

**INTERSECTIONS ON RELIGION AND SEXUAL DIVERSITY IN THE  
TV SERIES GLEE****INTERSECÇÕES SOBRE RELIGIÃO E DIVERSIDADE SEXUAL NA SÉRIE  
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**ABSTRACT** This article analyses the way in which religion and sexual diversity are constructed as oppositional fields in the educational debate. With this purpose, we use as a tool for analysis two episodes of the American television series *Glee* (*Grilled Cheesus*, third episode of the second season, and *Heart*, thirteenth episode of the third season), in which there is a careful intersection of religious issues with issues of sexuality and gender, facing the controversial debate over these themes, which is happening in the media and in public schools. Furthermore, we comment on some aspects of this debate focusing on the Brazilian public educational system.

**Key words:** gender, sexual diversity, religion, media and education

**RESUMO** Este artigo analisa o modo como religião e diversidade sexual são construídas como campos oponentes no debate educacional. Com este propósito, usamos como ferramenta de análise dois episódios da série televisiva americana *Glee* (*Grilled Cheesus*, terceiro episódio da segunda temporada, e *Heart*, décimo terceiro episódio da terceira temporada) nos quais há uma intersecção cuidadosa de questões religiosas com questões de sexualidade e gênero, enfrentando o debate controverso sobre tais temas que ocorre na mídia e nas escolas públicas. Além disso, comentamos alguns aspectos deste debate tendo como foco o sistema educacional brasileiro.

**Palavras-chave:** gênero, diversidade sexual, religião, mídia e educação.

The resistance movement of many socially excluded groups has been pressuring schools to discuss the theme of "otherness" and the inclusion of minorities, which implies discuss the position of school students who lay claim to new space in the curriculum, like ethnical and racial minorities, individuals with special disabilities, sexual and gender

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minorities, religious minority groups, and all the many cultural and behavioural differences that inhabit a school space.

Gender and sexual diversity have been a constant theme in media through soap operas, cinema, publicity, audience programs for young people, teenager's magazines, etc ... This has certainly forced the school to discuss these themes, brought up sometimes spontaneously by students themselves. The visibility of these alternative ways of living brings a certain acknowledgment of demands connected to those groups, forcing the school to review some normative standards that produces the identity of their students. On the other hand, it is also possible to notice the reaction of more conservative groups, mainly on the debate that involves the topics of religion and sexual diversity. In a historical moment in which we speak more about teaching about differences, we are also living in a world of political intolerance that affects also the space of our private lives, with a certain generalized difficulty to be free from standardized forms of conceiving our relationship with other people.

The television series *Glee* was created in 2009 by American director Ryan Murphy, produced specially by FOX Channel, in United States. The six seasons of the series were shown in many parts of the world during the years from 2009 to 2015 reaching a large audience, mainly adolescent people. The series has been one of the examples on the way of approaching discourses about sexual diversity and gender in television programs. Its approach to the theme of sexual and gender diversity led the series to receive in 2011 the GLAAD Media Award for best program of the year, promoted by the American non-governmental organization GLAAD (The Gay and Lesbian Alliance against Diffamation).

The fictional plot of the musical series revolves around the conflicts within a group of adolescents attending a public high school, William McKinley High School, which is fictionally located in the city of Lima, Ohio, in the United States. The group is comprised of students marginalized by social, ethnic-racial, religious, sexual, and gender aspects among others and brought together by Spanish teacher Will Schuester, who is also affectionately called Mr.Schue by the students. He decides to organize a musical choir, the Glee club, in an attempt to promote the teaching of arts in the school. Topics

such as religion, sexuality, gender, teenage pregnancy, ethnicity, race, suicide, violence, and bullying are some of the many controversial themes covered throughout the six seasons of the series.

More specifically, in two episodes of the series (*Grilled Cheesus*, third episode of the second season, and in *Heart*, thirteenth episode of the third season), there is a careful intersection of religious issues with those of sexuality and gender, facing the controversial debate over these themes, which is happening in the media and public schools.

