

An Artistic Review of Religious Education

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Abstract. *This paper presents the historical analysis of two faith traditions that utilized the arts, specifically song, word, and dance in religious education and faith formation. These traditions are the teaching of Christianity to Negro slaves through the "invisible church," and the United Society of Believers in Christ's Second Appearing, otherwise known as the Shakers. For both traditions the arts were extremely valuable in the teaching and comprehension of faith as well as being effective in formulating religious identity. Howard Gardner's study of multiple intelligences provides a foundation on the many ways religious education can be taught. This paper will analyze the value song, word, and dance had upon each religious tradition and the correlation these artistic expressions used in the teaching of religious education.*

Introduction

In looking at the history of religious education, what variations of tools were utilized in teaching faith and religious education? The arts were one of the tools utilized, but what effect did these expressions have upon the teaching of Christianity and religious education? If the arts were engaged in the formation of faith by particular groups of people, what did its usage say about the characteristics of these particular groups? What can we learn today from the utilization of such an approach? This is the area of study that will be pursued in this paper.

Religious educator Marianne Sawicki describes religious education as a "traditioning;" a handing on to what has been handed down (1987, 375). It contains stories of rituals, belief systems and the interplay of activities that give definition to one's religious beliefs. As a historical method, Sawicki identifies the historical narrative as a way she finds the correlation between what the religious traditions were and how they were taught. In this methodology she identifies the religious tradition found within the biblical narrative and then names the teaching and policy methods that were utilized in teaching the religious tradition (1987). Sawicki creates a comprehensive method by which religious educators can teach not just by retelling the story, but by finding the religious experience behind the story. It is the religious experience and its comprehension that should be a primary focus of religious educators.

It is within this approach of religious experience that the use of the arts as a teaching tool is at its best. And it is from this vantage point of recalling memory and historical events in teaching and shaping Christian identity that this paper will proceed. First the work of Howard Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences will be reviewed. The second inquiry examines the historical use of aesthetics, specifically song, word, and dance in religious education and faith formation by analyzing two specific groupings of people. The first will examine the teaching of Christianity to the Negro slaves through the "invisible church" during the Antebellum South and the second will examine the United Society of Believers in Christ's Second Appearing, also known as the Shakers.

Coincidentally both groups were outcasts from a particular portion of society for very different reasons. The Negro slave was ostracized due to a classification of being less than human, therefore one that was illiterate. The Shakers were labeled as being highly emotional, strange in religious practice, and incompatible, therefore they were estranged from the Christian

community. Hence Gardner's work gives credibility to not only the multiple ways the Negro slaves and the Shakers utilized artistic expressions to comprehend religious belief, but how transformative this understanding was to their very existence.

Educational Formation Grounded in the Theory of Multiple Intelligences

Howard Gardner's theory of Multiple Intelligences (M.I.) defines a set of different intelligences as procedures for doing things that include analytical, methodological and artistic forms of knowing. For Gardner, it is possible that the intelligences can function both as subject matter and as the preferred means for instilling diverse subject matter; thus creating options between student and educational material, between religious learner and faith formation.

Gardner's definitions of the linguistic, musical and bodily-kinesthetic intelligences are helpful in understanding the freedom utilized by the Negro slaves and Shakers in incorporating these forms of learning within their worship. Linguistic intelligence includes the ability to manipulate the structure of language, the phonology of language, the semantics of language, and the pragmatic dimensions of language (Armstrong 2000, 2). Musical intelligence has the capacity to perceive, transform, and express musical forms through sensitivity to the rhythm, pitch or melody and timbre or tone color of a musical arrangement (2). The bodily-kinesthetic intelligence affects the bodily vessel of the individuals' sense of self, allowing the individual to use the whole body to express ideas and feelings while facilitating the hands to produce or transform materials as does a craftsperson, sculptor, mechanic or surgeon (2).

The MI theory emphasizes the rich diversity of ways by which people use their gifts within each separate intelligence, as well as between two or more intelligences. In this way one can truly appreciate the wealth of creativity, spontaneity, and the propensity to express the love of faith through the use of worship styles, as seen in the religious experience of both the Negro slaves and the Shakers.

