

Shameless Theology

S2:09 - Living in the In-Between: The Wonder of Faithful Liminality with Dr. Arelis Benítez, Part 2

Rev. Alba Onofrio | 00:10

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 get to spend time with our beloved *sinvergüenza*, Dr.

Arelis Benítez, in part two of our conversation. In last week's episode, she shared what it was like to grow up as the queer daughter of immigrant parents, and how she navigated Seventh-day Adventist teachings, as well as how it felt to find language for the harm she once believed was her fault. If you haven't listened to that episode yet, you might want to go back and catch up. In this second episode, our conversation moves further into the themes of spiritual violence and white Christian supremacy.

We consider the value of learning to get comfortable in liminal spaces, we look at spiritual stubbornness as an asset that can keep us connected to God, and we explore the wisdom of code-switching as a survival skill. Our discussion connects the broader concept of spiritual terrorism in the ways that fear, surveillance, and threat of punishment shapes the lives of undocumented families, queer and trans people, and really anyone whose existence falls outside of the narrow boundaries enforced by church and by state. Ali speaks honestly about what it means to be bent but unbreakable, and how healing becomes possible when we have language, community, and the courage to rewrite our own narratives.

Here is part two of our conversation with Dr. Arelis Benítez. So I see you, I experience you as a very stubborn person. So the fact that you and I, I feel like, and several of us in this community, maybe

most of us, were stubborn about our connection with God, and stubborn about our connection with religion, and stubborn about, I mean, you had this experience of like, you knew that God was being misrepresented. I didn't know that God was being misrepresented, but I was hell-bent and determined to understand why God could possibly think this way when I couldn't figure out what was wrong with it.

But it's this stubbornness that I think not all of our community, like, I think we get robbed of God a lot of times because when we start that swirling, or that dissonance, and we've been taught that questioning is wrong, sometimes we even exclude ourselves, not only from the communities, or maybe we go the other direction, in which we go full throttle into, like, queer or trans politicized community, and it's a whole different language, it's a whole different culture, and we leave behind those faith spaces.

But at least for me, I feel like I can't be fully seen or understood if you don't understand the religion that I come from, that's a part of me, that's how I think about the world, and so that stubbornness in the cases of those of us who are like, I'm not letting go of God, is such an asset and such a special exception that I think that a lot of folks have to decide, do I let go of God, or do I let go of who I am?

And regardless of where you come down on either side of that, it sucks, and part of you is being murdered, and silenced, and all of those things, so I think that's such a beautiful trait that we're taught is bad, like, if you're headstrong, or if you ask questions, or if you doubt, but some of those questioning, and doubting, and all of that stuff is some of our deepest assets to the work of healing, and to the work of possibility, and defining each other, so I'm curious if you would talk a little bit about what do you see in your community with those around you, either those in our LGBT community, or those in church community, or family, or whatever around that, how people are navigating that division that tells us we have to be one or the other, do you find that we are rare, those of us who are stubborn enough to not let go of God, or what do you see happening in your community on either side around spiritual violence, and this both being excluded, but oftentimes I feel like we self-exclude, because we don't feel seen or whole in either space, either church space, or in queer space.

Dr. Arelis Benítez | 06:23

I think I like to talk about it, whether, you know, it's my community of faith, if they would have these conversations with me, whether it's students, whether it's family, friends, or relationships, I think whenever there's tension between polarizing views, I invite folks to get comfortable with liminality, to get comfortable with the space in between, and to me that, as everyone here at least in this chat knows, this is why I lean so much on Gloria Anzaldúa's work, right, to talk about *Nepantla*, to talk about that both and space, and that's what I invite people to, to be able, like, don't be in such a rush to be, you know, in the one place or the other, but reckon with the complexities, and see how they are speaking to you, and how they are making sense or not making sense for your life, how you want to leave it, how you want to orient yourself to people, to the environment, to the work that you do, to your call, to your vocation, to your spouse, whatever that relationship is, make it come in alignment with who you see yourself to be, and work with those, with also that ability that sometimes we do.

I like that, the code switching, like, yes, there will be spaces where you can't show up full self, but does that mean that you are, like, lacking integrity? No, it means that you've found wisdom, and

there's probably a reason why you're not showing up full self in one space versus another, right? And so, I don't know one more I can offer in that direction. I like the stubbornness part, too, as well as, like, willful determination in terms of, like, my view and understanding of God, that, for example, I was taught that God is love, God's character is love, right?