Challenging the normative statement that "religion should not be discussed at public schools," in the episode *Grilled Cheesus* the issues: religious diversity, atheism, and homosexuality are staged through dramatic and comic resources in the conflict that the teenagers in the series face when exposed to the theme at a public school. From the comic point of view, the construction (or deconstruction) of the theme takes place on the belief of student Finn Hudson (who was captain of the football team at the school) that he met the face of Jesus in a toasted cheese sandwich (a situation that gives name to the episode: *Grilled Cheesus*). From the dramatic point of view, the episode shows the suffering of teenager Kurt Hummel (an openly gay and atheist student at the college) when his father, Burt Hummel, suffers a heart attack, remaining hospitalized and unconscious in a hospital. Kurt and Finn became foster brothers in the series, as Kurt's father, a widower, fell in love with Finn's mother, Carole Hudson. However, in earlier episodes of the series, Kurt had nurtured an unrequited passion for Finn, which eventually became a fraternal relationship between the two teenagers.

After having the impression of seeing the face of Jesus in his sandwich (which seems to be a kind of satire to religious pilgrimages triggered by apparitions of religious icons in different places and in different material objects), Finn happens to consider himself a chosen and gifted one with rights to three different requests: first, that his football soccer team win a match; second, that his girlfriend Rachel let him touch her breasts; and third, that he may once again be the captain of the football team, since he had lost the position to Sam, another teenager who just enrolled at the school. The realization of his requests causes him to propose to the Glee club a week of songs in tribute to Jesus

Christ. The proposal creates conflict within the group, as Kurt totally opposes the idea, noting that public schools are not churches, and how many churches disrespect gay people, women, and scientific knowledge. As a way of focusing on the religious diversity present in the classroom (with students of Jewish, Protestant, Catholic, and atheist groups), and to appease the conflict, Mr. Schue proposes that the choir sing songs about spirituality instead of songs about Jesus.

Conflicts at the school get worse after Kurt gets news that his father is in a coma in hospital, caused by a heart attack. Sue Sylvester, a cheerleader coach and Schuester's main enemy, encourages Kurt to report an official complaint against the teacher for speaking of religion at a public school. In a private conversation with high school education counsellor, Emma Pillsbury, Sue justifies her attitude by saying that she is also atheist. She tells that as a child she used to ask God to heal her sister Jean, a girl with Down Syndrome who was bullied at school. As her prayers were not answered, this led her to conclude that there was no divine existence. On the other hand, while challenging and rejecting religious faith in a deity, Kurt argues that his faith is precisely his love for his father, while giving a beautiful performance of Beatles' hit "I Want to Hold Your Hand". Furthermore, Finn also comes into religious conflict after winning back his place as captain of the football team (one of his three requests to the Grilled Cheesus). However, he got it only after an accident in which Sam was physically hurt during a match. In doubt about his faith, he performs the song "Losing my religion", composed by the group R.E.M. The choice of the song leads students Tina and Mercedes to question Professor Schuester as well, since they were prohibited from singing about their faith, however, Finn was allowed to sing about his loss of faith.

At the end of the episode, in a hospital, next to the bed of his still unconscious father, Kurt is questioned for having refused the prayers offered by his colleagues, since they were addressed to his father and not to him. As he cries, his father begins to regain consciousness and shakes Kurt's hand. Moreover Sue visits her sister Jean and talks about the existence of God. Jean, who believes that "God does not make mistakes," asks Sue to pray for her. Upon returning to high school, Sue attends the Glee club singing "One of Us", music by Joan Osborne. The lyrics of the song says: "If God had a face what would

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it look like?[...] What if God was one of us? Just a slob like one of us. Just a stranger on the bus. Tryin'to make his way home (Osborne, 2015). Already at home, Finn eats the leftovers of his toasted cheese sandwich.

If in the episode *Grilled Cheesus* there is a mixture of dramatic and comic elements when approaching the subject of the religiosity, in *Heart* the predominating theme is the irony to question exactly the conflict between religion and sexuality.

The student Sugar invites the Glee club to attend her family-sponsored Valentine's Day party, which generates euphoria on one part of the group and reluctance on the part of the students who still do not have a significant other. Meanwhile Mercedes is organizing a meeting of the student's religious group, the *God Squad*, and welcomes Joe Hart, a student who wears dreadlocks and is tattooed with Bible verses. As an idea to raise money for charity, the religious group resolves to sing only love messages.

