Moving across Differences

Blackburn, Mollie V.

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Chapter 4

Moving with Respect to 
Religion in Classroom Encounters

LGBTQ+ people and their allies often have complicated relationships with religion (Bittner, 2018). This was evident in the experiences of students who took the class and also in which students came by to borrow books but did not take the class, as I discuss in the introduction. In this chapter, I study students talking about religious institutions and reflecting on their life experiences as they read fiction and nonfiction together. The students I taught who were either religious or raised with religion were Christian, and some of those were Catholic, so they spoke most frequently, although not entirely, from these perspectives. At least one spoke about her relationship with a Muslim. But most of the talk centered around Christianity.

Ann, in talking about how some religious people try to walk the line of hating the sin of homosexuality but loving the sinner, said, “I’m going to say Christians here, because, let’s be real, it’s mostly Christians.” In the same conversation, Carter said, “I also, um, do, like, study of religions and stuff like that, like Buddhism, Hinduism stuff. And, like, I just find it interesting because, like, in my personal opinion, it’s like most of the Christian people that I know are like, ‘No, this is wrong.’” In other words, in her understanding of at least Buddhism, Hinduism, and Christianity, homophobia is most pronounced among Christians.

Some students focused on Catholicism, in particular. Delilah and Kristy, for example, were raised Catholic. They spoke to same-sex romantic and sexual relationships:
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Delilah: For the most part, like, Hispanics are Catholic and Catholic—like the religion of being a Catholic, it's [indecipherable].

Kristy: It's, like, really big against [homosexuality].

Delilah: It's frowned upon, and it's like you did something completely wrong.

While most of the talk centered around Christianity, including Catholicism, not all of it did. Vic, for example, spoke about her experiences being raised Christian and dating a girl who was being raised Muslim. She said, "I think people, uh . . . like with Christianity and stuff, or like, if you're, um . . . Muslim, um, I just know, like, if it's—I've only had like personal, like, things with those two particular religions, so I don't know about other religions, but yeah. But those ones, um . . . they're—there are going to be negative people, um, who are like, 'That's bad,' you know, 'You're going to go to hell,' all that stuff." Whether they were talking about Christians, Catholics, or Muslims, students described the dynamics between LGBTQ+ people and religious communities as fraught.

According to Burack (2014), the dynamics between LGBTQ+ people and the Christian right rely on the notion of compassion, which she conceptualizes as a "'cultural framework' that enables the possibility of certain kinds of discourse and action" (p. 17). She describes this action as "between sufferer(s) and actors who are capable of responding to or alleviating suffering" (Burack, 2014, p. 5). Although compassion might initially seem like a healthy starting place for a relationship, it is not. For starters, just as an actor may choose to respond to or alleviate suffering, they may choose not to. The Christian right, in fact, regularly discerns who is and is not deserving of compassion. With respect to LGBTQ+ people, "this means compassion toward people who resist their same-sex desires and condemnation toward people who embrace some kind of queer identity" (Burack, 2014, p. 8). Undergirding this discernment is a balancing of the "divine source of compassion as well as the urgency of salvation" (Burack, 2014, p. 14). This balancing act is not new to LGBTQ+ people raised in Christian communities. We "grow up steeped in these traditions and modes of feeling. As a result, we recognize the invitations to shame and renunciation held out by antigay politics and religion" (Burack, 2014, p. 10). Thus, we know that "calls for compassion can engender cruel con-
descension as well as harsh judgments on the moral agency of sufferers” (Burack, 2014, p. 5). We carry this knowledge with us as we move into and around religious communities.

Vic, Mac, and Ann spoke explicitly about the tension between compassion and judgment with respect to religion and LGBTQ+ people. Vic mentioned that some religious people, and again she was talking about both Christian and Muslim people, “are like, ‘I love you, but you’re going to go to hell. I still love you.’” This was a stance Vic, and others, did not appreciate. Mac, for example, said, “‘I still love you. You’re going to hell, but I still love you.’ . . . Yeah. It [feels] kind of dirty, you know. Kind of like, ‘You’re a sinner. You’re doing all these sins just for being you, but I still love you.’ It’s like, ‘I’m going to be the bigger person and love you anyway.’ I don’t know—that’s some shade right there.” Vic and Mac, thus, pushed themselves away from religious people and communities who judge them for their sexual and gender identities, even when that judgment is framed in love.

