"We Break This Bread:" Christian Practices, Critical Reflection, and the Construction of Adult Religious Identity

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Abstract: This paper presents results from a Qualitative Research study of a series of classes on Christian practices of hospitality designed to respond to issues raised for adult Christian education by postmodernity. The classes built on Groome's Shared Christian Praxis approach, using ethnographic observations, self-ethnography, and critically reflective engagement with Scripture, religious tradition and contemporary culture. Their purpose was to empower class participants in the construction and transformation of religious identity, both for themselves and for their faith community. The paper proposes some implications for praxis-based, transformative models of adult Christian education in a postmodern context.

A Class, a Congregation, a (Postmodern) Context

"*Looking at this program, it seems we're going to be painting hospitality with a very broad brush. People like things black and white, you know; I like control, and that's a big scary brush*" (Frank– all proper names in this paper are pseudonyms).

We had gathered for the opening session of a series of adult classes. Dinner and introductions were over, I had outlined the subject matter and format of our proposed work, and class members had been invited to share their initial responses as a way to begin our process of reflection and learning. In many ways *Under Construction: Faith, Culture and Community* looked like any adult education class in any large congregation – but as Frank's uneasy opening comment made clear, in its breadth and integrative purposes it certainly did not.

The pedagogical features of this class that made it so different – the opportunity to explore the topic of hospitality by starting with experience, the invitation to engage in between-class ethnographic observations to bring the stuff of daily life and culture into conversation with the traditions and stories of faith, the interactive engagement with those stories and traditions through a socio-cultural lens – were both attractive and intimidating to those gathered to form this learning community. But even those, like Frank, who were honest enough to share their hesitations, were willing to stick with it; as he said several times during the course, "This is the right place for me because I'm a work in progress; I'm under construction myself!"

The Episcopal Church of the Incarnation, a large, theologically progressive congregation in a diverse West Coast metropolitan area, offered me the ideal setting in which to investigate a number of issues related to adult Christian education in the context of what I will broadly term "cultural postmodernity" (Horell 2003, 82; Lakeland 1997, 1), and to develop some practical responses. By "cultural postmodernity" I mean not a set of philosophical commitments but a loose cluster of life-shaping forces arising out of social and religious pluralism, late capitalist economics, and shifts in understandings of how personal and religious identity are constructed. While certainly connected with the intellectual currents of the late 20th and early 21st centuries, these forces operate at the level of everyday life. Elements of practical postmodernity are visibly at work in the lives of the *Under Construction* study participants and in the institutional life of Incarnation, and these present significant challenges and opportunities for Christian religious education.

Social and Religious Fragmentation

Kenneth Gergen describes several epidemic postmodern socio-cultural phenomena. Ever-extending communications systems, multiple social and vocational relationships, and discrete circles of social involvement combine to form an indiscriminately complex and demanding social universe. Within this setting individuals suffer, Gergen claims, from role overload and a fragmentation of identity that he goes so far as to call "multiphrenia," with all its connotations of collapse, incoherence and anomie (Gergen 1991, 16). The religious corollary to this is a response to pluralism that eschews rigid exclusivism only to fall prey to laissez-faire relativism.

Incarnation is located in a metropolitan area, with a scattered congregation. Its theological stance is one of engagement with the religious, cultural and intellectual currents that surround it. It is a diocesan center, and the civic church in its city: the natural place for a religious (often an interfaith) response to public affairs. Incarnation's multiple social and religious roles and its porous cultural boundaries are reflected in the lives of its members. Several participants drove miles to reach their homes after class. Almost everyone had moved to the area from elsewhere, and few had family nearby. Many were meeting each other for the first time, most had only a small group of close friends in the congregation, and several spoke of having no other relationships with people active in any kind of religious faith: "I enjoyed surrounding myself with people who actually believe in God, for a change!" said Isabel. As a religious educator in this socially fragmented and religiously plural setting, I find encouragement in Carl Sterkens' (2001, 76) claim that religious identity can develop a "polyphonic" capacity to combine particularity with respect for pluralism. The question is how such religious identity can be constructed.

