Fighting the Fear of Encounter: Discernment, Imagination, and Praxis in Educating for Resistance

In a political climate where fear of immigrants and minorities, white nationalism, and alternative facts are the norm, a religious education that embraces encounter must prepare people to resist the seduction of an easy exclusion. This resistance of exclusion involves establishing hospitality and encounter through the exercise of imagination, discernment, and commitment to praxis. A pedagogy of resistance equips youth to name and resist a social imaginary that has replaced hospitality and encounter with fear and suspicion.

In the Religious Education Association call for papers for this year’s conference, the coordinators provide us with some parameters to consider under the rubric of “encounter.” In particular, the inter-religious encounter is seen as both the goal of religious education and the site of religious education. As an educational goal, inter-religious encounter points to the responsibility of religious educators – in schools, parishes, and other religious organizations – to prepare young people to encounter those whose religious tradition differs from their own. This involves the “task of helping pupils learn the skills which will enable them to deal not only with their own religious tradition but with difference and diversity among religions and worldview orientations.”

So, in order to educate toward an openness to this kind of encounter, religious educators help students understand their own religious traditions so that they can be confident in their own religious beliefs. They also provide students with sufficient information about other religious traditions so that students can encounter them in openness, respect, and a willingness to learn from these traditions. At the same time, encounter with difference also becomes a site where religious education happens. It is in the encounter with those who have religious beliefs that are different from our own that we learn the skills of inter-religious encounter. The Christian practices of hospitality, generosity, respect, and humility are learned in praxis – in the doing of them in real-life situations. Thus, religious education for encounter is a dynamic educational program that involves both “learning about” – learning about religious traditions and practices – and “learning through” – learning from the encounter itself.

These are all worthy and necessary goals. As the United States and other countries where Christianity has historically been a majority religion become more and more religiously diverse, the need for religious education to prepare students to respectfully and hospitably encounter people with differing religious beliefs and practices is clear. And this call for a religious education that embraces encounter is itself reflective of the Gospel call to hospitality. Jesus provides the model of the teacher who is prepared to welcome and break bread with those who society would consider the stranger, the outsider, the other. The Good Samaritan and the stories of Jesus’ encounter with the Samaritan woman and the Syro-Phoenician woman, for example, all

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1 Religious Education Association, “Call for Proposals,” https://religiouseducation.net/rea2017/call/
provide Biblical warrant for the call for Christian communities to welcome encounter with the stranger. Yet, the Biblical witness also reminds us that Jesus experienced significant reluctance and argumentativeness from his disciples. They objected to his welcome of children, of a woman considered unclean, of a tax collector. They wanted to exclude these people from Jesus’ ministry, or, at least, to move them to the margins so that they would not intrude on the disciples’ vision for what Jesus’ ministry should be. But, again and again, Jesus pushed back on this exclusion; Jesus welcomed all (even when he had to be reminded to do so as in the case of the Syro-Phoenician woman).

Jesus’ hospitality provides the example for our encounters with those who are different from ourselves. Like the disciples, it is all too easy to fall into an easy exclusion, operating with the assumption that “we” do not need “them” or that “they” are a danger to “us.” Like the disciples, we find that it is often easier to follow the practices of the culture around us – seeking to surround ourselves with those like us, seeking to protect ourselves from difference or change. We often couch this exclusion in terms of service to our own before serving others or of a celebration of the uniqueness of our own group or of mindfulness of a perceived danger presented by members of some “other” community. But, regardless of how we explain it to ourselves, this exclusion of others from being welcomed into our Christian communities too easily mimics the wrongheadedness of the disciples and fails to walk the path laid out by Jesus. And, just as Jesus resisted his disciples’ attempts to exclude those who they thought were too different, the Christian church is called to continue resisting this kind of exclusion.

These practices of exclusion seem today to be deeply rooted in our culture and, by extension, in our churches. Racism, sexism, xenophobia, Islamophobia, anti-Semitism, discrimination against immigrants (regardless of their legal status), and white nationalism all seem to be finding new purchase in our cultural awareness. While these evils and the unjust structures that reinforce them were always there, these voices of injustice seemed marginalized. But the list of events that bring to public awareness the persistence of these attitudes and practices continues to grow: Ferguson, Charleston, Orlando, Charlottesville.

