

Reducing the Tension Between Queer Identity and Religious Discourses by Expanding the Idea of Religious Love: An Example

Clarence W. Joldersma

Calvin University

Burke and Greteman's book, *On Liking the Other*, is self-described as a series of conversations at the intersections of two discourses, religion and gender/sexuality.¹ The authors insightfully detail how tensions often exist between traditional Christian (Catholic, evangelical) discourses and queer (LGBT+) identities. The book tries to think differently about this binary to help teacher candidates see that these two don't have to be at odds. An important and timely task.

The book amply illustrates how traditional (Catholic, evangelical) religious discourses condemn the normalcy of LGBT+ identities. For example, Anita Bryant's campaign "love enough to tell the truth," summarized in the phrase "love the sinner, hate the sin," weaponizes religious love by forcing queer subjects into the pre-set identity of sinner.² Burke and Greteman illustrate that this weaponized love is baked into the religious discourse of many of their evangelical students. For example, they reference Hadley's (2020) study, in which a student-teacher Noelle talks about her relation to Hannah, a student in her class who is transitioning: "I'm responsible for making sure my student feels loved and accepted. And I'm responsible to myself and my faith in God."³ The implicit tension makes her love conditional. The authors rightly worry about this "use of love in educational spaces for religious ends," not only because such love is conditional, but also because it becomes "love full of hatred."⁴

The book attempts to change the conversation to reduce the binary's tension. The main suggestion is changing the conversation by moving away from "loving" and towards "liking" the other. There is much to like about this move, but I'm not convinced it gets them to where they want to go. Getting evangelical teacher candidates to "like" their students doesn't touch their weaponized religious "love full of hatred." For example, Hadley's (2020) student-teacher Mei Lin's religious identity centrally involves the obligation to "represent her faith" to her students.⁵ She may well genuinely like her students, but still feel

compelled to love them conditionally. Changing the conversation to “liking” one’s student doesn’t address Noelle’s and Mei Lin’s worry that precisely as teachers, their task as a Christian is to proselytize their LGBT+ students by hating their sin while loving the sinner. “Liking” their LGBT+ students isn’t going to dissolve the tension, although it might help Noelle or Mei Lin relate pleasantly to them day-to-day.

I would like to join the book’s conversation by relating what I do in my own teaching at a private religious institution, Calvin University. Many of my students’ evangelical identities, too, are tied to feeling responsible to God to represent their faith to those around them, that “being a Christian should be witnessed in your daily life.” They take their bible as authoritative, relying on its passages to decipher how to live. They too use the phrase “love the sinner, hate the sin,” which they situate in a religious discourse called Christian love. I too have learned that it’s counterproductive to ask students to choose, to cast off something central to their religious identity. Therefore, my approach is to transform their already formed religious identities in ways that ease the tension between religious discourses and queer subjects. I do so by expanding their existing religious identities and beliefs.

To unsettle the weaponized “love the sinner, hate the sin,” I build on their religious identity by expanding what religious (Christian) love means. I approach this enriching effort by using tools that are handy. In particular, Calvin University makes generous use of the term “shalom,” a Hebrew word that is often taken to mean “peace” or “well-being.” I make generous use of this idea, calling this approach “educating for shalom.”⁶ However, I enrich my students’ simple concept with an expanded notion, using Nicholas Wolterstorff’s description of shalom as an ethical community where “all members of the community are entitled to a full and secure place in the life of the community.”⁷ Wolterstorff argues that all persons, especially those on the margins, have a claim on our actions to ensure being included in the community. My goal is to have my students see shalom as a complex idea consisting of the call and vision for comprehensive human flourishing in an inclusive community.

I use the idea of shalom to expand their idea of Christian love. All my students know the great love commands “Love God above all” and “love your

neighbor as yourself.” This, they know, is “the summary of the law:” this love frames and animates the various ethical norms that are thought to populate the bible. From Wolterstorff they hear one must love God *through* loving one’s neighbor—no daylight between these two. And they hear that the content of “love your neighbor” is shalom: the claim of others on us to flourish in community. In other words, this enriched picture of love becomes a form of what Wolterstorff calls basic justice: the inclusive right for all to flourishing in society.⁸ I use their high view of scripture during this enriching process. I give them a detailed reading showing that this “basic justice” is foundational to the Christian bible, central to the messages of both the Old and New Testaments.⁹ I’m expanding their narrow idea of religious love to involve basic justice in community, especially for those who are on the margins of society. This enrichment is transforming, positioning them to think differently, but still from within the framework of their own religious identity.

I also introduce Wolterstorff’s idea that there are three storylines in scripture, not just one: “God as creator and sustainer ... God as consummator, and ... God as deliverer and redeemer.”¹⁰ The first storyline deals with the providential hand of God in the world. The second storyline deals with end-times, Jesus’s second coming and eternal life. But, like a good storyteller, Wolterstorff introduces a third scriptural storyline, where “God’s deliverance, God’s redemption, is centrally deliverance from injustice.”¹¹ He relates that the ancient Hebrews indeed had a religion of salvation, but “Not a religion of salvation *from this earthly existence* but a religion of salvation *from injustice* in this earthly existence.”¹² I’m expanding their religious identity to have all three narratives, rather than just the second one. I’m not asking them to choose, all I’m doing is expanding their own religious identity. But, in truth, this is potentially transformational. My intent is to use their buy-in to the third storyline to shift what they see as authentic Christian witness as an evangelical teacher, away from narrowly *proselytizing* their students (second storyline), towards expressing their Christian witness in terms of *educating for shalom* (third storyline). Then their Christian witness can be expressed through an expanded notion of religious love: unconditional love that seeks basic justice for the vulnerable groups by creating inclusive communities of flourishing.

