Teaching Ethics While Queer and Mennonite

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I knew that I wanted to be a religion professor since I was roughly nineteen. Sometime during my junior year at Goshen College I narrowed in on Christian ethics. I envisioned teaching at a Mennonite College. But it wasn't until I was about twenty-five that I began to grasp how deeply hostile Mennonite institutional contexts are to queer people. I began to understand that the Mennonite Church, specifically Mennonite Church USA (MCUSA), wanted nothing to do with queers like me and was willing to bring the full strength of its institutional power to communicate that rejection to any queer person wanting to offer their gifts to the church. "It's not personal. That's just how we feel about gay people" is a message I received from the Mennonite Church long before those devastating words actually rolled off the tongue of a family member.

By the time I began doctoral work at the Iliff School of Theology and University of Denver a few years later, I was angry and hurt that the church which had nurtured me as a young person could so flippantly reject me as an adult—the wrong kind of adult. I was not oblivious to the change in the air in some quarters of the Mennonite world: Germantown Mennonite Church, Atlanta Mennonite Fellowship, and the Brethren Mennonite Council for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer (LGBTQ) Interests, etc. Rather, because of my experience and the experiences of other queer Mennonites, I was no longer sure that 'Mennonite' was an association or identity that I desired. As I began to see that teaching Christian ethics at a Mennonite college was not in my future, I started to distance myself from Mennonite contexts.

I completed my Ph.D. in 2008 and began teaching Christian Ethics at the Methodist Theological School in Ohio (MTSO), a seminary just north of Columbus, Ohio, the following fall.[1] To be sure, the United Methodist

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[1] The Academic Dean at MTSO who oversaw my appointment to the faculty was Mennonite. I would be remiss not to acknowledge that I have benefited tremendously from the support of several individual Mennonite scholars working both within and outside Mennonite

Church has its own issues with institutionalized homophobia; however, at the same time there are certain ways my queer Mennonite identity registers as an institutional asset to the school.[2] For instance, as more LGBTQ persons seek theological training, MTSO is invested in creating an atmosphere of welcoming inclusion that includes hiring LGBTQ persons as faculty and staff. Additionally, many United Methodists hold Anabaptist peace traditions in high esteem and engage them with genuine interest, even if they do not always claim them as their own. In this way, the past eight years of teaching Christian ethics at MTSO has offered me something I have not previously had: space and institutional encouragement to explore and to practice enacting Mennonite and queer *together*.

This is a big deal, because I barely remember what it is like not to have a shadow hanging over my Mennonite legitimacy. In Mennonite spaces, LGBTQ people are constantly bombarded with the message that their queerness equals failure at Mennonite authenticity. Coming from Mennonite families, growing up in the church, attending Mennonite schools, making sincere professions of faith, membership in Mennonite churches—none of it matters. Rampant homophobia in the Mennonite Church, enacted with smug theological sanction and smooth biblical warrant, runs roughshod over people's bodies and spirits while crying "Peace, peace!" For this reason, the relationship between my Mennonite identity and the way I teach Christian ethics is complicated. My approach to teaching ethics is characterized less by simple appreciation of Mennonite theology or intellectual resonance with Anabaptist moral sensibilities than by painful experiences of community failure in relation to what it means to be queer and Mennonite.

Deconstructing Mennonite
I gained valuable theological and intellectual traction on the nature of the relationship that I embody as a queer Mennonite ethicist when, at the recommendation of a dear friend and colleague, I picked up Stephanie Krehbiel's dissertation "Pacifist Battlegrounds: Violence, Community and

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institutions.
[2] The United Methodist Church's homophobia is arranged a bit differently from Mennonite homophobia, and is targeted primarily at ordained clergy. The fact that I am not ordained permits me to be situated in a space of relative freedom.

the Struggle for LGBTQ Justice in the Mennonite Church USA." In brief, Krehbiel's argument is that Mennonite conflicts over LGBTQ inclusion are struggles over the definition of violence.[3]

Her project begins with a sketch of the conceptual framework Mennonite peace theology traditionally assumes, a church/world dualism that posits a strong oppositional relationship between the church and the world. In this theological imaginary the world is the source and purveyor of violence; the church, understood as the source and harbinger of peace, embodies an alternative community that occupies a space outside of, and therefore *exempt* from, "worldly" dynamics of power. This imaginary shapes Mennonites' understandings of violence and nonviolence, such that violence is conceived primarily in terms of militarism and nationalism propagated by and through the state, while nonviolence is understood as avoiding and resisting worldly forms of power.[4] Pointing out that from the 16th century on, Mennonites' movements within Europe and to North America were "largely dictated by the desire to avoid the involuntary conscription of their young men into military service for the nations in which they lived," Krehbiel argues that a hallmark of Mennonite pacifism is its emergence from "conversations among Mennonite men about how to resist masculinist nationalism and militarism."[5] To the extent that they were successful in this endeavor, Mennonites saw themselves in the terms of the communion hymn composed by Menno Simons as "people of God's peace."

