

Teaching Social Justice in Christian Higher Education: Some Post-Economic Crisis Educational Solutions¹

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Abstract

This article focuses on how the concept of social justice should be explored in Christian higher education in ways that could help ease the suffering brought about by the economic crisis in Europe and the United States (the so-called “Great Recession”). Influential economists have noted that a major effect of the current global economic crisis has been to increase inequality and injustice. Taking the issues of equality and justice to be at the heart of Christian education, I show how portraying the reality of justice in Bible stories can have a positive impact. Utilizing the model of African-American Christian education as a frame of reference, I aim to demonstrate how participants in Christian education can be helped in their everyday lives if they are able to link their experiences to Biblical narratives. It is hoped that this hermeneutical framework might become the lens through which people can overcome their oppression under the current economic crisis and be empowered to choose a hope-filled vocation under the guidance of God’s wisdom. In addition, this article also points out that Christian educational practices for establishing justice such as compassionate listening, community-building activities, and social or ministerial involvements might help young adults in Christian higher education institutions to sustain and develop their moral and religious habits, so that they might achieve peace and justice in light of a deep sense of God’s love as experienced in Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit.

Introduction

Federal Reserve Chairman Ben Bernanke, presenting the semiannual *Monetary Policy Report to the Congress* in July 2012, stated that “the European fiscal and banking crisis has remained a major source on global financial markets.” Focusing on how to maintain the resilience of the euro-area banking system, Bernanke argues that the European Central Bank (ECB)² ought to provide “ample liquidity to the region’s banks” as a response to tensions

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² The European Central Bank is “Europe’s equivalent of the Federal Reserve that rules over the seventeen-country Eurozone” (Stiglitz 2012, 255).

within the euro (Board of Governors of the Federal Reserve System 2012, 1). In addition, he points out that “continued economic weakness and political strain” are the two key causes of the current European financial instability. Yale economist Robert Shiller (2012) observes that the political process’ deafness to warnings about the risks of indebtedness facilitated the current crisis. Such a situation might naturally lead to “the problem of excessive government debt” in some European countries (Shiller 2012, 115). Pointing out the ECB’s failure in its regulatory role as a factor in the euro crisis, the Nobel laureate economist Joseph E. Stiglitz (2012) in his recent book, *The Prices of Inequality*, argues that our monetary system should not be run for “the benefit of those at the top,” but should be implemented for “the well-being of most citizens,” guaranteeing “trade-offs between the interests of bondholders and debtors, young and old, financial sectors and other sectors, and so on” (264). By reflecting on Stiglitz’s observation, we can now readily recognize why the issues of injustice and inequality lie at the center of debates about how to respond to the Great Recession.

Economic experts warn that if the global recession continues, income poverty in developed countries caused by unemployment is likely to drastically increase with the impact of the government’s increased spending due to much more extensive social protection programs for the poor (Stewart 2012). This means that the higher unemployment and the government’s increased spending are the main factors of the current economic crisis in developed countries. Given such a situation, it is worth reflecting on the 2010 “Faith and the Global Agenda” report produced by the World Economic Forum, which argues that the current global financial (banking and housing) crisis in developed countries “is inseparable from” the issue of justice, and that this situation appeals to “the heart of the Church’s social doctrine” (Knight 2010, 33). In light of this report, the aim of the current article is to search for educational solutions to the economic crisis by exploring the potential for impact of teaching social justice in Christian higher education. This study is divided into three sections. The first section seeks to normatively outline Christian teachings about justice in the light of religious educational perspectives, linking them with Biblical stories. The second focuses on the meaning of social justice as explored in African-American Christian education. The third suggests that compassionate listening, community-building activities, and social and ministerial involvements are the primary Christian educational practices for establishing awareness and understanding of the need for justice.

Highlighting Justice in Biblical Stories

Justice is regarded as a comprehensive framework shaped by “human relationships and natural life” in light of “God’s character” (Provost 2006, 316). In line with this approach, Judith Ann Brady (2010) explores the concept of justice in the relationship between “religious values” and “a person’s life” (9). Moreover, she suggests that the understanding of justice in Christian education is closely related to “the unjust situations that people experience” (Brady 2010, 11). Brady’s approach to teaching Christian perspectives on

matters of social justice explores opportunities for personal and social transformation in unjust social situations. Her practical strategies for establishing social justice, therefore, depend on cultivating a “compassionate” concern for the poor, realizing social justice through the “support of a community,” and developing “advocacy skills” for justice in society (Brady 2010, 8-10).

