

On Liking the Other

Queer Subjects
& Religious
Discourses



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Adam J. Greteman

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Published by Myers Education Press, LLC
P.O. Box 424, Gorham, ME 04038

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data available from Library of Congress.

13-digit ISBN 978-1-9755-0407-6 (paperback)

13-digit ISBN 978-1-9755-0408-3 (library networkable e-edition)

13-digit ISBN 978-1-9755-0409-0 (consumer e-edition)

Printed in the United States of America.

All first editions printed on acid-free paper that meets the American National Standards Institute Z39-48 standard.

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Cover design by Teresa Lagrange

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CHAPTER 2

Liking The Other And Lowering The Temperature

A Preliminary Conversation

Kevin: We have this ongoing text message thread that's filled with ambivalent news about religion and queer issues. One or the other of us is attending—or has Google alerts set up—to the news with an eye toward our shared project. This isn't that unique amongst co-researchers, I don't think. But what we keep settling on is the idea that there's no panacea in the work of understanding the ongoing landscape of educational issues at the intersection of the intersubjective. We have student teachers who are members of the LGBTQ+ community who have experienced generativity in religious commitment just as we have student teachers who have, of necessity, left their faith in order to more fully embrace queer lives. There's a range of options in between there, and we don't ever want to undermine the very real ongoing uses of religion for hate. But we want to figure out what to do in our teacher education classrooms not only when that hate happens but also when something else happens too.

Adam: Some time ago, as a way into these issues, we found ourselves intrigued by and interested in the concept of “liking.” This led to our first coauthored book *The Pedagogies and Politics of Liking* (Greteman & Burke, 2017), in which we really began the work of contemplating not only what “liking” is but also what it might do for us

when thinking about education. This book continues to create a path for liking that, for me, wants to navigate the world to the side of more well-known, -worn, -felt, and -theorized concepts (and emotions) of love and hate. In this book, I hope we bring this thinking more directly into teacher education and how “liking,” particularly the other, which also implicates the self, might assist us in navigating incredibly volatile and polarized times. This volatility and polarization are larger and more complicated than we can engage in one book, which is why we limit ourselves to thinking about “LGBTQ+” and “religious” issues. Both LGBTQ+ and religion are fraught in education, and this fraughtness is seen through the layers of education. They are topics to be considered in the classroom through the curriculum; they are embodied through student and teacher identities; they are discourses that contribute concepts to how we think and feel the world; they interact with one another historically. Each of these layers raises a host of concerns that various scholars and activists have sought to explore and/or advocate for in various ways. For me, our contribution, I hope, will be to assist individuals amid teacher education (both faculty and student teachers) to engage in conversations about these thorny and knotty problems to move past reproducing antagonisms that we might do something else.

Kevin: When I was in grade school, I was fortunate to have this really wonderful, stern, caring teacher named Mrs. Turner for both first and second grade. I’m not sure what was going on at Sutherland School at the time, but there must have been more freedom to make certain kinds of pedagogical choices in Chicago Public Schools in the mid-1980s than happens now because for those 2 years, the first- and second-grade classes were combined. I have a sense that Mrs. Turner, a longtime veteran, had a preference for the mixed-age format and convinced her colleagues across these grades that they, too, might try a bit of an experiment. In any event, what this meant was that we developed friendships that might not have otherwise been possible with kids who were a year older than us as first graders. It also put us in proximity to older students on whom, in short order, many of us developed really passionate early-career crushes.

Cut to a discussion with an older kid also named Kevin, whom a few of us were trying to get to admit to an undying love for a particular girl. Now the trick is, of course, that all of us in the group had a thing for her; this was pure projection. Kevin, however, the focal point at the time, tried to defuse a potentially explosive situation. He told us he “liked her from the bottom of [his] heart.” Second-grade logic here, but he figured that the bottom of the heart meant she ranked really low on his list of priorities. Those of us schooled in the idioms of love, however, pounced on this incontrovertible evidence that he LIKED HER THE MOST ANYONE COULD EVER LIKE SOMEONE. I bring it up, this early miscommunication in the ways of the heart, to suggest that some of what we’re trying to do here is flip the orientation of our emotional connections to—often as constructed dissonances from—others and ultimately the imagined other. The work here is about thinking about liking the other from the bottom of our hearts and replacing the supposed passion of that sort of statement with the indifference that Kevin tried to convey to us all those years ago in Mrs. Turner’s class. We don’t want to root our work in his confusion, in our misunderstanding his words, but rather, we want it linked to a sense that sometimes our notion of the gravity of a situation, as it connects to the humanity of others, might be diffused through a complacency of simply liking, from the bottom, top, or middle of the heart, with no commitment beyond this shared acknowledgment of humanity.

