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Contemporary, racialised conflicts over LGBT-inclusive education: more strategic secularisms than secular/religious oppositions?

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ABSTRACT

This paper analyses public conflicts over school policies that seek to advance Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) equality. It focuses in particular on conflicts where Muslims, who protest LGBT-inclusive policies, become racialised as other to secular national/Western values. Growing attention has been paid to the secular arguments used by majority and minority religious groups to publicly counter LGBT-inclusive education. In this paper, I contend that neither contemporary arguments for, or against, LGBT-inclusive education are neatly secular, i.e., non-religious, in their public appearance. Introducing a Critical Secular approach, I contend multiple parties in such conflicts work with “strategic” secularisms. Strategic secularisms are prevailing discourses which privatise, and deprivatise (make public), aspects of minority religious and sexual identities on neo-colonial, secular Christian terms. I present a thematic analysis of 149 newspaper articles covering protests largely by Muslims against LGBT-inclusive education outside schools in Birmingham, England. The analysis shows that newspapers foregrounded discourses seeking to privatise (assert private authority over) or deprivatise (publicly surveil) Muslim religiosity. LGBT identities were also variously framed as “beliefs” to be kept private, or an essential part of the public self which must be confessed to be “free”. Based on this analysis, I argue public discourse should certainly challenge queer/Muslim and secular/religious dichotomies. But more fundamentally, there is a need to cultivate education publics that refuse strategic secularisms based in neo-colonial, racialised discourses of secular Christian civilisation, and engage the losses created by the privatising and deprivatising of specific forms of minority religious and sexual identity.

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Introduction

Queer¹ scholarship and advocacy has long confronted the dilemma of state recognition, and the risks of a “proper”, assimilated queer subject becoming tied to narratives of national/Western political progressiveness (Jivraj & de Jong, 2011; Puar, 2017; Talburt &

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Rasmussen, 2010). Research on queer politics in education has expanded on this dilemma across Global Northern school landscapes marked by the continued centring of heterosexuality on the one hand, and particular forms of new state LGBT recognition on the other (Hall, 2020; Nash & Browne, 2021). In the case of the latter, scholars have problematised the limitations of attaching notions of progressiveness and emancipation to secular relationships and sexuality education (RSE), and to the removal of religious employment restrictions for queer educators (Neary, 2020; Rasmussen, 2016). A line of scholarship has also analysed forms of opposition to queer inclusion that do not necessarily use explicitly hateful rhetoric (Nash & Browne, 2020; Shipley, 2014). While taking somewhat different approaches, together, this scholarship has identified how apparently “progressive”, “conservative”, “religious”, and “secular” politics blur and interplay in conflicts over queer educational inclusion (White, 2015).

In this paper, I bring this work forward by analysing the secularist politics of both liberal *and* conservative groups in public conflicts over queer-inclusive² education. In the forthcoming section, I discuss analyses of contemporary political conflicts over public education in Ontario (Canada) and Birmingham (UK) that racialise Muslims as other to Western/national values. I then expand on how a Critical Secular approach can build on analyses of the politics of multiple parties, not by understanding them as “non-religious” in their substantive arguments, but as strategically mobilising and/or operating within secularised Christian discursive framings of religion as private belief, and/or of (homo)sexuality as essential to the public self (Van den Brandt, 2018; White, 2015). Rather than assume the state as a neutral arbiter of these issues, my analysis of these “strategic secularisms” is situated in an understanding of sovereign, colonial, and neoliberal (state) assemblages as regulating, rather than eliminating violence, through their arranging of secular-religious relations, and spatialisation of public and private minority identities (Asad, 2003; Rao, 2020). Thus, it has relevance beyond education contexts where queer subjects are afforded relative legal recognition. I then move to analyse news media articles on the Birmingham case. The analysis approaches this conflict not as a debate “in” or “over” “a” public sphere, but as involving the creation of multiple, overlapping and often exclusionary media, street, and school publics (Kitching, 2020; Nash & Browne, 2020). The paper draws attention to the need to foster education publics that move beyond simply challenging queer/Muslim and secular/religious oppositions, to refusing neo-colonial, racialised discourses of secular Christian civilisation, and attending to the losses created by the ongoing privatising and deprivatising of specific forms of religious and sexual identity in education contexts.

Secularism and racialisation in conflicts over queer-inclusive education

Rasmussen (2016) provides a pathbreaking analysis of how notions of secular progressiveness in transnational movements for public sexuality education may act in exclusionary ways. Drawing on Puar (2014, 2017), Rasmussen (2016) analyses a “queer secularism” that regards sexuality education that is factual, non-biased, pragmatic, producing better health outcomes, politically neutral, and incorporating pleasure, choice, and inclusion as “progressive”, whereas religiosity is represented as lacking such elements. Rasmussen (2016) notes how queer secularism purportedly refuses religiosity and considers it a private matter, but also retains Christian, and US-centric cultural norms, e.g.

through assumptions of its exceptional inclusiveness, transgressiveness, and its “saving” of excluded groups. Of course, such queer secularism is not uniform, or universally successful, as transnationally, there are multiple configurations of institutional secular-religious relations and thus *secularisms* (Asad, 2003), which are worked and reworked across contexts in specific ways.

While liberal movements for LGBT-inclusive education may often position themselves as secular, i.e. “non-religious” advocates, there is growing interest in the secular arguments used by those opposing such movements. Nash and Browne’s (2020) intervention in this field maps how “heteroactivist” movements in Canada, the UK and Ireland seek to re-assert “the superiority and centrality of hetero- and gender-normative individuals and families as the foundation for strong and healthy societies” (Nash & Browne, 2020, p. 2). Indeed, public protests against comprehensive RSE and LGBT-inclusive education have gained traction around the world, including the “*Con mis Hijos no te Metas* (Don’t Mess with My Kids)” movement in Peru which spread to other Latin American countries (Rousseau, 2016), and campaigns in the US, Ontario (Canada), and Australia. Similar movements succeeded in changing sex and relationships curricula in Hungary in 2021, Brazil in 2019, and France in 2014 (Butler, 2019).

