

Tales of gender(ed) identity constructions in one boys' Catholic school: A review of  
*Masculinities and other hopeless causes at an all-boys Catholic school.*

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*Masculinities and other hopeless causes at an all-boys Catholic school examines how notions of gender, specifically masculinity, are formed within the classrooms and school environment of one Chicago Catholic boys' school. Through a year-long autoethnographic study, the book explores how students construct their identities within discourses of religion, gender and sexuality.*

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Multiple layers attracted me to Kevin Burke's book, *Masculinities and other hopeless causes at an all-boys Catholic school*. I have two sons attending a Catholic boys' secondary school (I am an "old boy" of that school, and a member of the school's governance board). Secondly, Burke's book links to my research interest in sexuality. My doctoral research examines how children are positioned within discursive contexts where sexuality is problematised by adults involved in their lives. Lastly, questions of gender and understandings of masculinities continue to fascinate me as a researcher and teacher using social constructionist and poststructuralist theory, but also as someone who initially studied theology, was then ordained, and ministered as a Catholic priest for more than seven years.

Negotiating sexualities in my own life experience (e.g. traversing sexual relationships, celibacy and marriage) and reflecting on others' making sense and meaning of sexualities (whether in sacramental or professional 'confessional' spaces) also provided a contextual lens for examining this book. I approached *Masculinities and other hopeless causes* as a contribution to deconstructing masculinities, male sexualities, and constructions of gendered practices around male/female and heterosexual/homosexual binaries. What surprised, and delighted me, was the method with which the author engaged in this study – and the way he positioned himself transparently (vulnerably) within this project. Burke adopted an innovative approach, presenting his work poetically and eloquently, and, at times inconclusively and ambiguously. That is a strength of this work – it does not attempt to generalize or develop a universal truth on masculinities, single-sex education, or Catholicism, but offers exploration of multiple positions and possibilities and questions: some distinctly uncomfortable, yet others quite heartwarming.

However, this may also give cause to not appreciate this work: its focus on *one* school; a critical perspective of Catholicism and single-sex schooling contributing to sustain a dominant masculinity, without offering solutions and/or ‘a balanced view’ – could be read as anti-Catholic; and possibly the absence of attention to articulating the ethical issues of this research could be criticized. Nonetheless, this book is a timely contribution towards a much-required dialogue within the wider Catholic community of faith, specifically about constructions of masculinities within church structures including boys’ schools.

Burke located himself physically for a year within the all-boys (St Monica’s) Catholic High School in Chicago, including ‘enrolling’ in senior classes for a semester and using an available space to write up his research. He proposed “a study of masculinity and spirituality” (p. 10), and defined his research as a critical autoethnography. This methodology included and acknowledged his own memories of single-gendered education, including failure “at any attempt to separate the me as researcher, the me as classmate, and the me as former student from the me who struggled to exist again in a religious/gendered secondary schooled context” (p. 47). Such a disclosure seems to offer the reader an invitation to understand this research, and be immersed in it, as a transparent and collaborative process. There is no attempt to present this as science, to espouse grand narratives regarding masculinity and spirituality (“What follows is a fiction, full of truths” (p. 3)). Rather, it is refreshingly honest, simple and complex, as Burke describes his field work and theorizes these experiences.

Burke has structured *Masculinities and other hopeless causes* in seven chapters. The first three locate: the context of the study; his theoretical positioning; his method. Chapters 4-6 examine specific spaces in which masculinities are developed, practiced

and where themes of heteronormative masculinity, the Othering of women, and brotherhood are explored and evaluated. The final chapter reflects on Burke's positioning as researcher, relationality with students/participants, and the effects of the research for researcher and participants.

Burke outlines his personal history of single-sex/gendered schooling in Chapter 1. He provides background to Catholic Schools in the USA (naming further binaries of private/public schooling, and the Catholic/Protestant divide), situating religious education within "larger discourses about gender, sexuality and masculinity" (p.7). He also attends to race, ethnicity and culture in the local school setting, and to some religious beliefs and pious actions associated with practice of Catholic faith.

"Masculinity foretold, told, retold" (Chapter 2) presents the conceptual framework for this book: gender and sexuality; gender and the body; masculinities – where "hegemonic masculinity [is] characterized by dominant or compulsory heterosexuality" (p.27); Foucault's (1990, 1998) notions of discourse and power; and on disciplining practices of schooling and religion. Burke cites Carroll's (2001) concept of the "Church's 'mentality of power'" (cited on p. 41) as problematic, along with a history of "violent, assertive and brutal masculinity" through crusades, conquistadores and conquests; and of "its attitude toward the other, which in turn involves the issue of women's equality" (Carroll, cited on p.41). Burke claims, "It is this mentality of power as it formulates and foments young men in school, that has brought me to this study" (p. 41).

