

Shameless Theology

S2:08 - Beyond the Binary: Embracing Queerness within Faith with Dr. Arelis Benítez, Part 1

Rev. Alba Onofrio | 00:17

Welcome to Shameless Theology, a space for honest, courageous conversations with queer, trans, and feminist people of faith and our allies. This podcast is brought to you by Soulforce, who is an international organization working to end the religious and political oppression of LGBTQIA plus people and all marginalized people by breaking open the ideologies of white Christian supremacy. I'm Reverend Alba Onofrio, also known as Reverend Sex. I'm the executive director at Soulforce and I am honored and delighted to be your host as we dive into the thick of it.

This season is exciting because it goes deep on the ideas of our brand new book called *Spiritual Violence, Religious Phenomena That Defile the Faith*. Together we'll learn new concepts like spiritual trauma, religious abuse, spiritual terrorism, white Christian supremacy, and spiritual violence. Together we name the harm, not as abstract theories, but as lived realities. But we don't stop there because theory work is only as good as the path it leads to healing, and we'll be doing plenty of that too. These conversations are part idea session, part theological reflection, and part testimony.

You'll hear stories of resilience, liminality, code-switching, theological imagination, and a kind of dogged persevering hope that refuses to let go of the sacred, even when our institutions fail us. Whether you're here because you have questions, or because you are healing, teaching, leading, or simply trying to make sense of your own experience, you are so very welcome here. You are not alone on this journey. Now let's get down to business and pleasure with Shameless Theology. Today we're bringing you the first of a two-part conversation with our beloved friend and dear colleague, Dr.

Arelis Benítez. Her encouragement and editorial support with our new book, *Spiritual Violence, Religious Phenomena that Defile the Faith*, were pivotal and critical in us getting this work out and into your hands, so we thank her so much for that. Five years ago, we were honored to have Ali as a guest on *Teología sin Vergüenza* in Spanish, and today we'll hear her reflect on what that was like to speak publicly about her identity for the first time. In this episode, Ali invites us into the complexity of her story as a queer daughter of undocumented immigrant parents, and how she was profoundly shaped by the Seventh-day Adventist tradition, which is held fiercely with a kind of deep love and contradictions that we know so many faith communities can hold.

She speaks honestly about the nervousness of returning to this topic, and the weight of language, English and Spanish, and how each tongue carries a different version of her story and experience. As we continue our season long exploration of spiritual violence, religious abuse, spiritual terrorism, and spiritual trauma, Ali helps us see how these forces take shape not only in just doctrine, but particularly in the way that it splits body from spirit, in the fear of losing community, and in the impossible contradictions placed on queer people who are told to love God while denying the truth of our own hearts.

We'll explore the brilliant survival strategies of a theological imagination built in secret, and the quiet insistence that God has always known us, even when our churches refuse to. I also want to let

you know that this episode includes a reference to suicide. If you or someone you know is struggling with thoughts of self-harm or suicide, please reach out for help. Know that you are precious, you are loved, and you are not alone. Call or text the National Suicide and Crisis Lifeline at 988.

You can also contact the Trevor Project, which offers 24-7 support for LGBTQ youth through text or online chat. We'll add these resources in the show notes as well. This is a conversation about hurt and harm, but mostly about clarity, resistance, and the sacred work of telling the truth. Here is part one of our conversation with Dr. Arelis Benítez.

Karina | 04:57

So today we're here to have this conversation with our dear Ali, our friend and colleague. And Ali, first thing we would like to know is how do you feel today to talk with us in general? How do you feel?

Dr. Arelis Benítez | 05:13

Nervous!

Dr. Arelis Benítez | 05:14

I woke up nervous about this interview today when I started asking myself why, seeing though that I know each one of you have much love for each of you, this is not that kind of nervousness. But what it is, it's that the topic and that the last time that I did a public recording about this topic was also with Soulforce years ago, through the Teología sin Vergüenza podcast, and why that day and that interview was particularly impactful for my life, because it was my first public declaration of my identity.