When our public discourse seems to propose a religious faith that is exclusionary and isolating, religious educators have a responsibility to, in the language of Walter Brueggemann, denounce the dominant consciousness and announce a new consciousness. To do this, religious educators can cultivate an imagination deeply rooted in the Biblical tradition of prophetic resistance to injustice. And they can invite religious education students into the dialogical process of discernment – a practice that not only helps us to imagine God’s perspective but also helps us to form communities with other Christians, joining together to create communities of encounter and hospitality. But merely forming communities of like-minded believers is not enough; if the goal is the prophetic denunciation of a social imaginary that has become toxic, religious educators and their students are called to engage in practices of resistance. Even in the face of a seeming rising tide of hate and exclusion, there is the opportunity for religious education programs in schools and parishes to resist the turn away from encounter and to draw attention to practices of hospitality that welcome difference and dialogue.

**Social Imaginaries and an Easy Exclusion**

Philosopher Charles Taylor provides a perspective on the ways that societies imagine their common existence and make sense of reality. Taylor adopts the term “social imaginary” which he defines in this way:
By social imaginary, I mean something much broader and deeper than the intellectual schemes people may entertain when they think about social reality in a disengaged mode. I am thinking, rather, of the ways people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations.2

While a social imaginary might be grounded in or explained by a social theory, it points to the largely un-reflected-upon understanding that the people in a society have of the way things work.3 Social imaginaries, then, are the ways that societies as a whole imagine their social existence; it “is that common understanding that makes possible common practices and a widely shared sense of legitimacy.”4 Social imaginaries, because they ground the ways that societies and their people think about reality, underlie both the good and the bad of those realities.5

Social imaginaries have historically been grounded in the religious imagination of a society. Taylor describes a time, particularly from the Middle Ages until the advent of what he names as secularity, when Western society was embedded in a social imaginary that was largely shaped by a religious perspective. In this social imaginary, belief in God was assumed and participation in the religious rituals, teachings, and practices of the community was unquestioned.6 In this social imaginary, the practices of the community were shaped by Christian commitments and there was an at least implicit understanding of the need for hospitality and welcome. Outsiders would have been relatively uncommon and, when strangers did visit a community, they would likely to have at least seemed familiar – sharing the same religion, race, or class expectations. Nevertheless, there was in the social imaginary an expectation that strangers in the community could request and would be offered hospitality – a bit of food, a dry place to sleep, a word of welcome.

In the social imaginary of the early twenty-first century in the United States, this has shifted. No longer is the social imaginary shaped in an unquestioned way by a shared religious perspective. Even when a majority of members of a community claim the same religious tradition, the meaning of that religious tradition and its role in shaping the ways we live together are often disputed. For example, while Christianity is the majority religion in the United States, we seem to be in a period where the meaning of Christianity in the public sphere is under

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3 Again, Berger and Luckmann are helpful: “Only a very limited group of people in any society engages in theorizing, in the business of ideas… But everyone in society participates in its ‘knowledge’ in one way or another. Put differently, only a few are concerned with the theoretical interpretation of the world, but everybody lives in a world of some sort” (Berger and Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality*, 15).


5 For example, the belief that, in a democratic society, all people have the opportunity to participate in the common decision making can make it so that people expect all institutions (such as the Catholic Church) to function democratically; we see democratic participation to be such an obvious good that we do not understand why all institutions are not democratic. On the other hand, those in positions of privilege in a democratic society tend to assume that all people participate in that democracy and all people experience the same results; this ignores the impact of structural oppression and marginalization (such as racism and sexism) on the ability of some to participate in the democratic process.

question and the relationship of Christianity to our social imaginary seems to have become problematic.

The election of Donald Trump in 2016 has revealed this shifting of the social imaginary in unexpected ways. Prior to the election, many of us\(^7\) assumed that our social imaginary included a commitment to encounter, welcome, and hospitality. While there were situations where those who were considered “outsiders” were not met with welcome, we assumed that these instances were not part of the “mainstream” of our social imaginary. However, since the election, we have seen increasing incidence of hate speech, harassment, and xenophobia. Swastikas painted on synagogues and mosques, attacks against people who look Hispanic or Muslim, attempts to roll back the legal protections afforded to gay, lesbian, and transgender people, attempts to restrict access to voting in African American communities. Most disturbing, the resurgence of white supremacy movements, calling explicitly for the exclusion from the community of those who don’t fit a narrow definition of what it means to be an America citizen. It seems that the America that many of us thought we lived in – one that was making progress (too slow, sometimes) towards increasing openness, hospitality, care, and justice – does not exist. We can no longer take for granted that our communities are places that welcome encounter with those who are different from ourselves.