Chapter 3 ('Crossing over') presents the methods engaged in the study. This work is personal and political, analytical of power relations, and deconstructs fixed ideas of masculinity, utilizing feminist, poststructural and critical methodologies. As noted, this is a critical autoethnography in which Burke acknowledges "the partiality of

my own writing and the incompleteness of the picture to be described” (p.55). Burke attended classes within the Catholic school (taking notes on actions/practices/language) for three days a week in the fall semester of 2009, and he shadowed four different students, one per month. It is unclear how Burke determined which boys to focus on, but he describes each of these senior students, identifying three of them as football players: “they will deal with the requisite discourses and ideologies of the school and religion in unique and affected ways” (p. 55). There were no ‘formal’ interviews conducted in the study, but rather a series of ‘flash’ interviews: unplanned conversations in whatever space. Two further ‘points of contact with students’ developed over time: Burke was ‘found’ on Facebook and he accepted friend requests; and students knew and shared his telephone number. Burke used an office in the Counseling department during the spring semester where he wrote up the study and remained connected with the boys. He joined in specific spiritual and sporting events while also participating in other sporting and social activities, taking his partner to some of these. Burke notes that his partner “became important in much of the dialogue I had with students...as they tried to make sense of their dating lives [and] as they came to struggle with just who I might be...” (pp. 56-57).

The setting for Chapter 4 (‘Cafeteria Catholics’) are conversations over lunch, one of the spaces in which Burke examines the performance of masculinity and the absence of girls. Use of homophobic language (epithetical use of *gay* and *faggot*) sustained a heterosexual hegemony via a fag discourse, with an irony in the words finding use outside an understanding of the lack of masculinity. For example, when one boy was observed shopping in the mall with his girlfriend, the situation was described as, “That’s so gay” (p. 70). Burke remarks on the level of homoerotica within these boys’ relationships with each other, and the boys’ judgement of ‘gayness’ where time with

girlfriends takes one of them from time with the boys! Burke questioned that hanging out with the guys is kind of *gay*, and himself was called a fag. Burke was again called a faggot when he refused to speak with boys about whether he had had sex with his girlfriend after the Homecoming dance. Burke discovered that the fag discourse “operate[s] in a certain circularity” (p. 71), where when one receives the fag label, they then work to pass it onto another. The chapter continues by examining the relationships the boys had with each other in terms of religion (e.g. getting ‘inked’ with a cross tattoo when finishing school, not consciously as a religious mark but a social mark - one of brotherhood), and a sense of picking and choosing their religion (hence ‘cafeteria Catholics’); and sport (athletics, football and wrestling) as a site for enacting masculinity. A further particular site of the fag discourse was that of “dicking” - drawing and verbalizing the phallus (in Burke’s notebook, for example), where drawing a penis on a student indicated them as a fag, and any discussion of penis size was not so much a claim on masculinity, but more about comedy and “a way to disrupt expectations of decorum” (p. 85).

‘Squishes: The abjectified’ (Chapter 5) describes “ways in which masculinities came to be formulated through rhetorical engagement with women and heterosexual relationality” (p. 88). Burke recalls the boys’ chant at a hockey game of “GIRL, GIRL, GIRL, GIRL” by which young women from the opposing school were shouted down, embarrassed and kept separate from, and by, ‘the boys’. This was a public and vocal gender-segregation, showing how girls/women were spoken of and about by boys enacting masculinity – having effects on the boys and their homosocial relationships with each other. Girls were viewed as taking boys (in mind and body) away from rational purposes of schooling. Burke theorizes that, in the boys’ context, to be masculine, “is to revel in not being woman” (p. 99). Squishes, or sexually available

women, came second to being with 'the boys'. Burke reflects on a single-gendered male-dominated context of Catholicism, where women (and mythical women) are positioned differently from men and largely given subordinate roles.

The research site turns to prayer and a senior retreat in 'Kairos: Space and time apart' (Chapter 6). The boys speak about how they understand their faith, in terms of school religious rituals. The *Kairos* retreat is a key event, as a religious and social event for 'the brotherhood' – a moment of homosocial bonding for relationships as Monicamen – now and as alumni. The retreat's significance includes transgression of the fag discourse, perhaps more 'care' for one another - yet continues as a site for production of a traditional and dominant masculinity, which is heterosexual and gender-privileged.

In the final chapter, which looks at "Making sense of the research(er)" (p. 137), Burke reflects on his researcher identity (as interruption; 'seducer'), the use of flash interviews as invasive instruments, and his emotionally-connected relationships with participants as 'subjects/friends/students'. Amidst scandals of sexual abuse by clergy and religious orders, and unanswered questions about how much about this was known by the last two Popes, Burke suggests the Catholic Church is ripe for a New Reformation, in the vein of the Second Vatican Council (1962-65). *Masculinities and other hopeless causes* invites useful questions within this context: questions of faith and relevance of religious faith for young people's identities constructed in gender and sexuality discourses; questions of doctrinal positioning within sexualities and lived experience; and questions about Christian perspectives of masculinities and equity for women.

But are these questions that can possibly be explored in a different light with Pope Francis? His recent exhortation on the 'Joy of Love', *Amoris Laetitia* (Francis, 2016), indicates a turn in papal tone rather than church tradition. There is nonetheless

a small shift from rigid moralizing towards a wider perspective on gender and sexuality – a perspective not previously voiced by a Pope. Is it possible for him and the church (clergy and laity) to view sexualities and gender equity through a different lens and to effect change? *Masculinities and other hopeless causes* does little to instil hope for acceptance of gender-diversity in Catholic schools, but will challenge thinking for Catholic educators and educators in Catholic boys' schools (and perhaps all boys-only schools) about the discursive production of young people's sexual identities and experience of 'church' and faith.

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#### CONTRIBUTOR

Paul Flanagan teaches narrative approaches in Counsellor Education at the University of Waikato, New Zealand. He researches current constructions of child sexuality with

parents, teachers and counsellors, isolating discourses that shape ideas and practices which govern and discipline the performance of sexuality in childhood.