Nash and Browne (2020) argue heteroactivist movements and ideologies are diverse and may rely on tactics other than hate speech. Indeed, Nash and Browne argue there is a “multiplicity of heteroactivist forms that can operate obliquely across race, religion and the left/right divide” (2020, p. 9). Their resistances to LGBT equalities are articulated in specific times and places, potentially “travelling” through networks and appearing at different scales (local grassroots, national debates, international funding) in complex ways that are broader than the religious and moral frames and global interventions often associated with the organised US Christian Right. Importantly, any explicitly theological basis for opposition to LGBT equalities may take a back seat to the adopting of “secular positions” (Nash & Browne, 2020, p. 22) involving particular claims about threats to freedom of speech, parental rights/home authority, and child protection from state indoctrination (Nash & Browne, 2020, 2021).

Heteroactivists’ claims are often premised in racialised, nativist, nationalist and culturally Christian ideologies and concepts of citizenship (Butler, 2019; Nash & Browne, 2020). But a liberal, racialised framing of Muslims as homophobes has also been identified in conflicts over LGBT-inclusive education (Bialystok & Wright, 2019; Khan, 2021; Nash & Browne, 2020). The construction of the homophobic, heterosexist Muslim who fails to live up to Western conservative and/or liberal values has its roots in the reverse, colonial categorising and criminalising of Arab and Muslim queer desire (Massad, 2007); a process that extended across the British empire (Rao, 2020). Both historically and contemporarily, these processes construct the (neo-)colonial other in terms of normal/deviant sexuality, and good (liberal, Westernised)/bad (ungovernable, unassimilated) subjecthood. But racialised constructions of Muslims as homophobic and heterosexist in school-based conflicts manifest in spatially and temporally specific ways, not least due to their interface with specific national imaginaries and policy histories.

For example, Bialystok and Wright (2019) analyse how Canadian media seized upon opposition by Muslims to Ontario’s 2015 Health and Physical Education curriculum³ to create a racialised “multicultural panic” about who belonged in a Canada imagined as liberal, peaceful, and not susceptible to US-style culture wars. This racialised focus came in spite of the fact that the focus of protestors was on secular questions of

freedom of religion as much as it was on religious morality itself – and indeed protestors made common cause with White majority religious groups to emphasise their Canadian-ness. Notably, Shipley (2014) signals how Christian groups in Ontario had previously used the Canadian Charter of Equal Rights and Freedoms to challenge sex education and anti-bullying policies. A number of papers have also analysed representations of the 2019 protests in Birmingham (UK) that form the basis of this paper's case study. Below, I outline some key features of the case and the existing scholarship around it, before making the case for a Critical Secular approach to analysing this and similar contemporary cases of conflict over LGBT-inclusive schooling.

Existing analyses of the 2019 Birmingham case

In 2019, protests were held outside two Birmingham primary schools that are state funded (community and academy⁴ respectively) settings. These schools serve communities of predominantly South Asian, Muslim heritage in disadvantaged areas of the city. The protests preceded England's establishment of compulsory Relationships Education (RE) in primary, and Relationships and Sex Education (RSE) in secondary schools a year later (Department for Education [DfE], 2020), a move Christian conservative groups have long contested (Vanderbeck & Johnson, 2016). The wider protests were focused primarily on opposing the existing representation of queer lives to children in the schools as normal through, e.g. children's storybooks. The Equality Act (2010), which requires schools to protect and advance equality, including on the basis of religion or belief and sexual orientation, was frequently invoked by various parties as a basis for their claims on the importance of, or problems with, LGBT-inclusive schooling (DfE, 2014). There were also reports of parent concerns about LGBT content in schools in other English cities, and several assertions reported (e.g. citing the Chair of the Commission on Counter Extremism) that activists were stoking local conservative Muslim parents' fears as part of a vexatious national campaign (Haynes, 2019; Iqbal, 2019; Jackson, 2019). Below is a brief timeline of selected events in the case, that is further fleshed out in the data analysis.

- January 2019: At Chartry Community School,⁵ regular street protests from Muslims and Christians commenced. The school stated some parents linked the teaching of their "No Outsiders" programme to its separate RSE teaching, and parents were concerned about RSE's impending compulsory status (McManus, 2019). Designed by Chartry's then Assistant Headteacher, No Outsiders claims to positively engage difference and equality, to prepare children "for life in modern Britain". The programme was aligned to fundamental British values policy and the "Prevent" counterterrorist agenda (see below and Khan [2021]; No Outsiders [2021]).⁶
- A February inspection by the government education inspectorate Ofsted⁷ was announced in March to find "no evidence" for protestors' claims about a disproportionate and age-inappropriate teaching focus in Chartry's approaches.
- March-June 2019: Opposition to LGBT-inclusive schooling was also articulated at nearby Greenmount primary school via recurring street protests by Muslim parents and Christian and Muslim activists, and by withdrawal of children from the school. In June, Birmingham City Council was granted a temporary court injunction to prevent protests outside the gates of Greenmount.

- November 2019: A High Court-ordered permanent ban on protests occurring in an exclusion zone around Greenmount came into effect.

Scholarly analyses of the prevailing public and political discourses in the Birmingham case have resonated with Bialystok and Wright's (2019) Ontario analysis in some respects. Khan (2021), Vincent (2020) and Mac an Ghaill and Haywood (2021) argue that public and political representations of the Birmingham case fabricated a dichotomy of British LGBT-inclusive vs. Muslim community values. However, they also centralise the specific affective, discursive and material context of Birmingham city and British education; not least the 2014 Birmingham Trojan Horse affair and the securitisation and juridification of British education policy in a post-9/11 context. The Trojan Horse affair involved fabricated, racialised allegations of a "plot" to gain control of certain state schools, with the goal of turning them into "Islamist" academies (Cannizzaro & Gholami, 2018; Holmwood & O'Toole, 2018). The affair was used as a pre-text by government to intensify surveillance on Muslim communities through several investigations, and ultimately, the Counterterrorism and Securities Act (2015; Miah, 2017). This Act created an explicit legal "Prevent Duty" for schools to "have due regard to the need to prevent people from being drawn into terrorism" (DfE, 2015, p. 4). Associated guidance advises schools to identify children who may be vulnerable to radicalisation, and to build pupils' resilience to radicalisation by promoting the "British" values of democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty, mutual respect, and tolerance of different faiths and beliefs (DfE, 2015). Notably, Vanderbeck and Johnson (2016) examine how the Trojan Horse affair, and the Prevent Duty endorsement of LGBT rights as a securitised "British" value, reignited conservative Christian groups' claims of radical state overreach in faith schools. However, they contend, such claims are not borne out by analysis of subsequent school inspection reports.

