Levinas and Otherwise-than-Being (Tolerant): Homosexuality and the Discourse of Tolerance

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As an ethicist who was trained in the discourse of “rights,” and as a lesbian woman whose life experience has sometimes included the denial of various rights that most of us daily take for granted, I became personally aware of the limitations of “rights language” as a satisfactory way of dealing with difference. Hence, I began to search for an alternative discourse, one that could more easily respect the “heteronomous diachrony of the other” (Peperzak). This I found in the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas, the French phenomenologist.

It was Levinas’ theory of alterity that led me to pursue a research project during the 1990s in which I studied and interviewed conservative Christians who identified with the work and mission of Focus on the Family, one of the largest and most influential of the pro-family values organizations in the United States. My research sought to locate and to understand the values conservative Christians held behind the rhetoric of “family values” (see Holland). Reading Levinas had persuaded me of the importance of exposing oneself to the encounter with the other, so for a liberal, feminist academic who is also homosexual, people in the Religious Right were very nearly as “other” as I could imagine. Thus, I blithely went out across the country and sat down, face-to-face, with dozens of conservative Christians in their living rooms, churches, and offices to find out what they meant by their commitment to family values. What I did not do—in part trying to maintain an interviewer’s distance, and in part from fear—was identify my sexual orientation. While my strategy probably maintained the integrity of the sociological study, I have since felt that it did not do justice to the full meaning of Levinas’ ethics, which drove me to the study in the first place.

So now, eight years or so after I began the family values study, I want to take some of what I learned about that family values discourse, and
some of what I have since learned about Levinas' philosophy and issue a challenge, not so much to the Christian Right, but to like-minded liberals. The challenge I raise is to the discourse of tolerance that liberals rushed to embrace as a counter to the insidiousness of "family values" rhetoric. In Levinasian terms, which I shall subsequently explain in detail, we liberals, while meaning to embrace the other and difference, have unintentionally contributed to the ontological foreclosure of the other's alterity, and in this way, ironically, we join conservatives in refusing the radical openness and exposure to profound difference that accompanies genuine encounter.

In short, my thesis is that liberals have commandeered a rhetoric of tolerance to counter the rhetoric of family values, but that tolerance, while perhaps intending a "kinder, gentler" world, simply contributes to domesticating the other, rather than allowing oneself to be confronted by the presence of radical alterity (strangeness, difference), which for Levinas is the beginning of ethics. I argue, therefore, that tolerance is not a sufficient basis for ethics and may actually bring about unintended harm. I take as my case study the discourse surrounding gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgendered (GLBT) persons in the United States, particularly the discourse coming from that peculiarity known as American middle-class morality. This discourse is linguistically signified by a phrase made (in)famous during the Clinton era with respect to gays in the military: "don't ask, don't tell." In this article, I suggest that "don't ask, don't tell" characterizes the discourse of tolerance regarding GLBT persons, not just in the military, but in our schools, in professional sports, in public policy, and in religious institutions.

Thus, I aim to show that GLBT persons in this country inherit a cultural and religious legacy of violence against their persons, their psyches, and their families, and that liberals who espouse tolerance as a social ethic are perhaps unwittingly perpetuating such a legacy of violence. Although it has its virtues, tolerance ("don't ask, don't tell") does not demand encounter with the other; thus, one of its vices is that it inherently implies there is someone who needs to be "put up with." Tolerating GLBT persons by refusing to accord to them the same basic human needs (not just rights) as heterosexual persons are accorded would be, in Levinasian terms, a refusal to respond to one's basic ethical orientation, to respond to "being faced" by the other, to whom I owe all, and for whom I am responsible, even unto death, my own death. I turn now to an exposition of Levinas' thought by way of offering a framework for the possibility of thinking beyond tolerance with this question in mind:
what are we liberals left with if tolerance really does not do justice to the other?

**Not to Have “Faced” the Other**

To begin at the beginning, for Levinas, the primordial human experience is one of simply encountering the other person in the flesh, face-to-face. This is an experience each one of us knows, from the day of one’s birth to this very day, and each day, and many times each day. How do I know myself as a self?: only in relation to the flesh-and-blood other who is always there before me, beaconing to me, eliciting from me some response. Contrary to certain streams of Western philosophical thought, Levinas does not see the face of the other as a threat to one’s own existence; rather, he holds that one’s existence is indebted to the encounter with the other. I only become myself when I find the resources to respond to the other, who always has priority over me, before me. If the primordial human experience is the encounter with the face of the other, then the primordial ethical experience is not “to be,” but “to be otherwise,” or as Levinas often remarks, “otherwise-than-being.”

At root, Levinas’ philosophy is radically opposed to the Western philosophical inheritance that emphasizes the subjectivity of the self and that the American political tradition has enshrined as negative liberty: one has the right to be protected from interference with one’s autonomous choices. An emphasis on negative liberty is what spawns libertarianism, both as a political movement and as a personal values system. That is, neither government nor individuals have the right to interfere with the exercise of my liberties. “Don’t ask, don’t tell,” for example, was conceived as a way of safeguarding basic liberty for those with so-called objectionable lifestyles.

The problem with this philosophical and political inheritance, for Levinas, is that it never moves beyond an emphasis on the needs and desires of subjectivity (selfhood), and thus the other is inevitably subsumed by this subjectivity, by the same. Whenever the other is folded back into same (self), there is no possibility for ethics; ethics is only possible when we begin “outside the subject”; in other words, we must start from the encounter with the other; we cannot start with the sovereignty of the self. Such a beginning—a bracketing of oneself, so-to-speak—is the only way not to do violence to the other, for every taking in of the other by way of the self, every reduction of alterity to same is a thematization. To thematize another is to put the other into a category, to assume a kind of knowledge or truth-claim about the other that forecloses
difference and thereby to do violence; it is, according to Levinas, to totalize the other. Indeed, to approach the other in such a way is a thematization that can lead to such ultimate expressions of totality as the Holocaust. On a smaller scale, thematization is what makes possible the continued violence against GLBT persons in the United States and elsewhere.