And so, that's something that goes unquestioned, so it has to make sense. And I remember having experiences, one that's coming to mind right now, in church, where it would be like, there's a single woman, older in age, and they would treat her como la loca, la hermana que nunca se va a casar, the woman that's never going to get married. It's like she had failed her gender duties, right? Like, she was older, she was not married, she did not have kids, but when I saw her, I was like, you really love how your life is structured and how your life is set up, right?

And what wouldn't make sense to me is why in God's house, God who is love, we are tearing this woman down. And if I, as a human being, this bodily, carnal, not good thing, can see in my heart and feel like that's not right, that there's something wrong about the criticism and the hatred that we're throwing her way, and all she's doing is showing up faithfully and happily to worship with all you, like, judgmental brothers and sisters, right? So I guess what I'm trying to get at is that for me, I would also, the realization of experiences like that that were operative for me were like, wait a minute, if I, in a fleshly, my character is not love, but if I, in a fleshly, sinful, bad body, can look at those behaviors that were theologically, culturally informed and say, that doesn't feel good, and that is not good, then that's where, like, willful determination around, like, understanding how God operates, you know, for me, or how I see God operating is much different than how the church and doctrine is trying to push God to be, where there's a lot of enforcement trying to get us all to fit in a box that nobody's good for.

And so these were the things that made me stubborn, that it was just the incongruency. If my flawed nature can love on this woman and celebrate her as she wants to live her life, why are you putting God's name in your mouth to hate her?

Rev. Alba Onofrio | 10:30

Right. Right. And, like, I think so many of us leave church, regardless of orientation, gender, etc., because of the hypocrisy that we see. If there was one issue that I think the church should tackle, it's hypocrisy, theologically, which is what you're saying, Nadia, around this cognitive dissonance. So I really appreciate that perfect example. I want to touch on one more thing before we move to the next question, which is this concept of spiritual terrorism. And you and I, in particular, have been in deep dialogue about how to define spiritual terrorism.

And I think it's a concept that's really intense. The language is intense. We use spiritual terrorism. We use the word terrorism for a reason, recognizing that that's a highly used term that's meant to oppress, marginalize, and discriminate against Brown and immigrant communities, around Muslim communities. So we want to name that. And that sense that we've been taught, which is usually that it is something that someone does, or a group does, or government does, in order to keep people in constant fear of something bad happening, of violence happening, even until death.

Right. And I think that that is the reason that I use that word terrorism, because I feel like, in essence, it is much often that terrorism is actually imposed much more by governments, and much more by institutions, and much more by societies, than it ever is with a random individual here or

there. We also don't ever talk about white terrorism that happens within our own country. So it's a highly racialized term. And so I want to be sensitive to that. But one of the things that you talked about, I think, is really important to go back to reinforce and connect with this concept, is this idea of spiritual terrorism, for those of us who live at intersecting oppressions.

And in this case, you're talking about this divide between at school and in the world, needing to pretend like we are the same as everybody else. And we, therefore, are not vulnerable to state violence, because we are American citizens, and yay America, and the flag, and all that stuff. And then on the inside, the family unit, always having to be mindful of like, who's calling, who's got the right social security number, who's matches who, how do we speak English in a way that doesn't make us even more vulnerable, that kind of terrorism, that there's no safe place.

Because at school, you might be found out. At work, you might be found out. Driving your car in the street, you might be found out. There's all of these places. And how we learn to code switch, as those of us who are surviving in these liminal spaces, we get really good at being able to code switch between our internal conversation, whether that's church, and how we can use the Bible, how we can talk about God, how we can talk about religion, whatever, and then how we can fit in in school spaces or in public spaces.

So I want to talk a little bit about spiritual terrorism. I'd love to give us your thoughts on that, around how that happens, especially when we add an identity, either a racialized identity, or like an LGBTQIA plus identity, where it's like, this splitting, again, is happening where we're code switching. We're never fully present or whole in our identities. And it's not just that we aren't feeling fulfilled or satisfied. It is literally that as an LGBT person, if you're out at church, you could be kicked out of your community.

If you are undocumented at work, you could lose your job, or you could lose your housing. There's this intersection that happens. It's just like, there's just no safe place to sit and be your full self without a fear of attack or violence in a very real way. Not just like, I can't be my full rainbow self in terms of expression, but like very real consequences for a family who's undocumented, very real consequences for folks who can lose their housing because they're trans, or lose their job because they're queer, or lose their children because they're in a particular kind of illegal kind of relationship with another human that's adult and consensual.

