Safe Spaces or Brave Spaces? Reflections on Practical Theology and Transformative Learning Theories

Abstract

Introduction

In the spring of 2018, two of my graduate students in the Loyola Institute for Ministry (LIM) discussed with me an incident that took place in their class on spirituality, morality, and ethics. Their professor described the reading assignments for the next class on the topic of racism in the United States and offered a definition of racism as prejudice towards people of another race. One student, who is familiar with research on racism and white privilege, raised her hand and offered a correction of the professor’s definition, noting that racism includes prejudice and the systems of power that benefit from social and political inequality. Her definition generated a heated outburst by several white students who argued that racism no longer exists in the United States adding that they were deeply insulted and angered at the implication that they might be racist.

Robin DiAngelo recounts a strikingly similar situation, noting the anger that erupted when she and her colleague led a presentation on the topic of race in the workplace. DiAngelo describes these emotional outbursts as examples of “White Fragility,” whereby “even a minimum amount of racial stress becomes intolerable, triggering a range of defensive moves. These moves include the outward display of emotions such as anger, fear, and guilt, and behaviors such as argumentation, silence, and leaving the stress-inducing situation.”

The students who came to discuss the incident with me were shocked and upset to find their classmates hold these beliefs so vehemently and with such intensity, that they did not practice the skills of adult communication they learned at LIM, and that they would be graduating from a ministry program believing institutional racism and white privilege did not exist.

This caused me to think deeply about how my own curriculum design might implicitly and explicitly reinforce White normativity and White fragility. Is my curriculum, which includes LIM’s method of practical theology and transformative learning theories, perpetuating institutional forms of racism and White normativity?

This study asks, by teaching students to engage in dialogue through transformative learning practices that include creating safe spaces, are we furthering white normativity, protecting White Fragility and; thus, advancing rather than dismantling racism with our students in graduate programs in ministry and education?

Methodology

This paper presents a conceptual analysis of transformative/critical learning theories and adult learning and development in higher education along with multicultural and anti-racism

pedagogies to explore how LIM’s method of practical theology can address White normativity and White fragility by creating brave classroom spaces. The paper concludes by offering practical suggestions to encourage religious educators to understand and embrace the challenges of navigating White fragility in graduate programs in ministry and religious education to ground their curriculum in the context of Creation and extend their pedagogies from classroom to encourage students to work to dismantle racism in their communities.

The method of practical theology begins by observing and describing peoples’ lives, their everyday lived experiences, then asks: what is going on, in what contexts do these observations emerge, what are my assumptions about this concern, and why might this be happening? According to Fleischer, “rootedness in a praxis mode of questioning and acting presents religious educators with a way forward for relevantly connecting contemporary life experiences with the full breadth of Christian vision, wisdom, and experience.” This proposal examines the LIM method of practical theological reflection for its capacity to support an anti-racist pedagogy that addresses White fragility and White normativity in graduate programs in ministry.

*The LIM Method of Theological Reflection*

The Loyola Institute for Ministry offers their Master’s degrees (MPS and MRE) and certificate programs in three formats, LIM on campus, LIM online, and through an extension program, or LIMEX (now LIMFLEX). The LIM faculty developed a method of practical theology for ministry professionals and religious educators to engage in more intentionally and theologically on their experiences in ministry. Barbara Fleischer, emerita faculty member and co-author of the LIM method, describes this unique model and method of theological reflection, stating:

> Since its inception in 1983, the Loyola Institute for Ministry Extension Program (LIMEX) has relied on an experientially based method of theological reflection grounded in the works of David Tracy and Bernard Lonergan. The LIMEX program asks students to reflect on their ministerial praxis contextually (Bevans 1994) and to view their work as an interplay of influences, including their interpretations of the Christian tradition and the sociocultural, personal, and institutional contexts of their ministry.

Students explore these four ministry contexts within the wider meta-context of all God’s Creation, as manifested through the natural world and the universe, “as the context that makes possible all subsequent contexts.” A Creation-centered spirituality and method of reflection enables students to transcend the limits of human knowing, to open themselves up to learn from Creation by listening for God’s voice in the diversity of the natural world. Elizabeth Johnson, a prolific writer not only in feminist theology but also on creation theology, at her presidential address to the Catholic Theological Society of America, chose to discuss the issues surrounding ecology and cosmology. She affirms the centrality of the natural world, stating:

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3 Ibid.

