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Un-barring Hope:

Theological Education and the Prison

Abstract: This paper was written for a course on religious education and draws on personal pedagogical experience teaching in a theological certificate program at a state prison for women (I will share more of these stories during our time together). Grounded in the practical theological method of case-study, this paper uses liberationist pedagogy from bell hooks, Paulo Freire and Rebecca Chopp, to show that by offering liberation through affirmed personhood, theological education in the prison is complicated but necessary to counter the dehumanizing pedagogy of the prison system. By engaging the prison specifically, it is my hope that we will learn more about the role of religious education in the formation of other marginalized groups and in the midst of challenging social locations that are counter to the goal of religious education itself.

Colloquy Participants: During our time together, let us consider what we may do as educators when the fruits of theological engagement are at odds with the reality of the prison system. Let us question how we offer liberation knowing incarceration is the reality. I welcome discussion of additional theological and pedagogical resources, theories and practices as well as additional theological themes to be considered as I continue this research.

Introduction

We were approaching the end of the semester. We just finished covering some very emotionally charged writings by Mary Daly, bell hooks and Delores Williams. I could sense the electricity in the room. Synapses were firing at warp speed. Liberation was in the air. Twenty-three women dressed in tan colored uniforms spoke with clarity and conviction as they read their Prison Manifestos aloud. These women critiqued the injustices of the prison system in America and shouted against the injustices of poverty, racism and sexism. These women were comfortable with their critical and theological voices and were not afraid to express them in the classroom that day. They envisioned a better world for themselves and demanded equitable treatment and fair living conditions. They cried for justice and yearned for liberation. I looked around at these women and the concrete walls that held them in and wondered in dismay - what have I done? I was the instructor of a twelve week program at Arrendale State Prison for Women. The class I organized was entitled Her-Story: Women's Theological Reflections. I was supposed to come and teach the class about theology as a part of their year long program in the Theological Certificate Program but had I done something more? Had I offered these women liberation knowing incarceration was their reality? Had I offered hope for structural change that may never come in their time? What had I done? Is liberation and hope a byproduct of theology and if so, is theology at odds with the reality of the prison system? These are the questions to which we will now turn.

As a religious educator in the prison, I was constantly reflecting on the goal and outcome of what I was teaching. I found myself pondering the relationship between theology and religious education; questioning the role of theological education in the prison system. How does the context change what we do? Should it? To what end are we working? What is our goal? What is the role of the religious educator? Using Seymour and Millers' Context, Goal and Method framework, this essay will critically wrestle with the role that theological education plays in the context of the prison system. Using liberationist pedagogy from bell hooks, Paulo Freire and Rebecca Chopp, this essay will show that by offering liberation through affirmed personhood, theological education in the prison is complicated but necessary to counter the dehumanizing pedagogy of the prison system. I will then offer a way forward by proposing an intentional context, goal and method for prison theological education.

Framing the Issue

Let us begin by defining the key terms of which we speak: religious education, theology and state prison. These terms are loaded with bias and connote different images for different listeners. I do not assume that the following definitions are without bias but they aim to ground the remaining discourse in consistent language. The following definitions, as will the remainder of this essay, unapologetically lean toward liberationist motifs. Given that liberationist pedagogy heavily informs this essay, it is only appropriate that it inform the very definitions of the concepts to which we now turn.

Education is a practice of freedom and religious education is both an academic and spiritual practice aimed at ethical and moral instruction. It is concerned with religion at large though much religious education in the United States is heavily Christian focused. Rebecca Chopp discusses education as "a process of spiritual and ecclesial formation that is focused in and through theological wisdom."¹ Seymour and Miller similarly suggest a theological concept of education wherein education and teaching is a "theological activity, empowering the people of God to be agents of the new community within the public world of God's presence and power."² Consequently, religious education is a theological task whereby educators facilitate learning in order to empower students to a new reality. Christian religious education grounds this new reality in the *Basileia tou Theou*. While not explicitly theological, hooks' definition of education is theological nonetheless. For hooks, education is "about healing and wholeness ... about empowerment, liberation, transcendence, about renewing the vitality of life ... about finding and claiming ourselves and our place in the world."³

Theology is faith seeking understanding, or according to William Placher, it is critically "thinking about one's faith."⁴ However, theology is not merely abstract thinking. For Nancy Bedford, "theology, if it desires to be relevant and honest, has no alternative but to deal with the facts" of reality.⁵ As such, theology is born from both contextual realities and eschatological (or unfulfilled) imagining.