Not to thematize, however, is in some sense counterintuitive, for the approach most of us carry toward the other involves trying to understand the other through one’s own frame of reference, via one’s self. This, however, is precisely the movement that leads to totalizing the other and ultimately to violence. How, then, are we to resist thematizing the homosexual other through dialogue or through a gaze that says, “I will not respect your difference”? The very act of resistance to violence through passivity to the other—the ethical act—can only occur in an actual encounter with another’s face. In this encounter we come face-to-face with the hollowness of mere tolerance (active indiffrence), for the face of the other speaks to us, lays claim upon us, refuses us complacency and rest.

For each self, there is always the primordial and ongoing encounter with the concrete “face of the other.” The face, even the GLBT face, is what precedes me and calls my subjectivity into existence. I am called into the world by another and my very being is constituted “knotted through and through,” Levinas writes, as other (95). And should I ask, “where is my place under the sun?” I would be asserting the primacy of my subjectivity when, in reality, the other was already there before me, calling to me, obligating me. It is, as he says, a pre-original obligation.

The “face of the other” is what we encounter in every interaction, and every face is different from one’s own; every face contains both nakedness and destitution and says to us, “Thou shalt not kill!” We can kill, of course; the act of murder is banal. Yet, the reality of each encounter with the “face of the other” is that the encounter is asymmetrical: the other both commands me from a moral height and exposes me to his or her destitution and vulnerability.

The appearing of the face, naked, destitute before me (devoid of the mask that can be put on for social intercourse, social status), constitutes a resistance in its very appearing. It is as if, for example, the face of a homosexual person pleads to the heterosexual approaching: “do not see me as you see yourself; I am not the same. I am radically different, and if you try and absorb my difference into your sameness, you will have done an extreme violence.” In a very real sense, then, every face I encounter
contains both appeal and accusation. I am accused and guilty before it, or, as Levinas says, “responsible for its very responsibility” (Otherwise 96). When I encounter the face of the other, it is vulnerable before me, destitute—and yet, it contains a height, an uprightness that opposes my indifference, my autonomy. Each face, radically other, Levinas tells us, contains the trace, the “trace of Infinity,” of the “wholly other,” of God. That would be so, of course, for each gay, lesbian, or transgendered face one meets.

That is why, phenomenologically, each encounter with “the face” is the ethical moment par excellence; it is the reason subjectivity can only exist “outside the subject,” dis-interested—that is, otherwise-than-being. For Levinas, the self is not even constituted as self until the moment when he or she finds the resources to answer the call; to say, me voici, “Here I am!” (89). This is the primordial moment, the primordial call, but even this is not yet ethics. As Levinas puts it, “Ethics is when I not only do not thematize another; it is when another obsesses me or puts me in question. This putting in question does not expect that I respond; it is not a question of giving a response, but of finding oneself responsible” (99). Levinas is spare and unequivocal in his description: answering the call (the vocative) is not enough, which is to say that response is required but is not sufficient; no, one must find oneself responsible, held hostage. It is a condition of responsibility prior to all essence; one does answer the call, but one is compelled to do so. First, however, one “finds oneself responsible.” Most unsettling, it is never possible to say, “I have done enough; no more is required of me.” Such an ethic serves to highlight one of the limitations of the discourse of tolerance. It is as though in espousing tolerance we are somehow let “off the hook.” If I embrace the rhetoric of tolerance, then by liberal standards I will have done what is required of me; I will have shown that I am ethical. If, for Levinas, this is not ethics, what is?

An Ethic of Responsibility
Since Levinas’ ethics pivots on the appearance of the face—a concrete encounter with the other that is also a profoundly religious experience—I suggest we take a moment to consider whether we have ever allowed ourselves to be “faced” by a gay or lesbian or transgendered other, and if we have, what follows, phenomenologically, from the encounter. My contention is that it is the rare critic of the GLBT person who has actually responded to the pre-original obligation of the other with the “me voici” (“here I am”) that constitutes Levinas’ otherwise-than-being, or ethics.
The face I propose we summon—and this is an exercise we can only engage in imaginatively at the moment, and hence is not an actual Levinasian encounter—appeared on the cover of the *New York Times Magazine* two summers ago (see France). The cover showed us a woman with long, blonde hair and soft, feminine features. The eyes seemed to convey both sadness and appeal. The face I am attempting to describe (although Levinas says that “access to the face is straightaway ethical” so that one should not engage in studying it) is Calpernia Addams, a Nashville pre-operative male-to-female transsexual. Addams became known to us as the former lover of Army Private Barry Winchell, who was bludgeoned to death in his bunk at Fort Campbell, Kentucky, a story to which I shall subsequently return.

Addams, whose face is feminine and unassuming, is the kind of person whose difference makes even the most liberal of liberals squirm. “Legally she is a man. By accident of finances, she remains genitally male,” and yet to outward appearances she “presents” as a soft and lovely female (France 26). When Winchell and Addams went out as a couple, “they were not wholly straight or acceptably gay. Rather, they occupied a rare middle ground encompassing both, and neither: socially heterosexual, sexually homosexual, uncomfortably on the margins of all worlds” (26). The refusal to conform, the slipperiness of identity, and the willingness to live at the margins that is represented by someone like Calpernia Addams constitutes an example of radical heteronomy that shatters the autonomous sovereignty of the subject—in Levinas’ terms, the oneself—who encounters her. It is, at the least, uncomfortable, but more than this, such an encounter forms the basis for all ethics, an ethics both transcendent to and preceding tolerance. And yet it is possible to violate the ethical encounter with the face as even gay/lesbian activists did in publicly construing Addams’ identity as male, thus thematizing her. This narrative is one I will complete subsequently.

