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## **Sacred, Revolutionary Teaching: Encountering Sacred Difference and Honest Hope**

### **Abstract**

Sacred teaching takes many forms across religious traditions, focusing on creation and sacramentality in Christianity, God's nature and God's creation of human beings in Judaism, and spiritual and social practices in both. At the heart of Jewish, Muslim, and Christian traditions are accents on the sacredness of life, creation in the image of God, and human dignity. This essay analyzes the three traditions to discover the rich textures of sacrality and the many faces of sacred teaching and learning. Can such teaching be revolutionary in divided contexts? The paper explores the potential of spiritual practices and pedagogies of difference to cultivate radical compassion, openness, humility, and hope.

*A student speaks out in a class discussion, saying, "I hate all of this. I hate the ideas and I hate what they are doing to me." Weeks later, the student shares a theological break-through, having wrestled hard with personal and social history, new theological ideas, and long-held beliefs and values. The student expresses a new-found freedom to explore theology that asks the hardest of questions and opens continually to new questions, discoveries, and commitments.<sup>1</sup>*

*Another student glows with excitement in sharing a personal discovery evoked by class readings, discussions, and experiences, and then finding voice to express the discovery. The person, with abundant gifts and successes, describes a frequent sense of disquiet as a person of color living and serving in a minoritized ethnic community. In the context of a class, the person has taken time to dive deeply into haunting questions. As if by miracle, the person has discovered a new wisdom to value his/her/their cultural context, to speak boldly from it, and to speak to it. The journey has been long, but new moments have already opened a greater sense of self and cultural values, as well as new directions for future actions.<sup>2</sup>*

*A group of students travels to the Arizona-Mexico border to walk the paths and listen to the stories of persons who are seeking asylum in the United States, but encounter the ravages of capture, harsh living conditions, legal charges, fear for their families, and uncertain futures. The students walk and listen ... walk and listen and reflect. They observe legal hearings, listen to social service workers who are working with asylum-seekers to humanize their immediate living conditions, and advocate for longterm social and political changes. In the days and weeks after this class, students and faculty return home to say that they will*

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<sup>1</sup> Shared and retold with permission.

<sup>2</sup> Shared and retold with permission.

*never be the same. Some students say that the travel seminar has changed their entire vocational direction and, years later, the graduates have done exactly that.*

These stories reveal the existential importance of teaching and learning in people's lives. Education is not limited to classrooms and courses, but it breaks forth transformatively even in structured and semi-structured classrooms, immersions, and travel seminars. The stories here awaken listeners to the depths and wonders people encounter in their quests for meaning, cultural and intellectual understanding, and purpose. The stories resonate with many others that I have observed or heard, so they are not one person's story. They are unique but not siloed experiences. Part of their power is to reveal the sacredness and revolutionary nature of teaching. The first story reveals the deep questions evoked when someone engages challenging ideas; the second story, when a person asks existential questions of "who am I, who are my people, and what is my distinctive voice"; and the third story, when people experience the realities of others who are living threatened lives. All of these are situations permeated with difference, which can be jolting, disruptive of all that one has known, frightening, joyful, and, most important, sacred.

*The purpose of this essay is to explore the personal and social value of sacred teaching, as illuminated by the wisdom of three religious traditions, in this case three Abrahamic traditions. More specifically, it poses two central questions. (1) In what ways does the wisdom of these theistic traditions contribute to deeper understandings of the sacred and revolutionary aspects of teaching? (2) What hope do these traditions offer as people face sacred difference?* The first question is theological: Is sacred, revolutionary teaching a valuable concept and practice across traditions and to what extent might it be informed by religious and interreligious theologies? The second question is practical: How might we practice teaching that engages people in sacred values and practices for the sake of revolutionary change in the world? Such questions become especially urgent when the human family faces daunting existential issues, such as dehumanization of immigrants and people of color or minority tribes across the world, ecological degradation and injustice, spiritual yearnings, and/or life-threatening controversies and conflicts. To what extent is sacred teaching meaningful as a spiritual and life-changing practice within diverse traditions and across traditions?

I have been asking these questions since I completed *Teaching as a Sacramental Act* (Moore 2004). I completed the last revision of that book during a 5-week period when I was living in my mother's hospital room and communicating my love and care for her in every way I could imagine. I worked on the manuscript when she was sleeping, and I clicked "send" the day before Mother breathed her last breath. The sacred context of living with my mother in those Holy days imbued the topic of sacred teaching with even deeper significance for me; its power has not let me go. Over time, I have become more convinced that sacred teaching and sacred living call for interfaith attention and for expanded practical enactments.