Through greed, self-interest and injustice, human beings are violently bringing disfigurement and death to this living, evolving planet which ultimately comes from the creative hands of God… social injustice has an ecological face… [that we cannot] just think through a new theology of creation, but that cosmology be a framework within which all theological topics be rethought.  

The natural world reveals a deep interconnectivity between diverse species. Attentive listening to the rhythm of God’s Creation provides a framework from which students can explore their ministerial concerns, including issues of race, privilege, normativity, and social justice. Students are first introduced to LIM’s method of theological reflection rooted in Creation, through the LIM course and course book, *Introduction to Practical Theology*, and this method is embedded throughout our program.

LIM, like many graduate programs in ministry and religious education, draws from a variety of best practices in adult learning and education. Transformative learning theories such as, Paulo Freire’s critical pedagogy, Jack Mezirow’s transformation theory, and Patricia Cranton’s self-directed learning models, provide ways for religious educators to engage students in critical conversations that require students to become more aware of their tacitly held assumptions and come to a new understanding about their beliefs and actions in the world. Transformative learning theories encourage educators to create safe, respectful, and trusting spaces in the classroom so students feel comfortable articulating, examining, and critically reflecting on their initial assumptions in dialogue with their classmates.

The LIM course book, *Introduction to Practical Theology*, devotes a chapter to adult learning and communication skills. This chapter helps students learn and practice the art of facilitating and promoting healthy group conversations as informed by Paulo Freire. Incorporating insights from Freire’s critical theory helps students examine the dominant structures of power and oppression in society to work for justice. Critical theory comes to life as method of teaching, or critical pedagogy, in the classroom. Christine Sleeter notes several key features of critical pedagogy as they relate to diversity and multicultural education, including “voice, power, culture, and ideology.” Sleeter notes that “the concepts of voice and dialogue act as tools for uncovering whose ideas are represented and whose ideas have been submerged, marginalized, or left out entirely.” In Catholic ministry and religious education programs, critical pedagogy can be used as a teaching method that encourages students to analyze Catholic social teaching; for example, and the preferential option for the poor.

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7 Fleischer et al., 82-86  
9 Ibid.
In LIM, understanding and enhancing student’s capacity for dialogue is an important characteristic of healthy communication. “Dialogue,” for Freire, “becomes a horizontal relationship of which mutual trust between the dialoguers is the logical consequence. It would be a contradiction in terms if dialogue - loving, humble and full of faith — did not produce this climate of mutual trust, which leads the dialoguers into ever closer partnership in the naming of the world.”

Fleischer describes several skills to help facilitate the trust needed for true dialogue and ways to avoid misunderstanding and conflict by teaching them the value of using “I” statements, concreteness, appropriate self-disclosure, gatekeeping, and inviting more information. Barriers to healthy communication include “poor self-concept”, or low self-esteem, “Elitism/Prejudice,” defined as putting one’s own perspective ahead of others, “fear of the stranger,” or avoiding those who think differently than we do, “denial/self-deception,” when we close ourselves off to experiences we might not want to face, or are hidden from us, and “refusal of responsibility,” being responsible for our choices (Fleischer 2016, 80). These practices strive to ensure our learning communities, both online and face-to-face advocate safe spaces.

Embedded in the LIM Curriculum are holistic definitions of dialogue, discussion, and conversation that help students see the deeper meaning to their communication with their onsite or online learning group, those in their ministry context, and others in their lives. Other LIMEX/LIM course books, such as Pastoral Leadership and Organization, describe for students the practice of conversation which involves distinguishing between dialogue and discussion. Discussion is defined as talking with someone in a way that affirms or debates another’s argument. “Dialogue,” according to Fleischer and Grant, “is the slower, deeper running form of conversation that unveils hidden assumptions, evokes discovery and insight, and grafts collaborative relationships based on common awareness and understanding of purpose.”

It is from this premise that learning groups are encouraged to take the risks involved in changing our worldview and be open to a new horizon of meaning, or a “conversion.”

It is common for faculty, when mediating a communication issue between students online or face-to-face, to reference these skills and the learning agreement students agree to which outlines these procedures. We remind students of the overarching context of Creation that requires us to listen deeply to voices we are not attuned to, the voices of the natural world that are marginalized and ignored for human gain, to find God in all things, and extend this to one another in challenging conversations, no matter the circumstance. By practicing the skills of adult communication described above, students are better prepared to create a trusting atmosphere of deep listening and genuine conversations towards conversion.

