

Lives Worth Living: Religious Education and Social Movements

Jennifer R. Ayres

Emory University Candler School of Theology

Abstract. When people of faith participate in movements for social change, how are their religious and moral identities formed, challenged, and transformed? Although they have explicit and tangible goals as they participate in advocacy, protest, and boycotts, religious social activists also, James Jasper argues, craft "lives worth living" (1997). This paper examines the identity-shaping power of religious participation in social movements, in conversation with scholarship in religious education and social movement theory; and proposes some explicit practices for nurturing religious and moral formation.

Betsy is the kind of church leader for whom every pastor and religious educator longs. Her wisdom runs deep and quietly beneath the surface, perhaps stemming from her decades serving as both a teacher and a administrator in the public school systems of Chicago and New York City. When the congregation has a meeting in which a tenuous matter is under discussion, Betsy's presence calls forth all the members' best selves. She recalls with enthusiasm and can narrate with sensitivity the congregation's history of being on the forefront of social movements, and yet is eager to see what the congregation will do in its next phase of life. We all want Betsy sitting in (and leading from) our pews, our church parlors, and indeed, our classrooms. All of this is to say that by almost any measure of the phrase, Betsy is a mature and compassionate Christian, with an ongoing commitment to seek justice and flourishing in her community of Woodlawn on the southside of Chicago. Now retired, she continues to lead, in short, a life worth living.

All of which made one particular exchange quite fascinating. During a six-week bible study on the relationship between the church and social issues, the participants were asked: "Recall a time that you were engaged in social action—a protest, a soup kitchen, a letter to a senator. How might that experience shape how you understand Christian faith?" Betsy very matter-of-factly described her experience of participating in lunch counter sit-ins in Charlotte, North Carolina, when she was a student at Johnson C. Smith College. She was afraid that her father would discover her activism, as he had made clear his desire that she and her siblings focus on school, staying out of such politically charged situations. While Betsy readily makes connections between social justice and Christian faith generally speaking, and while she sees a clear calling for Christians to seek social justice, she pondered with the group why she had never thought about it that way, before: that is, why had she not considered how the experience of the sit-ins might have shaped her faith?

In other words, while people of faith might be quite used to considering the ways in which religious education equips, inspires, and challenges them to respond to pressing issues in their social contexts, the converse question is perhaps less obvious. How does participation in social activism, in turn, equip, inspire, and challenge people of faith to re-examine and deepen their own *religious* identity? Or, more directly, how does participation in social activism, *itself*, shape religious identity?

The theme of our meeting this year—religious education at the intersection of social justice, liberation, and civil and human rights—names well the creative openings for rethinking the relationship between religious education and movements for social change. In what follows, I will press at that intersection, examining how religious educators, practical theologians, and scholars of social activism frame the relationship between religious and moral identity and engagement in movements for social change, and how a robust theoretical conversation between these disciplines might be mutually enriching for our respective work. I'll conclude with some proposals for integrated practices that might nourish religious social activists in their work.

Describing his own history of social activism, from conscientious objector status to legislative advocacy, Presbyterian elder Thurston Griggs puts it this way: “I’m tied to these things. And my impulses, even, are governed by this sort of thing.” He recounts how his life has been affected by many forms of social activism, from his parents’ work in the temperance movement to his own work as a conscientious objector during World War II; as a peace activist during the nuclear freeze movement; and now as an advocate with legislators during his monthly visits to Capitol Hill with other Presbyterians from his community. From a very early age, participating in social activism has shaped Thurston’s understanding of himself. In other words, his identity has been formed by his engagement. Certainly, it is easy to imagine how this elder’s identity predisposes him toward social activism. One’s self-understanding has everything to do with whether or not one chooses to participate in this kind of activity. But Thurston Griggs and other activists tell a more complicated story than this.

They weave their experiences of activism and their developing sense of themselves together in a way that makes it clear that identity and practice shape *each other*.¹ When people of faith participate in a social movement, their identities are shaped in particular ways. Alasdair MacIntyre would describe this dynamic as a “good” obtained *as they engage in this practice of social activism* (MacIntyre 1984, 190).² Just by participating in a social practice, MacIntyre argues, we receive certain goods, some of which are tangible and external, some intangible and internal. Of particular interest to the present conversation is the concept of “internal goods,” those things that “can only be identified and recognized by the experience of participating in the practice in question” (MacIntyre 1984, 189). When human beings participate in any kind of social practice—something we learn in communities—we open ourselves to the discovery of the value of “a certain kind of life” (MacIntyre 1984, 190). For example, as a painter endeavors to seek progressive excellence in the art, she also learns the joy of *being* a painter, of *being* an artist. It is a sort of identity discovery, in which one internalizes the virtues of painting. The same can be said for activists who discover joy in the midst of the hard work for social change, as Rebecca Solnit so compellingly describes in *Hope in the Dark* (Solnit 2005).

¹ For a more expansive treatment of both practice theory and social movement theory, see Jennifer R. Ayres, *Waiting for a Glacier to Move: Practicing Social Witness* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2011).