Ann, though, was not only near those people and communities, she was among them. She said,

I used to, I don’t want to say preach, because I was never a preacher, but I . . . I used to totally be behind the whole “love the sinner, hate the sin” approach before I realized that I myself was technically a sinner. I don’t think I realized how—because with other sins, you know, it’s not an element of identity, it’s something that you do. I—you go out and steal or you go and murder, you go and commit adultery, or whatever, but it’s not part of someone’s identity. I don’t think I realized until I started identifying as asexual and then panromantic and then homoromantic what being—a huge part it is, of yourself, of one’s self. And so I think it’s really hard to see; I think it’s really hard for a lot . . . of Christians to see what’s erroneous in that approach, because they don’t understand what a huge element of people’s identity it is.

It was not until she started moving herself toward queer communities that she started pulling herself out of and away from Christian communities that judged LGBTQ+ people. Such movement was not necessarily easy. Ann’s history with and in Christian communities was an intimate one.
She moved away from them because she felt judged harshly as she began to claim nonheterosexual identities, but she continued to empathize with them, as evident when she said, “I think it’s really hard for a lot . . . of Christians.” In other words, the break was not a clean one. It was complicated by deep struggles between religious and sexual identities. It was a move away from a sort of home.

Students drew on their experiences with religion and religious people and connected to the literature we read in class to move both farther away from religious people and institutions, when they experienced religion as punishment, and closer to them, when they experienced religion with a complexity that allowed for more tolerance if not acceptance. Even in these cases, the proximity often came with a cost.

**Religion as Punishment**

Students talked about religion in terms of punishments for behavior deemed wrong by those invested in Christian institutions, whether or not they were among them. They talked about being “hit” with Bible verses and being told they would be out of heaven or at least out of their families on religious grounds. Not surprisingly, they pushed back against such punishments, often at some expense.

In the spring of 2016, we were reading and discussing Andrews’s *Some Assembly Required* and Hill’s *Rethinking Normal* and preparing to write a journal entry about the books, and we were reviewing where we had left off in Andrews's book. He had just met Darien, who becomes his girlfriend, and because he has not yet come out as trans his friends and family understand the relationship as a lesbian one. His best friend, Andi, has sent him some Bible verses condemning same-sex relationships. Students were very critical of Andi and then started talking about their experiences with Bible verses. Abbot started, “I’ve been studying Bible verses . . . [and] my thing to do is to send them Bible verses back that basically just contradict what they say. . . . But I haven’t been hit with a Bible verse in a while.” At this, the class erupted in laughter, then Desiree chimed in with her experiences: “I used to get Bible verses too. . . . Because, well, I was a problem child. So my family, like most of my aunts and like, they all would like bring stuff into the—they was raised up in the church, and they were all like pastors, and any time I did something wrong, they
would, like, sing [to] me about Bible verses and pray with my mom.” In response, Khalil pointed at Desiree and shook his head. When I asked him about his reaction, he explained how deeply Christian his family was and then said, “So, you know, and your parents—you did something wrong and and they just want to [slaps hand] boom. And then they be like, ‘Read this.’” I responded to his slap and “boom” with, “And that’s getting hit with the Bible verse. Yeah, yeah, I hear you.” Even in a different class, the one in the previous semester, while reading and discussing a different book, Kuklin’s Beyond Magenta, Carter said, “my family was like super Christian or whatever, and they’re like, ‘Gay is wrong,’ like, smash, smash, smash, ‘You’re going to hell.’” Thus, Abbot, Desiree, Khalil, and Carter talked about being if not “hit” then at least punished with Bible verses and “smash[ed]” with Christianity more broadly. Desiree and Khalil would “get” Bible verses when they “did something wrong” so that they would learn to behave as their religious family believed was right. For Carter, this was specifically tied to being gay.

