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In Good Conscience

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‘I choose not to collaborate in my own oppression by restricting a basic human right...’ To me this is a matter of conscience’. — Sister Jeannine Gramick (Rick & Maysles, 2004, p. 93)

When Sister Jeannine Gramick made the above remark she was commenting on the Vatican’s attempts to stop her work with lesbian and gay Catholics. Her struggle to resist this silencing has been made into the compelling film documentary In Good Conscience, which has been widely shown, including in North America and London, and has recently been shown in Melbourne and Brisbane at the 2005 Queer Film Festivals — and in Sydney for QueerDoc in 2004. Her story was commented on in the Australian Channel 7 news program Sunrise on 23 March 2005, where she was described as the ‘nun who defied the Vatican’ (Seven Online Network, 2005). It was also broadcast on ABC radio in 2005, with the ABC’s webpage including the following detail on the story:

Sister Gramick joined the School Sisters of Notre Dame at the age of 18. She has lived 40 years of religious life, but in her later years has fallen foul of conservative Vatican officials who have attempted to stop her ministry. Together with Fr Robert Nugent she was the founding director of New Ways ministry. In 1998 the Vatican ordered they cease this ministry to the gay community, and on direction from Rome in 2000 she was silenced by her order. Sister Gramick has declined — as she puts it — “to co-operate in my own oppression”. She still speaks publicly about the place of gays and lesbians in the church. Janine Gramick declined to stay quiet, joined another order, and has just released a documentary about her work, called In Good Conscience. (de Bien, 2005)

In Online Catholics an ‘Independent Australian e Journal’, Kelly explains that is was Gramick’s statement ‘I will not collaborate in my own oppression’ that prompted Barbara Rick, a filmmaker to make a documentary about Gramick’s journey of conscience’ (Kelly, 2005). Gramick’s poignant statement, and her courageous actions against the mandated opinion of those in power in the Catholic Church resulted in not only a compelling movie documentary.

Why consider Sister Jeannine Gramick when responding the conundrum ‘Sexualities and education in Australia — which way forward? The reason is because of what can be learnt in considering her acts of resistance. What I want to do here is explore how deciding her decision ‘not to collaborate in my oppression’ is an act of parrhesia. More specifically, I want to suggest how such parrhesiastic acts are critical to moving forward in relation to sexualities and education in Australia.

Foucault defined parrhesia as ‘a verbal activity in which a speaker expresses his (sic) personal relationship to truth, and risks his life because he recognises truth-telling as a duty to improve or help other people (as well as himself)’ (2001, p. 19). Indeed, as Simons points out, ‘this role of frank criticism, taken as a duty, is played by someone who speaks out against the majority in a democracy or against a monarch...’ (1995, p. 94). This could also be taken I suggest, to include individuals such as those in command of the Catholic Church. There can be little doubt then that what Sister Jeannine Gramick did, and continues to do, is speak out against a powerful influence which has control of a majority.

Whilst not suggesting the situations are analogous, there are striking similarities between the imposition of homophobic and heterosexist decrees (both overt and covert) in educational practice — and the attempted silencing of Gramick. It is difficult if not prohibited to discuss homosexuality in a positive way in schools (Harwood, 2004; Rasmussen, Mitchell, & Harwood, in press). Milton describes examples of such difficulties in her report a study of sexuality education in four public primary
schools in South Australia. As she explains, for the sexuality education, not one school ‘included sexual identity/sexual orientation in the written program’. It was a topic which came up in either questions posed directly to teachers by students, or those that were put anonymously into a question box’ (2003, p. 245). She described teacher responses to such questions, such as ‘The question has come up “Is it alright for a man to love a man?” It’s really hard because nobody can say “yes” because you’re going to go against many parents. And if you say “no” then you’re going to go against the other half’ (2003, p. 246). In this research she also reports how the teachers knew there were children from ‘homosexual families’ and for this reason they needed to ‘be careful’ in how things were discussed in class.

Milton goes on to emphasise the importance of discussing sexual identity in primary schools, for reasons such as for the welfare of Same Sex Attracted Youth (SSAY). She also stresses the significance of ‘...actively denouncing any homophobic comments made by members of the school community and actively challenging any myths, prejudices and stereotypes expressed by members of the school community (2003, p. 253). A similar point is made by Semann who discusses the furore that erupted when the ABC Playschool program televised ‘two mothers, Vicki Harding and her partner Jackie Braw with their daughter Brenna, enjoying a days outing at a Sydney amusement park’ (2004, p. 20). In his discussion he states there is ‘...need for early childhood educators to explore ways of ensuring that same sex families are treated with equality and respect, and have the same rights to access educational settings for their children as other families’ (2004, p. 21). Goldstein also suggests that teachers need to ‘do something’ about homophobic harassment (1997, p. 115). Associated with this ‘call to speak’ is discussion of the role of teacher educators. Robinson and Ferfolja (2001) discuss the complaints that may be levelled against teacher educators who teach positively about sexual identity. Then there is the reactions to the ‘lesbian mums’ on Playschool or the widespread negative reaction to a casual teacher who accidentally gave out The Heterosexual Questionnaire to students at a Victorian regional high school (Rasmussen et al., in press). Thus in the calls for action — or speaking out, teachers or teacher educators are being appealed to to tell particular truths, to be, one could propose, parrhesiasts.