In fact, I took once the podcast was published, I took the link and I put it on my Instagram. And it was also in Spanish. And so that was also a really big deal. Because it would impact the communities that are closest to me and also the most that are the ones that are most difficult for me to talk through this topic about. And so even this morning, I was like, is this going to be in Spanish or in English, because my experiences will be different.

In English, I feel more empowered to be able to say this is what happened to me, these are the powers and the systems behind it. But in Spanish, it's more like my heart hurts. I feel disconnect from church community, I feel disconnect from family in various degrees, even though we're close, there's still a distance between us around my sexuality. And so I thought, well, the stories are going to be different if I say them in Spanish or versus in English, also because I lived them differently culturally, right?

So to experience something in Espanol, with a cultural background of it is much different than the English. So I just wanted to name that. And hopefully by naming it, it can get out of my body and I can focus on the rest of the questions. The last thing I'll say is nervousness also comes because after that interview, I decided I was just going to live my best life. And that was that was the focus. So before that it was constant ruminating and thinking about my pain, my trauma, my hurt, the resources that I had or did not have, who I would lose.

And it was constant. I'm talking minute by minute that I was always in this space of pain. So being able to say it's out, I'm here, I have a supportive community felt wonderful. And I've just kind of

been riding that high. It hasn't been perfect, but it hasn't been the pain from before. And now it's like, oh, no, we're going to talk about it again. But if my experience could help communities also and individuals sort their thoughts and their processes out, I'm here for it.

So thank you.

Karina | 08:12

Thank you. That makes true that speaking a different language language, it's also the possibility of naming different things and explaining and looking to the world from different eyes. So now that we are in the English English version of these you and this conversation, can you tell us a little about you? I mean, whatever you would like to share and how these connects with the topics we are going to talk about today.

Dr. Arelis Benítez | 08:44

I think I'd like to orient my identities, I think, in the context of the conversation that we're having, which is this book on spiritual violence and other terms that I think the English version says that defile faith very carefully chosen words. So in the context of our conversation, I would like to identify as a queer woman, first generation daughter of Mexican migrant parents who exists or maybe coexists and loving tension with a Christian faith traditions, more specifically the Seventh- day Adventist church.

Nadia Arellano | 09:20

You're very familiar with the book and the concepts and you have been super important in the process of building and confronting and questioning what we want to say, which words to use. We know that you know what the concepts are. We would like to hear more from you about which one of these concepts that we use in the book feel closest to you or most relevant to your own experiences. And I think that will lead us a little bit more into your different identities and intersections.

And we are aware that the concepts shift, right? There's spaces where some concepts hurt more than others. So we know it's like a moving thing. But out of these five concepts, which is white Christian supremacy, spiritual violence, spiritual terrorism, religious abuse, and spiritual trauma, which ones do you feel closest to you? And when or where or why?

Dr. Arelis Benítez | 10:28

It was overwhelming to get through all of the concepts. I read them first in Spanish, but the one that definitely resonated the most for me was spiritual violence, that violencia espiritual, which felt right like that, like needle or that thorn in my heart of like, that's what this is. That pain that that boulder maybe even that I have felt in my chest is because of spiritual violence. And that is the term that has helped me give language and concepts and understanding to my experience that I was led to believe that if I felt the way that I did, it was my fault.

So one thing that I really also appreciate about the term is that they do a both and work right of talking about how it impacts us at the individual and internal level, but also how they are structured around us, their historical trajectory, the psychological, social, emotional impact of it all. And so it's a lot of different intersections to consider for each concept. But for me, I held spiritual violence as

the final turning point of like, oh, something was done to me.

And this is the pain. This is where it stems from. And the more that I thought about the term, and even in preparation for our conversation today, I started thinking about how the first harm or the first act of spiritual violence that the did to me was to split my soul, my spirit from my body. And with that splitting to call the spirit and the soul good, that which is worthy, that which is eternal, and then the body bad, that which is temporary, that which doesn't last.

