not for the "fall of man," no person would have.

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<sup>2</sup> The word "disorder" should be understood in a Scholastic sense, not in any sense used in modern psychology. It is a word indicating that the homosexual inclination or attraction is *teleologically* wayward—that it is contrary to the objective procreative end of human sexuality (Melina, 2015, pp. 129–140; Bohr, 2006, p. 264).

Consequently, for the Church, same-sex sexual inclination is a deviation from the created nature of human sexuality—it is not a variation.<sup>3</sup>

In summary, we know that, in Roman Catholicism, same-sex sexual acts are unnatural and bad while sexual inclination toward such acts is considered disordered, a sort of deprivation or affliction.<sup>4</sup> This position is what I identify as Roman Catholic heteronormativity.

In addition to this heteronormativity, we also know that Roman Catholics are called upon by Church leadership to oppose the recognition of same-sex civil unions and civil marriage for people both inside and outside the Church. This call for opposition is anchored in the idea that same-sex sexual relations are contrary to natural law and that there is no basis to think that these relations are even “remotely analogous to God’s plan for marriage and the family,” which therefore implies that there is no justified right to such behaviours or relations (Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, 2003, sec. 4). In societies that practice *de facto* tolerance of homosexual cohabitation, the Church encourages Roman Catholics to understand the clear distinction between tolerating such a cohabitation and approving or legitimizing this cohabitation through legal recognition or positive rights. The Church asks Roman Catholics to neither approve nor legitimize those arrangements even if they must tolerate them in their respective societies. Within societies that grant legal recognition and rights belonging to marriage, such as the current Canadian society, the Church states that clear empathic opposition is a *duty*. The Church informs Roman Catholics that they must resist formal cooperation in both the enactment and application of such “gravely unjust laws” (sec. 5).<sup>5</sup> These ideas are what I herein identify as the institutionalization of Roman Catholic heteronormativity.

What we now have is sufficient reason to infer that some Roman Catholic beliefs are both heteronormative and institutional, at least inasmuch as same-sex couples are denied a Catholic marriage and opposition to legal recognition of same-sex civil unions and marriages is an obligation. We thus have enough justification to support the truth of this proposition:

- (4) Some Roman Catholic beliefs are heteronormative and institutional.

Propositions 3 and 4 deductively entail a fifth proposition:

- (5) Some Roman Catholic beliefs are bad or are social ills.

Let me be clear: I am not personally affirming the truth of proposition 5. I am merely presenting that which is entailed by propositions 1 to 4. My point is that the PDSB and TDSB’s commitments to propositions 1 and 2, and the known truth of 4, entail proposition 5: some Roman Catholic beliefs are bad or are social ills. Consequently, some propositions that the PDSB and TDSB publicly affirm about heteronormative and

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<sup>3</sup> Some modern identity politics within the West has treated sexual inclination as part of a person’s identity, which therefore makes it seem as though Roman Catholicism is committed to the idea that persons with same-sex sexual inclinations are disordered *persons*. But Roman Catholicism rejects that identity thesis, refusing to understand persons in terms of their sexual inclination. The tendency to understand identity in terms of sexual inclination is a modern development, one that has critics even outside the clergy (Paris, 2001).

<sup>4</sup> It might be difficult to understand Catholic sex ethics, for modern Western societies have lost familiarity with teleology and natural law, seeing the ethics of sex largely as a matter of consent alone. However, there are authors to whom we can turn to better understand a more Catholic viewpoint (Hsiao, 2016; Feser, 2015; Skalko, 2015; Budziszewski, 2014; Rhonheimer, 2012).

<sup>5</sup> How Roman Catholics choose to oppose these unions is important. Roman Catholics are called to approach this issue with love, charity and prudence, but always kindly insisting on what they believe is true.

institutional beliefs, particularly propositions 1 and 2, implicate some known Roman Catholic beliefs as bad or as social ills, however incidentally. That is an implication that the PDSB and TDSB might not like or intend, but supposing their commitment to propositions 1 and 2, and the known truth of 4, it is an implication that they cannot plausibly or consistently deny.

The stigmatization of some Roman Catholic beliefs is thus an implication of the PDSB and TDSB speaking so negatively about beliefs that are heteronormative and institutional, the same sort of beliefs held by the Church. Their stigmatization of some Roman Catholic beliefs might be incidental, but the PDSB and TDSB still stigmatize some Roman Catholic beliefs through their commitment to propositions 1 and 2.<sup>6</sup>

I should further point out that, though my commentary here is directed toward the PDSB and TDSB, the same argument can be applied to *any* school board or educational institution within Canada that shares the anti-“heterosexist” education of either the PDSB or TDSB. That sort of education stigmatizes Roman Catholic beliefs regardless of who or what offers it.