Democratic Dialogue in a Learning Community

Stephen Brookfield and Stephen Preskill, scholars in adult learning theory, provide an alternative interpretation of discussion useful to adult learning communities. While noting the distinctions between the meaning of discussion, dialogue, and conversation put forth by scholars like Lipman, Burbules, Dillon, Rorty and Oakeshott, Brookfield argues that discussion can include both concepts of dialogue and conversation. For Brookfield, the term discussion is used

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11 Barbara Fleischer and Daniel Gast, Pastoral Leadership and Organization (Loyola Institute for Ministry, Loyola University, New Orleans, 2013): 130
“to explore the theory and practice of group talk…[which] incorporates reciprocity and movement, exchange and inquiry, cooperation and collaboration, formality and informality.”

He situates his understanding all three terms, discussion, dialogue, and conversation in the context of “critical discussion” which encourages people to examine how “different linguistic, cultural, and philosophical traditions can silence voices…to understand how [these traditions] have kept entire groups out of the conversation. For the sake of this paper, Brookfield’s understanding of discussion will be used synonymously with Fleisher, Freire, and Cowan’s understanding of dialogue.

Brookfield moves his analysis of discussion further by warning educators, to be attuned to the dynamics of “engaged pluralism” when using discussion as a the means to create a more democratic method of communication with adult learners.”

Engaged pluralism, according to Bernstein, “demands an openness to what is different and other, a willingness to risk one’s pre-judgements, seeking for common ground without any guarantee that it will be found.” Fleischer and Cowen affirm a similar understanding, noting when students are authentically engaged in conversation, they risk putting their own worldview and assumptions at risk.

The Limits of Critical Theory and Transformative Learning

There are several interrelated limits and assumptions in the literature on critical theory for anti-racist pedagogy. First, Freire’s original theory focused largely on class rather than race. Second, there are underlying assumptions to the necessity of ensuring students feel safe and secure in the learning environment. Third, there is a strong the emphasis on cognition for transformation almost to the expense of emotion. Fourth, there are fundamental assumptions about dialogue/discussion that may be barriers to dismantling racism in classroom learning. Finally, the post-structuralist or antimodern critiques of critical theory, while important to our analysis of critical theory, fail to transcend beyond the human community, thus limiting LIM’s program from framing anti-racism in the meta-context of Creation. This section discusses critiques of critical theory, Mezirow’s transformative learning theory, and adult learning as a way of exploring how LIM’s method of theological reflection can be more intentional in dismantling racism.

Classism in Critical Theory

Freire’s developed his critical pedagogy in the sociocultural context of Latin America in a way that does not transfer easily to the United States. Sleeter describes these limits of critical theory on multicultural education, noting that teachers working in traditional or modern institutional schools struggle to put into practice a critical pedagogy that often “directly opens up very difficult and painful issues in the classroom.” Critical pedagogy does ask the teacher to explore his or her own ideology, but it does not, according to Sleeter, “directly address race, ethnicity, or gender and as such has a White bias.” In this way, religious educators may fail to

14 Ibid., 18.
15 Quoted with Richard Bernstein, in Brookfield and Preskill, Discussion, 18.
18 Ibid., 122.
explore the power dynamics among students in the classroom learning environment apart from the teacher/student power dynamic.

Sharon Welch, in her discussion of a postmodern model of diversity training, also shifts Friere’s focus on power dynamics from the external to the internal; that is, she, like Sleeter, highlights the power imbalance between students, not just between students and oppressors in society. She takes this discussion further, stating when “acknowledging the power held by one’s own group” the dominant group can leverage that power on behalf of social justice.19 Both Sleeter and Welch’s critiques help religious educators reconceptualize Freire’s critical pedagogy to explore not only classism, but White privilege, White bias and asymmetrical relationships among learners.

Safe Spaces?

