Whither a Postmodern/Poststructuralist Feminist Education?

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Two line descriptor: *This paper proposes that there can indeed be an adult religious education (ARE), informed by feminist and postmodern/poststructural thinking, which challenges metanarratives and uses an analysis of knowledge, discourse and power to design a creative educational process.*

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Within various sectors of adult education, spirituality has gained a prominence (English et al. 2003; Groen 2008) that is reflective of a universal interest in spiritual matters. Although the traditional churches, synagogues, and mosques have attempted to respond, much of this spiritual searching is being met by a wide range of spiritual expressions ranging from an amorphous, unreflected new age teaching, to cooptation of things spiritual by human resource developers (HRD; see Driscoll and Wiebe 2007), to fundamentalism. Meanwhile, many view the adult religious education (ARE) programs that traditional religious institutions offer as static, immutable, non-feeling, non-cognitive sources of information that are oriented to the regurgitation of ideas from a past era.

This paper proposes that there can indeed be an adult religious education (ARE) which is informed by postmodern/poststructural thinking which is characterized by an understanding of the creative power of God and the general

becomingness of all of creation. This is a constructive postmodern theology

(Griffin 1989) as an answer to recovering the best of religious traditions and as a

way to address the genuine human need for an adequate adult religious education.

In particular it combines the theological insights of process theology with the

postmodern/poststructural insights of the social sciences to build a more creative

approach and grounding for ARE. This paper builds on earlier work on process

elements of ARE (English and Gillen 2000) and on poststructural approaches to

adult religious education (English 2008). It uses both postmodernism's emphasis

on fragmenting the grand narrative, and poststructuralist's emphasis on discourse,

power and knowledge, to propose an alternate hermeneutic lens for the field.

One of the main emphases of these postfoundational approaches is an

understanding of power as fluid and held by everyone. Poststructuralism, for

instance, is less interested in institutional power dynamics and more in the

everyday way in which power is held and used, as opposed to being owned and

exercised by the dominant elite. It does not look for causes and effects, or for

differences between groups; rather, it focuses on power and knowledge and how

they shift with the context and the participants involved.

Challenges for Adult Religious Education

Despite the many emergent understandings in the social sciences and in

theology, ARE continues to operate in a modernistic milieu. Modernity's

characteristics of universalism, dualism, supernaturalistic theism, individualism, anthropomorphism, patriarchy, militarism, and consumerism present religious traditions with seemingly insurmountable challenges. In this modern framework, theology is irrelevant, and is replaced with the god of materialism and natural science. This is a world that is based on the idea of "solid modernity" or the idea that "one can achieve a fully rational perfect world, rationally perfect, perfectly rational" (Bauman 2004, 3). In response, a postmodern/poststructural adult religious education reaches ahead to a world that is ecologically responsible, peaceful, and inclusive of feminist epistemology(ies).

The inability of organized religious groups to consider seriously the challenges of modernity and to grapple with them in congregations, through adult education, is an urgent demand, made all the more urgent by decades of indecision and internal division (see Irigaray 2004). Most of their educational efforts have been directed toward grade schools and institutions of higher education such as seminaries and universities, omitting the multitudes in churches, synagogues, and mosques which have no forum for relevant discussion. Roman Catholics, for instance, have acknowledged the need for adult religious education through documents such as the revised *General Directory for Catechesis* (Congregation for the Clergy 1997), but there has been little effort to engage in a participatory educational endeavor (exceptions include Hess and Brookfield 2008). Similarly,

in the Jewish community, adult education efforts have been somewhat sporadic, even though their religion embodies lifelong learning principles in its very tradition and history (Schuster 2003). The dearth of publications that deal with adult religious education from a critical stance is indicative of the challenges one faces in trying to cope with spiritual hunger today without an adequate theology/pedagogy/hermeneutic lens.

Implications for Adult Religious Education

The vision of a postmodern/process approach for adult religious education is progressive rather than static, flexible rather than immutable, emotive rather than non-feeling, cognitively and perceptively based in the here and now rather than dependent on non-cognitive sources of information of a past era. Six main insights which a postmodern/poststructual theology offer to adult religious education are discussed in turn.

1. Search for Meaning

Leon McKenzie (1986), long time adult religious education researcher, noted that an authentic adult religious education has three main purposes: to help individuals acquire meaning; to explore and to expand on this meaning; and to express meaning in a productive manner. Similarly, from a postmodern perspective, an authentic adult religious education is one that engages learners continuously in the search for meaning. It is one that acknowledges the co-

engagement of learner and educator, the constant state of becoming that characterizes the universe, and the key role of the adult educator in the meaning-making project. The human self is always in flux and is searching for answers to life's greatest questions (see Kang 2007). Whereas the God of modernity gave all meaning to humans (see Merriam et al. 2007), the God of postmodernism cannot. Hence, adult learners are compelled to become active agents in constructing meaning.