Punishments, though, did not only come in being “hit” in the moment. Some came in the form of threats for the future. In a later chapter about families and parents, I write about how some family members told their queer kids they would be going to hell. Darby, for example, contrasted Ari and Dante’s experience coming out to their parents with her own by emphasizing their religious commitments. She said, “I grew up in like super-religious Christian churches my entire life that are like, ‘Nope, gay bad. Going to hell.’” As previously mentioned in this chapter, Vic talked about Christians and Muslims telling gay people they are going to hell, and Carter talked about her Christian family saying something similar. Also, when I asked the class about their experiences with the “relationship between empathy and religion” in our discussion of Cameron in Kuklin’s Beyond Magenta, Mac said decidedly that religious people were not empathetic people. They explained, “My grandparents are, like, that religious. They’re like, ‘You’re not allowed to be gay because you’re going to hell.’ That’s the thing that they are. . . . Yeah. That’s the kind they are.” It was certainly a prominent even if not surprising theme across class discussions that many students talked about knowing at least Christians, if not religious people more broadly, who believed and espoused that LGBTQ+ people were going to hell.

Sometimes, though, students talked about LGBTQ+ people being ousted from home instead of heaven. We were reading and discussing
Farizan’s *If You Could Be Mine* in the fall of 2015, and I asked students to select characters they identified with and explain why. Vic selected both the main character, Sahar, and her love interest, Nasrin:

Vic: I think that I really, I can connect with Sahar and Nasrin. . . . Because, okay, because like . . . I dated someone who came from like a Muslim type of family. . . . So it was like—it was very hard, so it was like, [she] didn’t see us dating any time, like, past high school. So like that was, like, hard for me because, like, I was saying, “Oh my God, I’m so in love.” And then, you know. But like, we’re still friends so [indecipherable].

Dr. Blackburn: Okay, so [her family] knew you were dating?

Vic: . . . No, they would have killed her . . . because it’s just, like, not even a thing, like—it, I don’t know. She was saying, like, in her religion, like nobody is open about that. . . . Unless, like, you just don’t want to see your family ever again. But like, oh. . . . But also Nasrin because I feel like—I, um—it’s like, I don’t know, it’s like we can date, but then it’s like eventually you feel like you’re going to have to just do what your parents want you to do, which is sad.

In this account, Vic described her relationship with her middle school girlfriend, who was Muslim, saying if her family knew she was dating a girl they would excommunicate her from the family forever. Whether young people were getting ousted from heaven or home, they were being pushed away both by and from religion, religious institutions, and religious people.

In these encounters, students described being judged harshly by religious people and communities because of their sexual and gender identities, or even because of their acceptance of others’ sexual and gender identities. As a result, they pushed themselves away from these communities, even when those communities played a significant role in their growing up. As they pushed themselves away from these communities, they moved themselves toward LGBTQ+ communities, whether as allies or as LGBTQ+ people. Such movement suggests that they experienced their religious communities and LGBTQ+ communities as mutually exclusive, closing down the possibility of embracing both religious and queer identities.
The Push, the Pull, and the Sacrifice

Students often pushed back against or pushed away from what they understood to be religiously based homophobia and transphobia. Abbot drew on the Bible to do so. He said, “I know [the Bible] well enough to know that for every statement that seems like it discriminates someone, there’s another statement that totally throws it out and just makes it not worth it.” He went on to talk about how that plays out in terms of discrimination against gay people. He said, “People use religion as, like, an excuse for, like, homophobia all the time. But even though there is, like, one line in the Bible that it says something to that nature—like, I know it’s an interpretation. But it also says, before anything else, treat your fellow man kindly. So, like, using your religion as an excuse for homophobia, or any sort of hatred or shade, if you will, is just kind of, like—I don’t understand it because, before anything, you’re just supposed to treat people kindly.” Delilah immediately affirmed Abbot, saying, “You’re supposed to love thy neighbor,” and Abbot continued, “Even if they did say it a million times in the Bible and just stressed, like, that homosexuality . . . is forbidden—even if people did take that as, like, if you are homosexual, they’d take that as, like, being—like, violating religion or being disrespectful of religion—still, it still said in the Bible that you combat disrespect . . . you combat violence and hate, still, with, like, peace and love.” Here Abbot and Delilah, both of whom were raised Catholic, both of whom are straight and cisgender, critiqued people who used the Bible to condemn homosexuality rather than to promote kindness, peace, and love. Thus, they pushed away from a particular embodiment of Christianity while pulling themselves toward an alternative. In doing so, they opened up the possibility of a Christian future, but one that is distinct from the Christian past they had experienced.

