

## Freeing Speech: Proverbial Wisdom and Faith Formation as Liberation

Susan Willhauck

Atlantic School of Theology

**Abstract:** It is crucial to recover the practice of seeking words and ways of speaking faith, ever refining them as an act of faithfulness. Certain sayings, idioms, maxims and proverbs constituting wisdom from various cultures help shape a faith that is liberative, particularly evident in undervalued and dominated cultures. This paper examines the patois and wisdom of the street and how we find within this a source of theological insight. It explores the intersection of linguistics and Christian theology in order to develop a concrete approach for religious education toward appreciating and appropriating cultural wisdom.

Words and ways of putting them together to say things are important for religious faith. This may seem to state the obvious, but the premise of this paper is that we gloss over the weightiness of words and neglect our dependence on them to "speak our faith." I believe that it is imperative to reinvent how we use language and that refinement is an act of faithfulness. In keeping the words as the *Shema* implores, we *wear* them and we remember God's commandments and intentions and continuously try to discern how to re-tell them. Moreover, according to the Gospel of John, it is through *logos*, the divine word, that all things are made, securing the necessity of words in the work of creation and the Christian faith. I will argue that certain sayings, idioms, maxims and proverbs, constituting wisdom from various cultures, help shape a faith that is liberative, particularly evident in undervalued and dominated cultures.<sup>1</sup> My purpose is to explore the intersection of linguistics and Christian theology in order to develop an approach to religious education that aims toward appreciating and appropriating cultural sayings. It is to both discern why and how certain speech is freeing, and to explore the need to continue to free-up speech, to break out of social constraints allowing for new ways of faithful discourse.

Research into language and faith formation reveals two key challenges. One is the revolution in language. While language has always evolved, new words and meanings are cropping up everywhere, born of technology, social networking and globalization. There seems to be a tsunami of linguistic upheaval that one can hardly keep pace with. There are changing understandings of the way language functions in a social context. Arbitrary assignation of meaning can no longer be relied upon, if ever it could. I call this "tie-dyed" language--words that are not one meaning (color), but multi-variant, bleeding into one another, forming new meanings. For example, there is an emerging linguistically based wisdom from street culture that is worthy of exploration in theology. This investigation is especially evident in recent black theology.<sup>2</sup> I will return to this discussion later in the paper. So, the second challenge is that with such variation of meanings how do we speak clearly about faith and how do we define it in the first place. Faith is not simply a thoughtless warm and fuzzy feeling. Yet twentieth century Protestant theology moved away from understanding faith as essential propositions, doctrine and "right words." With the analogous changes in language such right words became non-existent. Faith became understood as ultimate concern, a universal--everyone has faith in something--an act of committing, of being oriented toward something.<sup>3</sup> A suspicion toward the authority of words has steered a turn toward image as a truer expression of religious faith, and perhaps paralleled the decline of some religions that are closely aligned to texts. It is true that many of

the unaffiliated see religion as tired platitudes with little relation to how people actually live. The message of this paper is that words still "mean something" and are needed for expressing faith as well as for liberation from oppressive and iniquitous structures. There is a sense in which "speaking makes it so."

This dialogue stands in the tradition of an important work by Randolph Crump Miller in 1970, *The Language Gap and God: Religious Language and Christian Education*.<sup>4</sup> Miller was the Horace Bushnell Professor Emeritus of Christian Nurture at the Yale Divinity School. Influenced by Rudolf Bultmann, Amos Wilder and Ian T. Ramsey among others, Miller explored the use of language and linguistic analysis as applied to Christian education. A valuable contribution in its time, Miller's work asked the age old questions, "How can we say what we mean about God so that our assertions will be understood, accepted and responded to? How does one speak of God in a secular age?" Miller referred to the language gap as a problem--the problem of being not relevant, of being too fantastical or mythological.<sup>5</sup> As long as there was a close relationship between Christianity and culture there was little difficulty in communicating the faith. At first glance the gap seems to have only gotten wider with all the changes in language and increased secularism. My challenge is that the gap is only wide because we let it be or insist that it must be. Miller might agree that people who are comfortable with the old ways of communicating resist new words, insisting that surely nothing from the "secular world" could be helpful.