Theories about teaching and learning in multicultural education and anti-racist pedagogies suggest that by creating safe spaces in the classroom religious educators diminish the capacity for students and teachers to adequately address White normativity, White privilege, and White fragility. I attended a workshop sponsored by Loyola’s Office of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion this fall led by anti-racist activist Tim Wise. I asked him about the ability to create safe spaces to foster transformative learning in adult student, and he replied, “Black and Brown folks never feel safe.” Explaining what, at first listen, might sound like a broad generalization, Tim writes “this country is never safe for people of color. Its schools are not safe; its streets are not safe; its places of employment are not safe; its health care system is not safe. So why in the hell should white people feel that we have a right to something—in this case, safety—that people of color have never had?” 20

Brian Arao and Kristi Clemens, in their article “From safe spaces to brave spaces,” provide us with case study to help unpack Wise’s claim. The authors describe how their experience creating a 90-minute workshop on diversity and social justice propelled them to explore the reality of safe spaces. For the workshop, they implemented a visual activity called “One Step Forward, One Step Backwards”21 as a way of “illustrat[ing] the phenomena of social stratification and injustice and how participants’ own lives are thereby affected.”22 The activity produced a series of negative emotions in some participants from both the dominant group and the nondominant group, including feelings of guilt, blame, anger, indignation, and shame.

One limit of this case study is whether the participants’ responses in a workshop are consistent with the type of safe space created through critical pedagogy with a classroom learning group. The case study does show, however, that the negative emotions in and of themselves, experienced by members of both the dominant and nondominant group, made each group feel unsafe. The authors argue that, given the research on transformative learning and the “ground rules” needed to create a safe space in a classroom, they still “question the degree to

20 Tim Wise, “No such place as safe.” (July 24, 2004). Date accessed September 10, 2018, retrieved from https://zcomm.org/zcommentary/no-such-place-as-safe-by-tim-wise/
21 This activity has several names, including “The Privilege Walk,” or “Leveling the Playing field.” To understand this activity, see https://edge.psu.edu/workshops/mc/power/privilegewalk.shtml or http://www.culturalbridgestojustice.org/resources/written/level-playing-field
which safety is an appropriate or reasonable expectation of any honest dialogue about social justice.”

They argue, with Wise, that by expecting racialized people to conform to a safe space, white people are forcing them to restrict their emotions and fears to conform to the dominant group. This “is the ultimate expression of white privilege.”

Mezirow’s also theory assumes the participants in a learning environment have reached a certain level of emotional maturity capable of transformation. He states, with Goleman “effective participation in discourse and transformative learning requires emotional maturity – awareness, empathy and control…major social competencies include…self-regulation [which] includes self-control and trustworthiness (maintaining standards of honesty and integrity).”

Belenkey and Stanton critique this pre-condition for discourse noting how it automatically excludes “the immature and the marginalized;” groups who, the authors believe, are capable of entering into discourse communities. What is more, committing to practice self-control and keeping one’s integrity is a formative task when discussing power and privilege in racially diverse classrooms. Belenkey and Stanton similarly argue that Mezirow’s argument on the prerequisite necessity of emotional intelligence for transformation, “presumes relations of equality among participants in reflective discourse when, in actuality, most human relationships are asymmetrical.”

Evans and Shearer argue that safe spaces do not enable the type of “principled dislocation” necessary for students to understand the realities of White fragility and the “white gaze” that prevents white people from seeing “white identity status” which inevitably makes “white power invisible but not impotent.” The authors describe how “White fragility distorts student perspectives on racial subjects… compris[ing] what Frantz Fanon calls the ‘white gaze.’” The “white gaze” often occurs when white students base their criticism and anger over learning about race-based topics on the race of the teacher rather than on Whiteness. To move beyond the white gaze and white fragility, students need to be encouraged, almost pushed to explore their privilege, to grow more inclusive of racial diversity. To move students beyond white fragility towards critical reflection on race and privilege in the United States, what Carol Dweck calls a “growth mindset,” Evans and Shearer, with Deck, argue:

educators must intentionally identify moments of challenge as those with great potential to produce the outcomes desired by teacher and student (Dweck 2013). Providing students opportunities to practice grit in the classroom presents a substantial pedagogical challenge to the popular classroom strategy of ‘safe space.’”

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23 Arao and Clemens “From safe spaces,” 139.
24 Ibid.
27 Belenky and Stanton, “Inequality,” 73.
29 Ibid., 10.
30 Ibid., 10. See also Frantz Fanon, Black Skin White Masks, (New York: Grove Press, 2008).
race by emphasizing safety undermine, rather than enhance, their students’ capability to learn about racial dynamics and gain the tools to challenge racism?  

