

**Queer Student Values: Religion Matters**  
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I have had the privilege over the years to be able to do campus ministry with wonderful students and wonderful queer students. I believe in the depths of my heart that our sexuality is a gift from God, and that God's desire for us is to live holy lives, and I believe that those of us who minister or work with queer students have a responsibility to reach out to them with the same words of grace, love and acceptance that we have been proclaiming to their non-queer peers.

Some disclaimers:

When I use the word "queer," I am using it as a blanket term to include gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered students. The term has also been used to include people who are intersexed, gender queer and straight allies. And while I do believe that we are called to reach out to and include all queer students I should admit to you that most of what I have to say this morning has to do specifically with gay and lesbian students.

When I say "God desires us to live holy lives," I mean that I believe that we are called to be good stewards of all the gifts God has given us (which includes our sexuality), called to offer service to neighbor and the world, and, should God will it, we are also called to enter into a life-giving and sacred union with a beloved, become a family, and perhaps even have children.

Not only do I not believe that same sex behavior is a sin, I also reject any theology or methodology that suggests that homosexuality is something that needs to be "cured;" and I further believe that those who engage in any practices which produce shame or guilt in a student simply because of a homosexual orientation; those who suggest that homosexuality is by itself a bad or sinful thing are guilty of practicing what The Rev. Dr. Mel White calls "spiritual violence." (See [www.soulforce.org](http://www.soulforce.org) for more information on The Rev. Dr. Mel White and the concept of spiritual violence.)

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As recently as ten years ago - perhaps even five - queer students were off the radar screen of most campus ministries. The fact that we didn't see queer students in our ministries may have meant that they were there but we weren't paying attention (or they weren't out to us), or that they weren't there because - well - it didn't occur to us to reach out to them.

Perhaps we thought they were somehow beyond our reach or perhaps we just didn't know what to do so we left them alone to fend for themselves. Those of us who were in ministry with queer students back then had our work cut out for us, particularly with students who came from Christian backgrounds and had been told either directly or indirectly that their sexuality meant that they were outside the embrace of God.

Over the years I have sat with countless students who, once they believed that I was not going to suggest that their being gay or lesbian was a sin, tearfully talked through the

conflict that was ripping their hearts apart as they felt they had to choose between two sets of truths: the truth which they learned in their churches, and the truth which they knew about themselves.

There are still hundreds - even thousands - of students who are struggling with their sexuality and their faith. What I have noticed, however, is that these days there is a greater number of students who come to college already clear about their faith and their sexuality, and who don't feel that there is a conflict between them. What has not changed is that many of these students are still not darkening the doors of our ministries.

For some this may be a question of scheduling, for others a reflection of their grappling with the challenge of integrating faith and reason, for others it may simply be a result of apathy - but I think that it is more likely the case that, like students of color, they simply don't feel welcome.

I believe that those of us in campus ministry have a wonderful opportunity - and responsibility - to reach out to queer students. Like their peers, they are in an environment which isn't necessarily conducive to spiritual reflection - at least not in the classroom - and on many of our campuses, there is a decidedly anti-religious sentiment against which we are constantly having to provide a counter-testimony. Queer students who come from religious backgrounds share with their peers a genuine curiosity about how to put into practice the system of values they learned in their religious communities.

But whether they are from a religious tradition or not, students of all sexual orientations and gender identities go through the significant paradigm shift as the grounding of their value system shifts from being "what my parents think is right" to "what I think is right." And as far as I am concerned, these are precisely the places and conversations in which campus ministers should be involved.

I want to share with you about what I have learned from some of the queer students I have worked with about what it means to them to be religious, and how their religion affects their decision making.

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In January 2003 I was asked to be on a panel for a local TV show entitled "Different Drummers." On the whole produced by the United Methodist Church in Chicago, "Different Drummers" addresses topics of interest to high school students. The subject of the show I was invited to participate on was "dating and faith."

Knowing that the show would be taped before a live studio audience, and not wanting to abuse the privilege or surprise anyone, I responded that I would be happy to appear on the panel as long as I could address the question of dating and faith with respect to queer students. After this was approved, I sent an email to the listserv for the queer student group "Queers and Associates" at the University of Chicago and asked them to let me know if and how religion played a part in their decisions about whom they dated. What I discovered was that every response indicated that for these students, whether they considered themselves religious or not (and frankly more of them did that I'd imagined), a sense of shared values was what they considered most important when deciding with whom to be romantically involved. I'd like to share with you some of their responses.