Many Mennonite peace theologies employ some version of this theological imaginary in which a peace/violence binary is mapped onto the church/world binary. Krehbiel draws attention to how one consequence of mapping these two binaries onto one another is an externalization of violence, so that violence and its causes are thereby located entirely *outside of* the church.[6] But, in turn, this externalization of violence leaves no way to account for violence that takes place *within* the church and religious communities. She explains, "Mennonite institutional discourse is dependent

[3] Stephanie Krehbiel, "Pacifist Battlegrounds: Violence, Community and the Struggle for LGBTQ Justice in the Mennonite Church USA" (Ph.D. diss., University of Kansas, 2015), 146.
[4] Ibid., 7, 34.
[5] Ibid., 34.
[6] Ibid., 17.

upon a collective theological imaginary in which the power created by
social privilege and histories of inequality *does not exist*."[7] Because it is not
waged by the state; does not take the form of militarism or sing the songs
of nationalism; wields no weapons; often leaves no visible physical marks;
and is perpetrated by respected church leaders or upstanding members who
profess nothing but love, these internally fomented abuses—"domestic"
violences, if you will—are rarely recognized as violence. The violence that
Mennonites commit against one another is largely unintelligible as violence
in the terms of this binary framework.[8]

Krehbiel's analysis is powerful, because she invites queers like me to
understand painful experiences of being queer and Mennonite through a
framework of systemic institutionalized violence rather than one of personal
pain. The difference between these two frameworks is immense. Pain is just
personal—particular, if not idiosyncratic, to the individual. A framework
of personal pain places the onus on the person experiencing the pain to
'get over' or otherwise deal with it.[9] By contrast, a framework of violence
recognizes the infliction of this pain as an organized social practice. Political
philosopher Iris Marion Young describes the systemic nature of violence as
"directed at members of a group simply because they are members of that
group."[10] She explains that violence is a form of oppression, less on account
of the specific acts committed and more on account of "the social context
surrounding them, which makes them possible and even acceptable."[11]
Moreover, violence is never the victim's fault. A framework of violence
places the onus of responsibility on the system to stop perpetuating harm.
Krehbiel's dissertation helped me get an intellectual handle on grasping
that my inability to trust the Mennonite Church and, by extension, most
Mennonites, does not reflect a personal shortcoming. I am not 'too sensitive'
or unnecessarily paranoid. Rather, I am responding to unacknowledged and

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[7] Ibid., 35; emphasis added.

[8] Ibid., 6, 146.

[9] On personal pain and its limitations as a premise for political activism, see Dawne M. Moon,
God, Sex and Politics: Homosexuality and Everyday Theologies (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago
Press, 2004), especially chapter 8, "Gay Pain and Politics."

[10] Iris Marion Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ.
Press, 1990) 62.

[11] Ibid., 61.

continuing violence.

Krehbiel further insists that not only have the dynamics of violence within the church been overlooked and benignly neglected, but also the existence of violence in Mennonite communities has been aggressively suppressed and resolutely denied. Needless to say, suppression and denial are notoriously poor violence prevention strategies. The systematic denial of violence and dynamics of power within the church has provided convenient cover for Mennonite leaders, like John Howard Yoder, Luke Hartman, and differently, Ervin Stutzman, to abuse power against women and LGBTQ people with relative impunity in the church.[12]

In the essay "Toward a Christian Feminist Liberation Hermeneutic," the late feminist social ethicist Beverly Harrison describes theology as functioning dialectically. She explains that theology "either masks or reveals power and relationships; it is life giving or it is life denying." She continues, "In its masking function, the theological perspective perpetuates and reproduces existing alienated relationships; in its revealing function, it opens the way to realizing concrete good as shared power and a deeper relationship with God, world, and neighbor."[13] Mennonite theology functions dialectically in the way Harrison describes. In its revealing function, Mennonite peace theology discloses peacemaking as the heart of the gospel. In its masking function, however, it conceals precisely the power and relationship that need

