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2013 REA Annual Meeting, Nov 8-10

Speaking With Meaning:
Helping Youth Claim A Public Religious Voice

Abstract

Young people live in a reflexive world. The market, society, and faith communities engage dialogically with young people each in their own native tongue. Evidence suggests that American culture has a seductive pattern of privatizing religious authority, even as concerns the common civil good. Using the work of Martin Luther, Jurgen Habermas, Thomas Groome and Eboo Patel this paper offers theory and method by which Christian communities can help young people claim a public religious voice.

Much has been written concerning the National Study on Youth and Religion. Various interpretations have examined the lack of discursive ethical and theological commitments in the voices of the youth. One way that some have approached this is the overly privatized nature of value systems among the youth, that is, a lack of a "public religious voice." It is urgent that Religious Education develops theories and methods for relating religious voice to civil and public spheres[1]. This paper intends to offer a preliminary starting point to this conversation, beginning with the theory of "voice" and following with its relevant application and development.

Lev Vygotksy studied voice as a subject's internal and external mastery of the tool of language (Vygotski*i, 1962). He found a direct correlation between the development of language with external experiences and challenges. Language use was primarily a social tool through which words and memories were used to creatively abstract thought beyond the concrete limits of a challenging situation in cooperation with adults (Vygotski*i, 1962, pp. 136-137). Voice represents this development from childhood onward of the subject's skill at language directly correlated with the development of creativity and imagination.

Inner-speech is thus directly related to intelligence. Language mastery and intelligence are linked as concrete constructions of humanity's external social reality. The self's history, creativity and dreams find their unity in the voice. Through external social-speaking humans can participate together in social reality in order, through communicative action, to cooperate in problem solving. Voice is necessary for individuals to speak to influence others and cooperate in external activity (Vygotski*i & Cole, 1978, pp. 52-57).

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[1] My political philosophy is influenced by the work of Jurgen Habermas (Habermas, 1984), (Habermas, 1974), and select Christian interlocutors namely, Don S. Browning & Francis Schussler Fiorenza(Browning & Fiorenza, 1992), Gary Simpson (Simpson, 2002) and Elaine Graham (Graham, 2002)

Vygotsky's work highlights that the cooperation of voices is key to social cooperation. Through voice, humanity transcends isolated experiences of the world by creating, sustaining and participating in a shared social reality. Thus, to participate in "deliberate democracy" persons must develop an intentional voice. How might religious communities themselves understand their responsibility in both private and public realms? How can this understanding positively impact youth as they develop and claim a public religious voice to participate intentionally in this process?

Throughout history, youth have given time, talents and passions to speak and act outwardly to affect a better world. Take for example the French Revolution; it was nothing less than France's teenagers who offered leadership of vision and passion to lead the French people to demand liberty, equality and brotherhood. We saw the same phenomena in the summer of 2010 in the revolts that made up the so-called "Arab Spring", which was initially and primarily a young people's movement.

Eboo Patel, however, reminds us that Al Qaeda and similar terror organizations have connected with the voice and passion of youth. Terror recruiters are gifted at speaking to young people's desire to make a difference. Once they have connected, terror groups bring youth into potent socializing networks and help them claim a distorted public religious voice. That voice speaks and acts towards the external world in violent and destructive ways. Patel states: "Young people wanna impact the world. They want to leave their footprint on earth, on the world, and they're gonna do it, somehow. If the only way they get a chance to do it is by destroying things, then we shouldn't be surprised that is the path they take" (Tippett, 2007).

It may be hard for many Westerners to imagine a productive public role for young people. Our collective conscience has little memory of teenage youth beyond the context of young people spending the majority of their time sequestered in an age-specific social cohort. For most of human history however, teenage young people spent the majority of their time apprenticing under adults for a vocational future. Mentorships placed maturing brains and minds in the midst of trustworthy social structures that provided scaffolding for the development of maturing voices.

Many religious communities struggle to see a connection between their private religious voice and the public sphere. Due to an inability to imagine how their religious practices and mentorship should connect with the public sphere, many assume that religious voices rightly remain silent in the public sphere and thus our religious communities resist claiming a public religious voice.

What is more many may ask that their religious communities keep utterly silent concerning public or "political" issues. When this occurs the possible scaffolding that could be built in religious social circles is subverted. This has most certainly not always been the case. Perhaps it would help religious communities in the West to imagine a different model for approaching the two-sphere model from which the private-public dichotomy arises.

On the eve of the Enlightenment, The Reformer, Martin Luther, described a two-sphere model that separated the state from the private lives of citizens (Wright, 2010). For Luther, the sole role of the state was to protect its citizens. The state is called to do this in two ways, first by limiting evil and second by encouraging external righteousness. Ultimately however, the authority of the state ends here. With Luther, the primary sphere of God's creative and governing action in the world is in the

private sphere, namely in families (Luther & Lull, 1989, pp. 429-459). Luther valued family and the loving nurture and education of children above all else. Luther comments, "A city's best and greatest welfare, safety and strength consist in its having many able learned wise honorable and well-educated citizens, who can then readily gather, protect and properly use treasure and all manner of property" (Luther & Lull, 1989, p. 465).