And so coupled with that, before that harm was for me in terms of my sexuality, which I wasn't articulating and actually running from at the time, I had my identity as the child of undocumented parents. And so that splitting that the church did also applied in a political context, because to be undocumented, it was a political bodily label. And so it was bad. And so it was just something that the world was doing. Right. And it actually helped me. It actually helped me because it made me think of like this label that the world has given me is temporary.

That's not what counts. That's not what matters unto salvation. So whatever people have to say about me, because my parents are undocumented, because I don't speak English well, because, you know, we don't have our own home because we don't vacation in the summers. It doesn't matter. What matters is that we come to church. What matters is that we love God. What matters is that we worship, that we praise, that our soul, that our character is developing and it's building. So that splitting from this undocumented, illegal space was helpful.

But then when I started applying and growing and maturing and changing, that splitting when so the political was external, it was the body and it was bad. The heart, the soul, the spirit was good. So when it came to my sexuality and me having feelings, right. So if I was protected from the external and the outside world, it was okay. I could reconcile even though it was harmful to I could reconcile it. But when my spirit, like in my heart, I was having feelings for another woman, then it was super harmful for me.

I don't know if that makes sense. And y'all can jump in if you'd like, because that's splitting no longer work. This was supposed to be the good space where good things could happen. And me loving another woman was a bad thing. It was part of the carnal, the bodily, the bad. And it messed me up because even at a young age, I thought to myself, but I'm not thinking sexually. I love her mind. I love that she loves God. I love that she loves the Bible more than I do.

That's what I'm in love with, but it doesn't fit here. And so that piece did not make sense to me. And I struggled with it for a very long time. And I had different waves of how I was trying to make that better for myself from repression to not acting on it, to considering, to having, I would have markers on my timeline. I would sketch these things out of like, when I could stop thinking about a girl. And I mean that literally singular because there was for many years, only one girl.

And it was reciprocated, but we both struggled and being from the same denomination and faith. And so I would have all these markers. And I remember one of the most impactful markers of when I would make this change was when I was at a Seventh-day Adventist institution and the professors and ministers there were talking about putting me on an ordination track. And I thought to myself, that's it. Once I have that ordination certificate, if I go through this process, having the support, the backing of my church, then I have to let this part of me go.

And in order, one of the ways that I conceptualized that was thinking, oh, I'll be like a nun. I'm not Catholic, but it'll be like nuns, right? So I had to look for models that were accessible to me of how do I make this make sense? Because from my theology, from my doctrine, it doesn't. And so I thought, well, God loves me. God just doesn't like this flaw, this sin in me. So I will just accept that it's some stain on me, but I won't act on it.

And so I kept trying to reconfigure my own theology and my own understanding of cells in a way that would cater to staying in community. And I think of all things, that was what was the most terrifying to me, to lose community, because I didn't have anywhere else to go. It was my family, and it was my church community. That was the refuge of undocumented people, right? And so if I didn't have those, then what do I have? Who do I have?

The people that were talking progressively around sexuality were white people in power. Are they going to take a little brown queer kid who didn't even understand or look up or identified herself as queer? Just knew that she had a sin on her. So all those conditions didn't allow me to, you know, I didn't have the words. I didn't have the language. I didn't have the community. And so I was just kind of stuck just trying to pull on things to make it make sense for me.

Rev. Alba Onofrio | 17:43

Yeah, it reminds me so much of that narrative. I want to go back a little bit to the splitting piece, because I think it talks of that idea of our body is carnal and of the earth, and therefore anything having to do with the body, including very relevant social justice issues, like hunger, like homelessness, like AIDS, like abortion, all of that stuff is relegated to the carnal world, and therefore because it's temporary as compared to your eternal soul, then it's not as important, like it's devalued.

And at least in my church, we didn't talk about it. It wasn't like we didn't believe that hunger wasn't bad. It was just not relevant compared to the eternity of our souls. And that division works well in lots of realms, but we are at this moment now where this love the sin or hate the sin kind of breaks down, right, basically based on that same division. Because if we now have most mainstream Christian churches accepting that we are born this way with these desires to love whoever it is that we love and whatever moment we are in our lives or around gender identity as well, that breaks down when we hit the internal part, because some churches now have the rhetoric of like, it's okay that you're that way, that you're crossed a bear, as long as you don't act on it.