In the hallway of the school, the students Brittany and Santana talk about the exchange of love gifts and are about to kiss when they are interrupted by the principal of the school, Figgins, who says he has received an anonymous complaint about public demonstrations of affection between the two students. Santana confronts and claims to be clearly a "double standard situation", since there was no complaint about the kissing of another heterosexual student couple, Rachel and Finn. Figgins says that he personally does not care, but he doesn't want to antagonize other people who could have religious motivations for the complaint.

Finn decides to use the services of the *God Squad* group to send a love message to Rachel. The message is presented by Mercedes singing the song "Stereo Hearts", known in the voice of the English band *Gym Class Heroes*. Santana, astutely, confronts the group's religious values during the presentation, also ordering a song for Brittany, emphasizing, especially for student Joe Hart, that Brittany is her girlfriend and not a friend, which in English is an interesting pun with the word girlfriend: "And by that, I don't mean my friend who's a girl, I mean my girlfriend girlfriend. How does that sound?"(Glee, 2015).

The controversy brought about by Santana's provocation causes a meeting of the religious group to decide on the subject. Joe demonstrates that he is not feeling very

comfortable with the situation and asks for time to think, justifying that he had never met any gay person before. The conflict experienced by the character Joe Hart is yet another creative provocation by the screenwriters. It seems to have been inspired by Christian beliefs of the actor Samuel Larsen, who plays the character. He was selected at the *Glee Project* auditions. During the rehearsals, the actor had to perform a romantic scene with Alex, another actor in the series, who would become later the first transgender character on *Glee*. At that time, Larsen said he felt uncomfortable with the scene since his mother, also a devoted Christian, would be watching.

The dialogue of the meeting of the group *God Squad* deconstructs, through the use of the irony, some of the conservative religious postulates on sexuality:

Mercedes: All right guys. We have to have a discussion and figure out what the God Squad feels about singing to gay people.

Sam: Well, three of us are in Glee Club, so we're pretty much sing to gay people all the time.

Mercedes: I know we're ok with it, but Joe may not be.

Joe: I try my best not to judge anybody. But, honestly, I've never met anyone who's gay.

Quinn: Oh, I guarantee you have.

Mercedes: Yeah, they say that one out of every ten people are gay. And if that is true, that means one of the twelve apostles might have been gay. And my guess is Simon because that name is the gayest.

Sam: The Bible says it's abomination for a man to lay down with another man, but we shared tents in Scouts and slept next to each other all the time, so that would make Cub Scouts an abomination?<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> The mention in the dialogue to the Scout group is an interesting strategy on the part of the scriptwriters of the series, since the topic has been subject of debate in the United States, with the movement of Scouts prohibiting the entrance of gay adolescents in the group, and the State questioning the appropriateness of allocating public funds to an institution that promotes homophobia.

Quinn: Do you know what else Bible says is an abomination? Eating lobster, planting different crops in the same fields, giving somebody a proud look. Not an abomination? Slavery. Jesus never said anything about gay people. That's a fact.

Sam: Well, maybe he wanted to, but he didn't want to hurt Simon's feelings.

Mercedes: You guys, we have to figure out where we stand. Especially, if we're gonna be asking volunteers from my church to sing backup for us. I don't want to hurt Santana's feelings, but I also don't want to make someone do something they're not comfortable with. So where do you stand, Joe?

Joe: I guess I've gotta think about it.

Quinn: You know what? That's totally fair. You have to look at the hard topics and dilemmas and be honest and truthful. If you ask me that's what being Christian is really about (Glee, 2015).

Later on, at the party sponsored by Sugar's family, the God Squad performs the song "Cherish", released by the Californian band *The Association*. The song is Santana's love message to Brittany, as Joe Hart, after much praying and thinking about it, came to the conclusion that "love is love." The final scene is completed with a public kiss between the two girls. Meanwhile Blaine, who is Kurt's boyfriend, also enters the same scene singing "Love Shack", a hit by the American pop-rock band *The B-52s*. However, there is no kissing scene between Blaine and Kurt.