Luther sought to value the ordinary lives of the faithful above the privilege of the princes. Luther envisioned a theological world that placed the state in service of its citizens. This required the private nurture and education of children and youth so that they might always be free to pursue inner-righteousness. His 1524 letter to the princes, demanding they establish a public school system, Luther stressed clearly and passionately the importance of teaching young boys and girls the Christian gospel, literacy, and wisdom in general. Luther went so far as to comment, "Indeed for what purpose do we older folks exist other than to care for, instruct and bring up the young" (Luther & Lull, 1989, p. 464).

Imagine a young man in Luther's day spending his hours in the care of responsible adults. A fourteen-year-old boy may have spent the morning studying basic grammar in school and the afternoon working in the local printing press with his father. He may have practiced the committed work habits of his older mentors daily, shaping his voice through those sustained interactions. Picture the formative exchange that would have taken place as the adults passionately engaged in dialogue about the reformation-writings of Luther they were printing together, doubtlessly debating the virtues of the Reformation itself all the while. Certainly the young man would have found his nascent voice in his youth participation in lively debates about popes, the princes and the future of Catholic Europe. Perhaps he would also daily witness his father taking a side route on his way home from the shop to share the family's hard-earned wages with the destitute widow and her children living blocks away in the boy's own hamlet. Daily his voice would develop through proximity to their practices of communicative action, voice, charity and justice making.

For our conversation we would do well to stress that adult mentorships and intergenerational praxis, like those described in our imaginary print shop, form what Lev Vygotsky referred to as a "Zone of Proximal Development", or "ZPD" (Vygotski*i & Cole, 1978, pp. 84-91). In a ZPD learners develop skills with particular tools. Notably for Vygotsky they develop their mastery of humanity's paramount tool: language. Whenever emerging, unskilled subjects utilize a tool alongside older, more highly adept counterparts, development occurs. Pedagogy that intentionally develops the use of language and by extension voice is always and primarily social in nature. The public voice is developed through engagement in a Zone of Proximal Development through conversation about ethics, morals and deliberative democracy.

In order then to help youth claim a public religious voice, religious communities must develop social practices capable of resisting the sequester of generational cohorts in American society; growing since the dawn of the high school era. Many congregations have developed practical ways of doing just that: congregational mentoring programs, intergenerational worship, intentional structuring of congregational-curriculum around inter-generational interaction, the list could go on

and on. However inter-generational ministry is not a simple guarantee of developing public religious voice. Faith communities with no practice of public religious communicative action will develop a privatized ethical and moral voice.

Nurturing such a voice requires two further assets. The first is an appropriate pedagogy. Such pedagogy must facilitate public communicative action within the congregational scaffolding, while also intentionally honoring and nurturing the voices of all the groups. Secondly, structures and practices must be built across religious traditions in which the inter-religious communicative action can take place.

Thomas Groome's five-movement method seeks explicitly to create dialectical and dialogical learning through empowering the voice of the learner. If engaged intentionally, it is an exemplary method for creating a ZPD helpful for youth in claiming a public religious voice. Groome offers a possible response to our first need to facilitate public communicative action.

Groome's pedagogical method centers on a generative theme that offers the possibility to learn together about any topic that seems right and relevant to the educator (Groome, 2011, p. 304). This means that the generative theme may be a particular confessional, moral or even public policy concern of a particular community. Explicitly claiming a more complex public voice requires that young people have regular access to intentional communities, grounded in practicing intentional democracy as a part of the natural fabric of their community's praxis.

Groome's first movement introduces the topic by inviting conversation among the learners concerning the generative theme's effect on their own lives (Groome, 2011, p. 309). This movement encourages learners to explore the generative theme in the same breath that they socially exercise their voices together. The second movement invites the group to "reflect critically" on the theme (Groome, 2011, p. 313). This step further deepens the methods engagement with the learners' individual voices, empowering them to direct their own learning together through communicative action. Thus together they develop their voices by speaking and hearing each one's personal connotations, experiences and loyalties regarding the generative theme. This "social-scaffolding" is exemplary of the pedagogy through which Vygotsky found that personal voice is developed and claimed.

Movement three lets the faith-tradition speak its "story and vision"; one might say that in movement three the teacher makes space for the historic voice of the faith to speak (Groome, 2011, p. 318). This movement is the key to utilizing Groome's method to engage the development of a public religious voice. Here the voice of the religious tradition is itself expressed to the learners. The group dialogically engages the tradition's voice communally and simultaneously as individual subjects with particular voices. Together they hear and explore the tradition.