In the modern world, spirituality has come to be seen as somehow different and divorced from adult religious education. Spirituality is viewed as the giver of meaning, and religion is seen as the giver of rules (Ó Murchú 2005). Consequently, mainline religious traditions are suspicious of what they see as a new age encroachment in matters spiritual, while new age movements are dismissive of traditional religious forms (Bruce 1998). A postmodern approach provides opportunities for adults to focus on their spiritual needs and their life questions, and boldly proclaims that individual members have value. It acknowledges the fact that the spiritual, meaning-making needs of some individuals cannot be met in traditional ways. Rather than building walls, process thought encourages a more welcoming, less threatening, more symbiotic and well-integrated community of believers and knowers (Griffin 1989). An authentic postmodern adult religious education embraces spirituality and is not concerned

with retaining members and indoctrinating--it aims to include all. Hence, the use

of terms such as co-learning, and the deliberate attempt to break down clericalism,

hierarchy, and irrelevant rule giving. Adult religious educators work in symbiotic,

mentoring relationships among themselves and with learners in order to address

crucial human questions about meaning.

2. Interrelationship Between the I and the We

The human self of postmodern theology cannot ignore the non-sensory

relationship that it affects and is affected by (Whitehead 1929). At once, the

individual is interconnected with nature and with the larger cosmos. He or she

interacts and is in relationship with greater social issues, resisting polarity and

division, engaging the other in conversation and maintaining an ongoing dialogue

of opposites (Bohm 1996). This challenge to the status quo results in total

commitment, promoting as it does legitimate inquiry, exploration, and never-

ending critical reflection (see Kilgore 2004). In other words, there is fluidity in the

ways in which assumptions about issues like sexuality and economic justice are

examined, and there is responsiveness to emergent ideas, especially those that deal

with human spiritual needs.

The constant tensions between the individual and the collective can now

be viewed from a fresh perspective. The institution (church, mosque, or

synagogue) directly and indirectly affects the individual and is affected by it. Both

the individual and the surroundings are in a state of becoming. This redefinition

and fluidity (*flexus quo*) place neither in a position of power over the other; as

Whitehead (1962) notes, "Religion will not regain its old power until it can face

change in the same spirit as science" (270). Power resides in the whole through

dialogue (Bohm 1996). Rather, the self interacts and engages with the other as

part of the process of defining and being defined. In practice, this would mean that

educators, church leaders, and learners would work together to model

collaboration in decision-making about the content and processes involved in

adult learning.

3. Moving Beyond Binaries.

One of the key offerings of postmodernity/poststructuralism and related

theories is that we need to move beyond a notion of us and them. The uncertainty

and fluidity of postmodern perspectives encourages us to see belief as on a

continuum that needs to be engaged and thought of as fluid. We need to see the

commonality of our search for the divine and the need to live right. This is a

pedagogy of inclusion that involves the need for all adherents to resist the fixed

"truth" of our tradition and to be open to learning from the other, whether they are

Confucian, Buddhist or Christian. In a pedagogy of inclusion the whole

community is involved in our conversation and our discourses. On a practical

level for adult education, a pedagogy of inclusion might embrace active

involvement in dialogue, informal learning, classes, preaching and teaching, and

community based involvement. To put postmodern and postcolonial theory into

practice involves resisting the binary logic of the lifeworld versus the state, the

private versus the public, or one religion versus another. We might indeed move

the dialogue forward through looking at a variety of representations of the Other

in fiction such as in Salman Rushdie's (1988) *Satanic Verses*, or in film through

Schindler's List (Keneally 1993), as well as through more traditional sources such

as the Torah, Qu'ran and Bible.

4. Attention to Gender and Difference

A postmodern understanding of education will be inclusive of gender. It

will pay attention not only to feminist thinking but also to feminist pedagogical

practice. This means paying attention to the ways in which women learn best,

taking advice from those who have studied this for some time (Tisdell 2000) and

being attentive to issues of power and voice, the latter being especially important

(Mantin 2003).

Dualities that existed in the modern age are challenged by the postmodern

understanding of interrelationships and nexus. One of the key contributions of

postmodern thinking is the emergent understanding of the connectedness between the religious education of children and that of adults. The current emphasis on the education of children is seen as only one part of the continuum of lifelong learning. Learning parishes would be part of the everyday organization of religious institutions, and opportunities for intergenerational learning would be provided. There are no "methods" for teaching--the "methods" arise from the situation and are governed by Whitehead's (1929) tripartite rhythmic educational approach; that is, the kind of education that first draws one in (romance), then gives precision and moves back to romance and generalizability again, is the optimum. This kind of religious education recognizes differences between adults and children but sees them as part of a continuum of intergenerational knowledge seeking.