But then if you separate like what I feel, what I believe on the inside, if I covet another man's wife, I've already committed adultery. All of that stuff was about what happens in the internal world. So if it is love the sin or hate the sin, and we accept that people are born queer or whatever form of deviance we are assigned, then what happens in the internal sphere is the only important sphere. And what do you do when you can't kill those thoughts, those desires, those identities, those things that just like your whole being says yes to, even though you've been told they're sinful.

I think that's a really, like that is a deep source of what I would say like leads to spiritual trauma. Because it's a particular kind of violence that is asking you to evaluate and monitor and control that which is within, which I think already happens with women and lots of other people. But I'm curious, like, can we get a little bit more into that spiritual violence as the big arcing umbrella? But there's this, I want to get to spiritual terrorism in a little while.

But I do want you to talk a little bit more about that experience of what do you think is happening? Or where do you see that breakdown in your theological experience around church when we have this internal versus like the world sphere? Because the other side of that is taking away community, which is exactly what you said, which is the like constant fear when for so many of our communities that have intersecting identities of oppression, community is everything, like literally, like where we access food, jobs, community, etc.

So a lot is at stake in figuring out what to do with that internal world.

Dr. Arelis Benítez | 20:57

I think one thing that came to mind was thinking that in my experience, like binary logic affected and harmed me, but it never had me. And I was thrown into polarities from a very young age, again, arriving to the US at six, seven years old. You know, for example, going to school, I was supposed to forget and to not let on that my parents were undocumented. Every time I came home, I was supposed and expected to not forget that my parents are undocumented, right?

And so for matters of safety at school, I had to act like that's not a topic of conversation that we're going to have, right? And try to assimilate and try to go with the way. But at home, it was constant reminders, seeing my father's hands, how rough, you know, seeing the labor. I never know how to feel about sharing this detail, but like the scent that most reminds me of my mom are not perfumes or flowers. It's cleaning supplies. Because I would open the door and receive her after a full day of cleaning houses.

And it's that scent that it's like, mom, or I will go with her over the weekends, right, to clean houses. And so the binary logic was ever so imposing, ever so like reminding me of where my place is and where my place is not. But the way that we were living life was always in a liminal space, was always in resistance to what the government says about me versus what God says about me. And so that's what I mean about my experience through the lens of undocumented and migrant narrative helped me be in the liminal space.

And at a very young age, I developed that threshold for the splitting and the resistance, even if I couldn't name it, even if it brought me down, even if it got me depression, even if it got me all sorts of illnesses, I was also surviving through them in very creative ways. And one of the most creative ways was that the God, the church didn't equal my relationship to God. Yes, I was, I mourn and I lament losing my church community, but I never lost my place with God.

I never have just because in my heart, when I would pray, even though even if the prayer said, God, take this away from me, I did not feel that God was condemning me. And then when I thought, and I would remember God called me into ministry at 18 years old, I have a very vivid like story and moment that's just very certain in my heart. And I would think to myself, here's what doesn't make sense. You knew me, yet you have known me according to the word of God itself, right?

Like since before my first breath came to be, you knew and you called me. So your perception of me must be different from what the world says about you and me. So I kind of put God in that same, you're being misrepresented and me too, but I didn't have the language to be able to articulate that. I didn't have a community. And so along comes the work that you all are doing in this book. And now it just has felt like, oh, I wasn't just in my head.

It wasn't just me. It's all of these processes that are happening that are affecting me and making me feel the way that I do. And I guess another way that I fought against this dichotomy and like splitting that the church can do is that eventually I had to keep, because everything that felt so contradictory, like love the sinner, not the sin, like be it, but don't become it or don't act on it. It's like, okay, well, let's take things like faith.

What does it mean for me to say, I am a woman of faith and never act on it? It doesn't make sense, right? So my way out of these contradictions that the binary logic was causing was to define for myself, what are my values and how do I live into an integrous life? I'm not perfect, but in as best as possible, live with integrity around the values that matter to me. Love matters to me deeply because if God is love and I believe in God, then love is central, is a central value.