Finally movements four (Groome, 2011, p. 324) and five (Groome, 2011, p. 329) draw the previous steps together. In movement four the group is asked to "appropriate" the voice and wisdom of the faith to their contemporary situation. Movement four asks the community to "re-voice" the conversation having listened together to the voice of the faith on the theme. Finally movement five requests a committed response from the group. We might say movement five literally is a moment that asks the learners in some way or another to claim a personal voice.

I wish to highlight three particular virtues of Groome's methodology for developing public communicative scaffolding. The first is his primary commitment to dialogue as the ground of learning. Groome's method stresses intentional formation that honors, even stresses, the voices of the learners and of the group. Thus youth are never told in Groome's method what to think, rather, they are invited to consider in their own voice, the wisdom and authority of the tradition. Secondly, Groome grounds formation in "shared praxis" (Groome, 1980, pp. 250-255)[2]. This means the formation of voice that occurs is connected with practicing that which matters. This empowers the translating of particular religious affections into the subjective voice, sending it out into the world. Thirdly, Groome's method creates space for the voice of the tradition, the voices of the learners and the day's pressing public issues to correlate in constructive dialect.[3] Within Groome's method public issues can be brought into private religious space while also structuring safe communicative action.

Hopefully readers have begun to imagine replacing the aforementioned 16th century print shop mentoring experiences within the social structures and praxis of our contemporary religious communities. However cooperative democracy requires transcending the boundaries of particular traditions. Eboo Patel's Inter-Faith Youth Core (IFYC) is trailblazing the way for the future inter-religious cooperation in deliberative democracy.

IFYC provides youth of all faiths with a shared faith experience and formation of a public religious voice across traditions (Patel, 2012). Patel stresses that the influences in young persons that shape voices that construct good in the world work in similar ways to those that shape voices that participate in religious violence. He asserts that when one listened Osama Bin Laden speak to young people, one got the sense Bin Laden understood their passions and longings and was able to connect with them deeply (Patel, 2010, p. 130). Patel comments, "Many mainstream religious institutions ignore young people or, worse, think that their role should be limited to designing the annual t-shirt. By contrast, religious extremists build their institutions around the desire of young people to have a clear identity and make a powerful impact" (Patel, 2010, p. 143).

Patel's approach is itself based in praxis. The first broad movement in IFYC is to engage in "service learning…hospitality, cooperation, compassion, mercy" (Patel, 2010). Patel asserts that in this shared engagement learners are "seeing the best in somebody else's tradition just as you are practicing the best in yours" (Tippett, 2007). Service is always coupled with a second movement, namely communicative action. The youth gather with adults from across the tradition to speak together about their motivation for service in care in their own voice and the voice of their faith. Patel describes hearing youth speak to each other about the best of their faith's great themes: youth speaking of Sura 93, Matthew 25, Tikkun Olam and the like to describe their religious motivations for acting together towards building social justice.

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[2] Here, Groome uses Piaget rather than Vygotsky. However Caryl Emerson has offered a demonstrated the relation "voice" in Vygotsky as a metaphor for approaching Piaget, (Emerson, 1983).

Ultimately three aspects of Patel's program offer indispensible worth in claiming a public religious voice. The first and most obvious is the creation of safe space to share faith across traditions. The students speak in their own voice their understanding of the tradition. They learn together that their traditions are distinct in their wisdom and theology. Patel has stressed that students tend to be deepened and strengthened in their own particular faiths even as they deepen their love of the neighbor's tradition.

Secondly, Patel's program grounds its formation in praxis and action rather than theory and belief. They form their voice by working together towards justice and speaking their faith to each other in the process. In this way they engage the best aspect of what modernity offered, namely their shared engagement in physical, material and historical reality. They work together towards building the world, and then explore the different reasons they did this. In the process they engage the difficult process of shaping voices that both value the private particulars of their faiths and act in public partnership in the construction of that vision.

Third, Patel's program practices building public cooperation through communicative action. The youth in Patel's program learn how to communicate constructively. In the process they also become the complex network of leadership needed for the future generations. Thus they learn constructively what issues are up for partnering public conversation and which are privately protected for the sake of inner-righteousness. Patel's program paints an exemplary picture of a claimed public religious voice.

It has become customary to describe Western pluralism as a "problem" or a "challenge". In reality, the promise of peaceful pluralism is one of the great theological accomplishments of Western democracy. This however begs a renewed and reinvigorated civil sphere. If democracy is to continue to serve the people, it is in desperate need of its religious traditions to find constructive ways to cooperate beyond the precious particulars of the faith in order to view together historical, material, and social reality.

Historically, finding a path through social growing pains has required empowering the rising generation. Religious education empowers young people in the fabric of private religious communities' methods, practices and communal life. Developing public religious voices among youth blesses the world by creating the promise of deliberative democracy. It is an urgent call to religious education that we begin engaging the process responsibly and immediately.

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