An Opening

There is a simple albeit politically tenuous need that grounds the conversations throughout this book. It is a need to metaphorically “lower the temperature.” This is, arguably, a fraught thing to put to print given the ways in which different sides will claim their interlocutors are responsible for the mercury rising. In a polarized society, looking into the future can seem a peering out into an abyss of projection: What we hope will happen is often what we see off in the distance. Will the temperature continue to rise, reaching a boiling

point, with animosity and hate overflowing? Will it rise but be tempered out through state interventions? Or will our better angels prevail, cooling off our heated selves, steam emitted in various forms without any real catastrophe occurring, but hopefully necessary changes taking hold? Oh, the metaphors we might extend! When looking into an abyss of the future, the possibilities while not endless are multitudinous, rooted inevitably in the decisions that are made across the spectrum—from our everyday decisions to the decisions of those in positions of power. Educators, particularly K–12 educators and teacher educators, are on the front lines of engaging students coming into these realities and developing ways of understanding, talking, and living amid and through such a time. Of course, educators are not the only ones responsible for taking on this work but exist alongside others who form and inform the way people live in the world.

One area, among many, where polarization is most visible is at the intersection of religion and LGBTQ rights. Prior to the 1970s, as shown by Putnam and Campbell (2010), religion cut across political ideologies. Religion within the broader history of the United States, as they illustrated, was rarely aligned with a particular political party but, instead, could be seen struggling alongside various political causes (e.g., abolition of slavery, advocacy for slavery, fights against sweatshops, arguments for the morality of work, civil rights marches and their denunciation from pulpits nationwide). It was, to put it differently, viable to be political and religious without one's political party tracking inevitably with any specific religious stance. Any number of political struggles noted earlier, as well as including things like the New Deal, would not have been possible without religion. Yet, starting in the 1970s, an alignment between religion and the conservative right emerged and calcified, which, decades later, has led to a consonant neglect of the religious left as it exists and in its political stances. This was something former president Barack Obama noted during the 2008 presidential election in the pages of *Christianity Today*. In a question-and-answer with Pulliam and Olsen (2008), Obama noted, “There’s been a set of habits of thinking about

the interaction between evangelicals and Democrats that we have to change” (para. 6). Continuing, he said, “Democrats haven’t shown up. Evangelicals have come to believe oftentimes that Democrats are anti-faith” (para. 6). This habit of thinking has not changed, so much so that by the 2016 presidential election, Hillary Clinton did little to no campaigning for evangelical votes. When the dust settled on the 2016 election, she had received only 16% of the evangelical vote, the lowest of any Democratic presidential candidate, while her showing among Catholic voters was evenly split with Donald Trump (Blumberg, 2017). Noting this is not, to be clear, to place blame on Clinton’s campaign, we, rather, mean it to illustrate the decades-long trend of Democrats (and, more generally, the left) of forgoing engagement with evangelicals and other religious voters. Instead, the left ceded religious discourses to the right (with, of course, exceptions), often painting religion, as such, with the broad brushstroke of intellectual vacuity and bigotry (Harris, 2005; Hitchens, 2007).