The director of the Glee series, Ryan Murphy, is openly gay and purposely approached the theme of sexual diversity in other television series that he has produced, such as *Nip/Tuck*, *The New Normal*, or *American Horror Story*. Murphy grew up in an Irish Catholic family and continued to attend church. He is married to photographer David Miller, and he is also the father of two children<sup>3</sup>. Biographical aspects such as his sexual orientation and his religiosity perhaps explain in part the conflict between religion and sexuality staged in the episode *Grilled Cheesus*.

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<sup>3</sup> Biographical information about Ryan Murphy was taken from *Wikipedia* (Ryan Murphy, 2017).

Despite the efforts of the director and co-writers of the series (Brad Falchuk and Ian Brennan) to deconstruct conservative religious discourses in several episodes, we cannot forget that the series *Glee* was produced by the TV channel FOX, a conservative channel that supports the Republican party in the US. The permanent play of forces between power and resistance sometimes gives concessions in aspects of the script, and at other times, shows an open or camouflaged resistance to conservative speeches, which may explain the concession in the case of the absence of a gay kiss between the male characters in the episode *Heart*, although gay kissing situations between male characters occur in the second season of the series and in later seasons.

Another of the conservative concessions seems to have occurred by quitting the purpose of addressing the issue of sexuality and Muslim religion, one of the few controversial issues not addressed in the series. In the first season of the reality show, *The Glee Project*, which consisted of a public selection of actresses and actors for the *Glee* series, the actress Aylin Bayramoglu, a young woman of Turkish and Muslim origin, lived conflicts on sexuality and religion, including her performance of a character in a romantic scene with another actress. Inspired by the struggles of the actress, Ryan Murphy expressed during the reality show the interest in creating a Muslim character for the *Glee* series, which unfortunately did not occur later in the series.

A related conservative aspect can also be analyzed in the exhibition of the series in Brazil. In its first season, the series was broadcast by the open channel of TV GLOBO on Saturday mornings. Already in the second season, the series happened to be exhibited in the early hours of Thursday, and there was no exhibition of the subsequent seasons. The change on timetable may be explained by the public displays of affection between male teenage characters Kurt and Blaine, who fell in love just in the second season. Therefore, the discussion about homophobia in adolescence during the first season, with scenes in which Kurt was exposed to homophobic insult and violence by the school group, was still tolerated by the TV audience and possible to be discussed in Brazilian morning television, but homoaffective experiences and sex between men became the subject not tolerated, being destined to the early hours of Thursday, an inaccessible timetable for adolescents and children.

It seems that there is a prevailing disposition of public opinion to regard homosexuality as a strictly sexual practice, which would exclude any other feelings that would be proper only in heterosexual relationships. This would justify the normative care in removing children and adolescents from viewing such themes, since in the conservative discourse, both childhood and adolescence, are stages conceived by the absence of affective-sexual maturity, and an exposure to such themes could trigger tendencies and behaviours considered abnormal. Such restrictions also seem to corroborate the French philosopher Michel Foucault's analysis that what is most disturbing in homosexuality is precisely the fact that it is a "mode of life", more than the sexual act itself:

One of the concessions one makes to others is not to present homosexuality as anything but a kind of immediate pleasure, of two young men meeting in the street, seducing each other with a look, grabbing each other's asses and getting each other off in a quarter of an hour. There you have a kind of neat image of homosexuality without any possibility of generating unease, and for two reasons: it responds to a reassuring canon of beauty, and it cancels everything that can be troubling in affection, tenderness, friendship, fidelity, camaraderie, and companionship, things that our rather sanitized society can't allow a place for without fearing the formation of new alliances and the tying together of unforeseen lines of force. I think that's what makes homosexuality "disturbing": is the homosexual mode of life, much more than the sexual act itself. To imagine a sexual act that doesn't conform to law or nature is not what disturbs people. But that individuals are beginning to love one another-there's the problem. The institution is caught in a contradiction; affective intensities traverse it which at one and the same time keep it going and shake it up. Look at the army, where love between men is ceaselessly provoked [appele\ and shamed. Institutional codes can't validate these relations with multiple intensities, variable colors, imperceptible movements and changing forms. These relations short-circuit it and introduce love where there's supposed to be only law, rule, or habit (Foucault, 2000, p. 136-137).