**Prophetic Imagining**

Walter Brueggemann’s articulation of the prophetic imagination is particularly useful for describing how an ancient vision – the critique of their social context offered by the biblical prophets – can become a call to a renewed social imaginary today. For Brueggemann, the study of the prophets of the Hebrew Bible must draw the reader from an analysis of the prophets’ message to their world to a continual re-reading and re-appropriation of the biblical message for our world. Brueggemann insists that “the task of prophetic ministry is to nurture, nourish, and evoke a consciousness and perception alternative to the consciousness and perception of the dominant culture around us.”\(^8\) This alternative consciousness is one that is both critical of the dominant culture and energizing of the community in creating a new way of doing things. If our social imaginary is the way that we have come to understand our reality, the way things are, then the prophetic imagination is one that calls this social imaginary into question and pushes the community to continually reshape this social imaginary so that it conforms ever more closely with the vision of God’s reign that is articulated by the prophets.

Brueggemann’s analysis of the work of the prophets can be understood in the categories of discernment, imagination, and praxis. Discernment and imagination go hand in hand for the prophet. The ability to see and judge the existing social order, especially when that social imaginary is unjust and oppressive, must, in the work of the prophet function alongside an ability to propose a new vision for the life of the community. The prophet calls for an evaluation of the current social imaginary and a break with oppressive structures. Engaging the community in the process of seeing – perhaps for the first time – that the social imaginary is an inadequate expression of God’s call to love, mercy, and justice, prophets encourage the community in the

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\(^7\) The perspective I’m describing comes from my own contextualized experience as a white, middle-class resident of the East Coast of the United States. Clearly, members of communities of color and others on the receiving end of hate, harassment, and violence have been aware of these currents in our social imaginary. My point is simply that the events of the last year have brought these to the forefront – especially for those of us with white middle-class privilege – in stark and frightening ways.

process of discerning their choices. This choice, discerned through the exercise of a prophetic imagination, is between the current social imaginary that undergirds a system of injustice and oppression and a renewed social imaginary more aligned with the biblical call to justice, hospitality, and openness to encounter. The process of discernment involves the imagining of new possibilities, an alternative consciousness that is proposed by the prophet and which provides an energizing hope for the community. The prophet “creates the sense of new realities that can be trusted and relied upon just when the old realities have left us hopeless… We are energized not by that which we already possess but by that which is promised and about to be given.” In taking the side of the marginalized and victimized in history, the prophet calls for a renewed vision for how things should be and instills the hope and confidence that this vision is coming to reality. The prophet and the prophetic community engage in the collective re-shaping of the social imaginary by visioning a new reality.

Under the influence of a prophetic imagination, this call for the community to reshape it social imaginary becomes a call to action. And, this call to action involves both the resistance of injustice and the creation of more just structures and communities. Prophetic resistance to injustice rests on a foundation of seeing injustice, judging in contrary to God’s vision, and acting in concrete ways to resist that injustice. In their denunciation of the unjust social imaginary and their annunciation of a more just vision, prophets call the community to praxis on behalf of those who are oppressed and marginalized. Brueggemann suggests that “prophetic imagination begins in the ancient covenant but it is carried, in concrete articulation, to current issue of the day, so that daily transactions are delineated as instances of old covenantal commitments.” And he reminds us that, as with the ancient prophets, this is a difficult task: “The prophetic act, now as always, is decidedly upstream and against the grain. Its work is to take deeply rooted memories (to which we still tip our hats in vague acknowledgement) and show how these memories continue to inform and shape and compel even now.”

Resisting Injustice

The Bible teaches us that God is a God of steadfast love, loyalty, and care, and, because of this, God’s actions towards the people of Israel are just. God’s justice is described, for example, in the mouth of Moses: “The Rock, his work is perfect and all his ways are just. A faithful God, without deceit, just and upright is he” (Deuteronomy 32:4). And God’s words to Isaiah paint a portrait of a God who wants nothing more than to act with justice: “Therefore the LORD waits to be gracious to you; therefore he will rise up to show mercy to you. For the LORD is a God of justice; blessed are all those who wait for him” (Isaiah 30:18). God stands up for those who are most in need of protection and care and expects the same from the people: “For the LORD your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who is not partial and takes no bribe, who executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and who loves the strangers, providing them food and clothing. You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt” (Deuteronomy 10:17-19). In calling the people to act with hesèd, the prophet Micah also calls the people to act with justice: “[God] has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God” (Micah 6:8).