The “original ethical relation,” Levinas claims, is precisely in my responsibility for the other, not in assuming a relationship of reciprocity, for this only leads back to same; it is always self-referential. Instead, “That responsibility is elicited, brought about by the face of the other person, described as a breaking of the plastic forms of the phenomenality of appearance: straightforwardness of the exposure to death, and an order issued to me not to abandon the other (the Word of God)” (“Apropos” 44). Ironically, the self is central in this ethical relation of pre-original responsibility, but it is not the centrality of subjectivity; it is the centrality of substitution that makes ethics possible.
Substitution, almost ironically, is Levinas' term for explaining that which cannot be escaped. I am commanded, as he says, “not to abandon the other,” and I, alone, must take up this responsibility; no one can substitute for me. In this sense, I am thoroughly a hostage to the other; it is a condition not of my choosing, but of having been chosen, of the “ineradicable centrality of the I—of the I not leaving its first person—that signifies the unlimited nature of that responsibility for the neighbor: I am never absolved with respect to others” (44). This is the sense in which the oneself is primary; it is a primacy “of the I not leaving its first person”; it is, he says, “the ‘first person accusative’ and not the ‘nominative’” (44).

Levinas uses a paradoxical phrase to describe the nature of this “original ethical relation.” He calls it “gratuitous responsibility,” as though the one being held hostage—the I—is in a state of gratitude for having been claimed. He writes,

Responsibility for the other person, a responsibility neither conditioned nor measured by any free acts of which it would be the consequence. Gratuitous responsibility resembling that of a hostage, and going as far as taking the other’s place, without requiring reciprocity. Foundation of the ideas of fraternity and expiation for the other man. Here, then . . . there is no initial equality. . . . Ethical inequality: subordination to the other . . . . Hence the truth of Dostoyevsky’s *Brothers Karamazov*, often quoted: “We are all guilty of everything and everyone, towards everyone, and I more so than all the others” (44).

This is what is meant by the pre-original condition of responsibility: I am born into such a state, whether accepting it or not, whether wanting it or not. I am imbued with responsibility for the other and no one can take my place in this. Indeed, this is the very origin of ethics. That we are “all guilty of everything and everyone . . . and I more so than all the others” is utterly foreign to the liberal discourse of tolerance, which instead eschews the concept of guilt and makes a virtue of indifference.

In a sense, for Levinas, the gratuitous responsibility of substitution is how one acts ethically. My subjectivity (or selfhood) implies *sub-jectum*: in responsibility I stand below the other, bearing the other up, bearing the weight of the world, breathing for the other, taking “the bread out of one’s own mouth, to nourish the hunger of another with one’s own fasting” (56). No one can do this for me; I may take another’s place, but no one may take mine. Thus, against deep-rooted Western notions of freedom and autonomy, Levinas posits the self that is not free except insofar as it is “for another.” Here, subjectivity is sacred, not in its freedom, but in its
captivity. "It is sacred in its alterity," he writes, "with respect to which . . . I posit myself deposed of my sovereignty. Paradoxically it is qua alienus—foreigner and other—that man is not alienated" (59). Taking responsibility for the stranger’s difference (the face of Calpernia Addams, for example) is the way in which I come to be a self; it is the meaning of liberty and the exercise of ethics.

There is a radical challenge here for the person who encounters the GLBT other, but approaches this "foreigner" from the perspective of the "for oneself," the same. As I have said, what is required in the encounter is that "I posit myself deposed of my sovereignty," for it is precisely my sovereignty as an I that precludes the ethical relation with the other. Paradoxically, it is only in finding that I am held hostage to the one whom I have feared or despised, or never looked upon—perhaps the one I simply "put up with"—that I am free to become a self. It is, Levinas says, the little we have, the "after you, sir," that makes ethics possible.

The Saying and the Said
In the encounter with the other, speech or discourse plays an important part in Levinas’ thinking about responsibility and alterity. Speech, the realm of "saying," as he calls it, is the openness to the heteronomy of the other that might shatter the sovereignty of my egoism; it is the place of vulnerability and hence of openness. Paradoxically, every saying brings with it a said, a foreclosure of the other, a thematization, and for Levinas a violence. The said belongs to the realm of ontology, egoism, philosophy. Yet, the said is where we begin; it is where we find ourselves. The discourse of tolerance as a domesticating discourse belongs to the realm of the said. Since tolerance does not demand a decentering of my egoicity, it instead permits the self to be the sole measure of the other's worth. In other words, I judge that you are worth being tolerated. For Levinas, this is precisely the move that thematizes and is at the root of violence against the other’s alterity.

Yet, there is hope, for every said can be un-said. Just as every saying carries a said, every said bears and un-saying. Adriaan Peperzak, explaining this point, tells us that "All thematizing discourse converts itself, as soon as it has been uttered, in a ‘said’ that obeys the constraints of a constellation in which objectification, universalization, representation . . . dominate its thought. It is not possible to destroy that constellation completely. . . . It is, however, possible—and this is what Levinas tries to do—to speak and to write in such a way that our said itself eases our transcending it toward another invisible and incomprehensible di-
dimension from the perspective of which the meaning of all the said is revealed to be relative only” (37–38). This sense of incompletion and of irresolution is both the crisis and the hope contained in Levinas’ sense of the said and the saying. There is, in the encounter with the other, in the discourse that commences, a constant inadequacy of any stance on truth and being, and this is so not for epistemological reasons but for interpersonal or intersubjective reasons. The other reveals to me the relativity of my perspective, the relativity of the truth of my said. Of course, the other does not expose the relativity of my said if I foreclose exposure to the other’s face in all its dismaying heteronomy.

In short, there is no stable, knowable reality, and, in a sense, sexuality brings this “reality” to the fore perhaps more acutely than anything else does. It is part of our discomfort with Calpernia Addams and with the ambiguous relationship she shared with Barry Winchell, as I have suggested. For Levinas, there is always heteronomy in its radical alterity, “the essential exposure to the other without which there would be neither utterance nor meaning” (Davis 75). The saying then is the site where my exposure to the other takes place, if you will; the place or utopia (literally, no-place) as Levinas says, where the Infinite is sought. The relation of speaking is what keeps us from reducing speech to an object or a theme that categorizes, totalizes. In this sense, the saying is what makes ethics possible for it, “like the other, can only be violated by discourses which implicitly or overtly seek authority over it” (76). Those would be totalizing discourses—such as, “don’t ask, don’t tell,” which seeks to foreclose all saying, all exposure to the other. That is why I maintain that the discourse of tolerance belongs to the realm of the said, just as does the discourse of intolerance. “It is surely possible” Peperzak writes, “to talk to a speaker in order to reach him/her through language, but that by which the other is someone evaporates as soon as my language thematizes the utterance of a speech” (29).