So will you help us connect that concept of spiritual terrorism with some of the experiences of your family, your community, what you've seen from others in that sphere beyond just the like feeling, not feeling like we can be our whole selves?

Dr. Arelis Benítez | 15:26

Yeah. It's a very fragmenting experience. It's also very painful, because so as a Seventh-day Adventist, we have at the root of our theology holistic approach. So it means that we understand the various aspects of our humanity, of our spirituality, of our being, of our self.

Rev. Alba Onofrio | 15:55

Love that about the Adventists. You can depend on them for a hospital, you can depend on them for health food, you can depend on them for vegetarian supplements. Love that about the Adventists.

Dr. Arelis Benítez | 16:06

Absolutely. And then as you were rightly saying, but being SDA is not the only identity, it's just one, even if it has an all-encompassing holistic approach. So for me, being a woman, being a Mexican, being a first-generation daughter to undocumented parents, feeling called into ministry, which is a leadership role. As a leader, I felt called. And what space is there for a Mexican woman in a Spanish-speaking Seventh-day Adventist? There isn't. And so there's all these parts of me that are not fitting the brackets of the social constructs of different spaces, because every space has its social construct.

It has its hierarchical order. And whenever we enter these spaces, we know where we rank or where we don't. We know where we land in these spaces. And when you embody and are a part of multiple communities, those things are just, there's a million little pieces. And for me, I think there was one point in undergrad, I wish so badly that I hadn't lost a poem, but I took to writing to try to process what I was going through. But I remember that I wrote a line saying that I've been bent unbreakable.

And that was my first moment of recognizing and feeling like I'm going to accept all this brokenness as a bending that communities and the people are doing to my body and with my being, but I am not broken. Right? And that was that resistance of like, you're not going to break my spirit. You do things that are harming, that are threatening to break me, but I won't be broken. However, I am bent. Yeah. And so it just made, it was like the first moment of being able to, again, embrace the tensions of what it comes to be in all the spaces and then the multiple identities that I represent.

The other thing that I have learned is that these multiple identities that I hold are always growing. Sometimes I regress, let's be honest. So like, I thought I had learned that lesson. I thought I knew better. Pick it back up, Ali, right? And so if I, in my multiplicity of self and multiplicity of being, can try to have this patience and this grace with myself of like, I'm still in process and it's a good thing. I'm still flowing. And this is a process that's going to continue throughout my life.

That was really important for me as like, as an anchor for myself of there are these multiple parts that the world might say don't fit and you need to choose the either or, but it's not reality. It's not the lived experience. So I have to make sense of all of these pieces holistically. So you see the Koyo Shoki behind me, right? The lunar goddess and broken in all these pieces, fragmented in her body, but still in a circular, still part of a whole.

And that's kind of how I've learned to embrace the space of multiplicity that these pieces don't always lock in together. Not necessarily because I cannot hold my queerness and my Christianity together. I sure the hell can, but people who are also broken, who are also in process, but communities who also can, you know, are all trying to fit things together. Like it's them that have an issue, I guess, or a lack of understanding about how I make these work for me.

And so that gives me a little more patience with like how I experienced myself and how I show up when I do the code switching, right? Of understanding that I'm doing this because in my wisdom and divine wisdom given to me and learned experience and shared experience from my community members as well, I know that I cannot quite show up in this way, in this space today, but maybe tomorrow, you know, or even this happened to me with church. Like I was okay when I was really wrestling to it.

I was still okay with showing up. And then there just came a time where it's like, actually no, you know, because you don't value what I have to say as important or you don't value me. And so it was too hurtful. So now I can't come into that space, right? So there's moments where the context will make us have to code switch and other times where we have that choice. And that's also difficult to navigate. This is probably the hardest thing for me that I didn't always, even if in my heart, I felt ready to do a thing or to say a thing about claiming myself, if I did not have the resource and that the consequence felt too high to try to show up fully myself, I couldn't show up.

It's hard. It's painful.

Rev. Alba Onofrio | 21:26

I think that one of the things that is coming up is that we've talked about these different manifestations of spiritual violence. And I think what we're getting at without naming it explicitly is that the root of all of that is white Christian supremacy, which is basically a kind of theology, a version of the Bible, an interpretation of the Bible that came over with the conquistadores and the settler colonial regime of what is now called the United States in this idea that created differences of value in human beings, right?