However, this move to cede religious discourses to the right and align the left with secular discourses failed to capture the large swath of a religious left, both historically and contemporarily. The narratives that arise out of these moves and alignments construct particular kinds of stories about conservative and progressive ideas about sexuality. Religion, never a monolith, is multitudinous as is secularism, with neither being aligned entirely along with progressive or conservative thought. We might, following Mary Lou Rasmussen (2016), grapple with relationships among secularisms to challenge the binary construction between the secular and the religious—the conservative and the progressive—particularly around sexualities. Indeed, the central organizing principle in the field of secularism over recent decades has been its shift to thinking in pluralities. Jakobsen and Pellegrini (2008) encapsulate this, noting that “the choice between secularism and religion represents a false dichotomy . . . because religious and secular formations are profoundly intertwined with each other” (p. 11). Just as religion, conceptually, begets multiple and specific religious discourses as they arise from various practices, dogmas, and histories, so, too, then, do the attendant secularisms

come to “vary with the religious formation in relation to which they develop” (p. 12). Secular formations, in the end, emerge in response to religious discourses and are thus colored by these discourses themselves. Certain critics (Heyes, in press) are clear, then, that there is no secularism that isn’t inherently religious in its structure. Understanding this, we are freer to think about imbrication: What points of contact across supposed secular and religious divides allow for new ways of thinking about how to become in the world?

A part of our interest here is to engage these not-so-disparate realities to think through ways, drawing on Obama’s earlier sentiment, to change habits of thinking. This includes drawing on the religious left and the ways they have sought to lower the temperatures often raised by the religious right. But it also means engaging the religious right and contemplating ways in which their viewpoints need to be considered within the broader democratic project. This presents a problem for contemporary democratic education. Yet, as Charles Taylor (2011) reminds us, “the problem is that a really diverse democracy can’t revert to a civil religion, or anti-religion, however comforting this might be, without betraying its own principles” (p. 48). Such accommodations are fraught, so we limit our own attention to them within the classroom space as student teachers work to make sense of their own selves amid their emerging responsibilities as public educators. Such work is complicated and complex as student teachers begin the transition from students who may have particular protections and rights to teachers who become responsible, in new ways, for their own students and take on heightened scrutiny for their work as public employees.

We turn, in this chapter, to the work of “liking the other” as a way to begin conversations and lower the temperature. Our turn to liking the other follows not only our previous work grappling with these very tensions between religion and sexuality (Burke & Greteman, 2020) but also our broader project exploring the word like and the work of liking (Burke & Greteman, 2013). In our work *The Pedagogies and Politics of Liking* (Greteman & Burke, 2017), we followed the word *like* around to see what it does in different contexts (e.g., universities) and

forms (e.g., popular, philosophical, theological). Of particular importance to our work here is the way Catholic theologian James Alison (2003) sought to tell a different theological story. In *On Being Liked*, he argues that “like” opens up in distinction from, in important ways, love, because,

the word ‘like,’ is rather more difficult to twist into a lie than the word ‘love’, because we know when someone likes us. We can tell because they enjoy being with us, alongside us, want to share our time and company. (p. 107)

Continuing, Alison suggests:

If our understanding of being loved does not include being liked, or at least being prepared to learn to be liked, then there’s a good chance that we’re talking about the sort of love that can slip a double bind over us, that is really saying to us “my love for you means that I will like you if you become someone else.” (p. 107)

To like, in Alison’s view, is to “be glad to be with us.” Being with others, others one likes, asks that in liking the other, one “looks at us with the delight of one who enjoys our company, who wants to be one with us, to share in something with us” (Alison, 2003, p. 108). This feels, in many ways, similar to the ways in which we have come to understand our relationships with our students over the years: a fondness not weighted with the deep emotional ties and heavy ontological commitments that emerge from a compulsion to love. However, as Alison noted, love is not to be discarded. Rather, love, if it is to be taken seriously, needs to include liking.

Still, such a sentiment rooted in liking may sound a bit romantic, perhaps even naïve, amid our polarized times as, indeed, there are habits of mind out of which we would hope our students will eventually emerge. However, our turn to like aims to open up a different story to tell and therefore enact in our everyday as we encounter others: The work of teaching isn’t about changing our students forcibly through the heavy application of love. It is about accompanying them in their work of becoming teachers where their failure to change isn’t about our failure to teach but is, rather, about agential decisions emerging from complex conversations. Liking the

other, we hope to illustrate not only in this chapter but throughout this book, is about the importance of drawing on concepts and stories that do different work. Or, as Donna Haraway (2016) has it, we recognize that “liking the other” might matter because,

it matters what matters we use to think other matters with; it matters what stories we tell other stories with; it matters what knots knot knots, what thoughts think thoughts, what ties tie ties. It matters what stories make worlds, what worlds make stories. (p. 12)

Education, through its everyday relations between others, is implicated in both the making of stories and the telling of stories. Such stories not only reveal matters of concern but also illuminate what thoughts are privileged. They require, no matter what, our constant vigilance and creativity. Our move to liking the other is, we hope, not an answer to the range of questions we raise but a way to respond to the ethical work of education, work in which people within and across generations meet one another. It is, in many ways, another pebble thrown into the pond of ideas and practices to help shift relations in ways that grapple with and do justice to the complexities of becoming subjects through, in particular, schooling.