What we can see, however, is that there is nothing neat and clean about these two realms of saying and said. Each presupposes and necessitates the other. Levinas does not call for the removal of all subjectivity in the face of the other; rather, he posits the subject as essential in its exposure to the other. This is the necessary precondition for ethics, and for all discourse that seeks the saying, or to un-say the said. If one were to experience saying without the said, it would be, as Levinas insists, the recognition of a debt that can only be claimed when one achieves “the conditions of communication in the ‘risky uncovering of oneself . . . in the breaking up of inwardness . . . in exposure to traumas,
in vulnerability” (Davis 78; Levinas, Otherwise 48). Saying is discourse, is communication, “but as a condition for all communication, as exposure.” It is “prior to objectification” (48). It is the meaning of disinterestedness, but not in the sense of the indifference that tolerance fosters in a middle-class libertarian world. For Levinas, saying is literally dis-interestedness, in which the ego is de-posed and de-situated.

But as I have said, here is the hope. Levinas’ ethics is not prescriptive, but descriptive. This is how one encounters difference in the other and it is “an interminable work of self-correction, a diachronical saying, saying again, leaving all syntheses behind in a success of dictions and contradictions without end” (Peperzak 37). The struggle to continue to say, or to continue to un-say the said, is this work of self-correction, of “dictions and contradictions without end,” and it constitutes the hopefulness of postmodern attempts at ethics, and Levinas is no exception in this regard.

Hence, we discover something that an ethic of tolerance, however well intended, cannot give. Levinas’ ethic of responsibility for the other, his insistence on attempting the saying and on un-saying the said, and the vulnerability of the subject in its encounter with the face of the other—all of this points us toward a continual openness to genuine respect for heteronomy. It points us toward le prochain, as Levinas says in French, the neighbor whose radical alterity knocks me hopelessly off balance. It is a position that is necessary for ethics, and one that the discourse of middle-class tolerance cannot accommodate, as the following cultural analysis reveals.

**Middle-Class Morality and the Value of Tolerance**

A few years ago, sociologist Alan Wolfe released the results of an important ethnographic study of middle-class Americans. His research project, known as the Middle Class Morality Project, attempted to “measure” whether the American middle class is divided on moral and political issues, or if, in fact, there is something tangible to the homogenous notion of “middle-class morality.” What Wolfe found, overall, is that the American middle class is not engaged in a great “culture war,” a highly-touted phrase that was perhaps overused in the 1990s. Instead, his findings revealed that middle-class Americans, conservatives and liberals (despite their differences), hold two things in common: they value moderation and they value tolerance. But, as Wolfe notes, middle-class Americans cannot always have it both ways, for these values—what he terms the “two ‘default’ moral positions” of these
Americans—will ultimately come into conflict (72). Homosexuality, he found, is the ground of that conflict.²

In fact, among all the issues Wolfe sought to measure, only homosexuality caused these Americans, both liberals and conservatives, to abandon their bedrock moral principles of moderation and tolerance.³ Unfortunately, the history of their responses to GLBT persons bears this out, in both the religious and the secular arenas, as the following data indicate:

- Seventy percent of Americans, for example “believe that sexual relations between members of the same sex is wrong.”

- Sixty-five percent of Americans oppose the right of gays to marry, as opposed to only twenty-eight percent who are in favor.

- With respect to the issue of the ideal family, over eighty percent of Americans surveyed [Roper] “recognize an unwed or divorced mother living with children as a family, but only between twenty percent and thirty percent recognize gay couples with children or unrelated adults as a family.” (74, 81, 103)

Asking his respondents their opinions about teaching respect for homosexuals in schools, Wolfe found that responses existed on a kind of continuum ranging from “positive” tolerance of homosexuals on the one end, to “negative” tolerance on the other end, and “tolerance without condoning” occupying the middle ground. Here he means to indicate the difference between “negative” liberty and “positive” liberty—that is, the distinction between “respect for privacy and respect for what takes place in private,” and whether one would go so far as to say that “homosexuals are deserving of respect as homosexuals” (74–75). For example, while a majority of Americans think that homosexuals should have the right to teach at the university level, they do not see this opinion as condoning homosexuality, and, as such, this would be an example of a negative liberty view, or “tolerance without condoning.”

It is not surprising then, that on the question of whether middle-class Americans condemned gays or whether they sought positive acceptance of them, Wolfe found that

The distribution of opinion on the ends of the bell curve is not even close to being equal: nearly three times as many respondents condemned homosexuality as accepted it. . . . The best that can be said is that support for public acceptance of homosexuality is negative rather than positive,

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rooted in a libertarian appreciation of privacy than in active acceptance of homosexuality per se. (76–77)

To recap: the best that can be said is that support is negative, meaning that middle-class Americans, liberals and conservatives, generally recognize and support the view that one has a basic right to privacy, to carry on one’s life in private, as long as it doesn’t interfere with anyone else’s life—“don’t ask, don’t tell.” Again, this reflects a libertarian, negative liberty view and one also recognizes it as part of the discourse of tolerance. But on the issue of homosexuality such a view does not entail the concomitant positive right to carry out one’s life for who one is in public, if one happens to be gay. It is a very “un-Levinasian” position.