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[12] On John Howard Yoder, see Rachel Waltner Goossen, "'Defanging the Beast': Mennonite Responses to John Howard Yoder's Sexual Abuse," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 89, no. 1 (January 2015): 7-80; on Luke Hartmann, see Lauren Shifflett, "Now We are Free," Our Stories Untold blog, April 12, 2016, available at www.ourstoriesuntold.com/now-free-2/, and Marissa Buck, "Good Intentions Aren't Enough: How Church Authorities Slid My Sister's Sexual Abuse Under the Rug" Our Stories Untold blog, April 21, 2016, available at www.ourstoriesuntold.com/good-intentions-arent-enough/. On Ervin Stutzman, see also Stephanie Krehbiel, "The Violence of Mennonite Process: Finding the Address of the Present, Part 2," Pink Menno, February 10, 2014, available at www.pinkmenno.org/2014/02/the-violence-of-mennonite-process-finding-the-address-of-the-present-part-2-of-2, and also Stephanie Krehbiel, "The Discernment of Knowledge: Sexualized Violence in the Mennonite Church," *The Ethnographic Case*, May 2, 2016, available at http://somatosphere.net/2016/05/the-discernment-of-knowledge-sexualized-violence-in-the-mennonite-church.html.

[13] Beverly Wildung Harrison, *Justice in the Making: Feminist Social Ethics*, ed. Elizabeth M. Bounds, Pamela K. Brubaker, Jane E. Hicks, Marilyn J. Legge, Rebecca Todd Peters, and Traci C. West (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 187.

to be clearly named: namely, violence in the church—against women, against LGBTQ and gender non-conforming people, against children, and against racial minorities.

The systematic denial of power and violence in Mennonite communities produces a practiced blindness that leaves Mennonites ill-equipped to comprehend the ways that power functions in and structures their relationships. According to Mennonite clinician and theologian Ruth Krall, "We do not see that our addiction to, internal tolerance for and denial of sexual harassment, sexual violence and domestic abuse have gutted the living peace witness of our denomination."[14] Moreover, this denial and ensuing blindness leave people without resources for naming their experiences and responding constructively to power.[15] Krehbiel's analysis shines a bright light on both the extent to which power is a mystified dimension of Mennonites' communal life and the ramifications of this mystification.

Teaching Ethics While Queer and Mennonite

When I received the invitation to contribute an essay on teaching ethics, my initial response was to regard it as a test—*Is the way you teach Christian ethics Mennonite enough?*—or possibly a contest—*Who is the* most *Mennonite ethicist?* The constant shadow my queerness casts on my Mennonite legitimacy produces a certain paranoia. Having received the message so repeatedly that my queerness seriously compromises my Mennonite-ness, attempting to anticipate the trap—the unpassable test or unwinnable contest—is a basic survival skill: Don't let them corner you.

Truthfully, writing about how Wesleyan thought shapes how I teach Christian ethics would be an easier exercise than articulating how my Mennonite identity informs my teaching. Four weeks of my "Introduction to Christian Ethics" course syllabus are the Wesleyan Quadrilateral: scripture, tradition, reason, and experience. While the content of this unit on moral epistemology is not specifically Wesleyan or United Methodist, the structure is unmistakable. I have learned to include periodic references to John Wesley and to use theological concepts like prevenient grace, sanctification, and Christian perfection. By contrast, I seldom mention Conrad Grebel, Felix

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[14] Ruth Krall, as quoted by Krehbiel, "Pacifist Battlegrounds," 7.
[15] Harrison, *Justice in the Making*, 173.

Manz, George Blaurock, or Menno Simons, and concepts like believer's baptism, revolutionary subordination, or nonconformity come up only rarely, usually as anecdotes.

Undoubtedly, the way I teach Christian ethics would not be 'Mennonite enough' for some ("Super-Mennonites," I call them). But what does teaching Christian ethics in a 'Mennonite enough' manner mean? Teaching only Mennonite authors? Using Mennonite theology as the standard for critiquing all other moral perspectives? On this point my pedagogy is influenced by the strong case Harrison makes against using one's particular theology as the exclusive basis for doing ethics. She writes,

> I do not aspire to derive my moral theory exclusively from my theology, nor do I think that Christian ethicists ought to so aspire. Morality is the work of our *common* life, and the particularities of my convictions and my participation as a Christian, grounded in the way I have experienced revelation in my community, must answer not only to my community's sense of narrative and vocation but also to the sensibilities, principles, and values that inform the conscientious efforts of other morally serious beings. Not to acknowledge this is to me sheer Christian chauvinism of the sort which is indefensible in a pluralistic world.[16]