Whereas some people struggled with such tensions, pushing away judgment and pulling toward love, some left their religious homes entirely. John, for example, said, “The only time I’ve ever actually encountered someone that’s, you know, not really, uh, pro-LGBT is my current priest at my, what I used to call my church.” John did not mean that he had never encountered homophobes and transphobes; he meant he had not in his religious communities, but when he did, recently, in his church’s leadership, he stopped calling the church his church. Thus, he pushed himself away from the religious institution he had formerly claimed as his own.
Students also recognized, though, that religious people are diverse, that they are, according to Mac, not all like that. Mac said, “But not all people who are religious are like that, I’ve learned. But, you know, and it’s very easy to be like, ‘Everyone who’s religious is homophobic, but that’s not true.’” Carter underscored this point, particularly in reference to Catholics. She said, “My best friend’s family is Roman Catholic, but they’re cool with the LGBT community. . . . When it doesn’t say anything against it, they’re like, ‘Hey, I’m cool with everything.’” Clearly Carter experiences her best friend’s family as queer-friendly. What is less clear is what the first “it” references—maybe the Bible, maybe the Catholic Church, although both of these are interpreted at least by some people as prohibiting homosexuality. Still, this was not the interpretation of Carter’s best friend’s family, at least as Carter experienced them. This allowed Carter, as someone who identified as pansexual, to be close to this friend and their family. It allowed her to move closer to Catholicism.

Carter valued an openness when it came to religion, even beyond the issues it raises for LGBTQ+ people. This was evident when we were reading and discussing *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe*. We were toward the beginning of the novel, and to help students connect with the characters I asked them to “write about a time something really challenged you or something with which you deeply struggled.” In response, Carter wrote and shared with the class her having become more open-minded about religion in general and her desire for her family to share in that openness. She explained, “My parents were always like, ‘Well, our religion is right; every other religion is wrong,’ like plain and simple, but, like, without an—like without directly saying that and, like, just based on how they thought about different things and stuff like that. It was very evident, and just, like, I always felt like that was wrong. Like, it—it—like, because I’m in the mindset, it’s like, ‘Who are you to say that to somebody that what they believe in is wrong because you don’t believe in it?’” She said her doubts in her parents’ sense of righteousness was amplified when she took a human geography course in the previous school year. She said it “was really interesting because, like, we learned about, like, different aspects of other people’s cultures and their religions and stuff like that, and I like the study of, like, human geography in general, and it’s like a real, like, way more open on, like, just what people believe in.” Understanding religion in this way drew Carter to it. It seemed to feel right to her in a way that her
parents’ embodiment of religion did not. She not only liked it, she claimed it as her own when she said she wrote this journal entry about her “religion open-mindedness.” It pulled her closer to religion and religious people.

And yet, often the push and the pull were in tension with—not isolation from—each other. Consider Ann’s account, for example. We, as a class, were talking about a meme a student brought in that pictured two figures like you sometimes see on public restroom doors to indicate who is expected use that particular room. But the figures were not white or black, which is typical. Instead, one was in what looked like a Confederate flag, and the other was in what looked like a rainbow flag. The Confederate one was kicking the rear end of the rainbow one. There was some discussion of whether the Confederate flag represented homophobia and transphobia, among other oppressions, particularly racism. John asserted it did not. He said it represented rebellion. Others said they understood the flag to be a declaration of white supremacy and racism but also other oppressive values, including homophobia and transphobia. I wondered aloud how John might feel when some people understood that flag to represent values that he did not hold, and Ann replied, “I feel that a lot because I’ve been raised in a Christian home . . . [and] there are other people going around like being all Christian, shouting all these terrible things, and I’m sitting here like [indecipherable].” I understood Ann to mean that she felt uncomfortable, at least, claiming a Christian identity when some Christians espoused hateful values that conflicted with her own. She worried about being thought to be a hateful Christian.