Secular Discourse
In order to ascertain just how this rhetoric of “don’t ask, don’t tell” plays itself out in public discourse, I begin with an example from professional sports. An illustration of the negative liberty view on the tolerance continuum appeared recently on the sports pages of the New York Times. In a regular column, “Sports of The Times,” sportswriter Ira Berkow opined that the lesbian fans of New York’s W.N.B.A. team, the Liberty, were going too far in staging a “timeout kiss-in” during a nationally televised basketball game in which the Liberty played the Miami Sol. Apparently, a group called Lesbians for Liberty staged the kiss-in to protest, by way of forced visual recognition, that thirty percent of ticket holders are lesbians, who are tired of being kept in the proverbial closet regarding their presence and economic support of the team. Berkow’s disagreement with the tactics of Lesbians for Liberty is a characteristic display of middle-class tolerance. He writes, “Your own personal or private business is your own. Lead any life you like, as long as I can lead mine, and you don’t try to foist yours on me. A good citizen is a good citizen, regardless of age, ethnicity or sexual orientation.”

Evidently, the Lesbians for Liberty were objectionable because they tried to foist their lives on Berkow and other heterosexuals who were watching the game. Using a classic rhetorical signifier of middle-class tolerance, Berkow explains that he doesn’t have anything against lesbians or gays, nor does he think they should be discriminated against in professional sports. But then Berkow closes his column with the thought that
Sex does sell, however, even in sports. Which is why members of the women's golf and tennis tours, for example, have sold calendars prettifying their athletes.

When you saw Greg Louganis dive, you thought, great dive, not great gay dive. And when you see a W.N.B.A. point guard make a spectacular drive, you don't think, great gay drive.

Who cares? Who needs to?

The "prettification" of female sports professionals, particularly in golf and basketball, is a well-known tactic employed by marketers of those tours to make sure that the players conform to a female identity (a particular kind of face) with which viewers are comfortable—an identity replete with heterosexual signifiers. Berkow wishes to be seen as tolerant of lesbians, and yet his discourse clearly signifies both the limits of his tolerance (as long as they don't foist their lives on the rest of us), and a preference for what is clearly better (heterosexual women, or at least women who look the part). In Levinas' terms, Berkow's discourse belongs to the realm of the said—thematizing the lesbian other and foreclosing difference through an ethic of tolerance that instead subsumes difference into a comfort zone of the self's own making.

Another site where the discourse of tolerance plays itself out is in American education. Schools have long been a battleground for issues of sexuality and parental control, and, perhaps because of this, "don't ask, don't tell" has become a de facto policy in educational institutions. It is at least the code in which GLBT students and teachers attempt to exist, and the code that liberal educators abide by as a form of instantiated tolerance.

During the 1990s, conservative Christians traveling under the rhetorical banner of "family values" were able to influence much of the sexuality curriculum in schools across the country. Abstinence-based education became a sort of rallying cry for pro-family values parents, teachers, and school board members as the Christian Right made gains in school board elections at grassroots levels. A trip to the Focus on the Family web site, or that of its policy affiliate, Family Research Council, shows the inquirer where to go for abstinence-based educational resources, which school districts and Congress persons can be counted on as allies; how to get the abstinence pledge to your child, and so on. Related issues for these pro-family values advocates are often expressed in the rhetoric of multiculturalism and homosexuality, with the former often used as code for the latter. Claiming that parental control over what
children learn about sexuality is a basic right of parents, conservative Christians in many places succeeded in eliminating curricular materials on HIV education, condom use, and homosexuality.

On the one hand, the success of the Right opened up a window of resistance for liberals and progressives who fought back against a narrowing of the allowable bounds of discourse in the classroom. On the other hand, the initial conservative backlash rhetoric seems to have spawned an increase in violence against GLBT students and increased scrutiny of educators sympathetic to the curricular and co-curricular needs of such students:

> Although there are an estimated 2.9 million gay and lesbian adolescents in the United States, many schools—uncomfortable with the issue or unaware of the extent of the abuse—have been slow to include 'sexual orientation' in their anti-discrimination policies. For homosexual students, that omission has transformed schools from institutions of learning to places where verbal harassment, beatings and even rape are all too common. (Reese 6)

John Anderson makes a distinction between the attitudes of educational administrators and teachers as to whether problems for sexual minorities in schools are perceived and dealt with. Administrators more often deny problems exist, claiming that programs are already in place to address the difficulties faced by GLBT students, while teachers are more likely to demand action (65–67). Despite the documented discrimination faced by GLBT students, both anecdotal and statistical (see Anderson; Reese; Rofes), comparatively little is done to educate about sexual identity discrimination, or to foster safe learning environments for affected students. The problem, however, runs throughout the educational system and is by no means limited to pre-collegiate education.

Even in collegiate and post-collegiate education courses, little attention is paid to GLBT issues, despite an emphasis on the merits of multicultural education. Most first-year composition texts, for example, pay scant attention to homosexuality, if at all; the same is true of most undergraduate anthologies of multiculturalism. In a survey of middle school teachers in Colorado, Norma Bailey discovered that "about 65 percent had never taken a course at the undergraduate or graduate level that included information about homosexuality and about 82 percent had never participated in a professional development session on the topic" (qtd. in Reese 7). In my own university, I informally inquired of education
school colleagues whom I view as progressive educators and found that none of them has made use of Debra Chasnoff and Helen Cohen's award-winning documentary, "It's Elementary, Talking About Gay Issues in Schools." Few had even seen it. Can educators learn to deal appropriately with the reality of GLBT students in their classrooms if they aren't educated about that reality in colleges and schools of education? Teaching tolerance is a good thing, surely, but is it transformative? Does it provide an opening to the real-life encounter with the GLBT other, or does it in the end serve the interests of middle-class morality by domest icating the other, rather than an exposure that demands, in Levinas' terms, responsibility for the other's radical difference?

Since it is common to regard the classroom as a building-block experience for life beyond its walls, if the reality of the GLBT other is not really dealt with in our classrooms, we should not at all be dismayed by the problems that "don't ask, don't tell" discourse has created for homosexuals in the military. One does not typically associate tolerance with the military, and on some level there are no pretenses about fostering a climate of middle-class values in the U.S. Armed Forces. However, Clinton's legacy of "don't ask, don't tell," now the official policy for dealing with homosexuals in the military, was sold to the public and to Congress by using the discourse of tolerance and fairness. It appears that such discourse has actually served to heighten violence against gay and lesbian persons, which is on the rise in both civil and military society. This is the case despite a rather more hopeful Harris poll indicating that fifty-six percent of Americans favor legislation opposing discrimination against gays. And yet, Americans remain opposed to altering the military codes to allow gays to serve openly in the military without fear of retaliation.