For Brady (2010), the life of Jesus provides an evident model of a compassionate heart and humane concern for the poor. Thus, Bible stories about how Jesus “welcomed children, the sick, and the poor” can be seen to provide a normative framework for Christian education in matters of justice (Brady 2010, 9). In other words, our sense of “God’s love experienced in Jesus Christ” yields a diverse array of resources and patterns for providing instruction in Christian attitudes toward social justice (Kim 2012, 222). In concert with this thought, Yolanda Y. Smith (2012) also argues that “a deep sense of God’s love experienced in Jesus Christ” builds “a ‘style of witness’ that seeks to overcome hatred, prejudice, and oppression” (222). Thus, on the one hand, Brady argues that the life of Jesus serves as a resource for taking care of the poor, while on the other, Smith (2012) understands His life as a way of criticizing “various sources of oppression” and “oppressive structures” (222).

In her article, “Justice for the Poor in a Land of Plenty: A Place at the Table,” Brady (2006) also claims that “The many scriptural references to how God acts justly” provides the main resource for inclusive education in social justice among members of the community of faith (364). This means God’s just activity itself, as embodied in worship and prayer serves as a legitimate precedent for members of the community of faith to pursue social justice. Brady’s term “justice is God’s work” signifies this normative legitimization of justice (2006, 365). Ann E. Steady Wimberly (2000) also demonstrates the prominent position of biblical texts while simultaneously articulating how the characteristics of “a black Christian pedagogy of hope” can bring about God’s peace and justice in our lives and the world (159). Her African-American Christian education, however, affirms not just the normative conditions of biblical texts, but also encompasses educational processes such as “re-biographing or reframing” lives in light of African-American participants’ experiences (Wimberly 2000, 159). The next section shows how these scriptural narratives about justice are reinterpreted from the perspective of African-American Christian community’s heritage.

Social Justice in African-American Christian Education

The recent teachings of the African-American Christian community have emphasized the fact that social justice is closely related to the movement “toward liberation and social change” (Smith 2012, 222). This means that we critique social structures so as to expose oppression and seek to transform unjust social contexts (such as hatred, prejudice, and inequality). Thus, in pursuing instruction in Christian perspectives on social justice, it is important to discern whether or not we live in an unjust group, community, or society. How is Christian education

in matters of social justice shaped by the African-American Christian community's educational practices? What are the main characteristics of African-American Christian education? Through which criteria does the African-American Christian community decide whether or not it is confronted by an unjust situation? These are important questions for exploring the meaning of social justice within the African-American Christian educational tradition.

Yolanda Y. Smith in her article, "Let Freedom Ring! Black Women's Spirituality Shaping Prophetic Christian Education," constructs a narrative of social justice in the lived spiritual experiences of African-American women. Her perspective highlights the "multiple forms of injustice" such as "poverty, discrimination, and violence" which African-American women are subjected to. But, by seeking to reorganize their experiences of oppression, and then empowering "personal piety and transformation action" in "Black women's spirituality," Smith (2012) provides an important framework to approach social justice in African-American Christian education (222). She argues that the struggle for liberation undertaken by African-American women should lie at the center of Christian teachings on justice. Encompassing African-American women's experiences of "hatred, prejudice, and oppression" within their heritage, Smith (2012) provides a prophetic framework to empower Christian education participants to transform oppressed communities (222). In addition, Smith (2008) suggests that their enslaved ancestor's oppressed lives should form the foundation for reflecting upon contemporary African-American experiences. While Smith herself does not discuss the experiences of slavery, she nonetheless affirms the memory of this oppression as an educational resource for the African-American community and so celebrates their heritage as a means to convey "the ways of survival, resilience, and struggle for liberation" (Smith 2012, 223). Wimberly (2000) similarly demonstrates the importance of African-American heritage as a framework for "a black Christian pedagogy of hope" that can allow the community to encounter "the God of hope" (159-160).