¹ Rebecca Chopp, *Saving Work: Feminist Practices of Theological Education* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995), 2.

² Jack Seymour and Donald Miller, eds., "Living into a World of Confessional Pluralism: The Partnership of Education and Theology" in *Theological Approaches to Christian Education* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1990), 240.

³ bell hooks, *Teaching Community: A Pedagogy of Hope* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 43.

⁴ William Placher, "Why Bother with Theology: An Introduction," in *Essentials of Christian Theology*, ed. William Placher (Louisville Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), 1.

⁵ Nancy Bedford, "Little Moves Against Destructiveness: Theology and the Practice of Discernment," in *Practicing Theology*, ed. Miroslav Volf and Dorothy Bass (Grand Rapids: William B Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2002), 164.

Finally, it is helpful to understand the prison context from which I write. Lee Arrendale is a state prison for women. Lee Arrendale prison confines women sentenced by the state and limits personal freedom. The mission of Arrendale is first and foremost to ensure public safety and effectively house offenders while operating a safe and secure facility. The Theological Certificate Program is unique in its offering as it is designed to offer selected incarcerated students academic theological instruction that is ecumenical in scope and train them to serve as lay religious leaders both in prison and after their release. Students who are accepted have not had any disciplinary reprimands in the previous six months and agree to refrain from disciplinary action while in the program.

From these definitions alone, one can already discern the challenges inherent in offering theological education in the context of a prison. The most pertinent challenge exists in the fact that theological education and the prison both aim to instruct. However, the tasks of each discipline are often different and at times conflicting.

The Task of Education

The task of prison education is retributive in nature. The American prison system is designed under the notion that punishment is the best response to and deterrent of crime. However, with the globe's largest prison population, one has to wonder how successful the retributive model has been in the US. In the Arrendale prison, women are taught to obey orders and conform. Obedience and conformation are in turn linked to safety. For those who obey and conform, they will be kept safe and create a safe space for others. The overarching pedagogy is one of behavioral submission and correction. It teaches obedience to authority and supports a dominator-based hierarchy.

The task of theological education is quite different. Leaning heavily on bell hooks' understanding of education in general, the task of theological education is not to reinforce systems of domination. Theological education should counter the "isms" of society, namely imperialism, racism, sexism and in this case, *inmatism*⁶. For hooks, the task is to liberate the minds of students, not indoctrinate them.⁷ Hooks identifies two primary tasks of education that are helpful in this context: the task of cultivating hope and fostering community. Influenced by Paulo Freire, hooks views hope as essential to educating. Hope works contrary to abusiveness and "stretches the limits of what is possible."⁸ Fostering community serves to (re)introduce us to the feelings of connectedness and closeness that are often lost. Interestingly, hope and community are also central to theology. Christianity is a faith deeply rooted in hopefulness and community. The desire for hope and community in a liberative model of education sits uncomfortably behind the imprisoned walls of a retributive-based hierarchy. The tension between the two tasks manifests itself in the classroom and poses tangible challenges for religious educators in the prison context.

Challenges for the Christian Community and Religious Educators

Not only is the tension between retribution and liberation palpable in the prison, but it exacerbates other challenges inherent in a prison context. These challenges manifest themselves

⁶ *Inmatism* is a word used by Sadie Pounder and refers to a pervasive belief by those who have never been incarcerated in their intrinsic superiority over and above those who have, resulting in prejudice and harmful discriminatory behavior, words and actions against those 'in the system.' For more information, consult Sadie Pounder, "Prison Theology: A Theology of Liberation, Hope and Justice" in *Dialog: A Journal of Theology* (Volume 47, Number 3 Fall 2008).

⁷ Hooks, 1.

