Exploring the Nexus of Queer and Religious

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In *On Liking the Other: Queer Subjects and Religious Discourses* (hereafter *On Liking)*, Kevin Burke and Adam Greteman take on the folk wisdom that takes queer and religious as incompatible, and I appreciate their challenging that apparent incompatibility. In my considered view and in my lived experience, being religious has a queer character about it, and being queer requires that one tap similar energies and possibilities as being religious. Burke and Greteman both recognize that reality and provide example after example of how this is the case. Still, they—and I—know that as a matter of everyday living with others, there is surely a tension to be recognized, acknowledged, and addressed if not resolved. Their resolution to this tension is "liking." Specifically, the authors suggest that the tension can be bridged if one can learn a habit of generous regard for anyone who might be seen as other.

I should note that they set the problematic in the context of teacher education, as my co-critics both point out, specifically in the challenge for teachers who are religious to appreciate (again, to have generous regard for) those who are queer, and for those who are queer to reciprocate for those who are religious. Curiously, (especially for someone like me whose bread and butter is teacher education), this focus seemed almost beside the point as I read the book. I was most attracted to and compelled by their underlying deconstruction of religious and queer. First, I explore why that might be the case before turning to highlighting the processes of recognition, acknowledgement, and resolution in my own work as a teacher educator.

It is fair to say that I am a person who experiences the world and myself in it as both religious and queer on a daily basis. In part, this goes back to my own religious roots in the very Catholic Philadelphia of the 50s and 60s. In those days, before the "liberalizing" Second Vatican Council, priests' garments were elaborate and, dare I say, flamboyant. Their language was mysterious (unless your Latin was up to snuff), and their gestures pregnant with transcendent meaning. The ritualistic sights, sounds, and smells might be analogized to drag culture in ways that make clear that symbol, ritual, and celebration matter

emotionally, convey meaning cognitively, and evoke response spiritually. It may well be that those who grew up in "low Church" Christian denominations did not have the same experience. Nonetheless, I would argue that there is room in both transcendent traditions (like Catholicism) and immanentist experiences (like Wicca) for appreciating the queerness of religious practice (and doctrine) and the religiosity of queer identity and community.

For that reason, I think it accurate to observe that certain kinds of religious practices attract persons who are homosexual or represent alternative gender identities and expressions. I also contend that both queer culture and religious-inspired cultures require that one "queer" (both slant and expand) reality. In both cases, the operant modes of perception and conception could not have originated *inside* of the dominant and quotidian practice, but demand attention outside of and beyond everyday practices of reality. In some sense, the religious distinction between the sacred and the profane can be understood as a "queering" of the profane. That Burke and Greteman open up this way of thinking by juxtaposing their first-hand attention to and appreciation of both religious ways of being and queer ways of being is a worthy accomplishment of *On Liking*.

Before thinking through some examples of navigating this tension in my own teacher education work, I want to make clear that Burke and Greteman are in good company when they highlight the links between queer and religious. I offer just one case in point. As I was composing this review, I received a copy of poet Lisa Dordal's new collection, *Water Lessons*. Dordal is a friend and a Vanderbilt colleague, whose recent work explores, in the words of the publisher's description,

> the relationship between reality and imagination, faith and doubt, presence and absence . . . Woven throughout the book are the speaker's meditations on a divine presence that, for her, is both keenly felt and necessarily elusive, mirroring the speaker's ultimate celebration of her unborn daughter as a "lovely fiction" who is both here and not here.[1]

The reality that Dordal lives is queer. Her references to her wife and to her father's pride in her coming out declare that. She lives in the shadow of a reli-

gious upbringing, again signaled by overt references to a long-recited creed. But it is her sensibility about race, class, patriarchal framings of sexual expression, addiction, loss, and religious understanding past and present that bears witness to the worldview that Burke and Greteman introduce us to. It is a sensibility in which, in the words of a reviewer,

> no one is truly safe, no one is truly innocent, and no one is truly gone. *Water Lessons* teaches us that swimming against the current of remembrance is futile. We can only trust the water to hold us without drowning us, and to return us to some shore, even if where we land is not where we were first submerged.[2]

Like Burke and Greteman, Dordal recognizes that the reality she experiences is always queer *and* always religious, even when her focus, as in much of this collection, is on race. Though not now particularly Christian (despite or perhaps because of an MDiv from the Divinity School at Vanderbilt), Dordal always juxtaposes and integrates what is queer and what is religious. The question that Burke and Greteman face is, what is at stake when this juxtaposition, this integration, occurs in an explicitly educational setting? I add an additional wondering: can the juxtaposition be avoided if one's intention is education?