The relationship between slavery and western civilization may be the most distinctive feature of African-American Christian education. Rosetta E. Ross (2012) points out that the systems of rational thought derived from Western civilization have often been used as a means of identifying "both plantation slavery and colonial regimes" (242). It is therefore very natural to assume that, given its historical experiences, the African-American Christian community may have a powerful tool to critique the rational pretensions of Western civilization. Consequently, the African-American Church's teachings on social justice can provide new ideals for educating and constructing a just society, one that would overcome "hatred, prejudice, and oppression" by orienting itself towards "God's love experienced in Jesus Christ" (Smith 2012, 222). Thus, it is an interesting task to explore the quality and character of the hermeneutical process of African-American Christian educational practice. In African-American Christian education, drawing on the heritage of the African-American faith community is the "primary means" of directing participants' experience and interaction with Bible stories (Wimberly 2005, 31). Wimberly (2005) focuses on how participants' everyday

lives are reframed through the lens of Bible stories and a recovery of the community's heritage. In her story-linking process, participants connect their own life experiences with Bible stories or exemplars in the faith heritage of the African-American community who provide hope even in the midst of inequality and injustice (Wimberly 2000, 159).

Wimberly (2005) demonstrates that the centerpiece of African-American liberation theology is "not simple" that "God want us free, but God through Jesus Christ sides with oppressed people in their struggle for freedom" (5). This means that the appearance of God through Jesus Christ in the Holy Spirit works as the foundational momentum to enable personal and social transformation. She defines "spiritual liberation" as transformational event that can link our everyday lives to "God's Story revealed in the person of Jesus Christ" (Wimberly 2005, 9). In other words, through connecting our everyday stories with the Christian faith as it is narrated in the Bible, Wimberly's story-linking process helps Christian students deepen their encounter with Jesus' presence and help them move toward attaining their freedom. Likewise, reinterpreting their everyday life story in light of the Christian narrative provides Christian students with transformational event of spiritual liberation. Osmer (1992) describes giving students an activity in which they have to compose their own narratives, and discusses how this provides "a useful way to understand how humans make sense of their lives" (112). The process of reinterpreting the Christian story in light of the Christian heritage of the African-American community may help Christian students recreate and recompose their own narratives as a way of realizing peace and justice.

Christian Education Practices that Promote Social Justice

Mary Elizabeth Mullino Moore (2012) proposes that Christian teachings on social justice emphasize that the struggle for liberation is necessary "for all human lives" (237). Pointing out "how much the freedom of one group relies on the freedom of another," Moore (2012) demonstrates that it is the important role or responsibility of Christian educators to ensure true freedom and peace for all human lives (239). In this way, a Christian education in matters of social justice will serve to "foster human liberation and fullness of life" (Horell 2012, 231). Horell (2012) describes this fullness of life as being concerned with "*all aspects of life*" and "the full development of persons and communities" (233). This means that Christian perspectives on justice will enable students to arrive at "a fuller understanding" of "Christian living" (Horell 2012, 232).

In addition, comparing negative attitudes or behavior such as "prejudice, bigotry, discrimination, and superiority" with positive attitudes "such as respect, mutuality, and empathy," Bischoff and Moore (2007) describe the topic of justice and peace in terms of "respectful human relationships" (153). They, therefore, focus on "how to promote respectful human relationships through religious education" (Bischoff and Moore 2007, 153). This means that Christian pedagogy concerning social justice must involve mutually cherished

interpersonal relationships. By focusing on such relationships we are able to create an environment in which people resist oppression, respect diversity, and come to value “both intimacy and equality” and “equal opportunity and mutual reciprocity” (Kim 2002, 115, 121). In other words, instruction in Christian notions of social justice, taken as “an essential part of a college education,” can help modern college students to exploring the “meaning, purpose, and values” of their lives through emphasizing the improvement of their social relations (Palmer and Zajonc 2010, 117). Here I suggest that compassionate listening, community-building activities, and social or ministerial involvement are the pre-eminent means by which Christian education practices can promote justice.