² MacIntyre defines a social practice as “any coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realized in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of, that form of activity, with the result that human powers to achieve excellence, and human conceptions of the ends and goods involved, are systematically extended” (MacIntyre 1984, 187).

This character-forming power of practice resonates clearly with scholars in our field. Craig Dykstra, for example, says about MacIntyre's internal goods: "Some of these things are products emerging from the practice; others are the effects of the practices on the practicing persons and their communities—including the effects on their minds, imaginations, and spirits" (Dykstra 1991, 45). The conviction that a practice, like social activism, might shape the minds, imaginations, and spirits of participants is a significant claim, one that warrants closer analysis. Particularly in service of a deeper and more robust understanding of religious activism, scholars in religious education can benefit from and make significant contributions to the examination of social movements for their formative capacity. This work demands an interdisciplinary account of their identity-forming potential. What exactly does it mean to "discover the good of a certain kind of life," for social activists?

One response to that question comes, perhaps surprisingly, from a scholar in the field of social movement theory. Of course, religious educators have been working for some time on the question of the construction of identity. We find, however, conversation partners among sociology scholars who study social movements. James Jasper, who begins his final analysis of social movements in *The Art of Moral Protest* with a section called "Lives Worth Living," writes that participation in social movements, quite apart from the tangible political accomplishments secured by the movement, offers participants nothing short of a life of meaning and satisfaction: "Entire lives can be artful creations, as protestors try to fit their convictions into their daily routines. They epitomize Socrates' call for 'the examined life.' Protestors often find new ways of living, new modes of applying moral visions in everyday life. . . . Protest offers many virtues to its practitioners, giving meaning to their lives. Their moral sensitivity, often painful but also deeply satisfying, is precious to them as well as being their greatest gift to the rest of us" (Jasper 1997, 340). While not himself a theologian or religious ethicist, Jasper is building a case that the development of moral sensitivity, an essential product of social movements, gives meaning to human life. The work of social change, according to Jasper and the narratives of social activists, has the capacity to generate transformation in human life—imbuing human life with creativity and a precious store of moral vision. Jasper thus places his own work alongside that of MacIntyre, arguing that social movements are a particular kind of social practice, generating within activists a set of goods: the "pleasures of protest" (Jasper 1997, 210).

Other scholars who study social movements also describe well the construction, maintenance, and transformation of identity as an important product of social movements. This long-term work of shaping character and identity rings true in the lives of many activists. To consider their activism a mere hobby or a phase would be a profound and patronizing misunderstanding. In my own research on religious social activism, I met many practitioners who have been engaged in social witness for *decades*. They have, to use Jasper's language, crafted lives of meaning and moral sensitivity. To the narrative of Thurston Griggs, the conscientious objector during World War II, we might add that of a woman who says her story began with her pacifist youth minister, and that of her husband, whose story of activism began a little later, with the anti-nuclear movement. Their stories are echoed by many of the people Christian Smith interviewed in his study of activists in the 1980s Central American peace movement. By participating in these movements for social change over months or even years, Smith discovered, they developed "activist identities" (Smith 1996, 382-383). One such activist is Phyllis Taylor, who goes so far as to say, "People's lives were profoundly transformed" (Smith 1996, 374).

In other words, religious activists become different kinds of people even as they seek and work toward social change. They, themselves, are changed in the process. Engagement in movements for social change *is*, itself, a kind of religious and moral education. It is a means by which theological and moral knowing is formed. To press at this formative potential, we might ask, what kind of *theological imagination* is being formed among religious participants in social movements? How do activists imagine, for example, an alternative future, even in the face of tremendous social and political resistance? While social movement scholars like Jasper readily identify the poetic and moral vision embodied by social activists, we might also identify the theological vision embodied in their work: among other internal goods, they cultivate an “oppositional imagination,” to borrow Evelyn Parker’s language. As they resist and work to dismantle structures that victimize, Parker writes, African American youth envision alternative structures of justice (Parker 2003, 48). The theological vision evoked in practices of social activism is the kind of deep awareness that, without this kind of engagement, “is outside our ken” (Dykstra 1991, 45). Insofar as activists among us are invited to excavate and share the theological vision inherent in their practice of social activism, their work and experience enriches “the whole relevant community” (MacIntyre 1987, 191).

Jasper ends *The Art of Moral Protest* with an ode to the creative aspects of social movements, praising the way in which activists sometimes are “more like poets than engineers,” and movements serve as sources of moral vision and voice for the broader community, and society at large (Jasper 1997, 379). For this reason, activists are critical to the ongoing work of formation and transformation of life within religious communities. They are the poets among us, inviting us to imagine an alternative future of justice and compassion, and embodying that vision in the lives that they are crafting in our midst. Religious educators might offer gratitude for their leadership, their wisdom, and their witness. At the same time, however, we are sometimes perhaps too quick to elevate social activists to a heightened level of religious enlightenment, and miss opportunities to accompany them in their *own* paths of religious formation and transformation. *Every* religious person is in need of ongoing educational nurture and challenge, even those to whom we might attribute the highest stages of faith development (Fowler 1991).