A postmodern/poststructuralist adult religious education eradicates the barriers of age, race, class, gender, and sexual orientation. It argues against the "othering" of people and for the welcoming of multi-voiced, interdisciplinarity, and multiperspectives, in all adult religious education experiences. An authentic adult religious education models and embodies inclusion and integration by welcoming a diversity of people and by providing opportunities for them to study the concerns and issues that they themselves identify (e.g., Weick and Putnam 2006). It also works toward breaking down religious barriers by promoting

ongoing dialogue with members of other religious traditions at the local, as well as the national and international level.

The spirit of postmodernity for ARE is captured by Diarmuid Ó Murchú in *Consecrated Religious Life: The Changing Paradigms* (2005), "Liminality is about growth and risk at the cutting edges ... it is about fluidity and flexibility, creativity and courageous abandonment to divine recklessness." A postmodern adult religious education among religions would reach ahead to a world that is ecologically responsible, peaceful, and inclusive of feminist epistemology(ies). Patti Lather (2001) describes the emergent critical pedagogical stance that we might embrace in this regard:

> Pedagogy becomes a site not for working through more effective
> transmission strategies, but for helping us learn to analyze the discourses
> available to us, which ones we are invested in, how we are inscribed by the
> dominant, how we are outside of, other than, the dominant,
> consciously/unconsciously, always partially contradictorily. (99).

5. Critically Reflective Practice

This poststructural/postmodern theology offers a basis for engaging in a critically reflective adult religious education. It attends to the particular concerns of poststructuralism for "deconstruction, texts, language, trace, absences, and

difference" (Koro-Ljungberg 2008, 221). Although some adult religious educators have advocated this practice for quite some time (see McKenzie 1986), it has not been widespread. In a postmodern world, where flux and uncertainty are the essence of reality, critically reflective practice is the primary mode of functioning. Humans need to be engaged in a continuous process of questioning and critique. A postmodern adult religious education would boldly discuss controversial issues such as war, peace, and the death penalty, and make the community's religious views known in a public forum. This presupposes a new context for adult religious education, one in which individuals with differing views are encouraged to engage in ongoing critically reflective dialogue, rather than to be passive recipients of ideas doled out by the hierarchy. As Whitehead (1962) himself said, "A clash of doctrines is not a disaster—it is an opportunity" (266). Gone are the traditional frameworks of fixed knowledge wherein dialogue is impeded.

Postmodern theology has at its center a new understanding of cosmology, and consequently ecology. A relevant adult religious education cannot exist without grappling critically with ecological issues. A fundamentalist, anthropomorphic agenda in any world religion cannot obtain in postmodern world view because it is a throwback to an earlier time and does not respond adequately to the understanding of creativity and becoming. Adult religious education would assist in orienting learners to the interrelationship of humans to the natural world,

with a view to making ecological responsibility a primary focus of the religious

community and not an optional undertaking.

6. Attention to Power, Knowledge and Discourse

A postmodern/poststructural lens allows us to focus on knowledge (how it

is produced), power (who exercises power at any one time) and discourse

(multiple modes of articulation). It allows particular attention to issues of

knowledge, discourse, power and meaning in women's religious learning.

When poststructuralism is coupled with feminism it becomes a helpful and critical

interpretive lens, focusing attention on issues of knowledge, power, difference and

discourse and how these intersect and entwine in the lives of women.

Poststructuralist feminism may be considered a branch of feminism that is

interested in the minutiae of everyday experience, especially in how women affect

and are affected by their interrelationships with each other and the world around

them. And, it points to the fact that our reality, our discourse, and language are all

under continuous construction. Poststructuralist feminism is a body of theory that

pays attention to the issues of knowledge, power, difference and discourse and

how these intersect and entwine in the lives of women. Within poststructuralist

feminist theory, women are not one unified, coherent group with a singular

identity—they are constantly creating new identities and subjectivities, freeing

themselves from labels, cultural expectations and norms. In recognizing that women are active participants in their own creation as subjects, poststructuralist feminism makes it possible for women to revise how they have been constructed and to grasp that they inhabit multiple and possibly contradictory positions at the same time.

One of the key insights from poststructuralist Michel Foucault's (1980) view of power is that it points to how pervasive power is, rearing its head in the minutiae of everyday teaching and learning. Here the theory suggests that we be attentive to the capillaries of power and trace them to the extremities, asking ourselves how our practices affect us and our students. Where are the resistances? Who refuses to follow directions and why? While we may still choose to use circles, small groups, and personal sharing we will want to make these optional, possibly disentangling them from grades, and providing greater variety in our teaching, in order to meet all learner needs. We can use a variety of chair configurations beyond circles and also be careful of what "going around the circle" means (English 2008).