Naomi, (All students quoted gave permission for their words to be shared; students are identified by name only if they gave specific permission to do so. Punctuation and emphasis are as written in the original emails) a Jewish lesbian who intends to study for the rabbinate, responded:

“Judaism is a huge part of my life and dictates many of the choices I make. Because of this, religion comes into play when I date someone, just as it comes into play when I’m friends with someone or when I’m making any important decision.

"Do I care about the religious affiliation of the person I'm dating? ... Yes. I care. I care because when I'm dating [someone] I care about all the details of their life. In some ways I think it might be easier for me to date someone who was active in a faith different than mine than to date someone who was an atheist. This has to do with appreciation of things as "holy", with the idea of sacred space and time, and with the ability to believe strongly in something bigger than yourself and separate from yourself... somehow, political causes, science, etc. don't seem like they provide the same sort of opportunities for inspired awe.

“Things get complicated in any relationship, and having differences of faith just gives one more way for things to get tricky. I think what really matters to me is that any person I share my life with has to believe in some sort of higher power, in holiness and in the sacred.... I can't imagine spending my whole life with someone who isn't an active participant in my religious life, but if a non-Jew were willing to go to shul with me, to keep kosher in the house with me, to raise any kids we had as Jews, and to help me celebrate holidays, I can't imagine passing her up.”

Her sentiments were shared by a lesbian from another religious tradition who wrote:

“I could never have a serious relationship with a person who did not also have at least some kind of faith, tradition, or guiding spiritual principles.... in any of my relationships of merit that have long term prospects, issues of faith are settled early on. So much of who and what I am is informed by my faith, and I need my partners to respect and understand this. My most serious relationships have always been with people who either share my beliefs or come pretty close...

“When in those rare moments I encounter someone [for] whom religious issues are not important, and when it is appropriate with respect to the state or degree of our love/friendship, I try to encourage that person to question the intellectual, moral, and personal reasons which have led them to not value the religious component in their lives, as I think all people are happier when they have at least some faith, and I believe it is my spiritual responsibility to [do this]... I am guilty of 'proselytizing' in the form of presenting challenges that may cause people to reexamine their (lack of) beliefs.

[She concluded:] “If I'm dating someone with whom I have high hopes, I make a point of having this discussion early on, soberly, and with earnestness.”

(And in case you're wondering, this student identifies herself as a pagan.)

A lesbian who grew up outside of the any religious tradition told me about what happened in her relationship with her girlfriend who was a Unitarian Universalist:

“She didn't at all fit my mental picture of a religious person but I liked her a whole heck of a lot and thought "what the hell, I'll give it a try" when she asked me to attend Church with her one Sunday morning. To my disbelief, it wasn't bad. I really enjoyed the time to consider my spirituality and felt refreshed upon leaving the temple. Instead of conformity, I found community; unlike anything I was used to in my [previous] experience. As my love for [my girlfriend] grew, so did my involvement with her Church, because that community is so much a part of her... I have joined her church, not because of her but because I have found a place for my spirituality there and become a member of a community that is full of love and growth.”

Even though they don't always make it to worship every week, she added that “we both make a space in our life for our spiritual growth and that really makes our lives and our love all the richer.”

A gay male from Georgia who came from a strong Christian fundamentalist background wrote that he

“was taught that religion was VERY important when choosing a date... that [he] was supposed to find some girl, who it was in [his] destiny (or God's plan) to marry, and she had to be a Christian.”

While this student reported that after puberty (after realizing that he was gay), he rejected his “fundamentalist upbringing” (his terms), and that therefore he believed that “religion no longer really matters... in a romantic interest,” nonetheless he wasn't willing to reject everything he grew up with. His email to me closed with the following reflection:

“...I do have faith in a lot of important things, and I suppose in that sense I could be considered “religious.” And it IS important to me that whoever I date be able to at least think seriously now and then about some of those things that have kept me lying awake at night.”

Another gay student was clear that while he didn't feel it was necessary that guys he dated share his faith, he was clear that it was important to him that his faith be respected. Like many other students who responded, he placed a high value on both partners having respect for one another's faith - or lack thereof.

Exemplifying how some students equated “religion” with “having values,” a gay student who grew up Catholic wrote that it wasn't important to him what the religion of another person was, but “it is very important that they have some sort of meaning to their life.” He went on to say:

“People have something that tells them what is right and what is wrong, whether they are part of a religion or not... It is not necessarily important that they have a specific religion, but it is important that they have a set of values that they uphold that allow them to define their lives.... If someone doesn't have values, I'm not dating them.”