So for example, we are taught morally, again, this cognitive dissonance between what we're taught and what we experienced, but we act like in church, like that auntie who never got married and kind of failed her gender because she's living her best single life. I think the same thing can apply when we hear that, when we heard during the first Trump administration that families were being separated and children were being taken away from their parents because they were illegal and therefore they were criminals.

And I think that that happens every day, all the time in all of our lives. If we are in communities that are targeted by this kind of idea that some of us aren't worthy of safety, wholeness, care, love, stability. And I think for the undocumented community, as well as for the queer and trans community, especially in this exact moment with the current political climate, a lot of our communities are really sitting in fear. And I'm curious where you see the theology or the moral position of white Christian supremacy, like where is religion backing up that idea that some of us deserve to be in cages and some of us deserve to have our children taken away just because we crossed a border that originally crossed us in the case of many Mexicans.

So I'm curious if that shows up. Now as an adult, it's a different world when we have more political education and we have history lessons and it's not just lived experience that we're trying to make sense of, which is often said, well, God is testing us or God is, you know, or this is punishment or sometimes we rebel against that and are like, no, this is not God. But a lot of us feel or worry that when bad things happen, that's God punishing us and that that is somehow okay because we are fill in the blank kind of sinner.

So I'm wondering if you now as a theologian, now as an adult with a lot more education of history in the world, see that white Christian supremacy or that colonized religion playing out to back up political agendas that lead to things like spiritual terrorism.

Dr. Arelis Benítez | 24:36

So something that came up for me right now that you were talking more about, like white Christian supremacy, that connects to like the importance of this book, it's like it offers us language and with language and ability not only to understand what is happening, but also to take this blame out of ourselves and assign it where it needs to go. But it is such a process to be able to do that. And when I think about like, oh, from a U.S.

perspective, as a citizen, U.S.-born doctor in a philosophy working at Vanderbilt, all these privileges that I could possibly say, white Christian supremacy, name it, and talk about the harms that it is causing to the communities that I grew up in where I was not a doctor, where I did not speak English, where I depended fully on my undocumented parents, that I can feel empowered by naming this thing and how it is operative in churches and how it is operative in governments for the sake of a possible liberation of our communities.

But when you take me back to where I was, and when you take me to where my parents currently are, liberation is a privilege, right? They're not at the point where they can speak about liberation when they're concerned about their safety. Because even now, one is a resident, one is a citizen, and what's the government saying now? You know, we won't split families anymore. We're going to take all of you back to the border. That's the Christian thing to do. That's the right thing to do, right?

And that's white Christian supremacy. But does it help my mother and father to be able to say white Christian supremacy? No. The border crossed us from north to south. The border also crossed us from overseas, right? So Mexico was colonized. And they colonized through spirituality. They colonized through religion. They colonized through our faith. So where the fuck do we go?

Rev. Alba Onofrio | 26:44

Right.

Dr. Arelis Benítez | 26:45

So we're in this space where we have this, I don't even know what to call it. We have to survive. And so this is where my heart and this sudden agitation is coming from with this question and conversation that it's actually a privilege. And even with all my ranks now that I've been able to achieve on their backs, let's be clear, on my parents' back and many migrant communities' backs that I'm here. I am still in a place where I have privilege, but I am unwanted there too.

As a brown queer woman, I might be a token, a lovely one. But am I getting the privileges that others are getting there? No. But I can say to myself as a queer woman, I am in a very safe space or in a much safer space when I go into work than I would be in other places. But I'm still, even within this privilege, unwanted. And so what do we do? What do we do? What do we name this? How do we heal from this?

That's my investment, right? That it's like in a world, in a society that takes so long to change. And I'm not saying that the efforts aren't worth it. Thank you to all who have made it possible and who have lightened the load for us in many ways and continue to labor in that effort. There are these political changes that could help us, right? There are these communal changes that could help us, but internally, how are we healing? When even you have narratives from my mother and father are not the only ones that still to this day will say to themselves, well, if they sent us back, it's okay

because we were illegal anyway, right?

And so part of that, it's like that they had to tell themselves this because in the event that they would get deported, they still had to survive. They still had poor kids to look after, right? And so they create these narratives for themselves out of safety. And for a very long time in my own journey, I did the same. I created many different narratives to keep myself safe. Was I living fully? Was I living wholly? No, but it kept me safe.

It kept me alive and it kept me enduring to the next step and to the next step and to the next step. But here we are and the problems and the harm and the violence and the trauma and the terrorism is still present. So how do we heal?

