

**Melissa M. Wilcox, Whitman College, Claudia Schippert, University of Central Florida, Paul Gorrell, Partners International, and Emilie M. Townes, Yale University**



*Paul Gorrell is Principal of the consulting firm Partners International in New York City where he works with Fortune 500 companies and nonprofit organizations on executive development and employee engagement. With a PhD from Drew University in ethics, Gorrell continues to write on topics of sexuality and religion and chairs the Gay Men and Religion Group of the AAR. Recently, he published an Op-Ed in The Washington Post reviewing President Obama's executive leadership style. His recent business book, The Coaching Connection (coauthored with John Hoover, Amacom, 2009), is being developed into a Masters Level Certificate by the City University of New York (CUNY).*



*Claudia Schippert is associate professor of humanities and Director of the religious studies program at the University of Central Florida in Orlando, Florida. Her research has been in queer theory and religion, feminist and queer ethics, religion and popular culture, as well as critical approaches to bodies and sexualities. Schippert's current research projects include work in queer pedagogy, queer popular culture studies, and a book project tentatively titled Queer Discipline. She serves as co-Chair for the Queer Theory and LGBT Studies in Religion Consultation in the AAR.*



*Emilie M. Townes is the Associate Dean of Academic Affairs and Andrew W. Mellon Professor of African American studies and religion at Yale University Divinity School. She has appointments in African American studies, religious studies, and women, gender, and sexuality studies. Her teaching and general research interests focus on social ethics, womanist ethics, critical social theory, cultural theory and studies, as well as on postmodernism and social postmodernism. Townes's specific interests include health and health care, the cultural production of evil, and developing a network between African Americans and Afro-Brazilian religious and secular leaders and community-based organizations. She is the first Black woman to serve as president of the American Academy of Religion (2008) and was named a fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences in 2009. Her most recent book is *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil* (Palgrave MacMillan, 2006).*



*Melissa M. Wilcox is associate professor of religion and Director of gender studies at Whitman College. She is author or coeditor of several books and numerous articles on gender, sexuality, and religion, including *Coming Out in Christianity: Religion, Identity, and Community* (Indiana University Press, 2003); *Queer Women and Religious Individualism* (Indiana University Press, 2009); and, with David W. Machacek, *Sexuality and the World's Religions* (ABC-CLIO, Incorporated, 2003).*



### **Wilcox: Introduction**

At the 2009 AAR meeting in Montréal, I had the pleasure of chairing a Special Topics Forum hosted by the Status of LGBTIQ Persons in the Profession Task Force. Called “Queer Careers,” the Forum was intended both to reflect on the career paths of LGBTIQ scholars and to offer mentoring to emerging LGBTIQ scholars. Consequently, the Task Force brought together three scholars with very different career paths to talk about the ways in which sexuality and gender have affected their careers and their work. A lively discussion followed the presentations, both formally during the session and informally afterward. Below, each of the scholars on the panel shares a portion of his or her presentation at the Forum.



### **Claudia Schippert: My Queer Career**

Being queer is not primarily what has made my career queer. Timing, disciplinary location, and disorientated trajectories play a role as well.

### **Being Queer, Doing Queer Work: Graduate School**

When I came to graduate school at Temple University, my teachers nurtured my budding queer ethics work, even though none of my mentors worked in exactly that field. I began writing about GLBT identity and ethics when queer theory was just emerging as academic discourse. Yet, even though being out as queer was largely uncontroversial, the specific form my work was taking caused disruptions — working with sexually explicit material and queering operative norms in ethics and religion both closed and opened doors. I changed advisors several times and was at times not quite “at home” in terms of disciplinary location. Increasing interdisciplinarity contributed to a slanted perspective — I was learning to queer disciplinary norms of the fields in which I was being trained — and in which I was trying to find a job.

### **Positioning Myself on Shifting Grounds: Getting a Job**

Perhaps I finally got a job (after three years on the job market and ten campus interviews), because I “de-queered” my job talk and appearance (a kind of drag). More importantly, my position is in Humanities within a Philosophy department. It seems not untypical that queer scholars in religion end up in departments of philosophy, English, sociology, history, or performance studies.

My training in theology, religion, and gender studies qualified me to teach interdisciplinary humanities survey courses; my job talk about queering ethics signaled some familiarity to philosophers thinking about epistemic responsibility. Fortunately, my being queer did not appear to be threatening. In retrospect, however, I got the job not so much despite being queer but despite doing religious studies. What has made me most queer at work for over eight years is not my GLBTIQ scholarship, but my odd disciplinary training, commitments, and orientations. Religion is a queer thing in a public university where most of my colleagues display either a knee-jerk “secular” disdain for anything religious or so completely closet their own practices or critical thoughts that proposing a major in Religious Studies in 2001 was more controversial — prompting open hostility — than receiving award funding for papers on gay drag queens or work on queer sexual practices.