I think it is impossible to avoid the confrontation of the queer and the religious if one is to be intellectually and emotionally honest. So I turn now to my own experience as a teacher educator exploring the queer-religious tension. Educators face three perhaps unavoidable challenges in this regard: 1) to *recognize* the manifestations of tension that Burke and Greteman point to in educational terms; 2) to *acknowledge* the tension explicitly and within a community of learners; and 3) to set up recognition and acknowledgement in such a way that a path to dissolve or bridge the tension emerges. To flesh this out, I describe two moments of my own practice in some depth, offer one observation of a colleague's enactment of the kind of generous regard the authors recommend, and wonder aloud whether the queer and the religious might be understood as contrapuntal rather than incompatible.

The first, the challenge of recognition, is captured in a specific live-actor, video-recorded, group-debrief simulation that is part of the secondary

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teacher licensure program at Peabody College, Vanderbilt. Here's what each teacher candidate knows before entering a two-part encounter, one each with Lexi and Matthew:

> Alexis Jimenez and Matthew Manning are both enrolled in your eleventh grade AP US Government and Politics class at MLK Academic Magnet School in Nashville. You are currently covering public policy, civil rights, and civil liberties. Discussions include, for example, whether Colin Kaepernick's decision to kneel during the national anthem, and other athletes' protests past and present, are protected by the First Amendment. The conversation among students has been animated, and you are trying to develop some norms moving forward. Lexi (Latina) and Matthew (white) are both solid but generally reserved students, as they have been in recent discussions. Because of this, you don't feel you know either one very well.
>
> On Friday, when you return to your classroom after hall duty, you find Lexi and Matthew in your classroom waiting to speak with you. They ask to speak with you separately. As you meet with each, you begin to understand that they have a similar concern about what's coming up—will they be "safe" during the upcoming discussion on the Obergefell Supreme Court decision on gay marriage.[3]

It will come as no surprise that the teacher candidates generally want to refrain from judging their students' political and religious commitments, especially when they surface matters central to personal identity. It will probably also come as no surprise that they generally want to take care of, to empathize with, *each* of their students. As a result, what typically happens is that the candidate expresses care and concern for whichever student they encounter *first* (it is a matter of chance and scheduling which issue comes first to the candidate's attention), at least implicitly offering a promise of safe space to that student. However, the moment they step out of one encounter room and into the next, they are pulled up short.[4] They are forced to recognize that this is a moment of tension. It may well

be impossible to ensure safe space for *both* this evangelical student and this gay student at the same time.

This is a moment of profound recognition, a moment when teaching requires a wisdom in the form of radical candor and infinite compassion (including with and for oneself!) Candidates are asked to view the videotape of their short encounter *privately* and often the experience of being pulled up short repeats itself. While this private experience of interruption can result in explicit recognition of the queer/religious tension Burke and Greteman explore, it doesn't necessarily do so. A teacher candidate can be unsettled without achieving recognition. The experience of being pulled up short comes to culmination when the candidates make common sense of separate but shared experience in a class debrief session. The debrief is designed to support a shift of horizon so that there is now room in one's own sense-making space to *understand the perspective of the other*. By acknowledging one's own horizon-bound pre-judgments, one is able to make room for the prejudices of others.

I note that this simulation didn't "work" until we incorporated encounters with both poles of this seeming opposition. In this disciplinary-specific simulated encounter for social studies, we wanted to take on the intersection of civil rights for LGBTQIA+ people and conservative religious liberties (often in conflict in our local context). In the first iteration, teacher candidates had a single encounter with student Matthew Manning, who was gay but not out in his school, and who was concerned about how the class was going to handle the Obergefell decision. In that first round, teacher candidates overwhelmingly affirmed the student's identity and assured him that a class discussion would be constructed in a way that would allow him to engage while staying "safe."