⁸ Hooks, xiv.

in the bodies of the women themselves. These challenges are invisibility, fear and shame. M. Shawn Copeland, in her work *Enfleshing Freedom*, writes about the destructiveness of invisibility on the bodies of black women. Invisibility is society's way of negating the presence of inmates. Out of fear and ignorance, society "buses inmates off" to prisons away from the comfort of the "average" well-behaved American. Inmates become unseen and unheard. Invisibility has ontological implications because it threatens the very humanity of the women in prison. How ought one to teach when the students themselves face dehumanization?

Second, there is a thick presence of fear in prison – both in the women and in the workers. Fear manifests itself in various ways, from violence to silence. Many of the students in a theological class in prison have histories of abuse, violence and oppression. Many of them have lived in a perpetual state of fear their whole lives and when they enter prison, they have to encounter another fear-based system of domination. How ought one to teach in an environment governed by fear?

Third, there is the challenge of shame one must address. Practical theologian and prison chaplain, Dr. Stephen Hall contends that shame and guilt are often confused and misused in prison. According to Hall, shame is an ontological quality whereby guilt is an ethical response. Guilt says "I have done something bad" while shame says "I am bad." The latter response is detrimental to the psyche and goes deep down to the very core of being. Unfortunately, as Hall has observed, many religious educators in prison perpetuate pedagogies of shame. This, according to bell hooks is problematic. For hooks, shame dehumanizes and questions one's validity as a human being. Shame, as a result, is a barrier to learning. The task of education, therefore, is to "challenge, confront and change the hidden trauma of shame."⁹

Any model of education in the prison must address these challenges. Theological education amidst prison pedagogy must be able to address the tension between prison and theology for the sake of the students. With a liberationist understanding of education and theology and a view of the challenges we face, it is now time to turn our attention to a way forward for prison theological education.

A Framework for Moving Ahead

The dialogue between theological education and the prison begs for an intentional understanding of the context, goal and method of prison theological education. It must be faithful to the task of theological education while navigating the retributive context of the prison. It must respect the desire for hope and liberation while addressing the deep-seated dehumanization, fear and shame embodied in many of the students. Liberationist pedagogies offer much help in addressing these questions. As such, what follows is one proposal for the role of theological education in the context of a women's prison.

Context

The context for theological education in prison is a community of *imago dei* (a community of humans made in the image of God). It would be easy to let the concrete walls and barbed wire of the prison structure overshadow the actual context of education within the prison system. The context for theological education is not concerned with the structure primarily (though it is a concern). The primary context of concern in prison has ontological significance – it is the students themselves. Due to the invisibility of the inmate and the dehumanization of the retributive prison process, it is important to remember that the community to whom we teach

⁹ Hooks, 103.

consists of women made in the image of God. Freire refers to this process as humanization. Freire's humanist pedagogy of the oppressed was an instrument of humanization as it sought to affirm the humanity in all people. Theologically, such a focus seeks to affirm the divine imprint on all people, even those in the prison system.

Goal

The goal therefore of theological education in prison is liberation through affirmed personhood. If education is about freedom (Freire), healing and wholeness (hooks) and formation of self (Chopp), then it is only adequate for the goal of theological education in prison to address the humanity of the students. First and foremost, the first part of the goal is liberation. As with education in general and theological education specifically, the goal is to promote personal and communal liberation by addressing the destructive ramifications of shame and shaming. The classroom must be a place where shaming has no jurisdiction. Pedagogy must affirm the worth of the students. Stephen Hall notes that one of the occupational hazards of working in a prison is the tendency to develop a superiority complex over and against the inmates. Theological education in prison requires a democratic approach to education whereby there is mutual liberation for the student and teacher alike.

One affirms personhood by encouraging all participants in the class to listen to one another as equal. It is also done by creating an atmosphere in the classroom that is counter to the atmosphere outside. While outside the classroom is governed by domination, fear and conformity, the classroom must be a place of egalitarianism, intellectual freedom and appreciation for uniqueness and difference. Within such an environment, it is also important to stress the need to liberate one's self and others as well. This Freirean notion helps to guard against the oppressed becoming oppressors. In the context of a prison, the concept is intended to keep the students from demonizing the workers in the prison system. It stresses a commitment to transform the context from within.