Pursuant to the 1999 brutal murder of gay Army Private Barry Winchell, bludgeoned to death in his sleep with a baseball bat by a fellow-soldier who did not like the fact that Winchell was gay, a Pentagon survey on harassment of gays in the military revealed that "offensive comments [against gays] were commonplace and a majority believed they were tolerated to some extent.... [And] 73 percent of respondents who said that a senior person had witnessed the harassment reported that the senior person did nothing to immediately stop the harassment" ("Conclusion"). This was the case, in spite of the "don't ask, don't tell" policy that is supposed to keep such activity from occurring in the first place. In fact, the New York Times subsequently reported that "A new [Army] report has exonerated all officers of blame in the murder of Pfc. Barry Winchell and
has concluded that no climate of homophobia exists at the base,” Fort
Campbell, Kentucky (“Report”). It seems clear that “don’t ask, don’t
tell,” despite the fact that it was meant to foster a climate of tolerance of
for gays in the military, is an abysmal failure on its own terms. In Levinas’
terms, it is a clear refusal to accept the fact of finding oneself responsible
for the other, whose difference claims me, and necessarily displaces the
sovereignty of my egoicity.

Lest the reader think that I am picking on well-meaning heterosexuals,
neither are gay-rights advocates immune from the critique of toler­
ance that I have been leveling against the heterosexual middle class.
Private Winchell’s lover, a pre-operative male-to-female transsexual (the
same Calpernia Addams introduced earlier in this article) was the subject
over whom Winchell’s own subjectivity was called into question. It was
his relationship with Addams that eventually brought about his murder.
When the publicity surrounding Winchell’s murder became something of
a cause célèbre for gay rights activists—a Matthew Shepard-type oppor­
tunity for education and fund-raising—attorneys for the Service-Mem­
bers Legal Defense Network (SLDN) approached Addams and suggested
that she convey to reporters, “for the sake of clarity,” that she is a he.
Rhonda White, co-director of Nashville’s Lesbian and Gay Coalition for
Justice, recalls the visit for a New York Times writer. “Barry was dating
an anatomical male,” White says. “How can you say he was gay-bashed
if he was dating a woman, you know?” (qtd. in France 26).

The rhetoric used here by gay activists betrayed the perceived
discomfort with Addams, a self-identified “transgendered woman,” and
the mainstream homosexual community, for whom liberal tolerance
evidently goes only so far. Speaking for gay-lesbian persons, Kathi
Westcott, the SLDN staff attorney, said, “A lot of people just don’t get
that this woman—tall, lovely, beautiful—has male parts. . . . It was a
difficult connection for people to make, even in the gay community” (26).
The reality that unfolded from these supposedly most tolerant of activ­
ists—the use of the male pronoun to describe Winchell’s boyfriend in all
media accounts—had the effect of obscuring Addams’ chosen identity
and of “domesticating” her difference for the sake of the movement. After
all, it was reasoned that a case against gay bashing could not be marshaled
if the couple were not understood to be two homosexuals.

This is a case-in-point example of Levinas’ meaning of thematizing
the other and the violence to which it leads. The denial of Addams’ own
difference is another example of the usurpation of ethics. In the conve­
sation that Westcott had with Addams, Westcott might have maintained
a "saying," allowing Addams to claim the terms of the encounter. Instead, Westcott appears to have relegated the entire exposure to Addams to the totalizing place of the said, wiping out all difference because alterity brought discomfort. The face-to-face encounter is one in which we realize, perhaps for the first time, that we are being asked to resist the urge to make this face conform to our own image, not to do violence by thematizing the other. This is something that liberal, tolerant gay activists did not do in this instance. In fact, they expressly attempted to mold Addams’ "face" into that of a heterosexual male and in doing so, thematized her in a way that did violence to the alterity she had fought so hard to affirm.

Readers of JAC will recall that in Olson and Worsham’s recent interview with Judith Butler, Butler addresses the reigning middle-class morality in the gay movement and its foreclosure of difference with regard to Addams:

The problem is that among that kind of bourgeois politics—and it is an intensely bourgeois politics that has taken over the gay movement—the point is to get good-looking people on television who say.... "I'm an identity that needs to be included within American pluralism...."

So we’re talking about a speech act that again and again runs up against a refusal to accept its claim. What’s most painful in the Barry Winchell story is that the very activists whom one might expect to be trying to produce a world in which this woman’s speech act would be accepted are in fact denying her, undermining her, violating her. (754–55).

It is indeed ironic that the very movement that aims to have middle-class Americans embrace the identity of their gay or lesbian neighbors next door, turns its own discourse of tolerance against the kind of heteronomy that poses a threat to homosexual subjectivity.

It is convenient to find, in the Army or elsewhere, that no climate of homophobia exists regarding homosexuals. But any gay or lesbian person in America knows differently. While it would seem that the irrational fear of the same-sex other, homophobia, is at the root of the kinds of schizophrenic public policies that are denying basic human needs such as housing, job protection, and bodily integrity to GLBT persons, I argue that it is also the case that a liberal rhetoric of tolerance can contribute to a climate in which the other is never really seen, never really heard. And people like Addams, whose identity is more fluid than fixity allows—such persons know most deeply the alienation and discrimination that accompanies our refusal to be exposed to alterity. As I have maintained
throughout, the discourse of tolerance contributes to a climate in which the other is domesticated and rendered invisible, while it simultaneously increases the comfort level of all those who are squeamish about difference. The Christian churches in America are especially complicit in perpetuating this bias in favor of homogeneity and against radical heteronomy.