Rev. Alba Onofrio | 29:14

Yeah, that is a great question. And the book is a little bit of our drop in the bucket to try to offer some of those possibilities of healing. And thank you for being part of the book. Thank you for being part of the project for years now for the Spanish and the English, and also hoping to bridge some of that Spanish language, Latin American work with the US and those of us in diaspora in the US to try to help that understanding, to try to like build those ways to be stronger, to fight together and to heal together, hopefully to close that wound as much as we can.

I'm curious what kind of response or what kind of what is possible or what you see possible with this project, but with this work in general around being able to name things, being able to connect the dots, being able to understand what religion has been imposed, the colonized parts and the spiritual parts and the God parts and the not God parts, particularly in your communities. I'm just interested in what you see, what are the challenges, what are the hopeful places and spots, any of that that you want to share as we close up.

Dr. Arelis Benítez | 30:39

Absolutely. I'm very grateful for the work of this book, because again, it's giving us language and through that language, the possibility that I see is that we can rewrite our narratives and live into narratives that feel more true and are more true to who we are than who we're told that we have to be or who we cannot be. And I remember that long before the Spiritual Violence book came out, while I was still a student at Vanderbilt, a friend of mine then told me about the Sodom and Gomorrah book that Soulforce has produced that you had done.

And I thought, oh, that was like rewriting the text that I didn't know, that I had heard and knew was used to harm one aspect of my identity. And I thought, somebody has actually had a conversation with the Bible, because the experience that I had, whether those people either leave it or they repress and stay. So it gave me the first spark around like, oh, like, we don't have to throw it all away. We can still, you know, hold this other part of our identity, which is, you know, whether you're Christian or profess another faith, but that you, in this case, Christianity, it's like, I could still hold on to this piece of me without having to let go of the other one, right?

But the hard part was, and it was also in Spanish, so I was like, it gave me even more hope. I was like, I could give this to my mom, to my dad, like the church can have it. How do I do that? But that hope and joy was also met with fear and panic, because at that time, I wasn't ready to make that move. My heart was, but it goes back to this thing that I talked about earlier, but what resources,

but what community, right?

Here's an answer, here's a resource. But then what happens to me when they say, what are you doing? You know, when I get conversation after conversation with parents or siblings or whatever, like, when these degrees of separation in all these important relationships are happening, where does Ali go? Who does Ali, like, who holds me? Okay, this new community, but I just met them, right? And can they truly identify with all my cultural context? Can they get it? So I'm sharing that because then I think of like the work that the book did, and when we put it online, and that immediately, so that question and that hesitation that I had with the Sodom and Gomorrah resource was, I don't have a resource, I don't have a community, I have a resource, but I don't have a community that I could continue to be in conversation with, so that when I have a heavy conversation with a church member, I can process it here, there's a space for it.

And when we were able to do that online, that to me was really wonderful. So that's another possibility they have, like the language helps us rewrite our narratives, but the community helps us live faithfully into them. And we need the community. And so I, my dream would be that, you know, to not just distribute as many of these books as possible, but to help people set up communities to talk about them, so that they feel that support.

Rev. Alba Onofrio | 33:53

That's amazing. Thank you so much for your time, for your stories, for your open heart, for your ferocious, willful, what was it? Willful resistance? Determination. Willful determination. I know, I'm like, oh, same, that's why I got them mixed up. We are resisting the forces that tell us that we don't belong and we're not enough. And tells that we're broken as opposed to bent. So thank you so much for your time. Thank you for being here. And we look forward to many more conversations.

Thank you so much. I appreciate it. Thank you for joining us for our conversation with Dr. Arelis Benítez. You know, spiritual violence fractures entire communities, families, and sometimes our complete way of understanding ourselves. And yet we're not without tools. We are building a shared language that names the harm and allows for healing. We have discernment, imagination, and we have each other. It is my prayer for you that we may all have Ali's stubborn, sacred insistence that our lives are worth living whole.

As we continue to explore the themes of spiritual violence, religious abuse, spiritual terrorism, and spiritual trauma this season, Ali's reflections offer us a roadmap for healing, identifying incongruencies, embracing liminality, practicing discernment about when and how we show up, and building communities where we can tell the truth without fear of losing everything. We are so grateful to Ali for her wisdom, vulnerability, and willful determination. And we're grateful for you, our listeners, for being here with us and learning and healing alongside us.

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.