To begin that process, I will share a personal example here and move to a more globally urgent situation in the last section. One of my Holiest experiences in the past few years was in a celebration of Passover in the home of a Jewish family who deeply value their Passover traditions, while also valuing friendships with people in other traditions. The family had gathered people at their table that year who were largely Jewish, but also Christian and Muslim. The celebration was traditional in food and ritual form, and we all ate and prayed and followed the

Haggadah, pausing frequently for serious reflection on hard questions. The celebration was sacred to all of us (albeit in diverse ways). For me, the intimacy, hospitality, teaching, reading, and reflecting were spiritually rich and powerfully centering. Even my experience of Easter a few days later was deepened by that sacred meal, not because of historical connections between Judaism and Christianity, but because of the wonder that Passover, as Passover, evoked in me.

I have shared living stories to ground this essay in the textures of ordinary life, and particularly educational life, whether in classrooms, travel seminars, contextual experiences, and/or human interactions in families and neighborhoods. Moving to a more theoretical level, the sacredness described in these stories reverberates with pedagogies of liberation, encounter, and transformation – pedagogies that engage people with the depths of religion and haunting issues in the world. Such pedagogical theories focus on the understanding and transformation of realities that oppress, destroy, and denigrate; they are revolutionary. When the pedagogies are also religious, they engage with Holy traditions, values, and possibilities. This article explores theistic and humanistic traditions in particular, but it points to the possibility of expanding the scope in future research.

The questions posed by this essay are especially urgent in the present moment. The human family faces life-threatening realities in the explosion of racist and homophobic attitudes and ideas that intensify and justify violence by individuals and whole societies. They create a climate for the uncensored abuse of persons with lesser power, whether they are immigrants, victims of trafficking, or people who have been oppressed in their own lands and families. We also face a climate crisis that human beings are largely responsible for creating and now largely responsible to halt or reverse. People want to hope, but they do not want false hope; they seek threads of honest hope that they can hold in their hands and weave into larger hopes. To glimpse such hope, people in theistic traditions usually turn to God and the relationship between God and God's creation.

People in these traditions are often limited, however, in their embrace of God's good gifts of difference. Many people avoid differences as frightening or destabilizing for themselves and their communities. In the public square, the dynamics become even more terrifying as polarized voices set the stage for debates and arguments in the form of a battle, described as a chasm by Hanan Alexander (2019). With that realization, how can we develop teaching that engages people with diversity in ways that genuinely respect differences, prepares people in the ways of dignity, and engages communities in honest hope and real transformation? This question-posing preview leads to the heart of the article – the power and possibilities in sacred, revolutionary teaching. The next section reflects on the riches of religious wisdom, and the final one identifies educational and social psychological grounds for sacred, revolutionary pedagogy. The essay concludes with practices of sacred teaching (Moore 2004) informed by interreligious wisdom and a focus on the particular issues of immigration in the present global context.

### **The Wisdom of Three Traditions: Creation in the Image of God**

God is Mystery beyond definition in words, images, analogies, or conceptual frameworks. Even so, the traditions of Judaism, Islam, and Christianity seek to express the inexpressible at the same time recognizing that those expressions are never adequate or even

close to describing the Holy. God, Y-H-W-H, Allāh is the Source of love and devotion, and is simultaneously Mystery. God calls forth meditation and prayer, ritual and art, and patterns of living; these practices enable people to dwell with God but never to define or capture the Holy. God is beyond expression, yet God reveals Godself in creation and in every human being – each and all created in God’s image. The three focal traditions of this essay all highlight the image of God as a defining feature of the God-human relationship. It is the source of human dignity, and the signifying mark of each being. If God so loved humanity as to create each one in God’s own image, then each and all are precious in God’s sight and should, therefore, be precious in ours.

These are counter-cultural ideas. Dominant cultures often cement their dominance by naming some people as better than others, and some as not only inferior, but even less than human. Dominated peoples often follow a similar pattern (albeit a far more defensible one) to seek their own wellbeing by posing themselves over against the dominant “other.” The counter-culture of the *imago Dei* disrupts cultures of scapegoating and disrupts pedagogies that set out to prove that some cultures, values, and religions are superior to others. Genuine learning takes place when people are freed to explore their deepest intellectual, existential, and social questions, as seen in the opening stories. Sacred teaching has revolutionary potential to cultivate deep awareness of and respect for difference – awareness of the sacredness of difference that inspires ethical visions and actions. To recognize the sacredness of difference runs counter to human tendencies to categorize, bifurcate, and denigrate “others.” Instead, sacred teaching honors difference as a reality and a gift. It recognizes the power of spiritual and social awakening to bring people closer to God (for those living in theistic frameworks) and closer to the heartbeat of the human family and the whole creation. Finally, it cultivates qualities and practices of radical compassion, openness, humility, and hope, which can contribute mightily to the capacity of people to live justly, compassionately, and peacefully in divided societies and contexts.