As we looked back, it seemed like nothing had been disrupted. While the teacher educator for the course took pains to point out in group debrief that the candidates could not actually ensure the safety of a student in a class discussion, they clearly had not been pulled up short in a productive way. Hence, in the next iteration the following year, candidates instead interacted with student Alexis Jimenez, or Lexi, who identified as a conservative Christian who felt "convicted" to speak out against gay marriage in an upcoming discussion about Obergefell but feared being villainized by her more liberal peers. Again,

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teachers escaped the potential disruption in this one-on-one encounter by affirming the student's right to their beliefs and committing themselves to a form of student safety in a whole-class discussion that is nearly impossible to provide in complex classroom spaces. The teacher candidates were mostly satisfied with how these encounters went because they seemed to unfold and wrap up smoothly in a manner that belied the messiness that often accompanies these difficult discourses. As teacher educators, *we* were dissatisfied and redesigned the encounter in a final iteration, run in the third year, to include back-to-back interactions with each of these students.

This version has consistently produced a clear moment of being pulled up short. While the interactions in the first student meeting look similar to the early years of the interaction, those in the second room look rather different, and teacher candidates tend to leave the end of the paired interactions feeling highly dissatisfied with how they handled them They struggled to manage their (and the students') expectations for safety in a classroom discussion and wanted to explore what structures in a social studies classroom might lend themselves to the kind of difficult discourse that offers learning for both students. In the end, we changed almost nothing about the directions that the candidates and the actors received. It was simply pairing the interactions that made the difference.

The wisdom of practice I alluded to earlier is rooted in the realization that Burke and Greteman offer us: even when the "religious" position and the "LGBT" position are recognizably at odds in public discourse, there is still common ground that must be won. Understanding is the path toward acknowledgement and (tentative) resolution. But how? In the simulation debrief, we move teacher candidates to the moment of understanding that enables recognition and invites acknowledgement. This brings me to my second example as an instantiation of acknowledging the tension within a community of learners.

Recognition has the potential to be fleeting; acknowledgement requires conscious acceptance of the recognition. In other words, an epiphany becomes a habit of recognition when it is acknowledged. For nearly ten years, I taught an upper-level interdisciplinary elective called "Women and Education: Socialization and Liberation." This course might best be understood as an exercise in developing recognition into the acceptance of acknowledgement of sometimes

hard truths (although I'm not sure I understood it that way when I developed and taught it). Those truths lived in exactly the tension that Burke and Greteman tease out: how can those who are understanding themselves as genderqueer live well with those whose self-understanding is rooted in traditional religious commitment and vice versa?

As with the simulation that brought the teacher face to face with both Lexi and Matthew at the same time, "Women and Education" attracted what might be characterized as flaming feminists (often women's studies minors and/or LGBT students) *and* hard-working white girls majoring in elementary education. The latter were largely female, very often avowedly Christian, near universally sincere, and delightfully solid students. Originally, the feminists enrolled because the course counted in a women's studies minor; the ELED majors enrolled because they needed a "Perspectives" course to round out their general education requirements and it had education in the title. Eventually, it became a destination where folks willing to face the tension Burke and Greteman articulate gravitated.

I had designed the course around the kind of philosophical conversation Jane Roland Martin suggested between Plato, Mary Wollstonecraft, Jean Jacques Rousseau, Catherine Beecher, and Charlotte Perkins Gilman.[5] We read substantive excerpts from primary texts—and supplemented that with other shorter primary texts, from the Old and New Testaments, from Aristotle and Augustine, from Sor Juana Ines de la Cruz and other "lost" feminists. We read contemporary women whose work defined intersectionality, like Audre Lorde and bell hooks. We learned with Gerda Lerner about *The Creation of Patriarchy*. And we sampled other genres contemplating relevant issues like Judy Brady Syfer's tongue-in-cheek *Ms. Magazine* essay, "Why I Need a Wife," Sarton's moving poem, "My Sisters, Oh My Sisters," and Sweet Honey in the Rock's rocking rap, "Women!"

Each reading raised questions, different questions for different students, and those questions provoked recognition. But recognition became acknowledgement as thirty women whose horizons differed, learned to listen before judging, to interrogate before denigrating. Recognition of their own limited horizons opened to recognizing the horizons others lived within. Nothing was

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unthinkable, but that never meant anything goes, and it also freed this community of learners up to regard each other seriously—and generously—even when what was suggested seemed alien or even unacceptable.

The course ethos echoed George Saunders' exhortation in "The Braindead Megaphone": "Don't be afraid to be confused. Try to remain permanently confused. Anything is possible. Stay open, forever, so open it hurts, and then open up some more, until the day you die, world without end, amen."[6] Staying "so open it hurts" made for some difficult moments, of course, but difficult is simply that, and learning to sit with difference and the discomfort it brings seems to me to be a triumph of education.