Habitual Thinking

The current habits of thinking started to calcify through the culture wars starting in the 1970s over the struggle around emerging rights of LGBTQ+ people and the concerns of, in particular, evangelical Christians. This struggle was captured by Anita Bryant’s Save Our Children campaign that fought against then emerging nondiscrimination policies protecting “homosexuals.” This campaign, while viewed as hateful by the left, was seen by Bryant as rooted in love. “I don’t hate the homosexuals,” Bryant (1977) claimed. “I love them enough to tell them the truth . . . that God hates sin but He loves the sinner and He will forgive any sin if the sinner repents of his sin . . . and not flaunt it or ask the law to condone it” To give in to the “agenda” of the radical militant homosexuals and their claims to legal

rights would, by her estimation, “destroy the moral fiber of our families and our nation” (p. 104). Such rhetoric inflamed the debates, sedimenting, at least in the popular consciousness, a definition of religiousness that was (a) de facto politically conservative and (b) alongside abortion rights, animated by its anti-LGBTQ+ agenda. And there was a reverse impact on LGBTQ+ movements, including queer theory. As Melissa Sanchez (2019) aptly notes, “given that the rise of right-wing evangelicalism was coterminous with that of queer theory, it is unsurprising that the field [queer theory] tends to regard Christianity with suspicion, if not hostility” (pp. 8–9). The response by the sexually minoritized was understandable: a rearguard action that maintained its humanity and decoupled gay possibility, again at least publicly, from religion.

This came concurrently with a resurgence of a specific kind of masculine Christianity in the United States that, although it has a longer history than we’re accounting for here, meant that a “resurgent militancy would become intertwined both with the sexual purity movement and with the assertion of complementarianism within evangelical circles” (du Mez, 2020, p. 172). This version of masculinity, which has seen its apotheosis in the full embrace of Donald Trump by evangelicals, was rooted in a ginned-up concern for “soft males” emerging from “homosexual neurosis,” due to both “addiction to pornography” and “the proliferation of androgynous gender roles” (p. 159). The answer was a muscular Jesus who could be used to assert that “most of life’s obstacles could be overcome ‘by exerting a little over ten pounds of pressure with a trigger finger’” (p. 217). We are, of necessity, telling a partial and streamlined story here. There are more detailed accounts that flesh out the production of American religious freedom through both conservative and progressive engagement in the public square (Curtis, 2016), just as there are gay and lesbian theological traditions that maintain space for, for instance, gender fluidity and sexual variety in religious spaces (Greenough, 2020), just as there are, as well, more thorough analyses of the racism inherent to American Evangelicalism historically (Butler, 2021). These tend to support our sense, however, that the general

strand in engagement in public activism as in the last decades of social science was an antagonism between religion, read as conservative, and LGBTQ+ lives and theories.

The violence here is not limited to evangelicalism; certainly Catholicism, the tradition out of which Alison seeks to rework a new way forward for LGBTQ+ possibility with theology, has its own abhorrent history. We need only look to the die-ins at St. Patrick's in New York as a rebuttal to Cardinal O'Connor's public adoption of murderous tropes around HIV/AIDS in the 1980s to confirm this or, more contemporaneously, Martel's (2019) documentation of the operation and consequences of the "closet" in the Catholic Church. But the suggestion from Alison is that these responses are linked together by a misunderstanding of the structure and use of religious love as a violent act made manifest through a false God. His response, as we've noted, is to lower the temperature and to try to interrupt the cycle of abuse with an approach that can be understood, even if rejected by, religious conservatives while providing succor for both secular and religious progressives and sexual minorities.