The Invisible Institution in the Antebellum South

A. The Praise House

The invisible church was known as the "Praise House or Pray's House," which was developed during the 1860's. This was the name of the acceptable establishment [acceptable by some white slave owners] where the African slaves held their religious meetings and services (Costen 1993, 50). Historically the slave owners permitted such activity as keeping the slaves both confined and occupied (50). Costen states, "For this reason, praise houses could technically be called the first 'visible' institution or creative worship spaces in which African American worship traditions were developed" (50).

The use of the African song and movement laid a firm grounding for the establishment of the call and response song pattern and the "Ring Shout" movement found in these praise houses. Costen writes of the importance of the story teller, the griot in African culture, who was responsible for narrating the history of the community in story, song and even in dance (2004, 10). The songs that grew out of this tradition were antiphonal in shape, with varying call and response musical patterns that "lead themselves to interlocking in overlapping phrases" (10). Costen further explains that the "syncopation and highly rhythmic patterns evoked intricate physical and instrumental accompaniment, or hymnic musical patterns with slow harmonic progressions" (10).

The use of the call and response pattern allowed the entire community to participate in recounting the facts of their family, religious, and tribal traditions and histories through recitation, choreography, and music. The griot would begin the story, the song or dance, and the community was invited to listen or join in by responding to the story using one of these three forms. The strength of this pattern of remembrance kept the history of the community alive and vibrant while the stories, songs and dances were used to help situate where the members of the community were in relation to that history (Costen 2004, 7-12).

In regard to the worship structure within the praise house, there was always a designated song leader who led all of the songs while the congregation either sang the songs collectively, followed the songs by having them lined out,¹ or sang in the call and response mode. The use of polyrhythmic clapping and the rhythmic tapping of the feet throughout the singing established the unity of the entire body of all people in attendance (Costen 1993, 51). Even today this rhythmic mode has continued to supply the drumbeat and/or base line of the gospel music found within the Black Church tradition.

The various texts that capture the character of the “Ring Shout” are all quite similar. It is a ritualized dance that is performed collectively by women, men, boys and girls usually at the end of the service and can last up to five hours. The “Ring Shout” is in the category of folk dance where everyone is invited to participate. It has certain circular formations and foot movements that include the use of shuffling rather than the lifting up of the feet. The “Ring Shout,” is distinguished from “dancing” by the shuffling of the feet against the floor. In dancing, which was considered wrong and sinful, the crossing of the legs and the lifting up of the feet off the floor were the essential physical signs that dancing was being performed. This was not allowed during the “Ring Shout.” During the dance the shoulders remained very close together while the shouters swayed their bodies from side to side in a circle forming “the ring.” The dance started off slowly and gradually increased in tempo as the song² and dance progressed.

The ring shout, both song and dance conveys a sense of knowing where God is in the midst of the life of the slave. The entire community joined in and the effect was a communal awareness of the ever sustaining presence of God as deliverer in their midst. The community of worshipers all became the central griot, if you will, and this afforded them opportunities to reflect, build, and strengthen one another’s faith in order to press forward in their present state of slavery. The call and response moment really engaged the slaves to see themselves more in their future liberated state as opposed to their current state of servitude.

B. Religious Education Traditioning Through Song, Word and Dance

Sawicki’s concept of traditioning is captured in the sacred use of the Negro spiritual that became dramatically alive and ever present. The use of the spirituals was a form of Christian education, through the oral tradition. Religious educator Anne Wimberly explains that these songs “were declarations and testimonies of an enslaved people’s journey in slavery and their

¹ Costen, *Spirit and Truth*, 51. The method of lining out a song followed a particular pattern of instruction. The leader would sing one line of the song and the congregation would immediately follow and sing the exact line. This method of song singing was not limited to the African American slave but cultures that experienced illiteracy among the community utilized this same technique.