George Lindbeck and the post-liberal school also weigh in on this issue. Influenced by the philosophy of Ludwig Wittgenstein, Lindbeck argues in contrast to liberal relativism, that religious faith is neither feeling nor propositions, but a cultural linguistic enterprise. Faith is centered in the language and culture of a living tradition.<sup>6</sup> That much I agree with. However, if he confines faith to the language and tradition of the church, that is where we part company. My critique is that today's post-Christianity, in which culture is not oriented around Christianity, is not necessarily secular and not necessarily unable to understand and speak of faith. Again, the "it's a problem" view only serves to make it so.

The enduring value of the language of a living culture is witnessed in the Aristotelian understanding of *phronimos* or practical wisdom for discerning the good. Sw. Anand Prahlad has described how proverbs play a unique role among African Americans, going beyond the Aristotelian view. He researched proverbs dating from slavery and spent years listening for them in bars, churches, on street corners and in the lyrics of music. He noted their contextual nature and the complex interplay of their meanings as cultural affirmation and expressions of protest.<sup>7</sup> In 2002, Anne Wimberly and Evelyn Parker's *In Search of Wisdom: Faith Formation in the Black Church* advocated for the role of cultural proverbs in wisdom formation, not limited to, but heavily influential in the black church:

written accounts of cultural wisdom chronicle black people's personal testimonies about treacherous journeys of survival, and the attitudes, values, and profound insights about life's journey that made possible their surviving and thriving.<sup>8</sup>

They say that phrases such as "God didn't bring us this far to leave us," or "Keep on keepin' on" are a means of gift-sharing in the black church for people throughout the life cycle.<sup>9</sup>

Noted paremiologist Wolfgang Mieder has contributed to understanding the power and influence of proverbial wisdom in religious faith. He writes of the “*momumenta humana*,” the omnipresence of proverbs which can offer common sense or wisdom based on recurrent experiences and observations. Proverbs do not represent a philosophical and logical system, but rather fulfill a deep need to understand and summarize experiences into “nuggets of wisdom” to become an “effective formulaic strategy of communication.”<sup>10</sup> Contrary to some opinion that proverbs have lost their usefulness and have become tired old sayings, Mieder claims they serve well as a significant rhetorical force.<sup>11</sup> He contends that proverbs have played a significant role in the political life of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, sometimes for good; sometimes for bad. Proverbs have been used for shrewd manipulation and have used and spread negative stereotypes and racial slurs. Still Mieder maintains that socio-political slogans, satire and graffiti accompany and fuel social resistance.<sup>12</sup> This is contrary to the notion that wisdom is accepting of the social and political order as it exists.

The political theory of Dean Wolfe Manders, however, counters the notion that proverbial speech is liberating. In *The Hegemony of Common Sense: Wisdom and Mystification in Everyday Life*, he critiques the common sense of American society that comes from everyday sayings. His argument is that in this class-divided society, the seemingly apolitical and universal wisdom of proverbs actually serves to maintain status quo.<sup>13</sup> Such common sense, he writes is infused with self-defeating passivity. Based on the theory of Antonio Gramsci, Manders claims that common sense preserves the hegemony of class and is the primary way individuals are reconciled to capitalist domination, “a conception of the world which is uncritically absorbed by the average person.”<sup>14</sup> The capitalist ideology promotes freedom which becomes non-interference in the competitive drive to freely accumulate wealth, and also promotes individualism, indifference to the world and ironically, submission to authority. For Manders common sense has a mystifying power over us and relying on it does grave injury to the potential for critical thought.<sup>15</sup> Consider the so-called common sense of “the early bird gets the worm,” or “good fences make good neighbors,” or “ignorance is bliss,” or “don’t rock the boat.” Manders does acknowledge that proverbial wisdom is not a one-way transmission from the dominant social position to those in a lower social standing and that common sense wisdom is originated in both dominant and mass popular classes. Whereas he admits that historical movements occasionally rebel with their own common sense slogans such as the 1960s peace movement’s “ban the bomb” and “make love, not war,” the scale is tipped overwhelmingly, he believes, toward the soothing and selling-out effect.<sup>16</sup> Common sense praxis prevails, yet he leaves open the possibility that common sense can break patterns of submission:

Common sense is not a one-dimensional process of self and social abdication to the overpowering reality of contemporary capitalism. Clearly, common sense praxis is never a finished product, a ‘thing.’<sup>17</sup>

Common sense is influenced by and influences the living culture. Going further than Manders, Mieder affirms that proverbs help grass-roots efforts bring about human and social transformation and are critical to the ongoing struggle toward equality and freedom. He asserts a call for a global ethic formed from a restructuring of the world according to new principals and ways of articulating them.<sup>18</sup> Schools of thought on language share a recognition that language is intimately related to action in the world. Mieder notes that the Civil Rights movement is a prime

example of the process of applying speech to action. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., as an extraordinary preacher had the rhetorical power and faithfulness to galvanize the fight for human rights. His proverbial wisdom led the way:

“I have a dream.” (Speech, August 18, 1963)

“Wait has almost always meant never.” (*Letter from a Birmingham Jail*, 1963)

“No man is an island entire of itself” (Speech, June 6, 1961)

“Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.” (*Letter from a Birmingham Jail*, 1963)

Dr. King’s language joined with and prompted other sayings to encourage and hasten change:

“I am Somebody.” (Jesse Jackson, Address, 1966)

“Keep your eyes on the prize” (Folksong attributed to Alice Wine, 1956)

“Keep your hand on the plow” (Gospel Song recorded by Mahalia Jackson, circa 1960)

Mieder also cites the recent proverbial rhetoric of Barack Obama as an example of powerful, effective political use of wisdom.<sup>19</sup> Obama follows in the proverbial footsteps of Frederick Douglas and King in quoting biblical proverbs and creating his own. He often channels Douglas in “Power concedes nothing without a fight,” or “No struggle, no progress.” In his acceptance speech for the Democratic nomination in 2008, Obama declared “I am my brother’s keeper. I am my sister’s keeper,” to quote a biblical phrase often used by King. He has also used “Make a way out of no way” in a number of speeches and in his books. Obama has popularized “The audacity of hope” (the title of a sermon by Rev. Jeremiah Wright and the title of one of Obama’s books) and “A new politics for a new time,” and “Yes, we can.”<sup>20</sup> Mieder attests that this is not trying to be folksy and “one of the people” and goes beyond sound bites used to spice up political speeches, but is a very measured and sensitive use of proverbial language to call for change. Barack Obama is also known to call for the homespun values of Ben Franklin’s *Poor Richard’s Almanack*, such as self-reliance, self-improvement, personal responsibility, some of the same common sense that Manders denounces.<sup>21</sup> But Obama tempers it with his global ethic of empathy and caring for each other. His message of freedom from economic recession and the freedom of equal opportunity is still a rallying cry as he seeks re-election.

In this vein I contend that new proverbial wisdom also emerges today from the street and can have power in the formation of religious faith. “Street” in this context is a metaphor for people who create and are influenced by popular culture, broadly including those who are out and about in the streets, in cyberspace or elsewhere encountering the world. Street is not a monolithic culture and has an underside of homelessness, gangs and crack houses. It may also imply a classism that determines who has access to the current “stuff” (technology, etc.) in our commodified world. Street includes people from all generations, but seems to be represented by twenty-somethings, a hinge generation that stays away from the church, but listens to music about God and posts millions of theological musings on blogs and social networks.<sup>22</sup> Street has its own patois and music and forms its own values and wisdom. Although some values proffered on the street are problematic (misogyny, homophobia are possible examples), Anthony Pinn suggests that the culture of hip hop and rap has a critical theological function of expressing black

suffering. He writes about “nitty gritty hermeneutics,” as a raw expression of reality, of telling it like it is.<sup>23</sup> He argues that conscious rap is a creative way of making meaning, of forging a sense of self and community in a hostile environment.<sup>24</sup> And Gill Valentine, in his *Social Geographies: Space and Society*, locates the street as a site of potential insurgency, noting that a culture liberates itself, and the street can oppose unjust situations present within itself.<sup>25</sup> I maintain that it can be religiously transformative as well.