Khan (2021) has argued the media representation of the "No Outsiders" protests largely presented the programme as an example of exceptional liberal secular tolerance, in a way that erased its alignment with a racialised deradicalisation agenda. Vincent (2020) has critiqued the manner in which the November 2019 court hearing relating to Greenmount othered Muslims as illiberal, in a way that was illiberal itself. Vincent (2020) also notes how the use of a legal resolution was symptomatic of a weakened public sphere. Mac an Ghaill and Haywood (2021, p. 6) critique the "reductive reification of religion" (i.e. specifically Islam), present in representations of the Trojan Horse and the Birmingham protests, which erased socio-economic, technological, demographic, cultural and political change. This change includes a shift in 1970s state representation of South Asian communities as the future of modern, multicultural Britain, to the framing of Muslims as a suspect, self-segregating community at odds with the prevailing neoliberal modes of civic participation. Sanjakdar (2021) has contextualised the Birmingham protestors' claims in relation to Islamic theology, philosophy and epistemology. Yet, the existing scholarship on both contexts (Birmingham and Ontario) has not systematically focused on the role of situated secularisms in assigning particular forms of privateness and publicness to religiosity.⁸

A partial exception, focusing on the publicness of forms of *sexuality*, is Nash and Browne (2020), who argue that heteroactivists in the Birmingham case spatialised (or assigned particular meanings to), sexuality in public (the school) and private (the home). For example, they note the Christian Institute's claims that Chartry's then Assistant Headteacher, who identified as gay, was "promoting" homosexual and transgender "lifestyles" (Nash &

Browne, 2020). Of course, by definition, heteroactivists do not want sexuality to be entirely privatised, as they seek to reclaim the heterosexual family as “a public good” (2020, p. 43). Importantly, Nash and Browne (2020) also frame the multiple heteroactivist political tactics (freedom of religion, parent authority, child innocence) they identify as secular, largely in terms of these tactics not being formally or explicitly religious/theological.

There are two untapped opportunities here that build on the key work of Rasmussen (2016) and Nash and Browne (2020) together. The first opportunity is to consider how secularism itself is used to frame and spatialise *religiosity* as public and private in specific, and exclusionary ways, including through, e.g. processes of spatialising public education as religiously neutral – yet premised on Christian cultural norms. The second is to consider how the secular spatialising of religiosity links and interplays with the spatialising of sexuality, including, e.g. heteroactivist representations of schools as value neutral – yet heterosexual – public spaces (Van den Brandt, 2018). I argue below that a Critical Secular Studies approach provides compelling ways forward, illuminating how secularist discourses are used by multiple parties who seek to privatise and deprivatise (i.e. make public) very specific understandings of religious and sexual identities (Kitching & Gholami, *forthcoming*). It thus allows us to further understand and unpack these conflicts as less about oppositions of essentially homogeneous and irreconcilable religious and non-religious cultures, and more about strategic secularisms which publicly mobilise ideas about minoritised groups in exclusionary ways.

Critical Secular Studies and the spatialisation of religion and sexuality

The critical study of secularism and secular-religious relations has received significant attention from anthropologists, political theorists, sociologists and geographers – but less so from education researchers – in the past two decades (Kitching & Gholami, *forthcoming*). As a colonial, orientalist, disciplinary project, secularism “presupposes new concepts of ‘religion’, ‘ethics’, and ‘politics’” (Asad, 2003, p. 2). Rather than banishing religion from the political domain entirely, secularism seeks to “reshape the form it takes, the subjectivities it endorses, and the epistemological claims it can make” (Mahmood, 2006, p. 326). There are three characteristic points from scholarship that broadly takes a Critical Secular approach that are relevant to the forthcoming data analysis.

First, feminist and queer scholarship have foregrounded secular processes of spatialising the public and private to challenge the idea that secularism is intrinsically concerned with gender, sexual and religious equality (Scott, 2011). Building on Mahmood (2015), Butler (2019, p. 962) notes secular governance has often “secured the private domain for religion” and afforded it authority over matters of family, marriage and sexuality. Butler further argues “secularism is at least partially responsible for the intensification of the family form as a site of moral and legal conflict” (2019, p. 959). Ostensibly private religious authority is also destabilised by the deprivatisation (becoming public) of gender and sexual diversity (on typically queer secular terms; Puar, 2017). Butler (2019) argues “anti-gender ideology” movements⁹ are fuelled in part by a quest to draw the line “between public and private, walling off the family and its patriarchal privilege from the market, where humiliation and dispensability have become the norm” (2019, p. 959).

Second, both the religious and the secular are understood not as essentially different or oppositional, but as discursive categories mobilised in multiple, interrelating ways, often to “shore up power in the never-ending quest to define national and civilizational identities” (Sheedy, 2022, p. 11). A key legacy of Western colonisation is the Christian-centred discursive construction and essentialisation of “true” religion as an abstracted category of inner beliefs regarding a transcendent being, which a self-owning individual freely chooses to invest in, and for whom religious materiality (e.g. clothing) is a matter of symbolism, rather than embodied ethical attachment (Mahmood, 2006, 2009). Taking the lead from critical studies of religion, Critical Secular studies reject the idea that religion is a social category with a cross-cultural essence that can be separated from the realms of politics, law, economics and science (Anidjar, 2006; Asad, 1993; Jivraj, 2013). This means that, on the one hand, ostensibly secular arguments may be aligned with, rather than contradict non-Christian moral theologies (see, e.g. Sanjadkar’s [2021] situating of Birmingham parents’ moral objections within Islamic ethics). At the same time, the politics of groups identifying as queer and secular or religious may have to operate publicly within Christian cultural codes (see below; Jivraj & de Jong, 2011; White, 2015).