**Religious Discourse**

While middle-class Americans might feel that tolerance is a bedrock moral value, except when it pertains to homosexuality, these Americans do evidence nuances of opinion as seen in gradual shifts in voter attitudes about, for example, whether sexual orientation deserves legal protection against discrimination—as race, gender, and religion do. There are few such nuances, however, in official denominational statements on homosexuality. Official denominational statements almost make a virtue of the "don't ask, don't tell" position.

Of the major Protestant denominations in the United States—those representing "mainline" Christianity—only one, the United Church of Christ, approves of having clergy officiate at same-gender unions. Three of the largest Protestant denominations—Methodist, Episcopal, Presbyterian—faced contentious debate in recent years over the place of homosexuals in the life of the church, and in each case, the battle seemed to have been fought over a hermeneutical distinction: how one chooses to read the biblical text matters, as it does with all texts. In all three denominations, a particular reading of Scripture prevailed—that homosexual acts are sinful, leading the church to conclude that it cannot approve of same-sex marriage. The proper state for the homosexual Christian is one of repentance and celibacy, and yet, these denominations really do see themselves as being tolerant of homosexual church members.

While America's largest religious denomination, the Roman Catholic Church, has had no church-wide meetings on the issue—its polity makes such events rare—Pope John Paul II was quick to reiterate the church's official position on homosexuality in the light of the World Gay Pride festival that was timed to coincide with the 2000 Holy Year of the Roman Catholic Church. Newspapers were filled with accounts of the Pope declaring his "bitterness" over the gay event, which he considered an affront to Christian values. The Pope spoke out against the World Pride event, stating that "homosexual acts go against the natural law" (qtd. in Stanley). Referring to the Catholic Catechism (sect. 2358), John Paul
Suzanne Holland

said, "This inclination, which is objectively disordered, constitutes for most of them a trial" but they "should be accepted with respect, compassion, and sensitivity" (qtd. in Harvey).

It did not seem to be respectful, however, when official Vatican spokesman, Joaquin Navarro-Valls gave an interview in which he attempted to address the problem of the sexual abuse of minors by priests by linking pedophilia and homosexuality. Navarro-Valls "was quoted questioning whether the ordination of gays was valid" as a consequence of the huge number of abuses that came to light during the first six months of 2002 (Tagliabue). This rhetorical slippage between homosexuality and pedophilia was also made by the head of the United States Catholic Bishops, Bishop Wilton Gregory, who, when asked about the cause of the huge numbers of abuses of children and teenagers by priests, said, "This is an ongoing struggle. It is most importantly a struggle to make sure that the Catholic priesthood is not dominated by homosexual men" (qtd. in Meacham 23). The rhetorical linkage suggested by eliding homosexuality and child abuse goes quite a long way toward planting that association in the minds of church adherents, and perhaps in the minds of the reading public.

It is a discourse that betrays the tolerance the church claims to advocate, and it is a discourse that is consistent with Levinas’ point that every said thematizes and totalizes. Such discourse belongs to the realm of the said, rather than the saying. Every said bears an un-saying, however, and this is what actually happened to the Catholic bishops when confronted with the face-to-face encounters of those who expressed chagrin and anger over the perniciousness of such associations. In the end, the bishops withdrew all such references in their official document on the abuse scandals. Despite this un-saying, the Catholic Church (consistent with the American mainline Protestant denominations) still affirms a rhetorical distinction between homosexual acts, which are "objectively disordered," and homosexual persons, who, as celibate persons, deserve respect and human dignity. Such a distinction has come to be known as the "love the sinner, hate the sin" distinction.

In one example of the rhetoric of dissent against this kind of thematizing, Richard Ostling reports that "Dramatizing the most divisive issue in American religion, 850 mostly liberal members of the clergy and other religious figures issued a declaration . . . urging all faiths to bless same-sex couples and allow openly gay ministers." Perhaps these Christians act today as a kind of "confessing church," of the kind that Dietrich Bonhoeffer urged upon us during the days of National Socialism in
Germany. Surely a kind of confessing church is needed when, for example, Christians picket the funeral of young Matthew Shepard, the college student who, in 1998, was tortured and strung up on a Wyoming fence post and left to die because he was gay. The same Christians—members of a Baptist church in Topeka, Kansas—who carried placards proclaiming to Shepard’s grieving parents that the Bible condemns their son to the fires of hell, also have a Web site with the URL: godhatesfags.com. Another group of Christians, The Roman Catholic Faithful, have a Web site that keeps track of homosexual priests, even invading their email exchanges and reprinting those emails over the Web, in the name of Catholic values.

Newspaper columnist, Frank Rich, chided the evangelical Christian lobbying organization, Family Research Council, for fueling the flames of anti-gay rhetoric and hate by launching a (short-lived) television ad campaign designed to show that homosexuals can be converted to heterosexuality. As the ads proclaimed, change can happen “through the power of Jesus Christ: It’s not about hate. . . . It’s about hope.” It is about hate, Rich says, “if you wage a well-financed media air war in which people with an innate difference in sexual orientation are ceaselessly branded as sinful and diseased and un-American seekers of ‘special rights,’ ground war will follow. It’s a story as old as history.” Click on the Web site of the Family Research Council, by the way, and you will find rhetorical evidence for Rich’s argument. When FRC proclaims that it is ready to “wage war against the homosexual agenda and fight to maintain the traditional meaning of ‘family,’” it is not just evidence to support Rich’s argument, but Wolfe’s, as well: for middle-class morality in America, tolerant to a fault, acceptance of homosexuality is where tolerance as a principle breaks down. Non-heterosexual persons might well be suspicious of Christians offering them “love” in exchange for repentance from their “sin.” While “love the sinner, hate the sin” is often employed as a discourse of tolerance for Christians, in fact it belongs to the totalizing realm of the said, where the other is thematized, domesticated, and made invisible.