Some students who identified as both Christian and LGBTQ+ struggled with the tensions between the two. You might recall from the first chapter when Sherry talked about being raised in a Christian home and attending Christian camps when she started experiencing “same”-sex desire. She told about being taught it was a sin and feeling horrible, she talked about crying and praying to be straight, but she also talked about making out with another lesbian camper during this same period of time. The irony was not lost on her. Vic articulated a similar struggle:

Vic: I think it’s really hard for, um, me personally to, especially when I first came out, like, after—sort of kind of during eighth grade, yes—

Dr. B.: And at that point you came out as—
Vic: Oh, bisexual. . . . It was really hard, because then I started questioning my religion as well, because I was like, “Well, people keep telling me I’m going to go to hell, so I don’t think I should be a Christian anymore.” . . .

Dr. B.: So are you at a peaceful place in your questioning that?

Vic: No, no.

Dr. B.: So you’re kind of still in the midst of it all.

Vic: Yeah, like I still, like if someone were to ask me if I was a Christian, I’d be like, “Sure.” But it’s like, I don’t know really, because it’s like it’s hard for me to say I’m a Christian and I tell them I’m gay. And then they’re like, “What? No.” And then it’s like—

Dr. B.: Like the two are conflicting.

Vic: Right, ’cause it’s like, Why can’t I be a Christian and gay?

Here, Vic wondered whether she could be both Christian and gay but also wondered why she could not be. She was, at the time, still in a place of questioning the relationship between the two. There was both a push away from Christianity and a pull toward it. And this tension was hard on Vic. She said, “It’s just a lot. It makes it really hard for people, I feel; it makes it really hard for people because it’s like, well now I need to rethink everything I do.” Although she talked first about it being hard for “people,” as if it could be anyone, she shifted to first-person singular pronouns after that; she suggested it’s hard for her because it demands that she “rethink everything.” I agreed in parallel. That is to say, I first said how it could be for people and then in second-person singular, in reference to her. I said, “Right, it can be really tumultuous for people. Yeah, it’s like you’re giving up a lot.” Thus, students pushed themselves away from religious communities and pulled themselves toward LGBTQ+ communities, but they recognized that this movement came at a cost, and they actively questioned why they could not be in both communities. In this questioning, they imagined the possibility of being able to be in both religious and queer communities.
These tensions were ones Khalil talked about at length. Khalil, whom I’ve discussed in previous chapters, is the student I read as Black but who explained to me explicitly that he was multiracial. That said, he regularly implicitly identified with Black people. The tension with religion, however, was around his sexual identity and gender expression. With respect to sexuality, Khalil had recently shifted from identifying as bisexual to identifying as gay, and he talked about having boyfriends. In terms of gender, he preferred masculine pronouns. He performed femininity sometimes but not always. In our introductory interview, he said,

I wear makeup, I put extensions in, I wear skinny jeans, I like clothing that fits me. First off, I’ve been wearing tight clothes since I was in my emo stage, so tight clothing has just always been there. But now I’m starting to get into colorful stuff, and this year I was like, I need my hair to grow faster; I’m tired of putting heat in it; I’m going to put extensions in. . . . And it’s hard because, like, some days—like, the other day I was wearing baggy jeans and T-shirt and a hoodie and sneakers.

Sometimes he performed masculinity for safety’s sake—to ride public transportation, for example—but other times just because he wanted to. I heard him identify as male, as a feminine male, and as not female. When he recounted wearing a dress and heels, he described himself as being in drag. So, he performed gender variably, but, as he said, “it’s hard.” This difficulty extended to his relationship with religion.

In our final interview, Khalil described himself as a “total Christian” and a “little church boy.” In class, he talked about how church used to be for him: “Sunday, Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday, and you got to go back on Saturday to go back on Sunday, and then you got night church.” But, he told me, “I just don’t go to church no more.” He explained that he prayed every day and listened to gospel music all the time because, in his words, “it kind of relieves me.”