Focusing on this normative framing of religion as *chosen inner belief* is important to understanding the claims of “ideology” used both by those advocating for, and challenging, LGBT-inclusive education. It helps identify how a “detheologised Christian” secular discourse is used to render proper religion as a matter of rational, disembodied, private belief that the state is paradoxically neutral about, but constantly intervenes upon (Mahmood, 2015). This framing of religiosity is relevant to the above conflicts and inequalities in at least three ways. First, as the Trojan Horse affair indicated, British South Asian communities have long been re-racialised as Muslims, whose improper religiosity must be deprivatised and scrutinised because it is potentially oppressive or threatening (Gholami, 2021; Ismail, 2008; Mac an Ghail & Haywood, 2021). Second, the discourse of private belief and religious neutrality may be deployed by protestors, not only to defend their religiosity, but to attribute pseudo-religious meaning to queerness and/or LGBT equality as beliefs that should not be proselytised in schools, as politically neutral spaces (Jivraj, 2013; Van den Brandt, 2018). Third, this secular Christian framing of religiosity further explains racialised processes of queer Muslim erasure. As speakability and confessional models of “out” Western queer agency map on to secular Christian framings of religion in terms of choice and autonomy, such norms may make queer Christians more legible, valorised, and funded as *the* progressive religious exception. Queer Muslims on the other hand, are intelligible largely as adhering to, or being liberated from, their inherent extremism (Jivraj & de Jong, 2011; Puar, 2017).

Fourth, Reza Gholami and I have outlined how existing education research on secularism has often relied on a liberal view of the state as the benign protector against secular-religious domination and conflict (Kitching & Gholami, [forthcoming](#)). Even when state (e.g. education policy, court rulings) actions are considered problematic, such actions are often assumed to be an aberration of the truly neutral character of the state towards religion(s) and belief(s). Addressing sovereign power as an assemblage of economic, juridical, and political forces (e.g. colonisation, securitisation and marketisation) within and beyond state territories, we have argued that secular sovereign assemblages privatise, deprivatise, align, and oppose specific aspects of performatively religious and

secular identities, to regulate, rather than eliminate, multiple forms of violence and inequality. For example, Rao (2020) outlines how, in the transnational and local political, economic and cultural circuits of decolonial sovereignty-making, queerness has been used as a signifier for anti-imperialism, imperialism, paganism, Christianity, whiteness, becoming bourgeois, and being of subordinate caste.

This point is important in terms of both challenging the assumption that there is an overarching *telos* behind conflicts on LGBT-inclusive schooling (with “one side” eventually “winning” state recognition based on its superior rationality; Nash & Browne, 2020; Rasmussen, 2016) and adopting a more agonistic understanding of democratic relations as always-already contested (Kitching, 2020; Youdell, 2011). These arguments are significant not only for countries where queer movements have had relative success; they point to ongoing, (neo-)colonial secular processes of privatising and deprivatising notions of religiosity and sexuality as part of ongoing struggles over national/civilisational identity worldwide (Kitching & Gholami, forthcoming; Rao, 2020; White, 2015).

Through the data analysis that follows, I consider the various secular publics – street, school and media – that interrelate in conflicts over LGBT-inclusive schooling. Advocacy itself is not simply an effort to protect *the* public or private sphere: it is part of a process of making and interrelating publics and privates at various scales (Fraser, 1990; Nash & Browne, 2020; Warner, 2002). Affectively speaking, at various points below, the school is affectively made to stand in for the (national) public using particular understandings of sexuality as essential to the free self, and religion as inner belief, while other publics, including grassroots protestors are represented as acting against the public (i.e. nation; Warner, 2002). While not drawing moral equivalence between all causes, this understanding of publics as interacting processes with their own contradictions, can challenge the exclusionary potential of local calls for government to intervene on behalf of *the* (secular, national) public, and help us respond to multiple strategic secularisms, i.e. exclusionary processes of public interpretation and contestation (Rasmussen, 2016; Warner, 2002).

Design and ethical considerations

Newspapers, while declining in circulation, continue to play a key role both in directly (through their own readership) and indirectly (e.g. through representing schools and protestors) constituting multiple, overlapping publics (Warner, 2002). Certainly, social media posts play a very significant role in framing and circulating discourses in this and similar cases. But the analysis of posts relevant to the Birmingham case is beyond the scope of this paper. Moreover, newspapers have a symbiotic relationship with social media (Chadwick, 2013). Furthermore, in this case, newspaper articles did not just include reports and interviews, but also opinion pieces and open letters from national education and political leaders on equality and RSE policy enactment (Gibb, 2019; The Times, 2019).

The Birmingham protests and related events were painful and distressing for several parties involved, including school leaders, teachers, parents, and children. Entirely false claims by some protestors included the accusation that there was a paedophilic or sexualising intent on the part of schools (Haynes, 2019). While in practice, readers can quickly trace the identities of those referenced in this paper, the principle of avoiding harm, having taken due account of the risks and benefits of the research, remains paramount.

I have thus given pseudonyms to the two schools that were the focus of protest, and anonymised local school leaders', activists' and parents' names, both due to the sensitive nature of the topics discussed, and to emphasise that my analytic focus is on the legitimising of ideas about the place of sexuality, LGBT equality and religion in public and private, rather than on unpicking individual intentions. I refer to two schools only, as the vast majority of articles were either entirely focused on, or at least referenced, one or both of them. Those in national policy and political roles, e.g. Members of Parliament (MPs), are named. This approach was approved by University of Birmingham ethics governance.

