

Edward R. Gray, GRAYMatter Solutions for Nonprofits and University of the Rockies



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Last November, I returned to Atlanta for the 2010 AAR Annual Meeting for this Special Topic Forum on scholarship and activism. I had been surprised when I received my invitation. I knew I was an activist but was I still a scholar? As editor of *Gay Religion*, I had the academic credentials to be part of the LGBT program unit. But my career has been decidedly outside the academy. I have never had a full-time teaching job. My path has been that of what I call a social justice or subaltern intellectual — PhD in sociology of religion and morality from Emory University; founding director of academic affairs at the AAR; coeditor of *Gay Religion*; executive director of YouthPride, a gay youth organization; senior program officer at the Gill Foundation; nonprofit consultant; and faculty member at the University of the Rockies, a new institution. I have been more interested in carving out a role where I could disrupt things than seeking a position from which to ponder them.

I had little choice of an academic career path. As an out gay man, I had few options at suitable

institutions, to say nothing of feeling disadvantaged in an almost nonexistent job market dominated by church-related institutions. Forty years old at graduation, I also doubted if I could put myself through the tenure process. I had had a career in higher education and an interest in nonprofit work. Why not try to change the world instead of merely understanding it?

Nonetheless, I was eager to be part of this discussion about activism and intellectualism. Working for the LGBT rights movement for the last ten years while teaching from time to time and doing other service to the academy has been both personally rewarding and a balancing act. Nonetheless, I cannot say I have blazed a path that I would encourage others to follow. It hasn't exactly been the best of both worlds. Activism is not much respected in the academy and academic credentials carry little weight (or should I say, less weight that I would like) among activists.

So, what does a subaltern intellectual do? I am trying to change the world and earn a paycheck. Having studied the moral responses to communities in crisis, I knew something about how to champion the rights of LGBT youth. During my time as an executive director and foundation program officer, I was able to discern that the LGBT movement was desperate for a more sophisticated analysis of religion. I found two "end zones" in the movement. (There is, of course, every view in between and beyond.) One has a barely disguised disgust with religion (here I mean Christianity). My sense was that it exists because its practitioners *know* that a certain theologically informed and well-organized group of Christians is the enemy in the United States. The other end zone is apologetic. Its practitioners *know* with equal certainty that religion is not the enemy. Talk to many of them and they will tell you, in fact, that Jesus loves them. Nowhere do I see a sophisticated analysis of and approach to breaking the back of religiously motivated hatred of LGBT persons.

I loved working with LGBT youth. My management experience in higher education and my role in launching the AAR's academic affairs department meant I understood programs and governance. I was able to grow YouthPride into the largest LGBTQ organization in the Southeast. I enjoyed attending to all the management and leadership duties I had — governance, fundraising, program evaluation, etc. I loved waking up each day and grappling with the deep and important question "*How do I create positive social change for queer youth in a politically conservative, religiously hyperorthodox region?*"

As an *academic*, my role was to deconstruct that *question*, study the *problem* it posed, and focus on a rigorous methodology for framing it. As a subaltern intellectual, I was compelled to seek practical solutions to that question, persuade others to join me, and focus on accumulating

resources so that we could become more and more effective in advancing our aims to change the world.

We scholars want to understand the world. We activists wish to change it. We scholars aim for objectivity. We activists are relentless advocates. The academy is the last bastion of individualism and leisure in the modern workforce. Activism is community-focused and requires teamwork. It takes place hurriedly through largely under-resourced nonprofit organizations. When we get together, we don't read papers to one another.

When I recalled my working reality as a high-profile LGBT leader in Atlanta I felt far removed from the academy. Nonetheless, I appreciated the opportunity given by the STF because there are few program units where a discussion about scholarship and activism could even be conceived. Moreover, those that exist are at the margins of the academy. (See the [program unit structure](#) for a confirmation of that.)

Just before the meeting, I read Tom Tweed's *Crossing and Dwelling: A Theory of Religion* (Harvard University Press, 2008), and I was drawn to the conceit of itinerancy. Itinerancy reflected my own life course. I travel between the academy and advocacy. Crisscrossing feels right. As a subaltern intellectual, my social justice values come prior to my intellectual commitments. My intellectual commitments flow from my social justice understandings and practices. I privilege my identity as a gay advocate for social justice over intellectual tradition, but only barely. I use my intellectualism to understand my social justice activism and be more effective at it.

I understand LGBT religious expression to fall into three categories: denominational heritage, subaltern, and popular cultural forms. Winning over denominations is still the strategy of the LGBT movement, I think. But I find the subaltern and popular cultural groups more interesting. Rather than attempting to work within existing structures, they have created new, and in many cases distinctly gay, institutional and cultural forms.

That said, my fellow panelists surprised me with their overt Christianity. At least on this panel, religion was more than an academic subject but something practiced. It was, as far as I can tell, the religion of denominational heritage traditions. There was really no surprise in that. Most of us serve those who pay us. My current academic affiliation is with the University of the Rockies in Colorado. We are part of Bridgepoint Education, a private company. This is a new sector in

higher education. At its best, the for-profit sector will continue to emerge as an engine for innovation. It has proven this with its excellent attention to students' needs. To date, we cannot say if this sector will be friendlier to the activist than the traditional academy has been. I think it will depend on whether a market could be found for it. I would like to think that market has been underserved for years. Imagine if we could band together, if subaltern intellectuals created our own institutions focused on social justice? Certainly there are possibilities for vigorous institutions that both teach and advocate. I think these will be in the for-profit sector. I can see adult students learning and supporting subaltern higher education institutions, institutions seeking to both understand and change the world. These institutions would be a home for itinerants, employing them as *both* scholars and activists.

It might even be possible to do well while doing good. Brilliant!