The three Abrahamic traditions emphasize the relationship of God with the sacredness of the world, which includes the sacredness of human beings and the dignity that flows from them into the world. They also emphasize the significance of the God-human relationship for ethical practice. Arthur Green (2003, 47) explicates the preciousness of every person from a Jewish perspective, “The person – each person – is an earthly replica or small repository of the fullness of divine energy and blessing.” In a similar spirit, Hanan Alexander makes a case that Jewish education is a reclaiming of goodness through a spiritual quest (2001). He thus emphasizes the close relationship between spirituality and ethics (2004), and the importance of education that is shaped by pedagogies of difference and spirituality (2015). In Islamic traditions, John Valk, Halis Albavrak, and Mualla Selçuk (2017) explicate the Muslim emphases on the sacredness of life and the depths of human dignity, all in relation to social values, such as openness, equality, and environmental care (127-156). As noted above, I have earlier described Christian religious education as a sacramental practice of mediating God’s grace for the sake of human sanctification and the flourishing of all creation (Moore 2004, 221). These are pointers to the larger traditions of sacredness that awaken people to the values of sacred teaching and learning, and to the potential of differences to teach people to value and build a more just and compassionate world, especially where divisions tear people and lands apart.

These theological ideas are all urgent for public life. Valk, Albavrak, and Selçuk (2017) make a case for sacredness in relation to public action, arguing that human dignity and sacredness

of life evoke the values of equality and openness, which are critical in a democratic society. Similarly, Hanan Alexander, concerned with the “growing chasm among diverse religious, spiritual, cultural, political, and other orientations” seeks a way out of the morass by appealing to “the uniqueness, not uniformity, of each individual person” (2019, 421). He appeals to the recovery of humanism” (2019, 421; 2018). In so doing, Alexander does not appeal to the image of God, but that connection is developed well by others.

In both Jewish and Christian traditions, the image of God is central to being human; thus, people can actually experience God as they relate with others. The Jewish mystic Art Green says, “We encounter the Divine through relationship with another person” (2003, 47). This perspective leads to a simple but challenging idea. When you and I recognize the image of God in others and ourselves, we can proclaim that God’s creativity is alive in the human family, and God’s aliveness calls forth responsibility to care for one another. For Green, this insight speaks loudly of diversity, both in revelation and in the human expressions of revealed experiences:

Divine speech is made accessible to us only through the human vessel, one that embodies it and hides it at once. Human languages are many, each of them bespeaking the divine encounter in its own voice, hiding-revealing the One in its own way (116).

He goes on to say that the divine life is “open to all and goes beyond the language of any tradition” (ibid). His explanation is directly related to diversity: “The divine light shines on all without distinction; it is only the differences in our own cultural settings that make for religious difference ...” (ibid).

Rabbi Green speaks boldly to the consequences of such thinking in relation to interreligious understanding. He asks the question:

Can we imagine a God so arbitrary as to choose one nation, one place, and one moment in human history in which the eternal divine will was to be manifest for all time? ...

How can a God who visits only Israel deliver a message for all of humanity whose spiritual traditions have nothing to do with Sinai and its legacy? (118-119)

Green’s view is particularly significant in this discussion because he draws deeply from the Torah, the rabbis of old, and the spiritual experiences deep within Judaism.

In Christianity, the emphasis on *imago Dei* arises from Genesis 1:26-27: “Then God said, ‘Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; ....’ So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. God blessed them, and God said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth’” (NRSV). Here the focus is on God’s creation; the plural nature of human creation (“according to *our* likeness” and “in the image of God he created *them*”); and the responsibility given to human beings as a result of being created in the image of God. Theologians over the millennia have emphasized different interpretations, and these include Martin Luther’s accent on human responsibility for creation; Elizabeth Johnson’s and Rosemary Radford Ruether’s questioning of the image of God as male; Jurgen Motlmann’s insistence on the connection between the image of God and human rights; and Pamela Lightsey’s (2015) declaration that Black queer women are created in the image of God, as is *everyone*. What is important to all of these is that God created humanity in God’s image to be in relationship with God and creation; to be treasured as sacred beings; and to be stewards of God’s creation.