The approach to data collection was to search for newspaper articles which discussed the protests. My focus was limited to newspaper articles in Britain and Northern Ireland, accessed through the Nexis Advance online database, and published between 01/01/2019 and 31/07/2020. The original search terms used to find relevant articles were "school" AND "protest" AND "religion" AND "LGBT" AND "equality" in one search. This yielded 122 articles from national and regional newspapers. After a first reading of all articles, thirteen duplicate articles, and eleven other articles which did not reference the school protests were removed, leaving 98 texts. All newspaper sources are detailed in Table 1 below. I used a thematic analysis approach, which in this case, identifies patterns or themes in the data and understands them as citations/performances of a range of secular discourses, while acknowledging the limits of the analyst's interpretive repertoire (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Articles were read and re-read, and data (narrative and interview quotes) from the articles were given multiple initial code files (e.g. LGBT equality/sexuality as belief; legislative progress; protecting child innocence). These codes were synthesised into more holistic themes, namely "common national (British) values", and "autonomy of belief", reflecting tensions within the overarching theme of "doing equality policy properly". While it was not possible for the codes and themes to be cross-checked by another

Table 1. Articles by newspaper title, regional focus and analysis phase.

Newspaper	Focus	Original analysis	Supplementary analysis	Total
<i>The Independent</i>	National	13	10	23
<i>Birmingham Evening Mail</i>	Birmingham	10	8	18
<i>The Guardian</i>	National/ International	14	4	18
<i>The Daily Mail, Scottish Daily Mail and MailOnline</i>	National	13	4	17
<i>Birmingham Post</i>	Birmingham	10	4	14
<i>The Times</i>	National/ International	9	7	16
<i>Asian Image</i>	National	5	1	6
<i>The Mirror</i>	National	3	2	5
<i>The Observer</i>	National	3	2	5
<i>The Times Educational Supplement</i>	National	2	2	4
<i>The Daily Telegraph</i>	National	3	0	3
<i>i-independent</i>	National	2	1	3
<i>The Sun</i>	National	3	1	4
Newspapers with one article (<i>The Express, The Sunday Times, The Herald (Scotland), The Western Mail, Daily Record and Sunday Mail, The Grimsby Telegraph, The Yorkshire Post, Redditch Advertiser, Sunday Mercury, Eastern Eye, Future News, Manchester Evening News, London Evening Standard</i>)	National or regional	8	5	13
Total		98	51	149

party, I used reflexive journaling and conducted a second search of a wider range of articles to test the reliability of the themes (Nowell et al., 2017), with a focus on seeking wider, alternative perspectives, and any additional information not found in the first 98 articles. This second search differed from the first by using the terms “school” AND “protest” AND “LGBT” AND “equality” only. It helped ensure that the initial search and analysis did not reproduce a narrow assumption that newspapers viewed “religion” as the entire basis for the protests. This yielded 564 additional articles (in addition to the original 98). All 564 article headlines were read, and 51 were identified as offering alternative perspectives or nuances on the existing analytic themes or additional information relating to the case. For example, an alternative, but rare perspective “How About (Radical Idea) the Three Rs?” (Liddle, 2019) ridiculed a focus on “diversity” in the school curriculum. All 51 additional articles were read and analysed using the same analytic process. It was found that the narratives in these articles reinforced, rather than undermined, the existing major themes.

The combination of narratives regarding both schools into a single case is limiting, and the sensationalism surrounding the case does not reflect the everyday mundaneness of secular-religious relations in these contexts. But the analysis is not aimed to be representative of bounded cases, and the article search was not exhaustive. The analysis is rather focused on the mobilisation of strategic secularisms as part of the creation of territories of religion, sexuality, race and gender enunciation (Gulson & Webb, 2012). Below, I analyse how protestors were reported as framing LGBT equalities and (homo)sexuality as a matter of free, private belief; before moving to consider how secular public queerness was tied in the articles to legislative notions of British values and emancipation.

Doing equality policy properly? Framing the publicness of sexuality and religion

Many news-focused articles attempted to report the views of both local education leaders and protestors, while columns and opinion pieces largely criticised the protests from a liberal, pro-LGBT standpoint. Activists and those parents supporting the protests were routinely quoted as viewing LGBT equality in secular Christian terms as a “belief” – and in at least one case as a “religion” – that they ostensibly respected, but which schools should not “(over-)promote”, and which should remain largely private. For example, at Chartry, a parent organising a petition was quoted as saying:

No Outsiders is not for our community. We have a different ethos. (Chartry Assistant Head-teacher) is over-promoting LGBT movements. I have nothing against him and I fully respect his beliefs but this should be stopped. It's not necessary. It's confusing children. (McManus, 2019)

The reference to “our community” here clearly works to represent Muslims and queers as separate categories/communities tending to their own, private beliefs. Protestors were reported as objecting to the representation of their moral concerns as homophobic, framed as it widely was as an intentional effort to harm or hate. Alongside chants of “let kids be kids” and “my child my choice”, outside Greenmount, protestors were pictured in articles holding placards which also exclaimed “don’t class us as homophobic!”, and “we are not homophobic people!” (Ferguson, 2019). Another parent protesting at Chartry was

reported as asserting “I respect all religions but why should sexuality be taught to primary school age children?” (McManus, 2019). Not only does this quote describe (homo)sexuality (as opposed to LGBT equality) as a religion; it reflects a common, paradoxically sexualising protestor narrative, which reduced teaching LGBT equality to sexual relationships, and claimed that children were at risk. Elsom (2019) reported:

(A) local businessman ... said, “The issue we have is the education being given, the indoctrination of young children is that they are expected to affirm, to celebrate, to embrace LGBT ideology, which is against the moral ethics of the many Abrahamic religions and faiths ... we shouldn’t bury our heads under the sand and not expose them to what the real world is. But there’s a fine line that gets breached between teaching children and proselytising them against a certain ideology”. (Elsom, 2019)