² *In Dat Great Gittin’ Up Mornin*, is one song example sung during the Ring Shout. For the entire text see Appendix A.

understanding of Christianity at work in that journey,” (1996, 10). Both the music and dance mirrored and sustained their faith not only in the God of history, but also the God of the “now” moment. Through songs, the biblical message of hope encouraged faith and perseverance and were a force to withstand the trials and tribulations the slaves were presently facing. Such messages were hidden away in the deepest recesses of their hearts, minds and souls; they also pushed the slaves forward to continue living their lives.

The songs adapted to their situations at the very moment the leader changed the first line of the spiritual, and the rest of the church followed that lead. Yes, the essence of the songs was spiritual, but they were also educational; as the slaves learned that God acted on their behalf. Their religious knowledge was growing more and more about the God of the Bible, as well as the God who called them His very own. The dances helped them to realize this in the physical form. As they gathered and moved, their very beings were engaged in a struggle to go on and not give up. This struggle had ebb and flow that carried them through moments of deep depression and stillness. One can only imagine what type of life slavery was and the visible and invisible chains that enclosed them. But it was the song and the dance that taught them that God was near to them and to their situation. And we in later times are *still* learning about our faith through their very example.

The Shaker Movement

A. Their Belief and Doctrine

Ann Lee was a twenty-two year old English woman who was attracted to the “shaking Quakers” led by Jane and James Wardley. In 1758 by virtue of her gifts of leadership and strange visions and revelations, Ann Lee assumed a dominant role in the movement before transporting nine members of the movement to America in 1774 (Andrews 1940, 3-4). Known as Mother Ann, Lee was accepted as the female reincarnation of the Christ spirit, proclaiming herself to be “Ann the Word,” and the Bride of the Lamb. Andrews explains that within the sacred ecclesia of the Shaker movement, later to be known as the millennial or resurrection church, salvation was only possible by confessing and forsaking all fleshly practices (1940). The members of the Shakers who assembled in the wilderness of Niskeyuna, New York held secret meetings in which the members danced with the ecstasy of a chosen and exalted people.

The seven principles of the Shaker theology were “duty to God, duty to man[humanity], separation from the world, practical peace, simplicity of language, right use of property, and the virgin life” (Andrews 1940). These seven principles formed the practical and external law of the Shaker life based on the twelve Christian virtues of faith, hope, honesty, continence, innocence, simplicity, meekness, humility, prudence, patience, thankfulness and charity.

B. Shaker Worship and Religious Instruction through Song and Dance

According to Andrews the service began with a devotional hymn, followed by a discourse directed to the public as followers of the faith. Dance songs were called “labored” songs that were done once the meeting was well under way (Andrews 1940, 21). They were called labored songs, because within each dance the shakers labored, representing an understanding of being consecrated (Patterson 1980, 100). This was exemplified through every believer’s life of labor in working; either in the outdoor fields or interior workshops for the temporal welfare of the Society. In worship they also labored to awaken their inner selves to the spiritual gifts that would be bestowed on them during the course of the service.

Early labor songs only had a medley to accompany the dance without song text, though each song was numbered according to the type of dance being performed.³ From the various photos of the Shakers dancing, there were particular spatial patterns that were utilized. One form had the men and women directly facing one another; another had each group create formulating rectangular shapes opposite one another; while others showed circular formations where the women were encircled by the circular formation of the men. The most prominent understanding of the “typical” Shaker movement had to do with the shaking of the hands, which represented the shaking off and the shaking away of one’s sins.

My most vivid recollection of any knowledge of Shaker movement was during my studies as a student at the New York High School of Performing Arts, formally called LaGuardia School of the Arts at Lincoln Center in New York City. As a dance major, for the Senior Dance Concert, one of the dances done by the modern department was, “Shakers,” choreographed by Doris Humphrey in 1931.⁴ Some of the movements were direct replicas of the original Shaker gestures while others were choreographed under Humphrey’s creative license. The movements were rigid, sharp and quite static, with much emphasis placed on the body bowed and on the body tall and erect. Movement gestures consisted of the shaking of hands, the elevation of the body with jumps and turns, shuffles, and the stamping of feet, while keeping both linear and circular spatial formations going. Throughout the entire dance the women and men were separated by the center figure, the Eldress, who represented Mother Ann.