The task of morality is to serve the common good. Therefore, Mennonite ethics do not serve just the Mennonite Church; nor do Christian ethics serve only Christians. Christian ethics serve a wonderfully diverse and pluralistic world. The ability to engage across and among differences is more important, morally speaking, than preserving theological purity. By the very nature of the process, genuine engagement with others opens us up to becoming more, or more different, than we were previously. If all aspects of my approach to teaching ethics referred back to Mennonite theology or straightforwardly reflected my Mennonite identity, not only would this be pedagogical navel-gazing, it would parochialize the relevance and significance of Christian ethics in precisely the ways that Harrison cautions against.

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[16] Ibid., 16-17.

Nonetheless, 'Mennonite' profoundly shapes the way I teach Christian ethics. The quiet yet vicious violence waged against queer and gender non-conforming people by the Mennonite Church while publically proclaiming peace and nonviolence is a crucial point of reference for my approach. A central task of ethics is to provide "the moral language to confront our social world."[17] Hence teaching Christian ethics is an opportunity to intervene in how these dynamics of suppression and denial of power and violence are reproduced and re-enacted in religious life. This conviction shapes the topics I teach and the frameworks I use to teach them. For instance, I always assign Reinhold Niebuhr's 1932 classic *Moral Man and Immoral Society* when I teach Christian Social Ethics.

I include this text not only because Niebuhr is widely considered the father of American social ethics, but on account of his keen insights into the relationship between peace and justice—or, more aptly, injustice. According to Niebuhr, peace always incorporates elements of injustice and coercion. "Social peace . . . inevitably incorporates social injustice which can only be eliminated by disturbing the peace," he wrote.[18] This observation was not an indictment of any specific situation. Rather, he meant it as a description of social and political life generally. Every social peace inevitably involves some injustice, some elements of coercion. Niebuhr saw this as unfortunate, lamentable, even tragic—but, nonetheless, unavoidable. He calls attention to the ways that peace and injustice are perfectly compatible. He argues that peace and injustice are in fact seasoned collaborators.

The compatibility of peace and injustice was something we didn't talk about in the Mennonite world of my youth. We didn't talk about it because we didn't see it and couldn't even conceive of it. I was taught to value peace above all else, as an absolute value. Niebuhr challenges simplistic valorizations of peace:

> No society has ever achieved peace without incorporating injustice into its harmony. Those who would eliminate the

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[17] Janet R. Jakobsen and Ann Pellegrini, *Love the Sin: Sexual Regulation and the Limits of Religious Tolerance* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2004), 132.

[18] Reinhold Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society: A Study in Ethics and Politics* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1932; reprint, Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 229.

injustice are therefore always placed at the moral disadvantage of imperiling its peace. The privileged groups will place them under that moral disadvantage, even if the efforts toward justice are made in the most pacific terms. They will claim that it is dangerous to disturb a precarious equilibrium and will feign to fear anarchy as the consequence of the effort. This passion for peace need not always be consciously dishonest. Since those who hold special privileges in society are naturally inclined to regard their privileges as their rights and to be unmindful of the effects of inequality upon the under-privileged, they will have a natural complacence toward injustice. Every effort to disturb the peace, which incorporates the injustice, will therefore seem to them to spring from unjustified malcontent.[19]

Niebuhr articulates what I was taught *not* to think and socialized *not* to see: Peace is no guarantor of justice. In fact, peace can be the perfect safe haven for injustice. Working for justice requires interrogating, disturbing—literally upsetting—the peace of the status quo. The chaos this produces can easily be misconstrued as violence, especially by people who are privileged by status quo arrangements.

Niebuhr's critique does not cause me to dismiss the value of the Mennonite heritage of peacemaking; rather, it sheds light on the necessity of reframing the value of peace. Peace is dangerous when taken as an absolute value, because it plays into the hands of the powerful at the expense of the weak. The value of peace is as a consequence of justice. Cooperation, mutuality, and peace are important values, to be sure. But absent commitments to justice, these can be wielded to protect ensconced patterns of privilege, exclusion, and abuse that are so widely accepted they seem normal. As Niebuhr cautioned, "A too uncritical glorification of cooperation and mutuality . . . results in the acceptance of traditional injustices."[20] In short, I teach Niebuhr for the hard questions he provokes: What injustices do pious Christian espousals of peace gloss over or cover up? How does privilege foment complacency to injustice? How and where have Christians learned to defer to the values of peace and cooperation at the expense of seeking justice and telling the truth?