On Liking

Liking, as we have come to conceptualize it, is intimately informed by Alison (2003) and his argument that "like" opens up in distinction from, for instance, love. Alison suggests that religious love is often wielded as a weapon that excludes the possibility of liking the other as other because it often "means something like: 'I feel that in obedience to God's love for sinners I must stop you being who you are'" (p. 107). We've written about this phenomenon as it gets applied in educational spaces—where it is quite common for teachers to suggest that they love their students—because much of the inevitable conclusion of teaching is that through schooling, students will be *made* to become different (Burke & Greteman, 2013). Our sense is that love, as engaged here, means very much a wedging of specific students into acceptable forms such that they might be

produced as educated whereas liking means walking alongside students, accepting their curiosities, and failing to seek specific ends that existed prior to the meeting of the student. This, however, may be too clean a binary. Certainly not all educators, when they speak of their love for students, view them as sinners to be kept from the hands of an angry God, but there are good data that suggest that in the United States, with its uniquely religious teacher workforce (Hartwick, 2015b; White, 2009), a kind of love the sinners out of sin through punishment does, in fact, persist deeply and truly as a vein in the rock of American schooling (Hartwick, 2015a).

Hadley (2020) writes extensively about the kinds of struggles we attempt to work through here. In an account of three evangelical early-career teachers, the author-as-ethnographer documents the dilemmas that emerge for teachers who have been raised in religious discourses that demand a particular kind of love, especially from women. Hadley uses a Derridean frame rooted in hospitality, asking “how does one wholeheartedly welcome a guest or stranger . . . while remaining in power” (p. 40) to try to engage the difficulty for emerging teachers raised in certain kinds of evangelical (but not only evangelical) traditions when they encounter challenges to their faith in schools. Not surprisingly, much of the data emerge around issues of sexuality and gender identity. Noelle, one of the teachers, when thinking of a student, Hannah, who is in the midst of transitioning from female to male, speaks of her responsibility to the student and her faith in this way:

Well, I'm responsible for making sure that my student feels loved and accepted. And I'm responsible to myself and my faith in God, and the fact that I believe that God created you in his image the way that you are and that's who you are supposed to be even if you might feel tensions to identify as somebody else. (p. 91)

Leaving aside very real concerns about notions of who gets to decide what a student is supposed to be, we can look at the difficulty and perhaps elegance of Noelle's solution when Hannah asks to be referred to with masculine pronouns. In answer, she says that, by way of support for the student, “it doesn't matter what you want to be

called. You're still the same person no matter what your name is" (Hadley, 2020, p. 91). There's a way, if you squint at it, that the student could take this as a statement of support, and in fact, the student, who was very close with Noelle, did indeed take it that way. But the carefully crafted statement, for Noelle, maintains a kind of plausible deniability with reference to her faith and its belief in complementary and fixed gender roles to function as a teacher in the space. This isn't an apology for Noelle's move, but it is meant to point to the use of love in educational spaces for religious ends while also holding out the notion that these are dilemmas that our teachers will face, indeed that their students will face as a result of their teachers' beliefs, with which we need to think in teacher education.

A second, more extreme example will help here. Mei Lin, another early-career evangelical teacher—who, it should be said, would see herself arising from different perhaps more Calvinist strands within the tradition than Noelle—speaks of times in her public school teaching when she fails to fully represent her faith. "I've gotten to the point where I don't even say, 'Sorry, God,' anymore" (Hadley, 2020, p. 109), her eyes filling with tears. "I'm panicked because I think I'm not saved" (p. 109). It's no surprise, then, that she rejects Noelle's "softer, less direct form of evangelism," noting,

The way people have [evangelized] in the Bible has always been very explicit. . . . Every single time, like in every story, people are being very explicit with their words—almost rude—when they evangelize. And so I think if I'm basing [my sense of how to evangelize] on the model of how Jesus and his disciples did it, it would have to be with words. (p. 103)

There are easy ways to make a caricature out of Mei Lin, and so it's important to note that she does some extraordinary work for her students, including loaning \$2,000 to one she notices is struggling to support his family with no expectation that he will pay her back. This puts her job on the line as it flouts district policy, but she sees it as a necessary support for a student in need and as a way to help him better engage in class so he won't have to work nights and can get some sleep. Certainly this is also driven by her faith as is, it's

important to note, her very explicit antiracist pedagogy in the classroom.