Competing Frameworks of Meaning-Making

Late capitalist consumer culture has surprising effects on religious identity. Theologian Vincent Miller claims that economic systems commodify even religious critique, making it increasingly difficult for religious symbols, doctrines, and practices to impact life coherently (2005). Economic structures act as largely invisible but overwhelmingly powerful alternative meaning-making frameworks. Their ubiquity subtly undermines the traditional power of religion, through the ways they subliminally train people to make meaning through the mechanisms of commodification.

Under Construction participants were aware of conflicts between their faith and the consumer culture in which their lives are embedded, but they responded with resigned helplessness: "It's tragic to think that we've got plenty of everything, no one should want for medical care, no one should want for food, for shelter, we just choose not to do it" (Stanley). They justified the ways Incarnation's own practices were subtly shaped by capitalism: the coffee shop outlet in the basement was commended for providing a "safe" space for non-religious visitors. When a class member began to explore the relationship between the language of consumer rights and the Christian mandate of sacrificial love, group discussion stalled. My educational response to the insidious effects of economic postmodernity is to raise awareness of how economic structures impact religious identity, and to foster mutually critical correlation (Tracy 1981) between religion and economics as competing meaning-making frameworks.

The Waning Power of Metanarrative

Within this postmodern mix of social fragmentation, religious pluralism, and alternative meaning-making frameworks, a suspicion of all metanarratives flourishes (Lakeland 1997, 31). Theologian Kathryn Tanner (1997) presents a postmodern model of religious identity as negotiated and constructed, emerging through ground-level interactions between religious traditions and the cultures in which they are embedded. She highlights how coherent religious identity develops through conflict and choice, and foregrounds practices (rather than metanarratives) as the principal arena in which it is constructed and reconstructed.

Incarnation's involvement with disputed ecclesial questions, and its engagement with changing socio-cultural forces, have emerged as critical factors in its self-definition. It enjoys a high profile because of progressive leadership around several issues: the AIDS crisis, full inclusion of gay and lesbian Christians, interfaith conversation, and most recently 'open communion' – offering the Eucharist to all, regardless of baptismal status. In all these areas its theological narrative has developed to reflect practices that have changed in response to cultural needs. Individual religious identity, for many in my class, had been intentionally chosen during adulthood; they identified more with the faith as practiced at Incarnation than with the doctrinal positions of their denomination, and expressed discomfort with religious narratives that made exclusive truth-claims. As religious identity becomes increasingly chosen and constructed through practices performed in a pluralistic setting, Christian educators must foster religious commitment without the supporting framework of an unchallenged metanarrative.

The Research: Questions and Methodology

In light of the above, I believe that postmodern adult religious identity must combine commitment to a particular tradition with openness to otherness, and a capacity for critical reflection on both faith and culture with deep grounding in religious practices. Adult believers also need to be empowered agents in the ongoing processes of transformation within their own religious traditions, and agents for transformation in the culture at large.

To address the educational challenges raised by such complex demands, I build on Thomas Groome's Shared Christian Praxis approach (1980, 1991). His methodological focus on practices, critical reflection, and dialectical engagement between church and world makes his work an invaluable starting point. I incorporate additional pedagogical strategies in response to issues raised by postmodernity that Groome does not fully address, particularly the fragmentation of both personal identity and religious tradition, the understanding of religion as a culturally-embedded phenomenon, and the need for empowered religious agency that transforms religious traditions and the culture around them as well as the people within them.

The design of the *Under Construction* classes and research study was shaped by the question: How well does a praxis-based, critically reflective, empowering approach to religious education work in a context of cultural postmodernity? The classes combined Groome's Shared Christian Praxis approach with the pedagogical use of a Participatory Action Research framework. PAR's purpose is to empower research participants to act in community for the sake of liberative transformation that impacts the context and circumstances of their own lives (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2000). This is congruent with the formational aims of Groome's approach; combining the two reflects my own attentiveness to the socio-cultural contextuality of religious identity foregrounded by postmodern thought, and my commitment to empowering ordinary practitioners to construct religious identity for themselves and for their faith communities.