Khalil talked about how important this community had been to him. He “loved” both the pastor and his wife. Because of them, he thought, “Okay, I can deal with these type of people.” He said when he was feeling suicidal he choreographed a dance to Beyoncé’s “I Was Here.” He described the song as about death and explained that he “connected it all to my
thoughts of suicide.” He decided to share the performance with his pastor because, in Khalil’s words, “I connected to him so much. He taught me how to play the drums; we have the same birthday. He was just like a grandfather to me.” The pastor responded positively, saying “I like it” and “I’m glad you’re still here, and if anytime you need to talk, we can talk.” Further, Khalil “loved” the pastor’s wife, and showed her the same dance. Rather than responding with empathy, she told him, “‘You need to listen to more masculine music, more gospel music, uh, you have all these spirits around you, I need them to go. . . .” According to Khalil, the pastor’s wife was “trying to take the demons out of me,” and the pastor was talking with Khalil’s dad. Khalil thought, “Okay. I can’t do this.” In our initial interview, he told me, “That was the actual first church that I really got into that I loved so much, and I got kicked out.” In this case, Khalil left the church rather than changing his sexual identity and gender expression. He pushed the religious institution, or the homophobic weaponization of Christianity, away.

That said, he described going back to church, albeit a different one. He was out of the state for the summer, visiting family, and he was expected to go to church for his nephew’s christening. He decided, “I’m going to be there to support him.” But then he started asking about and encouraging his sister-in-law to go to church with him. He said, “I was like, ‘We’re going to church, so get dressed.’ And I have no problem going to church, and I went there, and it was just like nobody knew [I was gay], and it’s like everything was just gone, and I was able just to focus on what I came to do. And I’m like, ‘I wish it was like that all the time.’” In this case, Khalil preferred to conceal his sexual identity rather than sacrifice his faith. He pulled closer to religion at this moment in time, and, in an effort to do so, he suppressed at least his sexual identity and likely his gender expression, although he did not mention that specifically. Across his accounts, I see the push, the pull, and the sacrifice of his sexual identity, his gender expression, and his religious commitments. He pushed away from a Christianity of judgment and pulled himself toward LGBTQ+ communities, but then he also pulled himself toward a Christianity of home, and, to avoid its judgment, he pushed himself away from LGBTQ+ communities, at least in moments in time. He longed for a future in which he could be in both communities simultaneously, even though his present did not allow for it.
The students in the LGBTQ+-themed literature classes talked most of Christianity among the religions, sometimes with particular attention to Catholicism. Sometimes they spoke of Islam, not only with respect to Vic’s ex-girlfriend but also in relation to Farizan’s *If You Could Be Mine*. Regardless, students reported being pushed away from religion, religious institutions, and religious people. They did not report being pulled toward such institutions and people except where they were not understood as LGBTQ+. Moreover, students reported pushing themselves away from religion, religious institutions, and religious people when they understood the related values as hateful ones, such as homophobic and transphobic ideas. Much less frequently, when they understood religious values as loving and accepting ones, students reported pulling themselves closer to the people and institutions who held them. For those whose religious commitments were deeply ingrained, such a push-and-pull relationship was trying if not damaging. Undergirding them seemed to be a longing for a future in which they could exist in both religious and queer communities.

I understand all of the movement initiated by young people, whether moving toward or away from religious or queer communities, as ethical because they were agile in looking for love and home and wanting to find both in both communities. It is in the push and the pull of religious institutions that I saw unethical encounters, whether the religious institution was pushing away LGBTQ+ people or pulling only particular, “deserving,” to use Burack’s (2014) language, people toward them. These unethical encounters closed down the possibility of future encounters where people could exist in both religious and queer communities simultaneously, whereas the ethical encounters initiated by the young people opened up the possibility of such futures. Further, encounters where a person could benefit from being in LGBTQ+ and religious communities simultaneously would be much more ethical than those that demand a person be pushed and pulled between them, giving up something of themself in each movement. Something similar can be said of families, which I explore in the next chapter.