Yet Robert K. Johnson, Professor of Theology and Culture at Fuller Theological Seminary, writes that believing all folk wisdom is subconsciously religious is dangerous. He suggests that even Justin Martyr’s aphorism, “All truth is God’s truth” is “falsely baptizing secular insight.”<sup>26</sup> His view again represents an unwarranted gap between sacred and secular. I find that to presume to know where God can and cannot speak to be a very limiting perspective. Could not so-called secular wisdom open out a “reflection on the transcendent” that he claims for traditional wisdom?<sup>27</sup> Religious impulses may well lie beneath the surface of even irreverent language and we may look within it for theological insight. The “language” of the street, hip-hop culture and “dub practice,” integral to the reggae dancehall culture in the Caribbean, are all ways that people speak. Robert Beckford writes about dub practice, in which reggae musicians take apart key elements of a music track and re-mix sounds and words, calling it a way to enable social critique and transformation. He argues that it is a deconstructive/reconstructive activity and claims that the dialogue between dancehall culture and theology attempts to “dub Jesus” to elicit new ways of hearing the Gospel message.<sup>28</sup> It is also in these human languages, not a holy language outside human existence, that we come to speak of God. Faith may come through socialization as people take on values and behavioral patterns of their primary social group and it develops and changes over the life cycle. It can also come unexpectedly from inexplicable impulses (and vanish just as mysteriously). It can come from the street.

For religious education this means that scholars and theologians need to look continually at sources of wisdom, the science of wisdom (cognition, brain research, memory) and the learning of wisdom (pedagogy). It means that both old and new language are needed and valued for the formation of faith. As noted earlier words can tear down and do great harm, so religious educators are needed to take part in the hermeneutical task to ensure the promise of language.

Proverbs have long been used as “learning hooks” for understanding concepts that lead to a cohesive moral identity and good practice. These are “gems of generationally tested wisdom”<sup>29</sup> that help people cope with and change the human condition. As Bishop Tutu has said of the proverbs of Africa, their power confirms the “pithiness, earthiness, joy and incisive cleverness sown in the African soul.”<sup>30</sup> But more than simply transmitting the norms and expectations of a society, proverbial wisdom calls for liberation. Even Dean Wolfe Manders, despite his dim view of proverbs, advises that a critical approach to paremiology may yield countervailing approaches to individualism and competition that the “common sense” of America has heretofore lifted up. Manders advocates “standing common sense on its head” toward constructing a politics of *uncommon sense* (italics mine) to abandon illusions and transcend suffering.<sup>31</sup> As educators we engage with street wisdom because it is largely where an increasing segment of society contrives its symbols, rituals and ethics and because of our commitment to the formation of faith in and through cultural contexts. This view understands with educators Henry Giroux and bell hooks that everyday street wisdom is indeed a freeing speech, functioning to raise consciousness about oppressive structures.<sup>32</sup> We often hear, “actions speak louder than words,” but it is also through words that we are able to act faithfully. I

advocate for “freeing up speech,” for understanding and using such uncommon sense and cultural wisdom to engage in faith talk in our endeavor to make the most of words.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> There are linguistic differences between these types of speech, but this paper focuses on their common basis as practical folk wisdom.

<sup>2</sup> See Anthony B. Pinn, *Why, Lord? Suffering and Evil in Black Theology* (New York: Continuum, 2006) and Ralph Basui Watkins, *Hip Hop Redemption: Finding God in the Rhythm and the Rhyme* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011).

<sup>3</sup> Paul Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith* (New York: Harper, 1957), 1.

<sup>4</sup> Randolph Crump Miller, *The Language Gap and God: Religious Language and Christian Education* (Philadelphia: Pilgrim Press, 1970).

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

<sup>6</sup> George A. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Post-Liberal Age* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1984). Biblical scholarship has articulated the special language of the biblical proverbs and how they function to form identity, shape values and define culture in the social milieu of ancient Israel and beyond.

<sup>7</sup> Sw. Anand Prahlad, *African American Proverbs in Context* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 1996), 5, 11.