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9 Brueggemann, The Prophetic Imagination, 14.
11 Brueggemann, The Practice of Prophetic Imagination, 40.
However, the biblical call to justice also means that communities are called to be communities that resist injustice. In other words, in addition to actively working to end oppression, we are called to form communities that empower people to resist the effects of injustice. Religious educator HyeRan Kim-Cragg, in exploring communities that practice this kind of resistance to injustice, names remembrance and relationship-building as “important threads that weave a theology of resistance, a theology that uncovers realities of violence and reflects the faith and wisdom of people who work to overcome it.”

Remembrance, which goes beyond a simple knowing about an injustice, to an embodied and faithful remembering, is a transformative practice that both recalls the injustices of the past and hopes for a more just future. Practices of remembrance become, therefore, practices of resistance; by remembering the injustices of the past and present, those injustices can be resisted and ended. Relationship-building – particularly the building of relationships across differences – functions to bind together in solidarity the community that seeks to resist injustice. “A theology of resistance as a relationship-building is a work of the body that touches and moves the soul of people. It ‘occurs only through the actual presence of people who have the courage to be physically present, to be in a place of hunger, violence, or despair.’”

Remembrance and relationship-building in communities of resistance function together; the stories that we tell in order to recall injustice need both tellers and hearers. In a community that resists injustice, not only does the sharing of stories help in the building of community, it provides alternative ways of imagining the ways of understanding the social imaginary at work in their world.

Resisting injustice calls on the same three categories of discernment, imagination, and praxis. Discerning injustice – seeing its manifestations in our current social imaginary; hearing the stories of injustice told within the community and by those outside the community; evaluating the effects of violence, oppression, marginalization, and exclusion – lays the foundation for resistance. We cannot resist injustices that we do not yet see and understand. Furthermore, communities engage in discernment as they consider not only what the injustice is that needs to be resisted but also how that resistance can happen. Exercising a prophetic imagination calls the community to critically evaluate the social imaginary and the injustices that it undergirds and to propose a new vision for the community – new ways of remembering, building relationships, practicing solidarity, and resisting unjust structures and protesting unjust acts.

And, in resisting injustice, it is not enough to discern the injustice and to imagine the appropriate response; the commitment to praxis for justice must follow. When we participate in communities that are resisting injustice, we are practicing solidarity, living alongside those who are oppressed and marginalized, and acting in the world as God acts. Because communities of resistance are built on a network of relationships that span all kinds of differences (in age, gender, class, and race), they can function to form people in the real relationships that help them to imagine God’s justice in the world. Practices of resistance – such as sharing stories of marginalization, participating in rallies and protests, petitioning government, raising funds, and

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13 Kim-Cragg, “A Theology of Resistance,” 424. For Kim-Cragg, “Faith is an act performed by the body such that it comes to know. This bodily knowing, through the communal gesture of remembrance, continues “to be learned in this physical gathering.”
engaging in dialogue across ideological differences – help people see the ways that various injustices impact the lives of the people around them and how they can participate in the fight against these kinds of oppression and marginalization.

Educating for Resistance

A most obvious source for a pedagogy for resistance to injustice and the creation of communities oriented toward inclusion and encounter is the liberative pedagogy of Paulo Freire. Freire argues that the role of the education is to educate for freedom and justice, to educate for conscientization. According to Freire, conscientization involves an educational system in which people, especially those who have traditionally been at the margins of society, learn how to name and change the reality of the poverty and oppression in their lives. By learning to recognize and analyze the situations of social, cultural, political, and economic oppression and marginalization in their lives (a practice of discernment), the poor become able to imagine ways to change these situations of injustice, transforming their lives and the whole of their world.16

