

The Challenges of Liking in Pedagogical Relations

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Kevin Burke and Adam Greteman’s recent book, *On Liking the Other: Queer Subjects and Religious Discourses*, raises important questions about the kind of tensions that can arise in teacher education when, as they put it, “the religious . . . enters our classrooms . . . in ways that are at odds with other commitments and ways of being and living in the world”—in this case, around gender and sexuality.¹ I am grateful that Burke and Greteman did not set out to find easy, how-to answers, but instead framed the book as a series of conversations that leave readers with more questions than answers, thereby inviting further conversation. Underpinning their project is an awareness that student teachers who hold religiously-based dogmatic beliefs about gender and sexuality often see their beliefs as inseparable from their religious identity, and thus not as amenable to critical scrutiny and revision as other ideas they bring to their teacher education program (for example, historical or mathematical ideas). As Rob Kunzman explains:

For many adherents, a particular religious commitment is inextricably linked with one’s very self, and the roots extend deep within a community of belief and practice. One is raised within such a community, and one’s ethical framework and interpretive horizon are largely dependent upon this pervasive and comprehensive way of life. The metaphor of religious identity as clothing—however prized the apparel may be—is a fundamentally insufficient conception of how many people experience and practice their religion.²

On Liking the Other is an attempt to grapple with classroom situations where students whose religious identities include narrowly circumscribed beliefs and commitments regarding gender and sexuality encounter others with non-heterosexual and non-binary gender identities and ways of being in the world. While I welcome much of what the book has to offer, I admit I am

somewhat ambivalent about the turn to liking as a way to frame pedagogical relations. In what follows, I draw not only on *On Liking the Other*, but also on some of Burke and Greteman's earlier work on the philosophical and pedagogical potential of liking.³

First, however, a word about context. I confess that when I read the news coming out of the US these days about the erosion of women's reproductive rights, legislation against gender affirming care, and Florida's so-called Parental Rights in Education (a.k.a. Don't Say Gay) bill, I feel like I am reading something out of Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, or at least from some other place and time than the United States in 2022.⁴ But those legal changes are real, and they put (at least parts of) the US increasingly out of step with Canada, Sweden, Denmark, the Netherlands and many other countries in terms of women's rights and legal protection for diverse gender and sexual identities. Such is the socio-political context within which Burke and Greteman are conducting their work; but the conversations about gender and sexuality that are permitted and encouraged in teacher education programs are highly context-dependent. In British Columbia, for example, teachers are required by law to uphold the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms* and the *BC Human Rights Code*, which has, since 2016, explicitly named sex, sexual orientation, gender identity and gender expression as prohibited grounds of discrimination.⁵ I recognize that legislation cannot guarantee equality and respect in day-to-day encounters, nor can it make homophobia and transphobia magically disappear. It does, however, make it illegal to harm or discriminate against others based on their gender or sexual identity, and that illegality makes a significant difference in schools and, by extension, teacher education programs. BC student teachers are required to demonstrate, in both their pedagogy and curriculum choices, how they will work to ensure that students, families, and colleagues of all genders and sexualities will feel welcomed and respected in their classrooms, and there are excellent resources available to help them do that.⁶

Regarding the role of religion in schools, Section 76 of the BC School Act states that, "All schools and Provincial schools must be conducted on strictly secular and non-sectarian principles."⁷ Obviously, teachers and other school

personnel are welcome to hold religious views and practice their faith in their personal lives, but religious teachings and doctrine are not to be taught in the classroom, except in courses where students learn *about* different religions and religious traditions. The policy is different for faith-based schools, of course, but for public schools, the mandate is clear—at least in theory. In practice, things are more complicated. Given Canada’s commitment to multiculturalism and to respecting and sustaining (not just tolerating) cultural differences, and the extent to which cultural and religious identities are often intertwined, it is, as Kunzman explains in the quote above, both naïve and misguided to think that students and teachers will leave their religion at the classroom door. And it is precisely in the space of these complexities that Burke and Greteman locate their work.

In *On Liking the Other*, as in their earlier publications, Burke and Greteman find in Roman Catholic theologian James Alison’s *On Being Liked* a promising way to “reframe the relations of education, building them according to a nonhierarchical model that is based not on transmission from superior to subordinate but on mutual fondness and attraction to given practices and ways of being.”⁸ However, as I mentioned above, I have some qualms about the turn to liking as a framework for pedagogical relations.

First, I am not sure that liking offers anything that couldn’t be addressed (and perhaps better) by Nel Noddings’ conception of ethical caring.⁹ In the first chapter of Greteman and Burke’s 2017 book, *The Pedagogies and Politics of Liking*, they briefly sketch the concept of care in the work of Carol Gilligan, Joan Tronto, and Nel Noddings, and find it lacking as a foundation for the kind of nonhierarchical pedagogical relation they are seeking.¹⁰ But their overview of care misses a key point in Noddings’ work: the distinction between *natural caring* and *ethical caring*.¹¹ For Noddings, natural caring arises in relationships where we already have feelings of love or affection toward the other person, so, as the term implies, the moral obligation to care arises quite naturally and effortlessly. There is no gap between what I *want* to do for the other and what I *ought* to do to support their wellbeing and flourishing—no gap between “I want” and “I must.” *Ethical caring*, on the other hand, comes into play when feelings of natural affection are not there. The caring response in these relationships arises not

from fondness for the other, but rather from the value we place on maintaining relation as an ethical ideal, and on caring for the other as a manifestation of that ideal.¹² Affection and fondness are beside the point. In contrast to natural caring, ethical caring may require us to dig deeper to arouse our sense of ethical obligation and muster the motivation to care for the other. I don't have space here to fully flesh out the pedagogical implications of ethical caring as opposed to liking, but, for reasons I discuss briefly below, I find Noddings' concept of ethical caring, and its grounding in an ethical ideal rather than affection and fondness, a more promising approach for pedagogical relations and the kind of classroom dynamics Burke and Greteman describe in *On Liking the Other*.