Returning to parrhesia, in his examination of this practice, Foucault explained that ‘What I wanted to analyse was how the truth-teller’s role was variously problematised in Greek philosophy’ (2001, p. 169). He goes on to state that the Greeks looked at the problem from two sides: ‘from the point of view of the criteria for true statements and sound reasoning... and from the of truth-telling as an activity’ (2001, p. 169). Foucault suggests that these relate to our society today in two ways:

[O]ne is concerned with ensuring that the process of reasoning is correct in determining whether a statement is true. And the other side is concerned with the question: what is the non-discriminatory practice. Like Robinson and Ferfolja (2001) I agree that preservice teachers need to be educated on these issues in order for there to be a way forward in sexuality education. One of the ways in which this can be done is to not focus on sexual difference as a marker of woundedness (for example, the risk of suicide, depression and so on gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, queer or questioning youth). Instead of trying to identify and examine the other, an approach could be taken that seeks to highlight the various practices that produce otherness. Examination of such practices intersects with equally important interrogations of practices such as racism, ableism, sexism and so on. Yet whilst these share the notion of ‘otherness’, I would argue that it is the non-heterosexual or non-gender normative topics that are the ones that are most resisted. For example, preservice teachers are more likely to be outspoken in their critique of the inclusion of this in the courses than of other topics pertaining to otherness (Robinson & Ferfolja, 2001).

To address the important issue of sexuality in education, teachers, and teacher educators are being asked to speak up about sexuality education in a way that risks sanctions, criticism, and a range of possible accusations. For example, Robinson and Ferfolja (2001) discuss the complaints that may be levelled against teacher educators who teach positively about sexual identity. Then there is the reactions to the ‘lesbian mums’ on Playschool or the widespread negative reaction to a casual teacher who accidentally gave out The Heterosexual Questionnaire to students at a Victorian regional high school (Rasmussen et al., in press). Thus in the calls for action — or speaking out, teachers or teacher educators are being appealed to to tell particular truths, to be, one could propose, parrhesiasts.

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[O]ne is concerned with ensuring that the process of reasoning is correct in determining whether a statement is true. And the other side is concerned with the question: what is the
importance for the individual and for the society of telling the truth, knowing the truth, of having people who tell the truth, as well as knowing how to recognise them? (2001, p. 170)

Following on from this quote, we need to carefully consider the importance of telling the truth and significantly, of having people such as teachers or teacher educators tell the truth about these pressing concerns related to sexuality. For Foucault truth, or more precisely, the telling of truth is a critical task. This may seem at odds with his much cited critiques of ‘truth’. However, as Simons points out, Foucault stated, ‘I believe too much in truth not to suppose that there are different truths and different ways of speaking the truth’ (Foucault, 1988, p. 51). This means that truths need to be both critiqued and curiously, have a value in as critical practice when they are spoken. For example, Simons (1995) explains that ‘Foucault proposes that there is a role for truth-telling in today’s politics. Indeed, there is no way to challenge dominant regimes of truth other than to criticise politics on the basis of some form of truth’ (p. 94).

What then, would it mean, to understand teachers or teacher educators as engaging in parrhesia? In a sense, this perspective could increase our appreciation and understanding of these parrhesiasts and their task. Most importantly, such acts of parrhesia could be viewed in terms of their wider agenda. As Simons explains:

Some forms of parrhesia focused on the personal sphere, improving the lives of individuals while others were politically orientated to the betterment of the state. Foucault recovers in the tradition of parrhesia an alternative to the epistemological focus on how we know that what is said is true. The alternative is to consider the moral and political effects of telling the truth.

(1995, p. 94, emphasis in original)

If parrhesia is concerned with improving the lives of individuals, then surely it is a worthwhile endeavour. Speaking up about sexuality has effects beyond those identified or labelled as ‘different’, it is critical for the work of educational practices that seek to address the complex issues of inequity — and offer an equitable education.

Yet when we ask teachers or teacher educators to tell such truths we are asking them to take certain risks because they are, largely, speaking against a majority. In so doing, they are engaging in practices that may involve certain threats to themselves. This is no easy task, but it gives pause to consider the value of understanding these as parrhesiastic practices. To paraphrase Foucault, it forces us to consider the ‘moral and political effects of telling the truth’ — and more solemnly, the possible effects of not attempting to tell the truth. As such, these parrhesiasts in education need to be valued, and their work acknowledged as a challenging and crucial task. Their speaking up or telling the truth is, I would suggest, something that quite often has something to do with not partaking in one’s own oppression — and perhaps even, is concerned with being ‘in good conscience’.

References