The role of Emotion in Critical Theory

Robin DiAngelo describes how the systemic power dynamics of White privilege creates a type of emotional barrier that protects White people from the tension or stress that emerges over the topic of race. Not only are White people less exposed to issues related to race, when, for example, attending a multicultural workshop, DiAngelo argues they typically use “racially coded language such as ‘urban,’ ‘inner city,’ and ‘disadvantaged’ but to rarely use ‘white’ or ‘over-advantaged,’ or ‘privileged.’” This behavior stems from the concept of “Whiteness” or, as defined by Sensoy and DiAngelo, “the specific dimension of racism that elevates White people of over all peoples of color. Basic rights, resources, and experiences that are assumed to be shared by all, are actually only available to White people.”

When the language of race, racism, privilege, white normativity do enter the discussion, many White people respond emotionally with angry outbursts, guilt, and indignation, or even leaving the discussion all together. This “White fragility,” according to DiAngelo, manifests for several reasons, including but not limited to:

- Suggesting that a white person’s viewpoint comes from a racialized frame of reference (challenge to objectivity);
- People of color talking directly about their racial perspectives (challenge to white racial codes);
- A fellow white not providing agreement with one’s interpretations (challenge to white solidarity); and
- An acknowledgment that access is unequal between racial groups (challenge to meritocracy)

These were some of the triggers that brought about White Fragility, noted above, in one LIM class last spring.

Mezirow’s theory of transformative learning focuses largely on the cognition of participants more so than role of emotion. Edward Taylor, in his analysis of transformative learning theory, notes how critical reflection often receives more scholarly attention than affective learning. He goes on to state:

it is our very emotions and feelings that not only provide the impetus for us to critically reflect, but often provide the gist of which to reflect deeply….Research should begin focusing on particular feelings, such as anger, fear, shame, happiness, and the like, and explore how they individually inform the reflective process.”

Critical and transformative learning theories, in their overemphasis on cognition, fail to prepare educators and students for the type of emotional reactions, or White fragility, that can emerge over race-related topics in learning groups. This begs the question, by creating safe spaces, are

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35 DiAngelo, “White Fragility, 55.
36 Ibid., 57.
38 Ibid.
religious educators inhibiting the self-actualization needed to confront white normativity and expose white fragility?

The Limits of Dialogue

Dialogue and dialogical teaching, for Freire, Fleischer et al., and Brookfield, are ways to create a democratic, trusting space that welcomes, encourages, and listens to all voices. Nicholas Burbules, in tracing the history of dialogue from Plato through contemporary theory, explores the limits of Freire’s understanding of dialogue through critical theorists such as Alison Jones and Elizabeth Ellsworth. For Jones, similar to Belenkey and Stanton, the assumption that dialogue brings equal parties into conversation ignores the asymmetrical relationships between dominant and nondominant groups, often in favor of the dominant group.39 “Dialogue, according to Jones, “and recognition of difference turn out to be access for dominant groups to the thoughts, cultures, lives of others.” This will lead members of the nondominant group to “remain silent” in these spaces of dialogue.40

Brookfield likewise explores Elizabeth Ellsworth’s post-structuralist critique of critical pedagogy and engaged pluralism by examining the relationship between historically marginalized voices, power, and dialogue in the classroom. Based on her experience as a student engaging in classroom dialogue centered on critical pedagogy, Ellsworth states:

Acting as if our classroom were a safe space in which democratic dialogue was possible and happening did not make it so. If we were to respond to our context and the social identities of the people in our classroom in ways that did not reproduce the oppressive formations we were trying to work against, we needed classroom practices that confronted the power dynamics inside and outside our classroom that made democratic dialogue impossible.”41

Barbara Fears and Sharon Welch affirm that safe spaces will not be free from conflict and may not enable people to learn to work with conflict. Fears discusses how religious educators can draw from “other critical/emancipatory/engaged pedagogies that encourage student autonomy, agency and authority” based on the Underground Railroad.42 Fears, with Harris, believes instructors can encourage students to “feel comfortable…examining, questioning analyzing, assessing evaluating, disagreeing, even challenging the hegemonic powers that be”43 Often safe spaces reinforce comfort rather than safety. It is noteworthy that feeling comfortable and feeling safe are not interchangeable emotions or reactions.