Labour MP Roger Godsiff also reportedly supported concerns about age-inappropriateness. But there were a number of reports of Muslim parents disagreeing. For example, a mother in Greenmount was quoted as saying the protestors’ “version of mediation is for the school to stop this completely, they want the school not to talk about gay people” (Haynes, 2019). Protestors’ reported claims about LGBT proselytisation evoked the Section 28 amendment of the Local Government Act enacted by the Thatcher government in 1988 in the midst of the HIV/AIDS crisis. This legislation outlawed “promotion” of homosexuality or its acceptability as a “pretended family relationship” in state-funded schools. As reported across several articles, Labour MP Angela Eagle raised parallels between the protests and Section 28, which was repealed in 2003 in a widely publicised parliamentary speech. Stating “we’re not going to get back in the closet” (Parveen & Adams, 2019), the speech framed (homo)sexuality as an intrinsic part of one’s selfhood, nature and wellbeing which has, in the past, been “monstered” by Section 28, and the lack of sufficient public sex and relationships education (RSE):

“If we had have (taught RSE) generations ago there would have been an awful lot of much happier and well-adjusted people than those that have been monstered in the way that they have for the way that they are in a system that was disfigured by the effects of section 28” ... And yet here we are in the middle of a similar kind of moral scare which is being whipped up by people who have a different agenda to the well being of children and their adjustment to the facts and experience of 21st century life in the UK. (Asian Image, 2019)

Newspapers also noted the respective points of Eagle’s marriage to a Catholic woman, and her statement that we are not going to allow this to happen “in the name of religion”. In contrast to protestors’ reported spatialisation of LGBT equality and/or queerness as a “belief” that remains under private authority, queerness is framed here as an intrinsic part of one’s nature which cannot be “repressed”, i.e. must be engaged in public education. The notion of “not getting back in the closet” is specifically tied here to an irreversible, emancipatory queer trajectory cemented in British legislation, one which public religion is compatible with, but on secular, “out” terms.

The regulatory use of British LGBT “emancipation”

The street protests were reportedly regarded by many education and political leaders as uncivilised, homophobic, and a potential national threat (Asian Image, 2019; Cambridge, 2019). For example, the former Chief Inspector of Schools Michael Wilshaw, claimed

protesting “parents have behaved disgracefully” (Cambridge, 2019). Both school leaders in Chartry and Greenmount, and the local Labour MP Jess Phillips were reported as asserting protestors cannot be allowed to “pick and choose” which parts of the Equality Act they want enacted in schools (Asian Image, 2019; DfE, 2014; Ferguson, 2019). This assertion suggested protestors cannot expect to have their religious freedom protected, while at the same time denying the protection of others’ sexual freedom. But in relation to Islam alone, this evocation of a benign sovereign protector of private religiosity neglects the fact that state-funded schools are expected to enact counterterrorist measures via the Prevent Duty (DfE, 2015), whose Islamophobic impact is well established (Khan, 2021; Miah, 2017).

Moreover, as an “instrument of secular power”, laws “produce normative notions of religion and religious subjectivity” (Mahmood, 2009, p. 150), thus erasing the diverse affective and embodied practices through which subjects come to ethically relate to sexuality (Jivraj & de Jong, 2011). Protestors were framed as not being disciplined enough to reserve their beliefs to their inner conscience or the private sphere. This was particularly pointed, given the constant local and national public scrutiny over Muslims’ ability to control their own religiosity in Birmingham prior to, and after the Trojan Horse affair (Holmwood & O’Toole, 2018). In line with secular equality policy discourse, the “pick and choose” discourse reproduces queers and Muslims as distinct communities or sides (Ewing, 2011; Jivraj & de Jong, 2011; Shipley, 2014) protected by the secular state. At the same time, (homo)sexual freedom was made the very marker of sovereign power’s *telos*, or progressive trajectory (Puar, 2017). In May 2019, the Greenmount School Head-teacher reportedly stated:

It’s not like I’ve decided to paint all the (school) railings pink and sparkly and everybody’s fed up with that. This is a British law. It’s a good law and it means all of us are considered to be equal in the law. (Ferguson, 2019)

Discourses of public sexual freedom (and the queer family) were used to construct “good” (liberal) and “bad” (protesting, reactionary) Muslims. In February 2019, the then Assistant Head of Chartry Community School related that:

Some parents struggle with aspects of the Equality Act ... but the vast majority of parents understand that ... living in the UK, you can be different, but you can get along with other people ... we want all children in Birmingham to know that their family is normal, that their family is accepted and welcomed in schools. (Sharples, 2019)

“Bad” Muslim religiosity was represented as potentially disadvantaging children in their own communities, keeping them in the dark, and even drawing racism on themselves. In a street interview, the Labour MP Jess Phillips reportedly said:

If we allow the protests at (Greenmount) to change the way we teach in British schools and create a two-tier teaching system, where kids in white neighbourhoods can have all the equalities and kids in Asian neighbourhoods have to have things kept in the dark, they win. (Haynes, 2019)

Phillips was sensitive to the racialised scapegoating of Muslims in comparison to Christian protestors. But, notwithstanding the real threat posed by White supremacist groups to multiple minoritised groups in England, this apparent sensitivity was tied to the idea that certain Muslims were their own worst enemy.

It is particularly dangerous for the Muslim community to be represented like this ... If Christians were out there doing it, they wouldn't be tarred with the same brush. They are handing the far right everything they ever wanted. (Jess Phillips MP in Ferguson, 2019)

These comments reflect a “double indictment” of Muslims: as only intelligible as adhering to or being liberated from their inherent extremism (Puar, 2017). Thus, those protestors who were largely focused on their locality had to respond to the fact that their views were “racialised through a religion that is often perceived as other not only to the nation-state, but also LGBT equalities” (Nash & Browne, 2020, p. 101). For example, one parent stated: “we respect the Equality Act and believe it can be implemented without the promotion of homosexuality” (McManus, 2019), and went further to state:

We are as British as they come ... we respect British values, but the problem is, (the Assistant Headteacher) is not respecting our ethos as a community. We don't send our children to school to learn about LGBT. We send them to school to learn maths, science and English. (Chartry parent in Sharples, 2019)