### **Becoming a Professional Queer Successfully: Getting Tenure**

Queer work has shaped my scholarly record. Yet, I am something other than a “straight” religion scholar, because of my institutional location. Unlike the “normal” career trajectory of writing my first book based on my dissertation, I followed my senior colleagues’ mentoring (and disciplinary standards), writing many peer review articles instead of a monograph. I have not made the “right” moves in my research and teaching (initially not teaching many courses related to my own work) or in the connections I can establish in order to become professionalized and recognized in my field. And yet, I had the chance to define religious studies at one of the largest universities in the United States, at which I now also hold tenure.



## Paul Gorrell: My Portfolio Career

When I was studying for my PhD in Ethics at Drew University, I knew that I was going to have to change my career. At that time, I was a Catholic priest who was embracing my sexuality as a gay man and was no longer able to represent a church that taught against my own well-being and the justice deserved by same-sex people. As I befriended gay scholars in the Gay Men and Religion Group of AAR, they informed me that I should be careful to not become overly associated with same-sex issues as a scholar. They let me know that this would negatively influence my chances to land and sustain a teaching position.

I left the priesthood when I was writing my comps and decided I needed to earn a living and gain some career stability. Landing a job with a personality assessment and human resource consulting firm, I slowly built my knowledge of my new field and advanced into the executive ranks of the company. Eventually, after a five year leave of absence, I returned to the doctoral program, finished my comps, and wrote my dissertation on a same-sex topic unencumbered by the worries of bias against me in the hunt for a tenure-track position.

Instead of returning to academia full time, I continued to pursue the consulting path — taking on a managing director position at a leadership development consulting firm in New York City. The clients love my academic credentials in ethics and I apply methods learned in school to the development of products and services. This includes the development of an executive coaching model called Contextual Coaching, which was published in a book I coauthored in 2009.

My interest in the study of religion and ethical problems continues. This involvement includes chairing the Gay Men and Religion Group, where I am able to work with passionate, first rate scholars who continue to explore the issues that matter to gay folks. This position also provides the opportunity to mentor and partner with new scholars at the beginning of their academic careers. Meanwhile, I write occasional essays at *Religion Dispatches*, which provides an intelligent forum to get ideas into the marketplace and create debate.

In career development circles, the kind of career experience I describe is called a “portfolio career.” This means the individual is able to do many different kinds of things instead of having the traditional “job” focused on one thing. Today, many people are opting out of full-time roles to take on multiple opportunities. This can include consulting, writing, and adjunct teaching. If health care was not so work-based in our country, this would be the preferred option of many people.



## Emilie Townes: Embodiment

i try to live out my everyday commitment to refuse to confine my complex body in “acceptable” but basically demonic stereotypes of what and who is a black lesbian, raised in the south, from a normal dysfunctional family who was middle class and highly educated, who attended the protestant church on the regular until it became irrelevant for a teenager who had large questions about the nature of the universe, coming to understand her sexuality and sexual orientation/identity, who played sports, played in the band, went to school in the Midwest, has lost both her parents, loves her baby sister dearly, and works in an ivy league institution — much to my surprise — and tries not to forget all those things and people who brought me to this time and place through their love and anger at a society that marked my black female lesbian body as disposable

hence, i refuse to perform a heteronormative drag show

and resist accepting minstrelsy as rigorous scholarship

instead, i turn to an integrative move that i believe best represents the complexity of our bodies in a complex sociocultural and political habitus

it also, and this is most important for me, means that i do not section off my private life from my scholarship and teaching

except periodically, for health

many of us throughout the academy

have been told to live in split, if not fractured bodies

to deny the gift that God gives us body and soul

to think of our bodies as merely vessels

to treat our bodies as suspect

almost illegal

and worse — illicit

and sometimes you and i have been told this is holy

i refuse to rip myself apart or to invite colleagues and students to perform this demonic shake dance

just because folks who think who i am is a sea of wanton black hot mess of sexuality

are threatening not to sit next to me in a scholarly pew that is little more than a postmodern auction block

i am looking for spaces — faithfully, methodologically and theologically — to understand that sexuality is more than sexual acts

it is who we are as thinking and feeling human beings

it is all of who we are

to deny the fullness of our sexuality means we destroy our selves each day

if we keep it up

one day there will be no one else left

i suspect that with a liberative hard-edged moral framework, it is possible to call abnormative theology and religious stances into question

because the complexity of creation and the roles we play in it are not as easily codified as much of traditional homophobic and heterosexist immoral theory portrays

turning to such a framework is one step that helps me out of this hegemonic endgame

for it provides me a series of windows into our individual and communal memory

that can then help me challenge my assumptions and perhaps even my values as they are placed into a wider playing field with the assumptions and values of others