40 Qtd in Burbules,“Dialogue,” 229.
43 Ibid., 25.
Welch also states that when we claim a classroom or workshop is a “safe space” we are suppressing disagreement that can emerge from difference.”\footnote{Welch, \textit{Sweet Dreams}. 83-85.} She instructs her participants that there will be painful and difficult moments, but these teaching moments mirror and learn from rather than hide from “the external world of injustice and mistrust.”\footnote{Ibid., 107}

\textit{Limits on Transcendence}

Discussions about race often default into binary thinking such as oppressor/oppressed, male/female, privileged/nonprivileged, human/nonhuman and white/black, and as such, minimize the reality that people live among dynamic intersections of social, cultural, and spiritual realities. Belenky and Stanton highlight this awareness in their critique of Mezirow’s transformative learning theory. They state:

We argue that people also find it difficult to think about asymmetrical relationships because the issue gets mired a dualistic thinking, that is, the persistent tendency of human beings to divide their experience into dichotomies or nonoverlapping categories of polar opposites\footnote{Belenky and Stanton “Inequality,” 75.}\footnote{Welch, \textit{Sweet Dreams}, 117.}\footnote{Ibid, 115.}\footnote{DiAngelo, “White Fragility,” 57.} 46

This binary thinking imposes an unnatural way of categorizing human relationships in a dualistic way that ignores the interconnectedness of the natural world and our human relationships to the world. It prevents people from seeing any value in the experience of the nondominant opposite, such as female, oppressed, nonprivileged, black, or nonhuman. What is more, it prevents us from fully listening to the voice of God in all who are marginalized.

Similarly, Welch’s research on multicultural education warns that critical or emancipatory pedagogies that focus on binary thinking; such as, oppressor/oppressed are too limiting in postmodern education. Welch’s model of multicultural education explores these dualistic categories to “see the capacity for justice among ‘oppressors,’ the capacity for injustice among the ‘oppressed.’”\footnote{Ibid, 115.} In this way, religious educators and ministers can learn to leverage White privilege and power to dismantle racism to, as Welch notes, “challenge other whites as individuals…to change structures, to put in place power relations that are more equitable.”\footnote{DiAngelo, “White Fragility,” 57.}

The research from DiAngelo, Evans, and Shearer argue that White privilege and White fragility prevent when unnoticed and ignored over time, do not enable White students to practice the skills necessary, “or grit,” to handle the emotions that emerge from race-based discussions. “Whites, according to DiAngelo, “are often at a loss for how to respond in constructive ways. Whites have not had to build the cognitive or affective skills or develop the stamina that would allow for constructive engagement across racial divides.”\footnote{Ibid, 115.}

\textit{Reconstructing Brave Spaces and Transformative Learning}
Arao and Clemens argue that we do not have to eliminate safe spaces, rather equators can transform them to become “brave spaces.” Even the act of telling students this will be a “brave space” sets some ground rules that this is not a space where “anything goes,” rather there are ground rules in place when engaging in race-related conversations. LIM’s adult communication skills still serve as a method for engaging in respectful dialogue, but by turning the space from one of safety to one of bravery, encourages students from the start to see this conversation from a different perspective. Students, for example, are still expected to use “I” language, and ground their reflections in their own experience rather than making generalizations about race or privilege. By taking the language of “safe” off the table, White students can practice the “grit” or affective skills needed to go back to their White communities and work to end racial injustices and marginalized voices are not told to they are in a safe space when they may struggle to feel safe in any space dominated by Whites.

Belenky and Stanton, drawing insight from Gilligan’s ethic of care, believe transformation learning can occur through procedures established around “Connected Knowing” rather than Mezirow’s cognitive or communicative learning. Procedures for Connected Knowing encouraged participants to embrace difference or disagreement as an indication for more dialogue, deeper listening, increased openness to understanding others perspectives, and practicing empathy, rather than presuming these skills are already established.

Elizabeth Johnson explores the cosmological implications of injustice and human exploitation, noting that “economic poverty coincides with ecological poverty, for the poor suffer disproportionately from environmental destruction…the exploitation of the Earth also coincides with the subordination of women within the system of patriarchy,” noting the maternal and paternal language. The framework of Creation through a process of Connected Knowing helps us to see diversity in the natural world as an invitation to listen, to learn more from the harmony in the natural world. Just one coral reef can teach us lessons about life, death, communion, harmony, empathy, and transcendence.