The question of resolution at multiple scales

Thus far we have seen the prevailing secularist spatialisation of religiosity as private beliefs some Muslims cannot contain (and thus must be scrutinised), and the framing of publicly minoritised sexuality and LGBT equality as an expression of the true self and of national values. It is unsurprising then, that the question of engagement and resolution was fraught; indeed, there were opposing views between protestors and schools in both sites regarding the presence and meaningfulness of prior consultation (Haynes, 2019; Warmington, forthcoming). In light of the protests, a range of community work was done by advocates and organisers (Warmington, forthcoming), but it was largely only the work of education and political leaders that was reported on. This may not be surprising given the prevailing press identification of the schools with the public (national, legal) interest. In the context of the constant reproduction of queer (secular) and Muslim (religious) as separate categories, it was noticeable how comparatively few of the 149 articles engaged local queer Muslim voices, including those that identified the racialised Trojan Horse affair as deeply stigmatising and wounding for Muslims in Birmingham (Jackson, 2019). As a somewhat unique example,¹⁰ one local activist was reported as responding to the comments of the former Chief Inspector of Schools of England who called for the reinstatement of “No Outsiders” in March:

Pointing our fingers from a white middle-class collective is not going to go down well after Trojan Horse ... We need to work with Muslim allies and try to get their voices out there. The protestors are not all the parents and they are not reflective of the community as a whole. (Busby, 2019b)

As alluded to above, in March 2019, Chartry announced the suspension of its No Outsiders programme. The school stated the remainder of the term had “already been blocked for religious education”, and that equality assemblies embodying the No Outsiders ethos, would continue (Harding, 2019). After five months of consultation with parents, community representatives and the DfE, Chartry announced a new “No Outsiders for a Faith Community” programme in July, which they presented as “acknowledging and respecting the concerns of and sensitivity expressed by some parents in the present school community”

(Busby, 2019a). The school would share the resources and programme structure with parents based on their child's year group. Yet some parents fundamentally disagreed with the new programme. Separately at Greenmount, six weeks of mediation between the local council, the school and parents broke down in May.

Many articles framed the protesting publics as needing national/judicial intervention, as, despite the existing requirement to consult with parents, the Greenmount leader in particular felt headteachers were in too ambiguous a situation regarding what they could teach in relation to "LGBT" (sic; DfE, 2020). In their May 2019 policy update, the National Association of Headteachers reported the Secretary for Education's advice that "primary schools are enabled and encouraged to cover LGBT content if they consider it age appropriate to do so" (NAHT, 2019). The Greenmount headteacher felt the DfE "muddied the waters with this further guidance, which is not policy ... the government is shifting the responsibility for LGBT content ... from politicians on to the shoulders of individual headteachers" (Ferguson, 2019). In May, the Education Secretary called the protests unacceptable and intimidating (Haynes, 2019). In June, the Schools Standards Minister wrote it was "wrong to protest about the teaching of gay relationships" (Gibb, 2019), and stated "ultimately we will be on the side of the headteacher" as "the content of the curriculum is a matter for schools" (Parveen & Adams, 2019). This statement did not simply reflect an ongoing contradiction at the heart of government policy on LGBT equality and RSE content (Vanderbeck & Johnson, 2016); it arguably fulfilled a dual purpose for a Conservative government practised in using reactionary and anti-immigrant sentiment to achieve the UK's withdrawal from the EU and its counterterrorism agenda (Khan, 2021; Mac an Ghaill & Haywood, 2021). It implicitly castigated reactionary Muslim publics seeking to (re-)privatise Islam, while not openly criticising more passive homophobia and open transphobia in wider society. It was ultimately the June and November 2019 High Court ordering of exclusion zones around Greenmount that defused the protests.¹¹

Discussion and conclusion

Across Global Northern contexts, queer education movements have made public (national) political gains on secular, i.e. detheologised Christian terms (Jivraj, 2013; Puar, 2017). The above analysis supports Nash and Browne's (2020, 2021) account of how discourses of freedom of conscience, parental rights/home authority, and child protection become the discursive resources available to and mobilised by heteroactivists to frame schools as ideally value-neutral (yet heterosexual) public spaces. Yet I have argued here that it is not simply the case that such discourses are neatly secular, in the binary sense that their content is not theological. They frame religion in a particular way by appropriating the culturally Christian spatialising of religiosity as a matter of chosen belief, i.e. private, inner conscience – to sexuality. This point is broader than the argument that such discourses seek to re-place sexuality under private religious control. Drawing on Van den Brandt (2018, p. 70), this "value-neutral" stance mirrors, in reactionary ways, the repression of public signs of religiosity (e.g. clothing, prayer) that Muslims experience in everyday ways in Western countries (Ismail, 2008). The discourse seeks to construct sexuality as "essentially a matter of internal faith and identity" which can be rationally separated from practice and visible signs, which in turn must be privatised (Van den Brandt,

2018, p. 70). At the same time, I have noted the spatialising of emancipated queerness used by those seeking to defend queer-inclusive schooling, whereby sexuality is “an intrinsic part of the individual self, which cannot be repressed ... but needs to be confessed and practiced without restrictions” (Van den Brandt, 2018, p. 71). This will to publicly name and categorise arguably conflates queer sexuality with its embodied doing, and aligns it with racialised notions of national values (Ewing, 2011; Jivraj & de Jong, 2011; Shipley, 2014).

This case and similar cases internationally indicate the impossibility of viewing gender, sexuality, race, and religion inequalities and conflicts separately, or detached from neo-colonial governing processes (Bialystok & Wright, 2019; Mac an Ghaill & Haywood, 2021; Nash & Browne, 2020; Youdell, 2011). Most importantly, the article’s Critical Secular approach moves firmly beyond viewing conflicts over queer-inclusive schooling as a matter of essentialised secular/religious oppositions; it shows the strategically secular, culturally Christian understandings of belief and emancipation they may reproduce, and how they are situated in wider (neo-)colonial processes. Echoing Youdell’s (2011) outlining of an agonistic politics of education where dissent and disagreement are anticipated, Warmington (*forthcoming*) and Vincent (2020) point to the need to avoid resorting to legal and securitised approaches in such cases, and recommend strengthened teacher-parent trust relationships and deliberative engagement – while recognising its practical difficulty. I would add from a Critical Secular perspective that strategic secularisms of street, school and media publics that reduce complex minority lives to fixed beliefs, makes any such engagements subject to relative failure (Shipley, 2014). Indeed, the focus of media attention itself on “emotive value ‘clashes’” (Vincent, 2020, p. 1) is itself to some degree premised in a secular-judicial understanding of religion as (fixed) beliefs (Jivraj, 2013). This framing strips away the cultural, aesthetic, and political fluidity of religion-gender-sexuality relations (Sanjakdar, 2021), and at best, leaves us with frames for deliberation that start from a position of “agreeing to disagree”. It also underestimates the ongoing and non-neutral role of secular governance in variously establishing and destabilising religious authority over gender-sexuality relations (Butler, 2019; Kitching & Gholami, *forthcoming*).