Like the work of the prophet, Freire describes the work of the revolutionary teacher as one who aids students in the discernment and imaginative processes of rejecting a “banking education”17 and engaging in the process of problematizing, asking questions, dialogue, and conscientization.18 This conscientization can only occur in the dialogical process in which teachers and students struggle together to understand and take ownership of some particular content, echoing Kim-Cragg’s call for practices of remembrance and relationship-building. To do this, Freire argues that

it is impermissible to train engineers or stonemasons, physicians or nurses, dentists or machinists, educators or mechanics, farmers or philosophers, cattle farmers or biologists, without an understanding of our own selves as historical, political, social, and cultural beings – without a comprehension of how society works.19

Students learn to discern their social imaginary, to understand the ways the world works – and especially the ways that it works to keep them marginalized and oppressed. In doing this, they also come to see that the way things are – the present social imaginary – is not necessarily the way things must be. And, in this understanding, is born the struggle for change and justice.

Feminist scholars of liberative pedagogy have argued that Freire’s approach points towards the integration of conscientization (through processes of discernment and imagination) and praxis. If this conscientization is “the process by which individuals recognize the systems of oppression in which they exist, articulate their roles and places in these systems, and develop concrete strategies to empower themselves and others to engage in social action,”20 then conscientization happens through the processes of

(a) dialogic practice, which encourages those who have been silenced to speak for themselves; (b) praxical pedagogy, which emphasizes skill development that prepares individuals to ‘understand and intervene into their own history;’ and (c) a pedagogy of

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17 Freire, Pedagogy of the Oppressed, 57-59.
18 Freire, Pedagogy of the Oppressed, 67.
articulation and risk, which focuses on making connections or maps between different practices and theories to find methods that work.\textsuperscript{21}

An education for conscientization is one that brings students and teachers together into communities where open dialogue and concern for those who have been silenced, marginalized, and oppressed combines with a commitment to act with them and on their behalf. A liberative pedagogy also has the effect of nurturing the imaginations of students. Educator bell hooks notes that “in dominator culture, the killing of one’s ability to imagine serves as a way to repress and contain everyone within the limits of the status quo.”\textsuperscript{22} The recurring and unexamined experience of silencing, marginalization, and oppression effectively stifles the imaginations, but a liberative pedagogy, one that focuses on conscientization, has the power to counter this.\textsuperscript{23} If, as hooks insists, “imagination is one of the most powerful modes of resistance that oppressed and exploited folk can and do use,”\textsuperscript{24} then it is also the task of education to find ways to nurture the imagination. And, for hooks, this nurturing of the imagination is an engagement of the prophetic:

The power of the imagination [feels] prophetic. In Mary Grey’s \textit{The Outrageous Pursuit of Hope}, she explains that “prophetic imagination is outrageous – not merely in dreaming the dream, but in already living out the dream before it has come to pass, and in embodying this dream in concrete action.” Individuals from marginalized groups, whether victimized by dysfunctional families or by political systems of domination, often find their way to freedom by heeding the call of prophetic imagination.\textsuperscript{25}

By engaging the imaginations of students, particularly the imaginations of those students from marginalized and oppressed groups, liberative pedagogies have the potential to enable students to analyze the world in which they live, to discern the ways that that world is unjust, and to propose new ways to engage that world in order to resist that injustice. In other words, a liberative pedagogy sets the stage for educating students in a prophetic imagination that denounces injustice and announces new ways of being in the world. Flowing from the perspective of a liberative pedagogy, practices of resistance to injustice become critical praxis – the cycle of informed action and critical reflection – rooted in a reading of the world and the word and engaging in prophetic imagining.

\section*{Fighting the Fear of Encounter in Religious Education}

The social imaginary that seems operative in the United States – and that seems especially visible since the 2016 election – is one that cultivates fear of the other. At best, this results in a lack of hospitality and a reticence to welcome others into our church communities. At worst, this leads to racist, sexist, homophobic, Islamophobic, xenophobic rhetoric that lives in and goes unchallenged by church communities. Most likely, church communities reject these