Later, Mei Lin discusses her struggle to “support” LGBTQ+ students. She pays lip service to creating safe spaces for them but, in the end, knows that her faith means that if she doesn’t bring them to Jesus, which would mean their acknowledging the sin of their identity and either becoming straight or pretending to, then she could go to hell and certainly her queer-identified students will. She, out of necessity for their shared salvation, must love them into something different. And, of course, this is violent, and of course, it’s troubling, but we do want to call to mind the deep belief for Mei Lin that eternal damnation is *real* and that it will mean profound and endless suffering. And to be absolutely clear—we don’t endorse this position. We emerged from different religious traditions that might be said to be a bit more humane, at least in the last 70-odd years, regarding the afterlife. And we don’t condone the need to convert gay students in any way, but we bring forward Mei Lin to remind all of us that teacher candidates (and eventual teachers) like her exist; they sit in our courses; they pay lip service to our discussions of inclusion; they are a real and not insignificant part of our public school-teaching cohort. So what ought we do to work with them to both protect their future LGBTQ+ students and help them think differently about what it means to teach amid the paradox of pluralism (Paris, 2012)?

We will not be able to offer an answer to what we ought to do that resolves these issues once and for all. Rather, we hope to work through the needs teacher educators have in responding to the range of issues that can arise when religious, sexual, and gender identities meet in classrooms. Hadley’s (2020) engagement with evangelical teachers already illustrates that the issues are not the same but refracted through a range of ideas and relations that fall under the banner of evangelical Christianity. Her work illustrates, as well, the need to open up such conversations and the challenges of doing so given the ways such issues raise questions about one’s conscience.

For Alison (2003), “someone of unbound conscience can dare to get it wrong, because they don’t have to get it right” (p. 110). Yet, for

many, if not all of us, our consciences are bound in various ways—consciously or unconsciously—due to our own conditions and contexts becoming subjects. Additionally, within our current polarized environment, the consequences of getting it wrong are serious, creating additional roadblocks to embarking on conversations rooted in liking the other, conversations again not derived from a need to change the other. This is not to argue that change is not possible but to recognize that change cannot be the starting point directed from the outside. The teacher, for instance, cannot position themselves over-against their students morally, even though this seems commonplace, whereby the teacher is expected to “know” and be a moral exemplar. This “over-against” structures the relation such that “it is the other who gets to stagger around the world as a sinner, bearing the weight of ‘my’ morality” (p. 26). The violence that emerges from this relation is rooted in distinctions between the pure and impure which are human creations and stories, not, in Alison’s theological view, the divine. Talk of the divine and morality is complex in public education for many of the reasons we write of in this book. Yet in turning to such language—alongside other languages—is to tell different stories that are rooted in the diverse discourses and realities that undergird public education, the relations between students and teachers, and questions of citizenship.

We draw on Alison (2003) because he attempted, quite humbly, to begin to offer an alternative story to this form of relation that, in a sense, embraces shame. Shame becomes inhabitable by the other, by not desiring what is desired but allowing for other desires to challenge and create a different narrative. This, curiously, aligns with queer embraces of shame that similarly expose the ways normative logics fail at recognizing the plurality of human becoming. Alison’s argument challenges dominant theological positions not by seeking entrance to that position but by showing that by inhabiting the position of shame one undoes the logic of goodness—a human logic, not a divine logic. If one’s goodness is created by positioning the other as bad, one’s goodness is exposed as, quite simply, a human invention informed by human desires and fears.