What happens when we start from the assumption that queer simply *is*, rather than is problematic? What happens when religion is taken to be not only a source of women's oppression, but also the font of existential meaning for many? My course design took each perspective seriously in turn, not allowing anybody to get too comfortable for too long.

The course was oversubscribed. Evaluation comments suggested that both loosely constructed factions valued the experience. I puzzle sometimes about how this encounter could avoid the factionalization that is so prevalent today. I sometimes think that my own conviction that one could be religious (in at least some form) and queer (in various facets), that the two were not necessarily at odds, created a strong enough platform to support students while they developed the capacity to live in the tension, to stay so open it hurts not as capitulation but as an expansion of their own queer and religious understandings. But maybe it's something simpler. They wanted to acknowledge what their own reading of the world confronted them with, they wanted to hold on to the stories (religious and otherwise) that gave meaning to their lives, and they wanted not to hate, but they didn't know how. I remain optimistic about the power of education in just the ways that Burke and Greteman call us to. The challenge facing those who want to support acknowledgement is not just how to create just the right course, but also to create the contexts in which acknowledgement is possible. It is simply the case that resolution of any kind (even if it's just a willingness to "live the questions" as Rilke would say), is only possible when recognition and

its habit, acknowledgement, are consistently achieved.

Others in this symposium have commented on whether "liking" is a robust enough concept to provide resolution to the tension Burke and Greteman so clearly limn. I am of two minds on the matter. First, it seems that liking may be just too mundane, even profane, an idea to carry the weight of this seemingly difficult and persistent tension. On the other hand, maybe Burke and Greteman are right, maybe we need a response so gentle that it carries us beyond our bluster to a place where we can light calmly. And so, I offer a single observation of what liking might look like were we to take the authors at their word.

Philosopher of education Cris Mayo has found a simple, sensible way to respond to the felt demand to declare one's pronouns, a practice that is clearly useful (in practicing a pedagogy of recognition), but also potentially dangerous (in reifying categories always in flux). On the email signature, Mayo says (without declaring anything):

> Pronouns: For some people, pronouns can be indicated with certainty. For others, minimizing and/or varying pronouns may be a better approach. Thinking about and asking about people's pronouns is a great way to signal respect.[7]

This seems to me to instantiate what Burke and Greteman might take to be "liking." It is general enough to offer openness, and concrete enough to be practiced. The first time I saw Cris' signature, I thought in admiration, "This is so sensible," so "liking," if you will. My point is only that while I see the philosophical limitations of liking as a grounding concept, I can imagine circumstances and concrete actions, especially in teacher education, where the usefulness outweighs the lack of philosophical heft. And in the process, we dial down the temperature on the roiling tension. Clearly, that is not nothing.

I close with the explicit acknowledgement of a possibility that runs throughout my musings here—and throughout Burke's and Greteman's observations, I believe. Perhaps the "tension" that seems to exist between queer and religious is itself manufactured rather than intrinsic. Mine is not a naïve suggestion that there is no clash in the political arena between those who defend certain versions of religious practice against the violations of queerness and vice versa. Of course, those fights are real and rightly perceived as threatening

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because queerness and religious commitment have both been weaponized in a fight for power and privilege. Rather, I suggest that the quality of religious experience and the quality of queer experience might be understood as contrapuntal rather than as incompatible. That is, each is a counterpoint to the other. Played together—dare I say, in harmony?—these two lenses for making meaning offer potential to enrich life as both lived and understood.

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1 Lisa Dordal, *Water Lessons* (Black Lawrence Press, 2022), publisher's description: https://blacklawrencepress.com/books/water-lessons/.

2 Destiny O. Birdsong, on back cover of Lisa Dordal, *Water Lessons.*

3 Elizabeth Self and Barbara Stengel, *Toward Anti-Oppressive Teaching: Designing and Using Simulated Encounters* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Educational Press, 2020).

4 We are indebted to Deborah Kerdeman for enhancing our understanding of Gadamer's notion of being "pulled up short" as described in Self and Stengel, *Toward Anti-Oppressive Teaching*, Chapter 3.

5 Jane Roland Martin, *Reclaiming a Conversation: The Ideal of the Educated Woman* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987).

6 George Saunders, "The New Mecca," in *The Braindead Megaphone: Essays* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2007), 55.

7 Quoted with permission.