Method

Finally, the recommended method for theological education in prison is one of narrativity and dialogue. Rebecca Chopp's feminist theological pedagogy is extremely helpful here. Narrativity refers to the process of allowing women to rewrite and retell their stories. This method supports the agency inherent in women's voices. By telling their own stories, women learn to tell of and compose their lives in new ways. Chopp insists that "the power to write one's own life as an active agent is the power to participate, potentially and actually, in the determination of cultural and institutional conditions."¹⁰ It gives the students the opportunity to envision new possibilities even in the context of imprisonment.

In the classroom at Arrendale, the students wrote weekly theological reflections wherein they wrestled with various theological questions and wrote about their life experiences. By the final projects, many women began writing about the life they envisioned as theologians, pastoral counselors, preachers and teachers. They began to write new positive scripts on the blank pages of a previously dismal tale. The process of writing and speaking their own stories and futures engaged a process of narrativity whereby the students exercised personal agency in owning their own experiences. This process supported the desire to affirm the humanity of the women and the sacredness of their personhood.

¹⁰ Chopp, 21.

Chopp offers four elements of narrative agency that theological education would be wise to embrace in the prison¹¹. First, Chopp details the importance of allowing the women to voice their own experiences. This is designed to help the student take responsibility for her own reflection and practices. This is helpful in guarding against an ethos of victimization and blame. Second, Chopp urges the educator to privilege contextuality and difference. In a system that forces conformity from dress code to speech, privileging difference in the classroom helps to counter the dehumanizing characteristics of forced conformity. Third, Chopp advocates for the allowance of the reconstruction of tradition. By allowing women to wrestle with tradition and search for new symbols and images with meaning, Chopp hopes that it might lead to ongoing transformation and flourishing. Finally, Chopp asserts that narrative agency aids in the creation of moral agency and feminist virtues. This final observation is instrumental in navigating the tension between the desires of theology and the needs of the prison. If narrative agency yields moral agency and virtue then theological education aids in the transformation of the individual which benefits the desire for safety by the prison while simultaneously leading to the liberation and affirmation the student needs.

Related, the practices of dialogue and conversation are also critical to the method needed for theological education in prison. In a retributive system that relies on a banking model of instruction, a method driven by dialogue and conversation is liberative and affirming. Dialogue and conversation stand in opposition to the dominator-based pedagogy of the prison. Instead, it affirms a democratic pedagogy in the classroom. Freire warns against a narrative model where the teacher is the primary narrator. In such a case, the narrative model lacks transformative power. Freire advocates for the voice of the student for “apart from inquiry (and) praxis, individuals cannot be truly human.”¹² It is only through communication and dialogue that human life holds meaning. This serves to affirm the personhood of the student and the imago Dei within.

Dialogue is transformative and is facilitated by “problem posing.”¹³ By posing problems as a religious educator, you are encouraging dialogue and conversation in the classroom. Such behavior leads to the students naming their experiences and naming the world. The feminist sensibility of naming one’s world and self is liberative and transforms both self and perception of the environment. According to Freire, dialogue and conversation cannot exist without hope. “Hopelessness is a form of silence” and by encouraging speech via narrative agency, theological education encourages hope, liberation and transformation in the lives of the imprisoned.¹⁴

Conclusion

Back to the classroom at Arrendale State Prison - in hindsight, I engaged a classroom of women in narrative agency and liberation, and hopefulness and transformation was the result – not only for the students but for me as well. Here is what one student in the program had to say about theological education:

“In my five years of incarceration, I have never felt important. I have found an area of study through theology that interests me and springs forth a hope that would otherwise be dormant. Through theology, I am heard, I am a woman, a mother—a theologian, And I am proud!” (JC, 2012)

¹¹ For more on Chopp’s narrative agency, consult Chopp, *Saving Work*, pp35-43.

¹² Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Continuum, 1970), 72.

¹³ Freire, 79.

¹⁴ Freire, 91.

Prison theological education is a worthwhile and necessary endeavor. It helps to counter the negative effects of retributive pedagogy while offering the reality of hope unbarred. When the proper context, goal and method are used, prison theological education stands to transform not just the inmates, but the *Basileia tou Theou* on earth as well.

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