### An Objection?

Anticipating an objection with a line of reasoning similar to my own, the TDSB makes a counterpoint:

Anti-homophobia education does not teach children that their parents’/guardians’/caregivers’ religious values are wrong. We live in a very diverse society. From a very young age, children learn that different religions and different families believe in different things. For example, learning that different groups have different dietary rules does not teach children that the diet required by their parents/guardians/caregivers or their religion is wrong. (2011, p.4)

The authors’ reasoning is that “anti-homophobia” education only teaches schoolchildren that there are different sorts of normative ideas on sexuality or sexual practice, which is distinct from teaching that some perspectives on sexuality or sexual practice are wrong. Likewise, we can teach about other kinds of diets without implying that any diet is wrong or bad. That is a fair line of argument to make, and if that accurately reflected the TDSB’s “anti-homophobia” education, then I would have no immediate complaint. Yet, that claim is *not* an accurate reflection. Let me explain why.

To the contrary of what those authors suggest, this “anti-homophobia education” does not just teach about the existence of other sexual norms or practices, nor does it just inform children about non-heteronormative ideas concerning sexuality. Instead, those heteronormative beliefs about sexuality and sex, or what it dubs “heterosexism,” are challenged and depicted as harmful. In other words, the TDSB teaches about other conceptions of sexuality and sex while *denigrating* heteronormative conceptions of sex and sexuality. Heteronormative conceptions of sex and sexuality are thus framed as bad and harmful, which then, however incidentally, implies that those religions that share those heteronormative conceptions (e.g., Roman Catholicism, orthodox Islam, Judaism and Protestantism) have some bad and harmful beliefs. Consequently, the stigmatization remains, however incidentally.

Thus, I reject the authors’ argument—the TDSB cannot counter my argument with this response. I therefore conclude, again, that these boards have stigmatized some Roman Catholic beliefs, however incidentally.

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<sup>6</sup> Elsewhere, the religious belief that homosexuality and “sexual minorities” are sinful has been *explicitly* described as “heterosexist” (Herek, 2004, p. 15).

## Reactions?

Presuming that I am right, how else can the PDSB and TDSB react? They can accept proposition 5 and its implications, or distance themselves from it, revising or abandoning premise 1 or 2. Those are their most viable options, as far as I can see.

If the former option is selected, then, for the sake of transparency and honesty, the PDSB and TDSB should inform Roman Catholics that their boards consider some Roman Catholic beliefs to be bad, harmful, or oppressive, and also that their boards *aim* to re-educate Roman Catholic students to believe some ideas that are knowingly contrary to Church teaching.<sup>7</sup> These boards should also inform the other religious communities that hold similar heteronormative beliefs (e.g., orthodox Islam, orthodox Protestantism and Orthodox Judaism) that these beliefs are also deemed to be bad, harmful, or oppressive. Upon learning this, religious families and communities could then consider the prospects of private education or homeschooling, or perhaps advocate for some sort of publicly funded educational pluralism, one that better accommodates their differences.

If this option is unpalatable for the boards, then I suggest that they choose the latter option, back-peddalling from their commitment to proposition 5. If they choose this option, then the boards will need to distance themselves from proposition 1 or 2, which would thus be a retraction of a previous commitment.<sup>8</sup> Supposing that the PDSB and TDSB choose this latter option, I have some suggestions for them that could extinguish the stigma toward Roman Catholicism while not abandoning a challenge to the bullying and harassment of students with same-sex sexual inclination.

## My Suggestions

Firstly, I suggest that these boards stop their current anti-“heterosexist” education, because it is unnecessary to address bullying and harassment against students with same-sex attraction. Let me explain why.

It might be true that heteronormative beliefs are a precondition of bullying and harassment of students with same-sex attraction, but there is nothing about those beliefs *per se* that sufficiently generate or warrant acts of bullying and harassment. For example, suppose I believe that (a) human sexuality and sexual expression is properly heterosexual and that (b) society should recognize and affirm the proposition expressed in (a). You might not like these beliefs, but nothing about these beliefs inform me about whether it is appropriate or permissible to bully or harass persons with same-sex sexual inclination. Instead, each case of bullying or harassment likely involves additional beliefs about the sort of conduct permissible or warranted toward persons with same-sex sexual inclination. I suggest that the PDSB and TDSB only resist those additional beliefs, promoting beliefs for a basic tolerance in their stead. For if the boards were to do that, then they would still

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<sup>7</sup> If this option were selected, it would suggest that those regular, public schools are not accepting educational environments for Roman Catholics *as* Roman Catholics, which would thus only further the imperative and justification for Roman Catholics to educate themselves apart from the public system, a demand older than the Confederation of Canada.