\textsuperscript{21} Enns and Forrest, “Towards Defining,” 7-8.
\textsuperscript{22} bell hooks, \textit{Teaching Critical Thinking: Practical Wisdom} (New York: Routledge, 2010), 60.
\textsuperscript{23} Annie Lockhart-Gilroy, “A Way Forward: Nurturing the Imagination at the Intersection of Race, Gender, and Age” \textit{Religious Education} 111, no. 4 (July-September 2016): 422. Lockhart-Gilroy makes this argument about the experiences of black adolescent girls: “Having suffered the killing of one’s ability to imagine a different life, one is left with the belief that one’s perceived reality is not only an acceptable option, but the only true option. Therefore, to see a new vision, this imagination needs to be rekindled.”
\textsuperscript{24} hooks, \textit{Teaching Critical Thinking}, 61.
extreme expressions of hate that have surfaced in the United States; but they need more strategies for educating their congregations to resist these kinds of injustices and to shape a community that welcomes the encounter with those who are different and that embodies Jesus’ example of hospitality and resistance of injustice. The categories of discernment, imagination, and praxis can provide a framework for educators to engage youth in a religious education that resists the fear of encounter.  

Discernment

A religious education program that wants to fight the fear of encounter can provide young people with skills of and practice in using discernment. As defined by David White, discernment is the attempt to “understand how God reveals truth to humans amid our potential for distorting this truth.” Discernment is the Christian practice of listening for God’s message to humanity amid the historical circumstances in which the community finds itself. In today’s context, discernment means seeking out God’s history of being on the side of the most marginalized, of calling the community to hospitality and justice, and of calling the community to action on behalf of the oppressed, marginalized, and maligned. Discernment today means seeing the ways that God’s message to humanity calls into question the current social imaginary, the unjust status quo. Discernment enables the community to see the interconnectedness of the world and to see the need for relationships across difference.

As White suggests, the practices of discernment are largely already in place in most of our church communities – practices of listening, understanding, remembering and dreaming, and acting. However, “despite the presence of these habits in popular youth ministry, they remain unrelated and discrete, and the responsibility for these habits lies largely in the hands of adults.” Practices of discernment have the potential to empower young people to see for themselves what God is calling the community to be and to do. Simply telling youth to be welcoming is not as powerful as helping them to see for themselves that hospitality and encounter is rooted in God’s Word and functions to cultivate real relationships among people. This echoes HaeRan Kim-Cragg’s call for remembrance and relationship-building in educating for resistance – it is through the telling of the stories of God’s interactions with God’s people and through the relationships that are formed in the community that everyone in the community is empowered to engage in the resistance to injustice that the current social imaginary calls for.

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26 In this section, I consider some guiding principles for youth in religious education, but the principles outlined here could and should also be used in adult religious education programming.
27 David F. White, Practicing Discernment with Youth: A Transformative Youth Ministry Approach (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 2005), 66. White broadens this definition, suggesting four ways that that discernment draws on human capabilities “as means of illuminating God’s Word and resisting self-deceit: (1) discernment as a language of the heart that focuses on affect and intuition, through which God speaks; (2) discernment as language of the mind, which engages in intellectual analysis, through which God speaks; (3) discernment as language of the soul, which privileges contemplation and biblical/theological imagination, through which God speaks; and (4) discernment as a language of the body, of practical exploration of the world, through which God also speaks” (66-67).
28 White, Practicing Discernment with Youth, 83.
29 White, Practicing Discernment with Youth, 200. He claims: “Youth ministers routinely create Bible studies or youth talks based on their practice of listening to young people and the themes of their lives. Most youth curriculum in some way engages in analysis of some social issue and frames it theologically. And most youth groups actively engage in missions work, whether journeying to Mexico or Appalachia or to nearby centers for ministries with the homeless and poor” (200-201).
30 White, Practicing Discernment with Youth, 200-201.
Imagination

A religious education that nurtures a prophetic imagination is one that takes seriously the importance of imagination in the ways that people make sense of the world. According to Mary Warnock, the imagination is the foundation of the ability to interpret experiences and to propose new ways of being in the world.\(^{31}\) Inviting young people to exercise their imaginations is not simply the effort to encourage them to create new things (through drawing, writing, and so on). Even more, it is an invitation for them to feel more deeply and to think more creatively about everything in their world.\(^{32}\) In taking on the challenge of educating for imagination, Maxine Greene notes that cultivating an imagination in young people means helping them move beyond their ordinary and habitual ways of thinking. This is a challenge for teachers: “It may be a challenge to pose questions, to seek out explanations, to look for reasons, to construct meanings. It may be a provoking of dialogues within the classroom space.”\(^{33}\) Greene suggests that the classroom space that is most conducive to education for imagination is one that provokes thoughtfulness and conscientization when teachers and students learn together in “a kind of collaborative search, each from her or his lived situation.”\(^{34}\) This search must be rooted in hope. Following Freire, she asserts that “people trying to be more fully human must not only engage in critical thinking but must be able to imagine something coming of their hopes; their silence must be overcome by their search.”\(^{35}\)