And finally, I heard from both halves of a lesbian couple who wrote independently, both stating that they had no religious faith, and thought it was really important that their partner shared this outlook. Interestingly, they also both pointed out that they felt that

shared religious beliefs, or shared lack of religious beliefs, was important in a relationship, particularly if the couple wanted to have children in the future.

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There are plenty more examples; what I wanted to share with you all is that, like their peers, those queer students who are not turning away from religion are claiming it as an important aspect of who they are, and of what they want in a dating relationship. I have found, on the whole, that queer students who come from a religious background and have left their traditions behind (often because they have been rejected first) nonetheless are yearning to engage in dialogue about these issues because they recognize that the value systems that they grew up with are still really important to how they want to live their lives.

So if you believe, as I do, that our religious values are vitally important for students to thrive in all aspects of their lives, then I hope you can understand why I believe that if we do not specifically reach out to queer students in our ministries, we are missing some important opportunities to make connections with a population that is ready, willing and able to engage in the same kinds of meaningful spiritual dialogue that their non-queer peers have come to take for granted.

In order to do this, we must, we must establish ourselves as "safe." By this I mean that queer students need to know that if we invite them to participate in our ministries or programs, we are not going to ask them to stop being who they are - and again, by that I mean that we are not going to tell them that they should not be gay or lesbian or bisexual or transgendered. I don't for a minute mean to suggest that we can't engage them in the same kind of moral reflection that we expect of their non-queer peers - only that the issue of their sexuality per se is not the question.

As with other minority student populations we have to earn the trust of queer students. Even those students who are established in their faith are wary of approaching us or of joining religious groups because they are afraid they will be met not with acceptance and support, but rejection. Even with my background of activism in queer issues, I have found that it can take 2 or 3 years before queer students really believe me when I tell them that I believe that God loves them and that I don't think they have to change their sexuality.

If there is a "campus ministry tip" that I could pass on to you, it is, as with anything else when you are working with students - if you want students to trust you, show up to their events.

I usually make a point of showing up wearing my collar. Even though some students see the collar and want to flee immediately, once they realize that I am there to be supportive, rather than to change them, my self-identifying as a member of the clergy lets them know that I am there not just as a "supportive adult," but as a supportive adult who also takes her religion seriously - and therefore takes them seriously.

Like their non-queer peers, I believe that queer students are hungry for a community that will hold them to a set of values that they can live by - respect for themselves, their bodies, their friends, and their relationships. Personally, I would rather that they found this community in a campus ministry event than at the local bar.

I'll close with one more story:

About 8 years ago I gave a workshop entitled, "It's not whom we date, it's how we date." One of the participants, a student whom I call Ben (frankly I'm not sure I ever knew his name) shared his story with the group. He had grown up in a Christian family, gone to church faithfully every week and believed what he was taught there, including the "fact" that homosexuals were going to go straight to hell. When he realized that he was gay, he knew that he was doomed - and that it didn't matter what he did with his body or in his relationships. Ben confessed to us all that he began to engage in very self-destructive and unsafe sexual activities, because, as he kept repeating, "it didn't matter - I was going to hell anyway."

Then Ben met a guy I call George who was gay and had grown up in a Christian community which did not condemn homosexuals. Ben was drawn to George in part because so much of what George believed resonated deep within him - he too believed that God had created him, and loved him, that God was in charge of the world, that Jesus was his Lord and Savior, that he was placed on this earth for a reason and that the Holy Spirit was available when he needed help.

Through his friendship with George, Ben reconnected with what he felt was the best of the faith that he had grown up with - and not only did that change how he felt about himself, but it also changed how he behaved. No longer feeling that he was going to hell, Ben started taking better care of himself, stopped having anonymous sex, and reported that he had started to date a guy with whom he had decided not to have sex with right away. The two of them believed that sex was such an important and intimate part of a relationship that they wanted to wait and be sure that their relationship had a possibility of a future before making that kind of commitment to one another.

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The values that I have from my religious tradition are not simply a guide to daily living, they are, as they were in Ben's case, a matter of life and death. I encourage all of you who also believe that God loves all of God's children for who they are - no matter what their sexual orientation or gender identity - to do everything you can to connect with the queer community on your campus. They need you - and your ministry will be enriched by their presence.