<sup>8</sup> Anne E. Streaty Wimberly and Evelyn L. Parker, eds., *In Search of Wisdom: Faith Formation in the Black Church* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2003), 11.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

<sup>10</sup> Wolfgang Mieder, *Proverbs Speak Louder Than Words: Folk Wisdom in Art, Culture, Folklore, History, Literature and Mass Media* (New York: Peter Lang, 2008), 2, 9. The scholarly study of proverbs began with Aristotle and many proverbs are found in the works of Plato, Sophocles, Homer and others. Erasmus' *Adagia* contains over four thousand explanatory notes on proverbial expressions. Martin Luther was a translator of classical proverbs and employed German proverbs in his writings. There is a seemingly unlimited wealth of cultural wisdom, with millions of proverbs in most every known language. No one work could serve as an exhaustive authority. A good deal of work has been done to rediscover and preserve African proverbs, such as the African Proverbs Project (1993-1997 funded by the Pew Charitable Trusts to promote the study, collection and use of African proverbs. See [www.afriprov.org](http://www.afriprov.org).

<sup>11</sup> Defining a proverb has proved elusive for scholars from many disciplines and many lengthy attempts have been offered. Since people use proverbs frequently, one would surmise that we know intuitively what one is, but that is not necessarily the case. Mieder simply offers that a

proverb is a “concise statement of apparent truth with currency among the folk.” *Proverbs Speak Louder*, 9-11.

<sup>12</sup> Wolfgang Mieder, *The Politics of Proverbs: From Traditional Wisdom to Proverbial Stereotypes* (Madison, WI: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1997), 4, 31.

<sup>13</sup> Dean Wolfe Manders, *The Hegemony of Common Sense: Wisdom and Mystification in Everyday Life* (New York: Peter Lang, 2006).

<sup>14</sup> Antonio Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks*, ed. by Quinton Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (New York: International Publishers, 1971), 161.

<sup>15</sup> Manders, 36, 87, 90.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 23, 43-44.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 45-46.

<sup>18</sup> Wolfgang Mieder, “It Takes a Village to Change the World: Proverbial Politics and the Ethics of Place” *Journal of American Folklore* 124 (Spring 2011), 4, 10.

<sup>19</sup> Wolfgang Mieder, *Yes We Can: Barack Obama’s Proverbial Rhetoric* (New York: Peter Lang, 2009).

<sup>20</sup> The text reads “When we are met with cynicism, and doubt, and those who tell us that we can’t, we will respond with that timeless creed that sums up the spirit of a people in three simple words: Yes, we can.” (Primary victory and concession speeches 2008, also the slogan of the United Farm Workers and associated with its founder César Chávez, as well as a song recorded by the Pointer Sisters).

<sup>21</sup> Mieder, *Yes We Can*, 11.

<sup>22</sup> Tom Beaudoin, *Virtual Faith: The Irreverent Spiritual Quest of Generation X* (San Francisco: Jossey Bass, 1998), ix, xiii, 41f.

<sup>23</sup> Pinn, *Why Lord?*, 116-117.

<sup>24</sup> Anthony Pinn, ed. *Noise and Spirit: The Religious and Spiritual Sensibilities of Rap Music* (New York: New York University Press, 2003), 2. See also Tricia Rose, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (Middletown, CN: Wesleyan University Press, 1994).

<sup>25</sup> Gill Valentine, *Social Geographies: Space and Society* (NJ: Prentice Hall, 2001), 170-173. I have relayed some of this discussion in “The Urban Dictionary, Street Wisdom and God: An Intersection of Linguistics and Theology,” in the *International Journal of Practical Theology*, forthcoming, 2013.

<sup>26</sup> Robert K. Johnson, "It Takes Wisdom to Use Wisdom Wisely," in *Understanding Wisdom: Sources, Science, and Society*, ed. Warren S. Brown (Philadelphia: Templeton Foundation Press, 2000), 141.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> See Robert Beckford, *Jesus Dub: Theology, Music and Social Change* (New York: Routledge, 2006).

<sup>29</sup> Mieder, *Proverbs Speak Louder*, 33.

<sup>30</sup> Bishop Desmond Tutu, Foreword in *Lifelines: The Black Book of Proverbs*, eds. Askhari Johnson Hodari and Yvonne McCalla Sobers (New York: Broadways Books, 2009), xi.

<sup>31</sup> Manders, 137-139, 181.

<sup>32</sup> See Henry Giroux, *Disturbing Pleasures: Learning Popular Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1994) and bell hooks, *Outlaw Culture: Resisting Representations* (New York: Routledge, 1994).

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