The ways in which LGBTQ+ individuals have been constructed by various religious discourses as sinful or in need of change explains, in part, we suspect why, according to the Pew Research Center, lesbian, gay and bisexual Americans were *less* likely than straight Americans to say churches protect and strengthen morality (Sandstrom & Schwadel, 2019). Relatedly, Pew Research also found that, while LGB Americans made up 5% of the respondents to their survey, they are “much less likely to say that scripture is the word of God” (38% of bisexuals, 33% of gays and lesbians, and 61% of straight Americans saying this; Schwadel & Sandstrom, 2019). Similarly, 34% of gays, lesbians, and bisexuals said religion is very important in their lives while more than half (54%) of straight Americans said religion is very important in their lives. These differences can illustrate a range of realities, and we think this range of realities deserves conversations that help unpack opportunities to relate differently to one another. Systems of goodness that prop up particular ideas of morality are never actually static, nor universal. Rather, morals are in flux as ideas and practices evolve and communities come into contact. For instance, over the past several decades, an overwhelming majority of U.S. adults have come to understand that they know someone who is gay, while most U.S. adults still do not know a transgender individual (Masci, 2016). Given this, Pew found that “nearly two-thirds of those who know a gay or lesbian person (64%) say homosexual behavior is either morally acceptable or not a moral issue, while about half (53%) of those who *don't* know a gay or lesbian person feel this way” (Masci, 2016, para. 7). And although we might peg these shifts precisely to the decline in religious membership in the United States alongside cultural and legislative wins for advocates of LGBTQ+ viability, we also still have significant gaps in belief that will inevitably play out in schools. Still, such changes in thinking are a reason why it is important to engage in conversations at these intersections within education where generations meet, come into presence, and engage in the work of learning.

A Case

Systems of goodness take on different flavors depending on how one's contexts and communities understand and view the world. Teachers and teacher educators have to navigate contexts and communities to make sense of such systems and enter into educational relations not only with students but other colleagues, parents, and community members as well. While Hadley's (2020) work touches on evangelical teachers, we end this chapter thinking about nominally secular teachers through an anecdote. This anecdote emerges from a conversation with an in-service teacher who asked for help navigating a situation that had emerged with a trans student. As teacher education scholars who explore realms of religion, gender, and sexuality, we often find ourselves fielding such questions and having conversations with not only our students but also other educators about, in this instance, gender identity. For those who position themselves as "theorists," in some way such moments can provoke mild annoyance as they request that theory leave its bracketed safety to encounter the particular. We have ourselves felt this mild annoyance. However, as we have continued our work and developed the arguments in this book, we have returned to such conversations, reseeing them for their potential, bringing abstract commitments into concrete practices. For each of us, such moments, on reflection, are exhilarating for the ways in which they recognize that we may, after all, have something to contribute to work "on the ground." Given the preceding conversation about the potential of liking the other, we turn to this particular conversation that we think offers a glimpse into a way one's teacher identity is always in process because of the students one teaches and the issues they bring to the classroom. This process is not easy but raises further questions and feelings, including questions about one's viability as a teacher and feelings of shame and annoyance.

There is, for us, little doubt that LGBTQ+ issues have gained an important foothold in education broadly speaking. Research on LGBTQ+ students, teachers, and curriculum has drastically

expanded over the past several decades (Graves, 2015; Rodriguez et al., 2016; Rofes, 2005). For instance, laws mandating LGBTQ+ curricula have been expanding, as have various protections against discrimination and harassment (Biegel, 2010; Mayo, 2014). However, attention to LGBTQ+ issues within teacher education remains complicated as such attention is more dependent on the context of the teacher education program that creates challenges for in-service teachers who can enter classrooms without any preparation about how to navigate a range of issues related to gender and sexuality.

In LGBTQ+ conversations in education, there has been an evolution around the work of the “ally.” Within the history of the ever-expanding acronym, and its contestations, the “A” once stood for “ally” recognizing those heterosexuals who fought/struggled/joined alongside LGBTQ+ people. The “A” has evolved in the 21st century to shed its “ally” meaning and now more consistently refers to “Asexual.” This comes alongside the ways in which the concept of the ally has been challenged in recent years to do more than merely “ally” but, instead, become an “accomplice” or “co-conspirator.” Each of these alternatives articulates a demand that one must do more than be an “ally” linked to an assumption that there is a certain incompleteness to the commitments required of allyship. This shift, seen in broader social justice discourses, comes with the recognition, for instance, that action is required, indeed that one must put oneself at risk in ways that perhaps were not demanded in the past. How such discourses play out on the ground, we suspect, is far more complicated around how risk is encountered and experienced since how one identifies may not be as visible as how one performs and is identified by others who may have ill will.