Canadian researcher Deborah Britzman (1995) also points out that the issue of homosexuality should not be of interest only to those who are homosexual, we must consider how the dominant discourses of heterosexuality produce their own set of ignorances both of homosexuality and heterosexuality. Therefore, we can conclude that the difficulty in talking about sexual diversity is also a difficulty that educators have about knowing their own sexuality and its multiple possibilities for pleasure.

An educational work on the issue of sexuality should emphasize that sexual and gender identities do not exist separately and in isolation, but are fluid, contradictory involving various social elements. Thus, to question the constitution of the different forms of sexuality, be they hetero, homo, or bisexual, is to understand them as a construction in constant negotiation with the other and with the social, and this can be a fundamental step to pluralize and problematize the discussion about sexuality at schools, understanding the process that leads to the formation of different identities and deconstructing the presuppositions of heteronormativity. Heteronormativity is the concept created by American researcher Michael Warner (1993) to describe the norm that takes heterosexual sexuality as universal rule and the discourses that describe the homosexual situation as deviant.

The deconstruction of the traditional and normative categories about body, gender, sexuality, affectivity and family models would be concerned with showing the social discourses and practices that are set in motion to "naturalize" the narratives that constitute the legitimate and illegitimate spaces to perform our sexual and gender identities. Heterosexuality was historically taken as a sign of universality in the discursive constitution of a heteronormative field (Katz, 1995), the same movement that constituted the space reserved for the "other," that is, the space reserved for people who experience other forms of pleasure or forms of identity that are far from this field of legitimation.

However, the arguments of religious freedom, the right to criticize homosexuality and to express religious beliefs against homosexuality, the freedom to educate children and adolescents according to the conservative moral values on which someone believes, have been used by religious groups in Brazil to position themselves against the

criminalization of homophobia and against the rights of LGBTIQ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex, and Queer) groups, bringing great controversy to the legislative, judicial and educational system, as we have analyzed in other articles (Dinis, 2011; Dinis, 2012).

The challenges are greater in countries like Brazil, since in churches and even on open religious TV channels it is common to witness the preaching of hate against homosexuality, and even exorcism sessions that promise to cure LGBTIQ people. The conservative religious groups that occupied the congress also oppose legislative projects that seek to give to LGBTIQ people citizenship rights (such as civil marriage, the possibility of establishing families with child adoption, and protection from physical and verbal harrassment). Some of these LGBTIQ rights have been secured by the judiciary system in recent years, but the argument of the unconstitutionality of such rights has been used by conservative religious groups, precisely because of the divergence of opinion between the legislative and judicial branches in the interpretation of Brazilian law.

The discursive trap used by teachers, principals, coordinators and students in public and private schools to legitimize prejudices and discrimination against LGBTIQ people has also been the argument of religious freedom. The presence of physical and verbal violence against LGBTIQ students (sometimes called homophobic bullying) also seems to be ignored by a large number of educators who often, due to the lack of orientation on which attitude to take, prefer the path of omission and silence. And although public schools are officially considered secular, the presence of religious education in these schools has been a controversial challenge.

Brazilian researcher Carlos Roberto Jamil Cury (2004) also analyzed the controversial relationship between religious education and the public school, emphasizing that although Brazilian legislation has maintained religious education as compulsory for schools to offer and facultative for students to enroll, it is not specified from where it would be provided the resources for payment of the teachers who teach the course. He also questioned the fact that the facultative character does not always effectively mean freedom of choice.

The omission and silence regarding physical and psychological violence suffered by LGBTIQ students, even if based on conservative religious justifications, means to agree with the same violence. Therefore, the preservation of the public school as a secular space is a challenge for education because it means the hope that the education of the new generations will result, at least in the future, in a society that welcomes and encourages the multiplicity of our religious, sexual, gender, ethnic-racial, behavioural and cultural differences. As a space for building citizenship and teaching the right to freedom of expression of our differences, the school institution must assume its responsibility in the fight against all forms of prejudice and discrimination. And these are some of the topics presented in the two episodes we analysed from the TV series Glee. Thus, an analysis of such aspects from the series can become an important tool for educators to discuss such controversial topics at public schools.

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