Relatedly, the analysis indicates that the discursive “managing” of Muslim religiosity in public and policy discourse – is not fully explained by any racialisation analysis that neglects secular-religious spatialisation processes (Gholami, 2021; Lloyd, 2016). We need to attend to the multiple losses experienced by marginalised communities in deeply unequal neo-colonial societies that may lead to a reliance on absolutist certainties around religion, gender, and sexuality, and a closing down of publics that engage inter-relating ways of engaging the spiritual, the embodied, the aesthetic, and the unknown (Blencowe, 2021; Kitching, 2020; Rao, 2020). A key contribution that a Critical Secular analysis can make in such cases is to complexify, rather than scrutinise minoritised and former colonial subjects, and to engage embodied encounters through multiple kinds of publics. Locally, this can include supporting youth and community arts and third sector organisations which challenge “the hierarchisation of the human” (Khan, 2021, p. 144), including through counterterrorist policies, as seen in Birmingham in the wake of the Trojan Horse affair (Lung Theatre, 2021).

Of course, performance and surveillance-focused neo-liberal, securitised education policy agendas mitigate against such creative opportunities. The unequal status of

education leaders as public professionals, and marginalised families as private consumer-citizens, makes building such pathways even more difficult (Vincent & Martin, 2002). But a starting point for school, education and community leaders can focus on collectively questioning the terms on which such complex conflicts and inequalities play out. School leaders' anguish in this case was recuperated into a wider dynamic of seeking clarity on "LGBT" (DfE, 2020) that moralised about minority lives and national law. Ideas of multiple publics can be used here to support leadership that consciously engages multiple, contingent, and interacting (school, media, city, parliamentary) participants and inequalities. Key to holding the consistency of such publics together is that they are not based on hierarchical desires for the secular/national/judicial regime to discipline the local institution, or for the majority and/or professional subject to discipline its community other(s).

Critiquing the exclusionary articulation of common ("global", "British" or "Birmingham") public values is always paradoxical, as the risk is always that we invoke new exclusions. It is also easy to forget that experiences and imaginings of painful and joyous childhoods past, present and future are often at the centre of such cases. I have argued previously that deep engagement with plurality and building "affirmative, unchosen school publics" (Kitching, 2020) involves reckoning creatively and generously with the ghosts, silences, and omissions that neo-colonial, secular publics create regarding childhoods, past and future. Instead of seeking to reproduce childhoods in our own familial, traditional, liberal, or progressive image, such affirmative engagement involves understanding children themselves as plural, relational entities whose encounters with the world do not simply reproduce binary, essentialised secular/religious "ideologies". While all the above work is always-already unsatisfying, it may help further develop policy, school, media, and street publics that move beyond simply challenging queer/Muslim and secular/religious oppositions, to refusing strategic secularisms based in racialised, culturally Christian notions of religious and sexual civilisation and belief, and thus ultimately, making alternative forms of community possible.

Notes

1. I use the term "queer" as an umbrella term to reflect the dynamic, political and minoritised nature of gender and sexual diversity, rather than refer to a fixed identity. I use the term "LGBT" when directly referring to the ways education policy discourse recognises and attempts to assimilate "normal" and "family-focused" minority sexualities and gender identities and relationships. Unfortunately space does not permit discussion of the political problems with the terms "queer" and "LGBT".
2. My use of the terms "queer-inclusive" and "LGBT-inclusive" draws from the above understanding of the terms "queer" and "LGBT".
3. This iteration of the curriculum advocated more comprehensive teaching about puberty, safer sex and "more thorough inclusion of LGBT identities" (Bialystok & Wright, 2019, p. 348).
4. In England and Wales, community schools are funded by the local education authority, which owns the school estate, employs staff, and is responsible for student admissions. Academy schools are directly government funded, non-fee-paying, and independent of local education authority control. They may follow their own curriculum and can have a specialist focus.
5. As discussed in the methodology section, both schools are given pseudonyms.
6. While the research underpinning "No Outsiders" engaged queer theory and distinctions between queer and identity-based politics, the programme at Chartry drew on a liberal

- identity-based notion of LGBT rights, and was aligned to the wider British securitised counter-terrorist policy agenda (see DePalma & Atkinson, 2009; Youdell, 2011; Khan, 2021).
7. Ofsted, the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills, is a non-ministerial UK government department, which inspects all state-funded and some fee-paying schools in England.
 8. Mac an Ghaill and Haywood (2021) problematise the reification of (Islamic) religiosity, but do not explicitly link this to notions of publicness and the assigning of particular notions of religion to the public and private sphere.
 9. Butler (2019) outlines the anti-“gender ideology” movement as originating in the Roman Catholic Family Council's warning against the notion of socially constructed gender as a threat to family and biblical authority. Nash and Browne (2021, p. 78) regard heteroactivism as reflecting a more complex set of movements, including “freedom of speech and religion, parental rights, anti-abortion and reproductive rights, family structure, (and) adoption and foster care”.
 10. Khan (2021) however, critiques the representation of “authentic” queer Muslim voices on the protests which addressed Muslim homophobia, but not the Prevent policy.
 11. New directions for policy arose in the wake of the protests, including Birmingham City Council's primary school toolkit for statutory RSE, and central government guidance entitled “Primary School Disruption Over LGBT Teaching/Relationships Education” (DfE, 2021). The latter document guides local authorities and Regional Schools Commissioners to look out for the signs of organised campaigns.

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