Betsy, the woman whose story and witness opened this paper, is one such activist. In her congregation, she is the wise person, the poet, the source of moral vision and voice. She too, however, is in need of the kind of religious education that equips her to examine and integrate her practices of social activism with her religious identity. Even as one of the wise elders of the congregation, she too, might discover new depths in her own religious identity if invited to reflect more explicitly upon her own life as an artful creation of moral vision and precious sensitivity. Although we can see the ways in which activists’ identities are being formed, challenged, and transformed in social movements, activists might encounter few explicit opportunities to intentionally reflect on the religious significance of the ways in which they are crafting “lives worth living.” This might be, in part, a function of our tendency to look at activists as either the “lovable kooks” in our midst on the one hand, or as moral and theological exemplars, on the other. In either case, we perhaps unwittingly objectify them, abandoning them in their search for religious meaning in their lives. The dearth of opportunities for theological and self-reflection for activists, however, might also be a function of their own impatience: with all

the work for social change yet to be done, committed religious activists sometimes are loathe to spend much time in reflection. They might even consider it “navel-gazing,” as one activist put it.

Scholars and practitioners in the field of religious education have a great deal to contribute in response to this challenge. The question for our field, then, is this: “What cultivates in a person of faith the capacity to recognize and tend new moral and theological visions, as they develop in the midst of movements for social change?” Religious activists can both be supported in their work for social change, as well as deepen their engagement in their religious traditions, when they consciously seek to understand the theological and moral significance of their activism. Craig Dykstra argues that meaningful engagement in Christian practices (including aspects of social activism, such as criticizing destructive powers in society and creating life-sustaining social structures) requires not only participating in the activities, but also intentional and thoughtful reflection upon our participation in them (Dykstra 2005, 73-74). In other words, social activists are in need of organic processes of theological reflection by which they might discover and celebrate the ways in which their religious identities have been shaped by their practice in service of social change. How might one’s understanding of the social and moral significance of the eucharist, for example, have been and deepened challenged by joining the work of Cesar Chavez and the United Farmworkers movement? Or by sitting together at a Woolworth lunch counter, demanding a meal?

What processes of reflection might nourish people like Betsy, contributing to her recognition and cultivation of this kind of creative, imaginative, and deeply held identity? In conclusion, let us consider in brief three proposals for religious education that take into account the dynamic identity-shaping power of practices of social action. First, the simple acknowledgement that in fact, identity may be an outcome of social movements (even as identity also predisposes persons to participate in social movements), provides an invitation to people of faith to reflect upon how this may be so in the case of their religious identities, in particular.

Second, activists must be convinced that theological reflection is an integral component of, rather than distraction from, the ongoing work of social transformation. Such organic processes of theological reflection are marked by their integration with the on-the-ground engagement in social movement work, and the questions about self, social relations, and God that arise therein. Elaine Graham, Heather Walton, and Frances Ward describe this model of theological reflection as “theology-in-action,” which privileges practice to a very high degree: it is “more than simply another form of applied theology in which systematic and historical theology provide norms for pastoral care or ethics. Rather, here, practice is both the origin and the end of theological reflection” (Graham, Walton, and Ward 2005, 168).

Rooting the discoveries of this model of theological reflection in the midst of social movement activism reveals its indebtedness to both Marxist understandings of practice and Freirian understandings of liberative education (Freire 2000, 81). When activists are invited to reflect on their experience and its moral and theological significance *as they are practicing* social activism, they can raise their own questions, spring forth directly from their daily interactions in the context of social movements. Paulo Freire calls this mode of learning “problem-posing education,” whereby the innate curiosity of human beings and the organic emergence of questions are cultivated so that they flourish, equipping people of faith to discover how they are

learning and being transformed in the midst of social movements (Freire 2000, 84). In this case, the activists, themselves, bring deep and transformative moral and theological knowledge to bear, and the educator becomes the companion, a dialogue partner in the process of self-discovery (Freire 2000, 75). Integrating theological reflection in the midst of practices of social activism—particularly when it equips activists to practice more meaningfully, astutely, and consciously—strengthens the practice and the participants, themselves.

Finally, even people of faith long since retired from the frontlines work of protest, political advocacy and public witness, benefit from reflection on the meaning of these stories in their lives. For Betsy, theological reflection on the experience of the lunch counter sit-ins might have come almost fifty years after those politically-charged moments, and yet it still came. Particularly for lifelong activists, religious education can offer opportunities to take the long view, inviting them to take stock of their whole lives, and the religious and moral meaning of their work for social change. Practices like story-weaving (Wimberly 2002), digital storytelling (Lambert 2010), or photo elicitation (Harper 2002) might serve as windows into the stories of their lives, glimpses into the moments of change and religious and moral development that have given shape and vision to their lives.

Who will be the traveling companions for Betsy and Thurston? Who will honor the “artful creations” that their lives represent? Drawing on the resources of both practice theory and social movement theory, scholars in religious education can develop practices that call forth and honor the deep wisdom embedded in activists’ lives of service and advocacy.

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