My second qualm about liking is that it puts an implicit burden on the other to be at least somewhat likeable, or, as Burke and Greteman put it (quoting Alison), "differently valuable, forever performative, and, ultimately, worth liking."¹³ A bit further on in the article, they write:

The fundamental point here is that students are *likeable*. We want to center classroom ethics and the question of likability. Specifically, we propose that liking—to like the other—obligates us to respond ethically. To like does not require knowledge as grieving does (I must know loss in order to grieve it). Liking requires relating to others and the self—it is fundamental to how subjects are constituted . . . "Is it not true," Alison asks, "that the mere phrase 'I like you' gives permission to be, is creative of space, suggests 'I'm curious to accompany you,' means delight?"¹⁴

For Burke and Greteman, the turn to liking helps lower the temperature in the love/hate binary, and it moves teachers away from the educational discourses of love they find so pernicious—especially when teachers claim to love children, but it turns out to be a contingent love that is more about changing the other than loving them as they are. In that light, the shift to liking certainly seems a sensible move, and I am sure that in using the term "worth liking," Burke and Greteman did not intend for the other—in this case, the student or student teacher—to be the one to bear the relational burden. But I

remain uneasy about the often gendered and racialized nature of likeability. I'm thinking here of Sara Ahmed on the “affect alien” and “feminist kill joy” and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie telling her female students that while it is important to tell their stories truthfully, in order to do so, they must “forget likability.”¹⁵ To put it differently, when we foreground liking and likeability we are putting a personal relationship in the place of a pedagogical/professional one.¹⁶ In my view, it shouldn't matter whether or not I like my students (or whether they like me), but rather that I respect and care for them *qua* student and future teacher, and that they feel respected and cared for as such.

I share Burke and Greteman's commitment to the pedagogical relation as accompaniment—and there is much more to be said about that—but I worry that grounding educational relations in liking, especially in the context of professional certification programs, may muddy the waters in ways the authors did not intend. That said, I want to thank Kevin and Adam again for giving us much to think about, and for inviting us into further conversation about the often contested and sometimes fraught space of teacher education when religion, gender and sexuality meet.

1 Kevin J. Burke and Adam J. Greteman, *On Liking the Other: Queer Subjects and Religious Discourses* (Myers Education Press, 2021), xxi.

2 Robert Kunzman, “Educating for More (and Less) Intelligent Belief or Unbelief: A Critique of Noddings's Vision of Religion in Public Schooling,” in *Philosophy of Education 2005*, ed. Kenneth R. Howe (Philosophy of Education Society, 2006), 73.

3 Adam J. Greteman and Kevin J. Burke, *The Pedagogies and Politics of Liking* (Routledge, 2017); Kevin Burke and Adam Greteman, “Toward a Theory of Liking,” *Educational Theory* 63, no. 2 (2013).

4 Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* (McLelland and Stewart, 1985).

5 Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms. <https://laws-lois.justice.gc.ca/eng/const/page-12.html>; British Columbia Human Rights Code https://www.bclaws.gov.bc.ca/civix/document/id/complete/statreg/00_96210_01

6 See, for example, *SOGI 123*. (ARC Foundation, 2019): <https://www.sogied->

[ucation.org/](http://education.org/) This set of resources includes material for students, teachers, administrators, and parents.

7 BC School Act, section 76 (1): https://www.bclaws.gov.bc.ca/civix/document/id/complete/statreg/96412_06

8 Burke and Greteman, 2013, 163. See also James Alison, *On Being Liked* (New York Herder and Herder, 2003).

9 Nel Noddings, *Caring: A Relational Approach to Ethics and Moral Education* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013). Originally published as *Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education* (1984).

10 Greteman and Burke, 2017, 11ff.

11 Noddings, 2013, 72-79.

12 Noddings, 2013, 78-79.

13 Burke and Greteman, 2013, 154. See also Ch. 4, On Liking Pedagogical Relationships, in their 2017 book.

14 Burke and Greteman, 2013, 164.

15 Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, pp. 224-225. See also Greteman and Burke's discussion on the politics and ethics of likability in higher education in Ch. 5 of their 2017 book; Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie: <https://www.feministcurrent.com/2015/06/02/if-you-want-to-have-an-opinion-for-get-likability/>.

16 See also Cris Mayo on putting personal relationships in the place of political relationships in "Civility and Its Discontents: Sexuality, Race and the Lure of Beautiful Manners," in S. Rice (Ed.), *Philosophy of Education* 2001 (Urbana-Champaign, IL: Philosophy of Education Society, 78-87).