In teaching justice from a Christian perspective, it is important to be aware of “compassionate listening” (Wimberly 2005, 35). Describing “the power dynamics of educational relationships,” Horell (2012) points out how empowering “leadership processes” for social justice can make a new pattern of oppression (234). In this context, compassionate listening will be an excellent means to respect the liberation of other peoples as well as realize our own emancipation. Here compassionate listening can be understood as the ability to identify and emphasize with the sufferings of others. Thus, for instance, in *Teaching from the Heart*, Moore (1998) addresses the importance of “listening to the poor and oppressed” (181). Pointing out that it is very difficult to hear their voices, she has argued that the Christian approach to teaching about social justice ought involve our capacity for “respecting truth in the voices of others” (Moore 1998, 181). For Moore (1998), the scope of listening includes “all peoples” and even “the nonhuman natural world” (181). In other words, this means that not only human beings but also the earth itself can be an active participant in Christian educational practices concerned with social justice.

Secondly, the social engagement of Christian education participants is encouraged by “the communities’ rituals and practices” (Ross 2012, 243). The story of Ayanna Abi-Kyle, introduced in Moore’s article, shows that her social engagements in the community provided her with the support needed to fulfill the demands of justice (Moore 2008). Abi-Kyle learned to struggle against iniquity in the Shrine of the Black Madonna. So that, whilst still a teenager, she addressed oppression and engaged in a variety of community-building activities to “build the black church, support women in ministry, encourage healthy lifestyles in children, and counsel women victimized by domestic abuse” (Moore 2008, 225). These community-building activities help participants in Christian education to deepen their commitments to social justice and to maintain a balance between “piety and social engagement” (Ross 2012, 243).

Thirdly, Ross (2012) provides a Christian educational model to encourage justice through shaping and sustaining “inner convictions and social activism” (243). In this way Ross argues for the attainment of a holistic integrity as the means for educating people about social justice. Activities that can enhance students’ convictions include comprehensive religious practices such as prayer, worship, meditation, and so on. Likewise, social engagement can be improved

by involving students in various community practices that serve to critique and overcome oppressive social situations. Describing religious education as the means to foster human liberation, Horell (2012) also demonstrates the importance of balancing “academic enquiry” with “pastoral involvement” (233). His practical experiences and involvement in social justice and liberation allow him to enlarge and discern his “understandings of life and faith” based on his knowledge of “faith traditions” (Horell 2012, 232). This means that pastoral involvement in ministerial practices can be understood as a creative process to articulate the reality of justice in “the fuller realization of God’s Reign” (Horell 2012, 235).

Conclusion

With the preceding narratives and perspectives on Christian educational approaches to matters of social justice, I have sought to portray the real need for justice that exists in our time of profound economic crisis. Christian approaches to teaching the subject of social justice provide many of the best means to resolve inequality, restore freedom, and overcome prejudice. This approach focuses on sharing everyday life-stories with the oppressed rather than constructing an ahistorical idea about the character of justice (Rorty 1998). Justice is often something that can be uncovered by people only through their experience of struggling against oppression and poverty. Among those who experience injustice, it is natural that the demand for a resolution manifests itself in very particular concrete circumstances. In other words, contexts involving injustice or suffering may operate as our main resource for motivating activities that seek to restore just social conditions and relations. In the worst situations of injustice, the reality of justice may appear more clearly and transparently. Perhaps this can be seen most apparently in my examination of Christian education in the African-American community. From such a faith heritage and set of educational practices we are clearly able to hear people’s voices calling for and invoking God’s character as revealed in scripture, as the guide and guarantee of their hopes for liberation. I recognize that it is difficult for my suggestions in this paper to sufficiently alleviate the suffering of the many people affected by the Great Recession. Nevertheless, it is my own firm conviction that Christian higher education can provide the basis for both a greater knowledge of the need for social justice and the practical means to realize it. Furthermore, by becoming aware of unjust and unequal social situations, students will come closer to experiencing the hope embodied in Jesus Christ and thereby be imbued with the motivation and confidence to create more just, equal and free social environments. Thus, by helping people encounter the Holy Spirit, Christian education can provide a comprehensive vision of justice capable of liberating all of humanity.

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