Groome's five pedagogical movements (1991 146-8) shaped the course design. Each session began with a shared meal (Focusing Activity), during which participants presented and reflected on their weekly ethnographic observations of hospitality practices in the surrounding culture, their congregation, and their own lives (Movements One and Two), before engaging with Christian narratives, traditions and practices (Movement Three), and participating in structured group reflection (Movement Four). Movement Five sometimes emerged spontaneously, but was intentionally placed in the final session, when the class imagined possibilities for action in the personal, congregational, and social arenas of their lives.

In using elements from PAR, I incorporated ethnographic observation as a pedagogical strategy, and structured our encounters with Scripture, tradition, and the broad sweep of church history interactively, through a socio-cultural lens. I did this by means of drama, conversation with present practitioners of Christian hospitality, group investigations of recent changes in Incarnation's practices of Eucharistic hospitality, and small-group questions formulated to encourage socio-culturally based critical reflection. The research study of the course combined PAR (since I was simultaneously a leader and participant in both the classes and the life of the congregation and wider community under investigation) with a phenomenological approach (since I was also an observing researcher).

The Results: Findings and Implications

An Effective, Yet Limited, Strategy

The study data yielded rich and double-edged findings about educational design. Shared Christian Praxis is a classic pedagogical approach for good reason: it works. But in the context of cultural postmodernity, even with enhancements designed to respond specifically to postmodern challenges, it is harder to make it work.

Throughout the *Under Construction* course Groome's five movements led participants towards critical reflection about religious identity and culture. The additional strategies that I incorporated sharpened our awareness of pluralism, and of the socio-cultural nature of religion. Class members were enthusiastic about the interactive and communal nature of our engagement with Scripture, tradition and religious practices. They spontaneously integrated materials covered in different class sessions. They increasingly saw their religious tradition, its stories, history and practices "serving as a vessel for ongoing reflection and insight, rather than as a dogmatic institution that's unwilling to question" (Louise). But our work was too often fragmentary, especially our attempts at critical reflection across the categories of faith and culture, and our decisions for lived action were limited and circumscribed.

When presenting ethnographic observations, participants occasionally engaged spontaneously and fruitfully in all Groome's movements. Claire told a painful story about inadvertently offending a needy woman at the back of the church – "immediately all my defenses were up, and mind you, I had just come from Eucharist" – and then being able to offer her hospitality in the café – "grace happened there". Her description (Movement One) was suffused with analysis (Movement Two) and self-reflective connections with the Christian story and vision (Movements Three and Four), and she concluded by acknowledging personal change: "I now find myself looking at others and wondering, am I making a big distinction, choice, that I'm not proud of?" (Movement Five). One of the values of the ethnographic observations is that they could lead participants into what I came to describe as 'self-ethnography,' in which they became more critically-observant and critically-reflective about their own practices and assumptions.

Reflection like this happened infrequently, however. More often, participants offered their observations with little analysis, and made few connections between their faith and the very secular context of their lives. Despite careful crafting of small-group questions, cross-categorical reflection on competing frameworks of meaning happened only intermittently, and was seldom grounded in coherent socio-cultural analysis or awareness. Rarely was any connection made between breaking bread together in the Eucharist, for example, and practicing hospitality in other areas of life; or between the ways cultural norms are incorporated into Scriptural narratives, and the ways they can uncritically become part of congregational life. In discussing economic dimensions of hospitality, drawing upon their between-class observations of restaurants, participants focused on their experiences as consumers. They ignored the in-class conversation they had just experienced with four guests, with whom they had discussed ministries with the homeless that involved sharing meals. Providing a counterpoint of reflective experiences within the structure of the class, and crafting pointed questions to shape group discussion, did not elicit the expected critical reflection.