During the dance there were moments of complete movement arrests performed by the ensemble. At these times the choreographed movement centered on the Eldress, who appeared to prophesy to the entire group. Such moments allowed both the dancers and audience to really reflect upon the Shakers; who they were and the beliefs they modeled and lived by. Whether as dancers or as the audience, it always appeared during the execution of Humphrey’s dance that all were being educated about the life and faith of the Shakers.

The hymns and anthems voiced the doctrines while the exercise songs expressed the inner spirit of the sect. One of the favorite images used by the Believers was the image of the vine that exemplified Jesus Christ.⁵ The Shaker’s life was a continual reminder of the doctrines they upheld. Although their theology may be questioned by the Christian they exemplified a life style of faith nurturing, faith building and religious education.

Conclusion

Both examples investigated in this paper give a beginning understanding and credence to the historic association and union found between religious education and the arts. This union does not seem to have flourished with intensity since education in our culture has advanced from modernity to post-modernity. Hopefully it will be resurrected once again. Historian W. O. E. Oesterley so correctly wrote of the “extraordinary uniformity,” (Oesterley 1923, 2-3) that exists in human culture giving rise to a state of standards that are neither borrowed nor stolen, but that

³ Patterson, *The Shaker Spiritual*, 105-130. The forms included the Back Manner form, the Holy Order form, the Skipping Manner form, the Regular Step form, the Drumming Manner form, and the Walking Manner form.

⁴ Humphrey was one of the pioneers of modern dance and a major contributor to the field as both teacher and choreographer. The dance was reconstructed by Jo Ann Bruggemann through a dance language called, Labanotation.

⁵ *Living Vine* is one example of a vine song and can be viewed under Appendix B.

inhabit the soul of the human being. Furthermore both examples highlight the relationship of music and dance as it relates to religious education, faith formation and worship.

There is a very direct sense of knowing and presence generated from such an activity that is both overwhelming and invigorating. Change does take place, communities do become empowered and identity is declared. My work is to see the birth of a new method of religious education where all the forms of the arts will engage the entire church, as a communal place of learning. Such an engagement can support the understanding that Christianity is emancipatory and transformative. The church needs the earnest assistance of the Holy Spirit so to encapsulate the true meaning of being Christian forging a people after God's own heart; a people who sing, dance and believe in a faith that can move us into God's future time for us, toward the Christian church universal.

Appendix A

*In Dat Great Gittin' Up Mornin'*⁶

Chorus or Response

In that [dat] great gittin' up morn-in', fare ye well, fare ye well. Repeated 4 times

[1] There's a better day a com-in', fare ye well, fare ye well. There's a better day a com-in', fare ye well, fare ye well. When I see king Jesus, fare ye well, fare ye well. When I see king Jesus fare ye well, fare ye well.

[2] There'll be no more dy-in', fare ye well, fare ye well. There'll be no more dy-in', fare ye well, fare ye well. There'll be no more cry-in', fare ye well, fare ye well. There'll be no more cry-in', fare ye well, fare ye well.

[3] Oh, saint's will be a ris-in', fare ye well, fare y well. Oh, saint's will be a ris-in', fare ye well, fare ye well. There's be no more striv-in', fare ye well, fare ye well. There'll be no more striv-in', fare ye well, fare ye well (Carpenter & Williams 2001, 585).

Appendix B

Living Vine

The song, *Living Vine* was a hymn composed in the year 1808, yet its strong doctrinal message, biblical allusions and polemical tone makes this a typical Shaker hymn.

Verse Text

Christ is the true & living vine, Vine in ancient days this was made known
And now he's come the second time descending from the Fathers throne.

He first appeared in the male, there did Imman'els Glory shine
His second coming in Female is still the true and living Vine (Patterson 1980, 159).

⁶ This song, "could hardly be delivered without handclapping and boy movement, (Lovell 1972, 219).

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