Life, life matters to me. I had a turning point, actually, when I arrived here in Nashville, that things were getting so bad internally. And I was not talking to anyone, not reaching out for help, not knowing that I could or what I would say. And I was a trained chaplain by the time I arrived here. And one thing that I had learned in chaplaincy training was around like the difference between suicidal ideation when it comes to depression and then actually inching over into committing, like having a plan for suicide.

And that happened to me while I was here, you know, that I struggled with suicidal ideation, but I knew that it was a matter of me wanting to just go to sleep and rest. It wasn't that I hated life or that I didn't consider my life worthy. I was just tired. I was tired of carrying all the weight. But when that ideation turned into me starting to think about plans and doing things in the kitchen or thinking of things outside of my balcony, then I knew I had, like, because I valued life, then I had to do something different than the repression around my sexuality.

Then the telling myself, accept it, but don't act on it was bullshit, was not true. It was actually life-taking, right? And if I value life, and if I value family, and if I value love, then I need to get well, and I need to reach out, and I need to do something in order to help myself, in order to live, in order to honor life.

Rev. Alba Onofrio | 27:16

Yeah, I think that's so, you've literally just like articulated, at least in my mind, why we call it spiritual violence, because the impacts, the harm is not, like, I think a lot of us have in our minds growing up, the violence is like, when you can see the cuts, the bruises, the gunshot wound, the whatever, like, that is violence, and we get told that narrative. And as some of us, as we are trained and learn more, we learn about things like psychological violence or emotional violence, but these invisible forms of violence, in this case, spiritual violence, where God and the word of God and the tradition of a religion, in this case, Christianity, is used in a way that creates conditions that even those of us who desperately want to live and love and be in community, and all of those things that we, that it puts us in such discord with our own selves, with what we've been taught, that we often are ourselves the inflictors of the violence, or our closest partners or families, people who love us and people who we love.

And I think that we don't recognize often enough how much the root of spiritual violence and white Christian supremacy that imposes those ideas, those moralistic ideas, is what leads to that. And so therefore, we can be oh, you're sick, or you're bad, or whatever, or your family was bad, or your

partner was bad, but we're all in this community working out of the same ideologies that came from the colonization of our lands. And until we get at that root, I feel like it's hard to understand how intense those impacts are, and how far they actually go, because you literally just described the experience of spiritual violence to the point where it was just like, I'm done.

Like, that is such a perfect, clear, like, walking out for us the steps for you, but I think is very representative of so many stories we hear in our communities.

Nadia Arellano | 29:35

I believe that also theology, like creating theology, theological narratives, has always been a form of resistance. And that process which you named, like, you were doing your, you were creating theology of, that is God, that is not from God, I understand this, that is a piece of theological imagination, that has resisted colonization, and violence, like throughout history of people reading through their own experiences, what God is, and taking this piece, like, this part of, like, this agency to be like, that is not the God that I believe in.

And that is something that we all do, and everyone has those pieces of who God is for them, but there are some of them that are criminalized and stigmatized, and that have been institutionally conditioned to believe they're sinful. But everyone has those pieces of theology in their life stories, and the way they form their own, like, moral agency type of thing. And I also believe that it is a piece, a very important piece of violence and abusive relationships that happens a lot in abusive marriages, but also family, like, dynamics is this piece of, like, what's the word?

Cognitive dissonance, right? When you're, like, being taught different things that don't make sense, and that takes away your agency, because you stop thinking, you're able to understand what's happening in front of you. So it is very, very, I love that you mentioned that, because it is such a common thing in the, like, when we talk to people, that it's like, I was listening to them, and I was, I was seeing this other thing. And even, like, theologically, when you were saying, they were telling me that you can be queer as long as you don't exercise queerness, but that is not what the Bible says, because Jesus was, like, if you're sinning your heart, you're sinning already.

