Religious Education as Public Theology: A Black Perspective

Panelists: Nate West, Lynne Westfield, and Joseph Crockett
Moderator: Annie Lockhart-Gilroy

Panel Overview: This panel will highlight an upcoming book stemming from a conversation of the Black Experience Working Group of REA and will be moderated by one of the book’s editors. As we discuss learning through encounters, this panel will discuss the way we learn through different types of encounters in three specific actions: viewing the religious educator as a public theologian, seeing Black mothering and the meta-narrative of Ubuntu as a natural framework for public theology, and creating dialogue with the Black Lives Matter Movement and other protest movements that may be skeptical of religious institutions.

Paper 1: Revisiting the Formation of Religious Educators: Imagining Religious Educators as Public Theologians – Nate West

Systemic racism, unemployment/underemployment, economic disparities, police brutality, voting rights and mass incarceration are just some of the social issues facing African Americans. Although activist, civil rights groups, non-profit organizations and others are actively addressing these concerns, there is a void from the faith community that could impact the social and political concerns of their communities. The author contends that that void can be filled by religious educators. What role can religious educators play in the public forum to address these and other issues? What do religious educators have to offer in the area of public theology? What preparation is needed to
help religious educators fulfill the role of public theologians? Why does it matter that religious educators participate in public theology?

The author asserts that in general, religious educators are formed to engage their faith in a private manner and in turn they teach and train others how to practice their faith privately. However, faith is a community endeavor and should be displayed and practiced in public. Norma Cook Everist states, “The tenets of Christianity hold that faith is for the sake not only of the individual or the family, but also of the whole community. Mission implies being made openly, not secluded or private. Christianity can be personal and intimate, but it is never private.”

This essay will make the case that religious educators have a vital function as public theologians. Specific attention will be given to how the leadership practices and principles of two religious educators – Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X, can help prepare religious educators for the public theology domain. Martin Luther King, Jr stated, “On the one hand I must attempt to change the soul of individuals so that their societies may be changed. On the other I must attempt to change the societies so that the individual soul will have a chance. Therefore, I must be concerned about unemployment slums, and economic insecurity.” Religious educators do not have to limit themselves to the formation of individuals. They can also be agents in the transformation of communities. Religious educators who have been properly equipped for public theology will be positioned to effect transformation in both individuals and communities.

*Paper 2: About Face!: Mothering and the Meta-Narrative of Ubuntu - Lynne Westfield*
An under-interrogated phenomenon is the role of African American Christian mothers who nurture the prophetic impulse in themselves, their children, and their churches. Black mothering, done by moms, aunties, big sisters and neighbors, provide the epistemological lens through which liberation is imagined and self-worth is known as sacred. The prophetic impulse can be encouraged or snuffed out thus showing the power of mothers who fight for survival of their people. It also shows the formidable struggle undertaken by mothers who want freedom for their children. This paper looks at an exemplar mother, Nancy B. Westfield, who nurtured the prophetic impulse in her children and her community. The writer, daughter of Nancy, extrapolates from childhood experiences three key elements which her mother employed to foster the prophetic impulse: (a) common sense, (b) truth telling, and (c) authentic subversion as a routine way of living. The essay suggests an epistemology of resistance is not to create a counter-narrative to the politics of inferiority and superiority—no counter-narrative can shout louder than hate. Instead of a counter-narrative, an epistemology of resistance maintains the meta-narrative of “Ubuntu” as a guiding law of humanness, thus liberation. The essay seeks to unpack these questions: what does it mean to nurture the prophetic impulse for the continuation of public theology? What does it mean to foster public theologians in the communities of African American people? What can be learned from mothers who are exemplars as public theologians?


Religious education can be conceptualized in a variety of ways and approached from varying vantage points. After a review of several theories and approaches to education and religious education, a case is made for the use of critical pedagogy in teaching and learning for emancipatory religious education. Public
protest movements are not inevitably inclined to accept religious features as the cure for their protestations. Yet, even secular, post-modern educators work and write with an awareness, to paraphrase T. S. Eliot, that the dominant pursuit of scientific knowledge and technical information is bringing our world “nearer to death, but not nearer to God” (Eliot, 1971, 96). The argument advanced is that **words grounded in experience and animated by actions have capacity—power—to reconstruct significations of “otherness,” for framing and refreshing prophetic visions of teaching and learning.** Five features of critical education—context, power, praxis, “otherness,” and critical literacy—are identified and discussed in support of the thesis. The author contends that Black Lives Matter and other nonviolent public protest movements call for a unique educational methodology and warrants the support of religious educators in their endeavors. These elements are also discussed in this presentation.