Whereas the creators of the seminal feminist text *Women's Ways of Knowing* (Belenky et al. 1986) were strong on the need for voice for women, we need to remember that for them voice was metaphoric, as was silence. Voice refers to the right to express oneself in multiple ways. As teachers we can

encourage voice by providing the option to do personal reflection or to choose other assignments altogether. In encouraging multiple ways of knowing we can honor women's difference, the effects of our infra-laws, and the tyranny of normalizing discourses that want all women to be caring and feeling all the time. Voice is about choice, literally and figuratively. Voice in religious and theological education is about the opportunity to articulate through the arts, through music, through writing and orally. The ways in which we "voice" issues is highly dependent on context. We might also do it through some creative ways involving the body. Christian religious institutions have a rich tradition of bodily knowing from meditation, to walking the labyrinth, to gesturing in prayer, that they can draw on in this regard.

The postmodern approach to sacred text, for instance, cannot be the same as in modernity. There cannot be a fixed relationship that separates the knower and known, but rather a constant growth, questioning, and reinterpretation of each, a recognition that each shapes and is shaped by the interaction with the other. This shift challenges those who believe in the permanence of the meaning of a religious text. A postmodern/poststructural adult religious education would forego a literal interpretation of sacred texts such as the Bible or Qu'ran, and would foster the ongoing search for the meaning of the text for the community in which it is read. It would also broaden the meaning of text to be inclusive of the text of readers'

lives and the texts that are co-created in the reading and interpreting of Scripture.

This postmodern theology cannot translate easily into a typical adult education program of one-hour classes over a 13 week term. It is better to have lengthy periods of time that provide opportunities for critical thinking and dialogue. Postmodern theology also can help learners to "cultivate high tolerance for difficulty, uncertainty, and error" (Usher et al. 1997, 25). Adult educators will be challenged to model the integration of a critically reflective practice in which silence gives way to voice, individualism to collectivism, and privacy to public disclosure.

Critiques

If a postmodern adult religious education can work and it does so quite logically, what are the possible pitfalls? Why are more adult religious educators not embracing it? What is problematic about constructive/revisionist postmodern/poststructural theology, when its critique of modernity can deepen critical reflection in adult religious education?

One of the primary charges against a constructive postmodern version of adult religious education is that it does not go far enough; it basically works with the same religious institutions as before, in trying to *construct* a new world from the old. The charge is that although the tools are new, there is no real change; it

simply is a semantic difference. Yet, this paper holds that an attempt to

reconstruct the best from the tradition(s) is realistic, engaging, and possible.

Rather than dismissing religious communities, a revisioning within them is

proposed whereby we name points of paradox and examine the spaces of

difference. Rather than entirely rejecting reality or theology, postmodernism

"studies the difference, absences and intertextualities within these realities (Koro-

Ljungberg 2008, 222).

Another critique is that postmodern/poststructuralist theology is basically a

Christian conception, influenced here by Whitehead who was Christian (see

Griffin 1989). The obvious question is: Where is the room for interfaith and

ecumenical dialogue? Recognition of indigenous perspectives? (Papuni and

Bartlett 2006). My response is that all adult education writers locate themselves in

some sphere and that this does not necessarily disadvantage them; positionality

can inform our work. Its openness to creativity and to the becomingness of the

universe can do much to further a case for an ethical, interfaith religious

education, one in which we dialogue about our commonalities and differences.

Postmodern adult religious education is an antidote to the denominational and

interfaith divisions that separate us.

Finally, in the sense that it promotes a notion of a fragmentary world and

self, postmodern/poststructuralism is suspect from the perspective of feminist

theologians (Beste 2006) and from feminists schooled in a Marxist tradition. Some branches of feminism, especially those that attend to the structural inequities that include race, class, and gender, argue that postmodernism (and by extension, poststructuralism) breaks down attention to a strong sense of self (subjectivity) or structure that is so important an accomplishment of feminism. This paper recognizes these achievements of feminism; yet it follows Tamboukou's (2003) argument that postmodern/poststructural ideas need to be gendered and contextualized, rather than dismissed.

A Final Word

This paper recognizes that there are many future directions for adult religious education. In many ways the whole chapter is about the future because it points to where adult religious education needs to go. And, of course there are other issues that could be explored such as how to better serve volunteers, how to meet the increasing demand for the religious education of older adults (demographic responsiveness), and how to promote the concept of a learning congregation. Much must be done to make process theology relate to adult religious education in a meaningful way. Yet, until the basic premises of modernistic theology are changed, all of these other concerns are moot. This allows us to build an adult religious education which is strong and inclusive, and which attempts to grapple seriously with complex issues in the everyday world,

and which assists people in finding an authentic meaning and voice.

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