So it is what happens on your brain, but why, for being gay, it is, you can be, but not be, but what does that mean for trans? Like, there's a lot of pieces that don't make sense, and they are so fragile, like, fragile, fragile theologically, but we've been taught to not question them. And once you just, like, reach a little bit closer, you're like, that doesn't make any sense. Or, like, where you were saying, this understanding of God and the divine is not, it's not physical, and it's not in the body, and love, like, true love is not in the body.

So that smell or that feeling of your mom is not true love, it's just temporary. That's not true, like, God's love was embodied through blood, you know, like, that is very physically real, real, like bodily, and that is God's love, like, literally divine love. But it is so, it is nonsensical, but it serves a power, like, it serves, it serves a power narrative. So we are taught to believe it and not question it.

Dr. Arelis Benítez | 33:10

Definitely. And not only, like, not questioning it, something, thank you for lifting up, like, the theological imagination. I think that a lot of us who belong to, like, minoritized or oppressed communities learn to get creative. Survival is a creative approach. And when the violence happens in theological spaces, theological imagination is imperative toward our own survival and continuity. One thing that is also very hard, right, it's like, it's a whole divide and conquer. So if they're targeting our spirituality, they're teaching us how to split ourselves, right, to the point that you no longer need reminders or sermons.

The seed has already been planted. But what I really wanted to also touch on with the theological imagination part is that we push, right, and we start to question and realize there's a lot of cognitive dissonance. This thing, these things are not making sense. They're not tracking with my lived experience. However, if the church also tells you who you are not allowed to associate with, to talk about what your theological imagination is telling you, if your church also bans the books, if your schools ban the books, you know, if you are cut off from communities where there are other voices that can say to you and to normalize that questioning process and nurture the theological imagination, you do start spinning.

You do start feeling like, maybe I am in the wrong. Maybe I don't understand something. And what it does is it forces you to lean back into the very community that's causing you the harm to begin with, because it is forcing you to excommunicate yourself from other circles where the conversations, where the community, where the growing can happen. And so I think part of that process is also that, that they cut us off from being able to share these experiences with folks who are also questioning.

Rev. Alba Onofrio | 35:10

All right, that was part one of our conversation. What Ali shared today reminds us that spiritual violence is not an abstraction. It lives in our bodies and in our spirits, in the quiet places where we're taught to split ourselves, to mistrust our own desires, and to choose belonging in certain spaces over our own wholeness. And yet, as Ali showed us so beautifully, our spirits keep reaching for the truth. Our bodies keep insisting on life, and our theological imagination keeps finding ways to survive.

Now that our book on spiritual violence is out in the world, conversations like this one help us see how these concepts live in real people's lives. Ali's reflections give us language to experiences that so many of us have carried alone, and she reminds us that naming the harm is part of reclaiming our power. We're not meant to navigate these contradictions in isolation. We're meant to unlearn them together. Join us next week for part two of this conversation where Ali helps us trace the path from survival toward healing and community.

We'll discuss ideas of hypocrisy in binary logic, getting comfortable with liminality, code switching as a survival skill, and stubbornness as a spiritual asset. You definitely don't want to miss it. We'll see you next week. Thank you for spending time with us today on this episode of Shameless Theology. I hope you found it both provocative and helpful on your own journey toward healing. These conversations are part of Soulforce's ongoing effort to name harm, honor our lived experiences, and imagine faith beyond violence.

If you want to go deeper, you can find a link to our new book called *Spiritual Violence, Religious Phenomena That Defile the Faith* here in the show notes. You can also find more information on our website at soulforce.org where you can download free theological resources designed to support individuals, faith leaders, and communities who are navigating religious harm and spiritual reconstruction. If something in today's dialogue resonated with you, maybe it stirred something and settled something or helped you find language for your own story, then you have found yourself in the right place.

Consider sharing this episode with someone who might need it and follow along for future conversations and supplemental content. Whoever you are and wherever you find yourself in this time, questioning, grieving, rebuilding, or reclaiming, I am so grateful that you are here. May your theological imagination remain ever alive and may you find spaces that honor your full, blessed humanity. With hearts ablaze and spirits unyielding, until next time, I'm Rev. Sex, and this is Shameless Theology.