Curiously, this evolution implicates the realities of change and how such change bears out across generations. We cannot claim by any means that schools are a safe place for LGBTQ+ students (Meyer, 2009; Sadowski, 2016). Research continues to document the harassment, bullying, and violence that LGBTQ+ students face in disproportionate numbers, including at the hands of teachers (Kosciw et al., 2018). Yet we do know that more and more teachers—still a

minority most likely—are taking up the work of anti-homophobia not only through everyday actions, for sure, but also through advising Gay-Straight Alliances and seeking out ways to provide other, more substantial modes of support. Such supports are, unfortunately, often rooted in particular understandings of LGBTQ+ lives. In a conversation with an in-service teacher, this complexity manifested itself. She, a cisgender female high school teacher, raised questions about how to support trans and nonbinary students. Attentive to their needs around both privacy and recognition, along with the legal landscapes that remain unsettled and contingent based on state and district policy, she expressed a feeling of being caught in an impossible place.

Her trans and nonbinary students had access to political discourses as they emerged and evolved most notably on various social media platforms. They were, in many ways, trying on such ideas to help make sense of their own emerging identities that were becoming in relationship to others in ways social media allows. Unlike trans and nonbinary youth a few years ago, she noted, youth were bringing in critical terms to assert their selves; this a good thing. This, also, an important part of high school itself, has made it more complicated and dangerous for trans and nonbinary students given the backlash against trans rights and the contested realities that trans and nonbinary students face as they navigate what should otherwise be the quotidian: bathrooms, pronouns, clothing (Coupet & Marrus, 2015). And she was, in working with the students, put in a challenging position of both supporting them but pushing them to recognize the complications in play. For instance, a trans student accused her of being transphobic for asking the student how they would like her to refer to them when talking with their parents. Unsure if or how the student was out to parents, she wanted to be sure to protect their privacy while also being mindful of their relationship with family. The student, however, felt that these were settled issues and being asked at all was inconsiderate, at best, and transphobic, at worse.

What this case illustrates—in condensed form—is not the need to decide what is and is not transphobia, although that is a needed,

important, and always contingent project as dynamics change. Rather, what it reveals for us are the challenges of meeting in schools where these discourses are not abstract but concretely present and constantly evolving. Adam's response to the teacher was, in part, to think through with her what it might mean to like that student, to accompany them through those discourses and what they mean in everyday educational relations. How do students coming into themselves understand concepts like transphobia such that engaging in such conversations can assist in fleshing out that concept for students in relation to teachers? It was clear that the accusation of transphobia hit the teacher personally. She wanted to work through if or how her actions indeed were transphobic. But she also had to think through how to relate to the student moving forward, remembering as well that the student is themselves on the rocky road of becoming. The student may have, at least momentarily, hated their teacher. And that teacher may have, as well, hated the student not for their transness but for their adolescence. We return to notions of hate in Chapter 5 but, for now, want to sit with its affective possibility and pain. The affective realities of classrooms are charged after all, made challenging, we suggest, when we err toward love and hate as extreme feelings. A point here is the need to have conversations through these terrains that are simultaneously abstract and concrete.

Conclusion

Liking the other, we hope, offers us a framework to think through the challenges that arise when people meet both in teacher education classrooms and preK–12 classrooms given the ways they are intimately implicated in one another. As we address in later chapters, liking the other creates a way to both explore our own conscience and engage the consciences of others who are similarly amid their own becoming. In liking the other, however, we do not offer a prescription for relations but a different story for how we might relate to ourselves and others. The burden of liking may fall at first on teachers who establish the relational mood in classrooms. However,

the self is never independent of the other; rather, the other is vitally important to our abilities to become a self. So liking quickly becomes multidirectional in recognizing the relations in play. Liking, we propose, provides an alternative, arguably simpler, perhaps more mundane, way of conceiving our relations. Such relations, however, are never simple. In public education, they are, as well, wrapped up within legal discourses that form and reform the rights students and teachers have (and don't have) as they pass through the schoolhouse doors. The remainder of the book is a rumination on concepts through which we might think engagement across religious, sexuality, and gender discourses in education. We turn first to prophetic indictment to understand barriers to the work and then move to legal histories as a way to establish both context and an argument, later, that lead us away from accommodation and the juridical. Along the way, we consider twinned notions of forgiveness and reconciliation as a way to build toward accompaniment as a culmination of liking across these various conceptual arguments.

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