Human life is also considered sacred in Islam, as found in the Quran in which dignity is attributed to all humans, understood as an inherent right; thus, Muslims often identify human dignity as the base for human rights. Masataka Takeshita (1982, 111) describes the complexity of these ideas in Islam, in which the idea of God creating Adam in God's own image has raised some confusion. To address this challenge, he turns to the theologian Ibn 'Arabi, who distinguishes between the image of God in sense perception and the image of God as paradigm. To speak of the image of God "means that God Himself is the paradigm of man and the universe" (1982, 118). Ibn 'Arabi thus identifies human knowledge of the self with knowledge of the universe and with knowledge of God, both of which emanate from Allāh (120). Takashita connects this idea with the hadith, "'Whoever knows himself knows his Lord ...'" (120). This means that God is the paradigm of human beings and the universe, including the riches of human differences. For Ibn 'Arabi, this also means that to know self is to know God, but not to hold *all* knowledge of God: "the God which we can know through our self-knowledge is different from the absolute transcendent God which has no image nor positive attributes (120-121).

One finds more attention to the image of God in the mystical Muslim traditions of Sufism, but I have shared only briefly here. My intention is to offer sufficient complexity to indicate that Christian, Jewish, and Muslim views of the image of God are not the same, but they similarly point to the sacred dignity of human beings. With such an emphasis on the sacrality of human lives and their dignity, the grounds are cultivated for emphasizing human rights, the sacred value of each and all beings, and the sacred responsibilities that they carry. The emphasis is on gift – God's gift of sacredness, which people do not earn but receive, albeit with high expectations for people to live faithfully with God and all of God's creation. This is itself a sacred task, calling people to appreciate the sacred in themselves and recognize the sacred in every other person. Such a theological orientation leads naturally to sacred, revolutionary pedagogy.

### **Practicing Sacred, Revolutionary Pedagogy in a World of Diversities**

The traditions presented briefly above communicate deep connections between sacrality and the capacity to live compassionately and justly with others in the human family and in God's larger family of creation. These traditions are deep streams from which flow the personal, social, and revolutionary values of sacred teaching. We turn now to religionists and psychologists who emphasize the importance of drawing from the deepest roots of one's tradition in ways that respect differences and serve the wellbeing of all people and creatures.

Consider, for example, the social activist David Jaffe (2016), who discovered that activism leads nowhere if not nourished by spiritual roots, at least for him. This led him to the study of Torah and immersion in Jewish practices so his activism would be rooted more deeply in the sacred. Similarly, Dorothee Soelle (2001) discovered that mysticism and spiritual experience are at the root of radical living, and Katie Geneva Cannon (1995) found life and courage to reshape ethics from her roots in the Black church and with the wisdom of Black women. Eboo Patel (2013) claimed his place in social transformation by reclaiming his Muslim roots and engaging directly with the challenges of diversity. Ada María Isasi-Díaz (2005) turned to Latina women to anchor her wisdom and courage, and Thomas Porter (2010) found his way in

conflict transformation and restorative justice by studying the ways of Jesus. These are a very few classic figures, but they point the way to sacred and revolutionary transformation, a cornerstone for education.

Consider also the work of educators and psychologists, who have focused on the sacred in religious learning and public witness (Patel 2013; Alexander 2004, 2017; LeTran 2017). Their research illumines connections between a sense of the sacred and a welcoming engagement with diversity, not as a source of novelty, but as a source of life and revolutionary practices of human community. Psychological research in relational psychology informs this further, revealing the role of humility in cultivating commitments to social justice and intercultural competence (Bell, Sandage, Morgan, and Hauge 2017) and the especially challenging and unique forms of cultural humility engaged by people of color (Moon and Sandage 2019). Further, psychological research in relational spirituality reveals a close relationship between spiritual depth and a mature sense of alterity in ministry leaders (Choi, West, Sandage, and Bell 2018).

All of these studies, emerging from diverse disciplines, cultures, and religious communities, point back to the importance of dignity in encounters with difference and in the birth of honest hope. Encounters with difference can be very superficial, leading either to a reveling in diversity or to judgments on beliefs, values, or practices different from those of oneself and one's people. While curiosity can draw people into relationships, it is never enough to touch the sacred fibers of human relationships. While the practice of making judgments is a critical dimension of human relationships and serves to guide ethical practice, it does not serve well as the beginning or end of human relationships.

What people need is encounters with difference that begin and end with dignity. Donna Hicks has been particularly important in highlighting the negative consequences when dignity is violated (2011), as well as the potential of "dignity consciousness" in leadership (2018). More recently, she has underscored the ways in which dignity plays a role in conflict transformation and building human connections (2019). Reflections on dignity circle back to theologies of the image of God. When Judaism, Christianity, and Islam recognize the strong emphases on God's creation of human beings in the image of God, they open the way to recognize dignity in themselves and in others – even in the most feared and antagonizing others. Such dignity consciousness does not magically resolve hard issues, but it offers a starting place, a cornerstone. It also opens paths to sacred teaching that honors the image of God in everyone and creates space for a raw and honest search for hope. Out of these movements, revolutionary changes can be wrought.