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[19] Ibid., 129.
[20] Ibid., 233.

Niebuhr reminds his readers that peace is not enough.

Krehbiel's observation that Mennonites have engaged in a collective refusal to talk about power is another way 'Mennonite' shapes the way I teach Christian ethics. [21] I believe that it is morally imperative for Christians to talk about power. Further, it is imperative to theorize power beyond the distorting confines of the church/world binary. This binary exempts the church from relations of power when there is no evidence to support the validity of this exemption. No church or community stands immune from, or totally external to, power and its effects. An adequate ethics of justice and peace must recognize the generation of power in all social relations, including in Christian communities and the church.

For this task, I draw on the French poststructuralist philosopher and historian Michel Foucault, because he explicitly rejects binary conceptions of power (such as ruler/ruled, powerful/powerless, or in the case of Mennonites, church/world) that fix power in certain places and with certain groups while denying its presence in other locations and groups. Foucault argues that there is "no binary and all-encompassing opposition between rulers and ruled at the root of power relations, and serving as a general matrix." He continues, "One must suppose rather that the manifold relationships of force that take shape and come into play in the machinery of production, in families, limited groups, and institutions, are the basis for wide-ranging effects of cleavage that run through the social body as a whole."[22] Power is not a binary affair—here but not there—but circulates throughout social life.

This non-binary way of conceptualizing power enables two key insights. First, there is no outside to power—no place where it definitively resides (i.e., the world) to the exclusion of other places immune to or exempt from it (i.e., the church). Power is everywhere. Here, power is not understood as intrinsically corrupt and immoral but simply as a fact of social existence. Nonetheless, power and the use of it are always ethical issues. Second, since power is everywhere, it does not come just from the powerful or from 'the

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[21] Krehbiel describes her dissertation project as a product of "my fascination with Mennonites not talking about power." See "Pacifist Battlegrounds," 5.

[22] Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1: An Introduction* (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 94.

world.' Power comes from everywhere.[23] A Foucauldian perspective enables Christians to acknowledge the presence and effects of power in religious communities, and not just as a corrosive, external dynamic to be avoided as much as possible but as part and parcel of their very existence.

Thus understood, the church is not defined by its exemption from worldly relations of power but by its commitment to, and practices of, building and enacting different relations of power. The way of peace to which Jesus' followers are called has to do not only with responses to external sources of violence but with the use of power in communities. The church's unique identity as people of God's peace does not consist simply in the negative (and passive) action of saying "no" to power by refusing physical violence. The church's identity is its empowerment by the Holy Spirit to use and generate power differently—the proactive activity of beating swords into plowshares (Isaiah 2:4, Joel 3:10). If peace is not defined by the absence of power but is better understood as another form of power that must be actively generated through the formation and reformation of rightly-related community, then refusal to talk about power is inconsistent with a genuine commitment to peace.[24] The church *must* talk about power, and this power talk must include frank acknowledgement of how power is used and abused within the church. The classroom is an important venue for these discussions.

Finally, I make a serious attempt to treat the classroom as a space of accountability for what my experience as a queer Mennonite teaches me about power. There is nothing "nonviolent" about MCUSA's assault on LGBTQ people and their allies, nothing "peaceful" about the harm it inflicts. Accountability means telling the truth about my experience: refusals by religious communities to acknowledge or talk about power does not thereby make them peaceful. Similarly, refusing to acknowledge power is not the same thing as protecting vulnerable people from violence. Refusing to talk about power does more to aid and abet those who abuse their power than it does to protect people from abuse. In fact, refusing to talk about power or denying the presence of it in the church is a crucial component of why power remains a mystified dimension of Mennonites' communal life. This reticence is not protection. It deprives people who are vulnerable to harm and abuse

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[23] Ibid., 93.
[24] Harrison, *Justice in the Making*, 16.

of the tools and resources to understand their situation. It's important to talk about power in the classroom and as an ethical issue, because such conversations are crucial for equipping people who experience harm and abuse in church communities and by religious leaders, and those who have witnessed this harm, with the critical insights and tools to comprehend and name the dilemmas they face, and to act creatively and effectively for change.[25]

Working for peace requires justice—creating, maintaining, and sustaining just relationships. And justice requires telling the truth about power, including, if necessary, a commitment to the process of learning *how* to talk about power for the first time.

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[25] Ibid., 205.