<sup>8</sup> Readers might herein object that these boards could just choose to distance themselves from proposition 4, taking an agnostic stance toward it or deny its truth. But to take an agnostic stance is to act irresponsibly, refusing to deal with matters of known fact. It is also a willful ignorance of the justification herein offered for the truth of proposition 4. The boards could try to deny proposition 4's truth, but given the strength of its justification, that is not a viable endeavour. I should also add that neither strategy will work with a disgruntled and persistent Catholic parent who demands to know what propositions 1 and 2 entail about *his* Catholic belief, expressed in proposition 4.

address bullying toward students with same-sex attraction while not stigmatizing heteronormative beliefs (a) and (b).

Secondly, I suggest that regular, public school boards resist any philosophy or anti-bullying measure that frames and furthers pluralism as an ideal, making inclusion, diversity and non-judgemental attitudes a civic or moral obligation (Raum, 2011). Such philosophies or measures can depict non-pluralist perspectives, such as Roman Catholicism, as impediments to the common good. Rather than suffer that consequence, regular, public boards could accept an arrangement that recognizes restraints and limitations, not as ideals, but as pragmatic necessities for living together within a liberal state (Reno, 2017; Jackson, 2005, pp. 139–141).<sup>9</sup> On this model, the boards would not educate schoolchildren to resist heteronormative conceptions of sexuality, nor any other idea of sexuality. Instead, schoolchildren would be educated about the different and conflicting conceptions of sex and sexuality, being made aware of a range of disagreements, but also encouraged to tolerate these differences.

Thirdly, I suggest that regular, public school boards educate for a basic tolerance rather than a warm embrace and celebration of same-sex sexual inclinations, behaviours, relationships, or household arrangements. On this suggestion, regular, public school boards will educate for a peaceful co-existence and basic tolerance despite deep and significant differences between our ideas and practices of human sexuality (Halstead & Lewika, 1998; Halstead, 1999; Halstead, 2005).<sup>10</sup>

Consequently, on this suggestion, the TDSB's efforts to educate schoolchildren to celebrate the diversity of families (2011, p. 57) would be rejected as an unreasonable request for individuals, families and communities who believe that "same-sex families" are based upon an immoral or wrongful relationship. Students could still learn *about* such relationships and household arrangements recognized under Canadian law, but the celebratory aspect would be excessive, because people cannot celebrate that which they believe is strongly immoral or evil—it is like a performative contradiction.

Fourthly, I suggest that regular, public boards adopt the belief that their non-discriminatory and "inclusive" values toward human sexuality and practices only apply to them as regular, public institutions within a liberal society. In other words, these are political commitments pertinent to regular, public *institutions*—they are not commitments *individuals* need to share. Hence, on this suggestion, if a board were to educate a schoolchild to share those commitments, then it would be treating an individual as if he were a regular, public institution. That would be a category error.

I am not here suggesting that regular, public schools should not educate schoolchildren for some basic civic virtues, but just that these boards should not muddle the commitments necessary or appropriate for regular, public institutions with those commitments necessary or appropriate for individuals. So, for example, it might be true that the PDSB and TDSB themselves should not believe or advocate for heteronormative ideas and practices, but that is a restriction for the PDSB and TDSB as regular, public institutions—the Church and individual Catholics are not restricted by those same political commitments.

Those are my four proposed suggestions to extinguish the stigma toward Roman Catholicism. Readers should notice that my suggestions do not require an abandonment of anti-bullying measures aimed to support persons with same-sex attraction. My suggestions also do not necessitate the abandonment of "Gay-Straight Alliances," nor do they undermine a curriculum that recognizes persons with same-sex attraction and their

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<sup>9</sup> Here Jackson (2005) addresses the question of tension between Muslims and liberal-pluralist societies that give "...the right of gays, atheists, and witches to be gays, atheists, and witches." (p. 140). Jackson notes that this political system is an "enormous challenge" for Muslim-Americans, but he argues that American-Muslims can support such a society, perhaps not as an ideal, but as a political arrangement.

<sup>10</sup> Halstead's focus in all three essays applies to Muslims and educational instruction in regards to homosexuality, but the same point can be made for Roman Catholics.

contributions to society; hence, my suggestions are consistent with these endeavours while not leading to any notable stigma toward some Roman Catholic beliefs.

## Conclusion

I have here argued that the PDSB and TDSB stigmatize some Roman Catholic beliefs, even if such stigma is unintentional. I believe that my argument for this conclusion is sound. I have also offered four proposed suggestions aimed to extinguish this stigma, those that do not necessarily interfere with an education aimed to curb bullying or harassment toward persons with same-sex inclination. Thus, I conclude: If the PDSB and TDSB want to stop this stigmatization, then I encourage them to adopt some of my suggestions, or something like them. Otherwise, as I have argued here, their commitments stigmatize some Roman Catholic beliefs as bad or as social ills, however incidentally.

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