I conclude with an experiment in building on my earlier work in sacred teaching. As described above, I have been aware that I am not yet finished with the work I did in *Teaching as a Sacramental Act* (2004), so I return to it. I especially want to explore the potential of sacred teaching as an interreligious phenomenon, and as a practice that contributes to human engagement with the most pressing of our planet. Thus, I turn to the six movements of education that I identified in that book, testing the potential of these movements, especially in divided contexts, to cultivate radical compassion, openness, humility, and hope. For the sake of focus, I will develop these practices briefly in relation to immigration and the seemingly intractable

global issues that magnify human oppression, violations of human rights, and threats to wellbeing.

- (1) Expecting the Unexpected – The unexpected is God’s surprising movements in the midst of turmoil. With an “image of God” frame, people might expect not only for God to break into the dualistic, “us vs them” debates over immigration, but for people created in the image of God to break through with wisdom not yet expressed or valued. Such breakthroughs can awaken people to the gifts (and not just challenges) of difference and can spark creativity to imagine alternatives beyond the restrictive, life-destroying policies that are presently practiced in many national and communal settings around the world.
- (2) Remembering the Dismembered – To explore the “issues” of immigration and migration, people need to awaken to the realities of “the dismembered,” the victims of ill treatment and harsh policies. Much study is needed into migrations of the past, as recorded in religious texts, history books, and patterns of human life from the Bronze Age forward. People also need to study the migrations of the past 50 years and give special attention to those who suffered most from the migrations themselves and from the conditions that forced the movements of people from one country or region to another. People need to know more than facts and figures because the large, data-documented patterns of migration are inscribed in human lives and passed down for generations. Thus, sacred teaching also involves listening closely to human stories of oppression, fear, and loss.
- (3) Seeking Reversals – To seek reversals is to give great attention to immigrants, refugees, policy makers, and policy enforcers to ponder their wisdom, hurts, and fears and potentially break open stereotypes and discover countercultural and alternative views of policies and actions. Seeking reversals can reshape the very practices of engaging people in conflict, even in violent, situations. The practice can include fresh, questioning readings of religious texts and traditions for “reversal” wisdom. It can include gatherings of “enemies” to do the hard work of listening to deep hurts and of seeking new options for change.
- (4) Giving Thanks – To give thanks is to recognize the movements of God in the midst of the hardest situations of conflict over immigration and to see movements of God also through people seeking to bear love and justice, even in very different, oppositional ways. Giving thanks is a discipline that awakens people to the smallest and most obscure gifts in a situation. It awakens people to Divine presence in hard conversations and interactions, which can potentially open eyes to the harshness in immigrants’ life situations, the fears of people who have long lived in a country or region, and the prejudices that exacerbate the situation for all.
- (5) Nourishing Life – To nourish life is to act with compassion for all persons caught in the web of immigration – to care for basic needs of food, shelter, health care, and family and communal relationships. Sacred teaching is a way to identify those needs and create pathways for responding and nourishing human lives. Sacred teaching nourishes life within and far beyond local communities for the sake of honoring and caring for the sacred in God’s creation.
- (6) Reconstructing Community and Repairing the World – Finally, sacred teaching asks people to explore and act toward radical transformation, both within local communities and in response to an aching world. If human beings are created in God’s image, their revolutionary analyses and actions will be reflections of God’s work, though permeated by the limitations of human compassion, knowledge, and courage. People will thus



communicate, distort, and miscommunicate the stirrings of God. At the same time, people need to attend closely, engage, correct, and move beyond the limits of any person's or group's perspective, recognizing the dignity of each, even while critiquing, upturning, and reconstructing the paths proposed. As reflections of the Divine, people deserve the listening and recognition of others; they also deserve in-depth engagement with people whose views and actions are quite different from their own. Such engagement has to be exercised in ways that disrupt the power of some over others and the focus only on persons in power positions. What is needed is awareness of Divine presence and movements in and around the people themselves, made possible by practices and attitudes that open space for God to lure the community beyond the limits of any one or any group. What is needed finally is for communities to live toward a more just approach to immigration and the human lives that are at stake.

In the context of our REA discussions, I look forward to the wisdom of colleagues and the opportunity to learn, correct, and reshape the insights shared in this essay. The stakes are indeed high as we live in a world that fears difference and uses it as a wedge to build power and thus to oppress human beings and their communities and even the ecosystem that are precious gifts from God.

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