LIM, Practical Theology, and Anti-Racist Pedagogy

Religious educator, scholars, activists, theologians, and church leaders are documenting the drastic need to dismantle racism in Christian ministry and education programs. Hosffman Ospino, citing the research from Russel Moy on racism as the null curriculum in religious education, argues that too “often our classes, projects, and programs of formation are sanitized insofar as they do not focus directly on issues of racial inequality and other forms of social injustice.” In 2004, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops’ (USCCB) commissioned research report for the twenty-fifth anniversary “Brothers and Sisters to Us.” Bishop Murry, in his 2018 address at the Catholic Social Ministry Gathering in Washington, discussed this report, stating:

The results of that study painted a disheartening picture of the church’s relationship with the black community…the study noted that many diocesan seminaries and ministry

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50 Arao and Clemens, “Safe Spaces to Brave,” 142.
51 Belenky and Stanton, “Inequality,” 87.
formation programs were inadequate in terms of their incorporation of the history, culture and traditions of the black community.  

Ospino notes “It is easy to think that discourse about God can happen in neutral terms, rather than look at faith from the perspective of social, economic, and political conflicts.” LIM’s method of theological reflection in each ministry context has the capacity to do just this.

LIM’s method of practical theology places our curriculum in a unique position to explore one’s faith from multiple ministry contexts. LIM’s method of Practical Theology, grounded in Creation, can become more intentional about the dynamics involved in exposing white students to white normativity and white fragility to dismantle racism, to use the language of brave spaces over safe spaces. When LIM students explore their concern within their personal ministry context; for example, they often analyze their personality type and explore the strengths and weakness in their communication skills. Transforming the LIM curriculum to dismantle racism would include exploring one’s own position in society, or positionality (teachers and students). The curriculum texts can include a list to check through, noting their race, ability, ethnicity, gender, identity and class to encourage them to see the larger context from which their lives take shape. Positionality, according to Sensoy and DiAngelo, “asserts that knowledge is dependent upon a complex web of cultural values, belief, experiences, and social positions,” and, to which I would add, the natural world. Exploring one’s or positionality opens students up to see beyond their social location to their ecological location, thus, grounding the personal context more fully in the framework of Creation.

The LIM curriculum can add to the literature on the sociocultural ministry context to include reflections from Peggy McIntosh’s article, “White Privilege and Male Privilege: A Personal Account of Coming to See Correspondences Through Work in Women’s Studies” and ask White students to explore their own unexamined privilege as it relates to their ministry concern. This privilege plays out for all students in the human community when we elevate humans above creation and ignore the voices of the natural world, the streams, the wetlands, coral reefs, the owls, the deer. Students can then explore the systemic and institutional systems of oppression using case studies on diversity in their Institutional/Organizational ministry context.

Finally, Bryan Massingale’s research and reflections in his work Racial Justice and the Catholic Church, particularly his chapter on racism and culture, and articles from Black Catholic theologians can break open students’ limited racial experiences with Catholicism to explore the tradition in a more racially diverse way as it informs their praxis. The curriculum can include not only scholarship from feminist theologians, but womanist theologians as well. As Johnson notes, “the turn to the cosmos in theology needs to cut through the knot of misogynist prejudice in our systematic concepts, shifting from dualistic, hierarchical and atomistic categories to holistic, communal and relational ones.” A Cosmic postmodern curriculum of

54 George V. Murry “The church must ‘speak and live in truth’ to combat racism, bishop says,” America (Feb 1, 2018): 62.
56 Sensoy and DiAngelo, Is Everyone Really Equal, 29.
57 Bryan N. Massingale, Racial Justice and The Catholic Church, (New York: Orbis, 2017). The first chapter, “What is Racism” also includes a case study on unconscious bias by discussing the events surrounding Hurricane Katrina.
theology, filled with wonder and unknown territory, moves beyond the dualistic, binary humanistic theology, inspires religious educators and ministers and fills them with a spirit of communion that listens to the natural world in order to imagine a better home for all God’s Creation.

It is no longer enough to expect White students to uncover the systems of power and oppression to which they do not experience. If White fragility insulates students from understanding the their racial privilege, then graduate programs in ministry have a responsibility to help White students build the skills and competencies to engage constructively in dialogue to leverage their privilege for the work to dismantle racism and uplifting of all God’s creation. Leavening the LIM curriculum to focus more intentionally racism and privilege in the context of Creation not only enables white students to understand Whiteness, but also helps them develop the cognitive and affective skills necessary to engage in challenging discussions in their own communities and ministry contexts. It may also help marginalized students engage with more voices from their race and culture more fully in the curriculum to develop a Creation-centered spirituality that advances ecological justice in the name of God’s Kingdom.

Bibliography