In my teaching I steadily focus on the third storyline. I suggest that while Christian teachers are living and working in society, here and now, *this* storyline should be central. I use it to frame their expanded vision of shalom—of creating and maintaining inclusive communities of human flourishing. I plant the idea that, from within their evangelical religious discourse, their role of teachers can be animated by the third storyline: that working towards shalom authentically expresses their felt obligation that “being a Christian should be expressed in your daily life.” I’m introducing a shift while maintaining continuity of their basic religious identity. In short, I decline creating a binary that forces a choice; instead, they can find their religious identities enriched in continuity with what they believed before. But simultaneously, their religious identity is also transformed, as they see radically new possibilities for how to remain authentically religious as professional teachers. What I’m doing is expanding their narrow view of religious love to include a vision of human flourishing in inclusive ethical communities.

I use the third storyline’s idea of shalom—where justice is the public face of love—to think about issues of race and racism and about disabilities and ableism. At a certain point, it also frames their discussions on LGBT+ students in schools. By transforming their religious discourse first, I am changing the parameters of this conversation too. I ask them to bracket the theological disputes about whether homosexuality is a sin, suggesting that as educators we can focus on something more basic, drawing from their expanded religious identity.¹³ The Christian command to “love your neighbor” and “love one another” is more basic, interpreted as doing primary justice. This uncovers an ethical claim arising from LGBT+ students, a call to be treated as full and secure members of the ethical community, suggesting that “seeking liberating justice for the claim-rights aris[es] from wrongs done within history.”¹⁴ LGBT+ students have a claim-right on Christian teachers, precisely because of the claims of the Christian gospel in their lives. Moreover, we discuss the idea that justice delayed is justice denied, that doing justice means doing so in the present. My evangelical students, all teacher candidates, learn to recognize that LGBT+ youth in their lives require basic justice, and that “Justice arrives only when the marginal ones are no longer marginal.”¹⁵ We discuss that this means LGBT+ youth are entitled

to be full members of the school community, not relegated to the margins of second-class citizenship by having to hide their sexual orientation or gender identity. We discuss that LGBT+ youth are entitled to a secure place in schools, without fearing verbal harassment, physical assault, and intimidation because of their sexual orientation or gender identity: they ought to be able to participate securely in curricular and extra-curricular activities in school. My intent is to give my evangelical students tools to bracket those interminable disputes about bible exegesis of a few obscure passages about gay sex and focus the discussion on something more central to their religious identity: loving your neighbor, doing justice, seeking shalom, creating inclusive communities of human thriving—and accepting their LGBT+ students in such inclusive communities.

It may seem I've strayed far afield from Burke and Greteman's book, and in a sense I have. But in another sense, I mean this as a serious contribution to their discussion of "dialing down the temperature" of the tension between religious discourses and queer subjects. My own experience is that by enriching existing religious identities of students, especially those who feel caught in the tension between unconditionally loving their LGBT+ students and feeling their evangelical faith forbids such love, they find a way forward to dissolving the binary without having to choose between their faith and their teaching. It is entirely possible for evangelical students to feel the call of justice and love from within their religious identity, resulting in their LGBT+ students being welcomed into inclusive classrooms.

1 Kevin J. Burke and Adam J. Greteman, *On Liking the Other: Queer Subjects and Religious Discourses* (Gorham, ME: Myers Education Press, 2021), 18.

2 Burke and Greteman, *On Liking the Other*, 34.

3 Burke and Greteman, 36.

4 Burke and Greteman, 37.

5 Burke and Greteman, 37.

6 Clarence W. Joldersma, "Introduction," in *Educating for Shalom: Essays on Christian Higher Education*, by Nicholas Wolterstorff, eds. Clarence W. Joldersma and Gloria Goris Stronks (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 2004), xi–xxi.

7 Nicholas Wolterstorff, "Teaching for Justice," in *Educating for Shalom: Essays on*

Christian Higher Education, eds. Clarence W. Joldersma and Gloria Goris Stronks (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 2004), 143.

8 Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Journey Toward Justice: Personal Encounters in the Global South* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013).

9 Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Justice: Rights and Wrongs* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008).

10 Nicholas Wolterstorff, "Seeking Justice in Hope," in *The Future of Hope: Christian Tradition Amid Modernity and Postmodernity*, ed. Miroslav Volf and William Henry Katerberg (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 2004), 83.

11 Wolterstorff, "Seeking Justice in Hope," 85.

12 Wolterstorff, "Seeking Justice in Hope," 79.

13 Clarence W. Joldersma, "Doing Justice Today: A Welcoming Embrace for LGBT Students in Christian Schools," *International Journal of Christianity & Education* 20 no. 1 (2016): 32–48, <https://doi.org/10.1177/2056997115617950>.

14 Joldersma, "Doing Justice Today," 41.

15 Wolterstorff, "Teaching for Justice," 143.