As explored earlier, Brueggemann reminds us that key to the prophetic imagination is the prophetic task of denouncing the dominant consciousness and announcing a new, more liberative consciousness.\(^{36}\) Similarly, Freire argues that, in our educative efforts, we have a responsibility to both denounce and announce – to denounce the injustice that we see and experience and to announce the ways that the world can be changed.\(^{37}\) In the process of asking questions, posing problems, and engaging in dialogue, we examine our world, read our world, and commit to changing it. The biblical prophets serve as a model for engaging in critical reflection on situations of injustice and for communicating that reflection to the rest of the community in a way that calls that community to act. Following their model, young people can be invited into the Christian prophetic imagination as, with the community and from their own positionality, they imagine the church as God has called it to be – to be a community of faithfulness, mercifulness, loving-kindness, and justice.

Praxis

Discernment and imagination are the first steps; for a church community to educate for resistance to a fear of encounter, discernment and imagination – seeing God’s message to the church, denouncing the unjust social imaginary, and proposing a new way of being in the world – must be followed by praxis. White suggests that young people are hungry for action:

Young people yearn to “do something” and so are expressing a holy desire to engage meaningfully in the reconciliation of the world and their true selves – beyond frivolous social and recreational activities we provide in hopes of retaining their interest. They

\(^{32}\) Warnock, *Imagination*, 207.
\(^{34}\) Greene, *Releasing the Imagination*, 23.
\(^{35}\) Greene, *Releasing the Imagination*, 25.
young people want to make a difference in world, but they do not yet know how to connect what they believe and what they have discovered through discernment and imagination with the real problems they see in the world.

Praxis – action that is rooted in discernment and imagination – helps young people to see the connections between an activity and their faith commitments. It equips them to engage in encounters with others that are just, respectful, hospitable, and deeply rooted in the Christian faith. And, as Freire reminds us, education (particularly religious education) and praxis cannot be separated: “For apart from inquiry, apart from the praxis, individuals cannot be truly human. Knowledge emerges only through invention and re-invention, through the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry human being pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other.”

In confronting the fear of encounter, this praxis moves young people beyond simple action to a reflective and creative practice. Any individual activity in a church community can invite youth to think more deeply about their faith. But, by combining reflection and action, church communities can help young people engage in the kind of praxis that can lead to a transformation of their world and, ultimately, of the social imaginary.

Conclusion

The social imaginary of the United States in the early twenty-first century seems to have shifted. The un-reflected-upon ways that we thought the world worked no longer seem to be true. Instead of a world that seemed to be making progress in eradicating hate, mistrust, and fear of difference, we find ourselves in a world where those who preach exclusion are finding new audiences. While this may be the “last gasp” of a dying imaginary rooted in a history that can no longer be recreated, it is, nevertheless, still operative in our day-to-day lives. In the quest to confront a social imaginary – both in the church and in the wider community – that undergirds an easy exclusion of those who are different, young people can be on the front lines of change. Discernment and imagination, remembrance and relationship-building, when combined with praxis with and on behalf of those who are marginalized or excluded provides young people with a way to put their deep yearning to “do something” into conversation with the Gospel call to love, mercy, and justice.

38 White, Practicing Discernment with Youth, 187.
39 White provides an example, which I retell using the categories of discernment, imagination, and praxis: A youth group exploring the connections between racism and the juvenile justice system used practices of discernment to learn about the issue and about God’s call for love, care, and respect. They used practices of imagination to critique the social imaginary that led to the disproportionate incarceration of African America youth and to imagine ways of being community that are more just. And, finally, they took action both in the church community and in the wider community. This praxis not only helped them advocate for a change of an unjust system, it also helped them change themselves and their own practices of welcoming and hospitality. See White, Practicing Discernment with Youth, 197-199.
40 Freire, Pedagogy of the Oppressed, 58. Freire says this even more pointedly: “To affirm that men [and women] are persons and as persons should be free, and yet to do nothing tangible to make this affirmation a reality, is a farce” (35).
Bibliography