In contrast, when one finds oneself responsible and utters the “here I am” that accompanies responsibility, then to put it in religious terms (as Levinas sometimes does) this is itself testimony to “the revelation that comes from outside, from elsewhere, from otherwise than my being. . . . [It is] a testimony to the voice of the other that commands from beyond. For Levinas, this is Revelation, and this is ‘how God comes to mind’” (Veling 281). God “comes to mind” in the “face of the other” and in the
condition of being held hostage by the other, quite outside-the-subject. When we find that we are, as indeed we are, “faced” by the other, we must allow ourselves to be “faced,” for it is here that Revelation comes to pierce our subjectivity. Turning toward the other, being faced, is what is required for ethics. If the face contains the “trace of the Infinite,” then it is also God who calls to me in the most vulnerable, the destitute; it is God who identifies with that which is radically other than oneself. The connection Levinas makes between the face, Infinity, and God betrays his Jewishness, and yet it seems to me that such a connection might be a fruitful one for Christians who find themselves using the rhetoric of tolerance (or worse) with regard to the place of homosexuals in the church.

Every encounter means that one can find oneself in a position of responsibility for the other, the stranger, finding “in his face that asks for me, unexceptionally a face turned toward me and putting me in question.” This is a deeply religious encounter; it is how “‘God’ comes to mind” (Levinas, *Of God* 168). My response as responsibility to the radical alterity of the other is literally a testimony to “a God who loves the stranger who puts me in question by his demand, and to which my ‘here I am’ bears witness…” (167). This is not a game; not a matter of semantics or of psychology. No, it is the very way in which “the Infinite comes to pass, signifying through him to whom it signifies, understood insofar as, before any engagement, I respond for the other” (75). To take my place before the other who calls to me, obligates me (and only me) is to decenter myself, as it were, so to avoid a violence prior to all violence—thematizing the other:

The infinite is not “in front of” me; it is I who express it, but I do so precisely in giving a sign of the giving of signs, of the “for-the-other” in which I am dis-interested: here I am [*me voici*]. A marvelous accusative: here I am under your gaze, obliged to you, your servant. In the name of God. Without thematization! (75)

Think of it: to be “for the other,” the despised and feared other is the most profoundly religious of all responses, and the beginning of all ethics. That is why “The religious discourse prior to all religious discourse is not dialogue” (75). Such dialogue only thematizes and belongs to the realm of the said, as the evidence presented earlier in this paper shows. For Levinas, the religious discourse (and the ethical discourse) begins in the “here I am,” the said that bears a saying—the response to the call of the other who is not like me. “It is the ‘here I am,’ said to the neighbor to whom
I am given over, and in which I announce peace, that is, my responsibility for the other" (75). What would happen if each of us were to experience "being faced," instead of the self-righteousness of "facing being"?

A Final Word
I find that I have come full circle in the writing of this article, for the question I just posed is one that I realize I was not able to answer eight years ago when I interviewed conservative Christians about family values. I am not sure that I have an answer for it today, but writing this article has left me with the following realizations. First, it seems important to interrogate and to disturb the complacency of whatever regnant theories and discourses we have come to accept as normative or even sufficient explanations for the way we see the world, especially the way we think we see the other. In Levinasian terms, this is to interrogate the said; to open a space for the saying. I have meant, not so much to be critical of the discourse of middle-class tolerance, as to interrogate our acceptance of it as a sufficient way of approaching and dealing with difference. In doing so, I have also meant to interrogate myself.

Second, I am aware that the reader may be wondering at this point something like, "Well, what does she want me to do if I’m supposed to let go of tolerance?" I do not have a concrete answer, although I used to. I have finally managed to understand that Levinas’ writing, which disturbs me so much, is not meant to be used in prescriptive ways. Therefore, it won’t do for me to answer the question by telling the reader that he or she ought to stop espousing tolerance and start taking responsibility for the other, à la Levinas’ responsibility ethics. To be true to what this unusual philosopher is telling us, I think, means that we begin by paying attention to the kinds of encounters we have with the other; we begin with the encounter itself as exposure to difference, and we allow ourselves to be knocked off-center. In some ways, it is an ethics of encounter that Levinas commends to us. For this task, there are no prescriptions—only the disconcerting, disarming, disturbing exposure to the face of the one to whom I owe everything, even the condition of being a self at all. Of course, we can refuse this ethics of encounter, but the face of the lesbian or gay or bisexual or transgendered other is still there before us—in our classrooms, in our workplaces, in our homes.

I said that I have meant to interrogate myself by writing this article. I have been writing in the midst of a political furor in Tacoma, Washington, where I make my home. As we approach the fall elections, voters in my city must decide whether to repeal a new city ordinance that protects
GLBT persons from discrimination in hiring and housing. In a sort of déjà vu experience, conservative Christians, who I suppose must be threatened by the Face of the other that faces like mine represent, succeeded in getting enough signatures for a ballot referendum asking voters to repeal the ordinance in the November elections.

And here I am again, trying to decide whether to volunteer by canvassing the neighborhoods of my community—ringing doorbells and introducing myself, placing the vulnerability of my face before the vulnerability of the face of my neighbor(s). It is an ethics of encounter that presents itself to me, and the demands are frightening. Yet, I think that this time, I will try to do it differently than I did eight years ago. What will happen when I allow myself to be faced by so many others, instead of merely “facing Being?” My desire and my intention is to be able to stay open to a saying, and to the hope that each encounter will expose the relativity of whatever truth claims I carry about the other—including a commitment I have long held to the discourse of liberal tolerance.⁴

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Notes

1. Levinas’s magnum opus is entitled, otherwise Than Being, Or Beyond Essence.

2. I will refer to Wolfe’s work extensively in this section, for his study was definitive in terms of its analysis of the middle class and the so-called culture war.

3. Wolfe did not attempt to measure attitudes toward or make distinctions between gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgendered persons; nor to the best of my knowledge did he attempt to define for the interviewees the term “homosexual,” which he employed.

4. In March, 2000, the Reform branch of Judaism became the first major religious denomination to officially sanction same-sex unions. Reform Judaism claims one and a half million members in the United States and is the most liberal of the three main branches of Judaism.

5. I wish to thank my colleagues, Heather Bruce (University of Montana), Julian Edgoose (University of Puget Sound), and Ptiri Joshi (San Diego State University) for their invaluable help with revisions of this article.

Works Cited