Class members' social and religious identities were clearly fragmented. They found it difficult to connect their faith with their lives, or to envisage being change-agents in their life-worlds. Frank made huge efforts (a key word for him was "struggle") to use the theological term 'neighbor' to think about "how you do your Christian ethic in a secular world." From this perspective he critiqued insightfully the ways economic forces affect his relationships with customers and co-workers in his commission-only sales job. But in the final analysis, his response was personal, not structural: "You're able to find some sort of inner peace with who you are." When asked if the church could be more proactive with its economic critique, his response was telling: "Well, I think it can, and I think that it tries probably every Sunday in every pulpit across the country. And I think that the only way it really probably makes the final impact is if enough people were at peace with themselves, it would probably just be contagious. It's the individual's struggle that will make the difference."

The prevailing individualism in the group also led people to back away from participating in changing congregational practices, even after discussing ways such changes had been made 'from below' by members of their own community. After exploring a broad sweep of religious responses to changing cultural circumstances throughout history, class members were asked about pressing socio-cultural issues to which Incarnation might respond today; they quickly raised the needs of immigrants, the homeless, those alienated from religion, and the "unhappy rich." But Louise immediately moved the discussion back to the personal level: "I'm just glad [the church is] here to make me feel safe … there's so much humanity here, so much caring about what to me is really important in life, it's a refuge for me."

This shift from the socio-cultural arena to the personal happened frequently; it marked a lack of empowerment that no amount of critical reflection could overcome. Comparing the reflection questions I provided with the transcriptions of small-group discussions revealed a consistent pattern. Groups chose to focus on the personal dimensions of the issue at hand and to ignore invitations to think about how they might transform either congregational practices, or their personal participation in prevailing cultural practices. Even conversations with ordinary Christians like themselves who had participated in, for example, the transformation of Incarnation's practices of hospitality in response to the AIDS crisis, provoked interest and respect, but a sense of inadequacy rather than empowerment.

Further Challenges for Christian Educators

When Christian educators design critically reflective, transformative pedagogies, we need to be aware that these can have limited effectiveness with the postmodern Christians who so badly need them. There are cultural disincentives, especially those created by social fragmentation and economic structures, to doing the work of integrating religious and cultural identity, and of exposing and questioning (let alone transforming) the personal, religious, or cultural status quo. It is difficult to construct pedagogical strategies that will empower Christians to do these things, though the combination of Shared Christian Praxis and elements from PAR used in my study certainly shows promise.

Complex issues are raised by using transformative pedagogies in a postmodern context. They originated in the work of educators like Paolo Freire (1970, 1999), whose context was the overt oppression of the Brazilian countryside. The social and economic structures that shape the postmodern western world raise different issues, in that most educated, working people (like the members of my class) participate in them as simultaneously both beneficiary and oppressed, and are only dimly aware of this. The overwhelming practical imperatives for participation in transformative action are clearly lacking in such a setting. By contrast, Groome's use of transformative pedagogy is certainly directed towards personal religious transformation, but within a context that assumes coherent religious traditions and well-formed practitioners, both of which are singularly lacking in postmodern culture.

The value of an empirical study lies in the richness with which salient themes emerge from the data, and the vividness of the challenge they issue. My experience with using transformative pedagogy with Christians embedded in and formed by the cultural forces of postmodernity reveals that it must be used in fresh ways if it is to empower them to engage in critical reflection, integration, and transformative action in relation to their faith. Above all, postmodernity demands a holistic approach to forming adult religious identity over the long haul. A single course, however interesting, is not effective. Ideally, all Christians should be engaged in trajectories of formation that are long, broad and deep, within faith communities that provide a rich ecology of participation in Christian practices, and multiple opportunities for critical reflection on religious identity as it is lived out in both church and culture. This is a pedagogical approach that involves painting with a "big, scary brush" indeed.

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