

THE FLESH BECAME WORD:
(INTER)CHANGING SUBJECTIVITIES
AND CHRISTIAN RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

RETRACING THE “SUBJECTS”

“Christian education is as old as Christian faith,” writes Seymour in *Mapping Christian Education*.¹ Arguably, the central concerns of Christian education essentially have been: (1) what “truth claims” the Christian faith makes about God, humanity, the world, and the relationship among them; and (2) how these truth claims are transmitted and sustained in faith communities. A quick survey of four major movements of mainline, U.S.-American Protestant Christian religious education (CRE) since the late eighteenth century will make evident that certain truth claims about the person, the world, and God serve as theological underpinnings for the central aims of CRE of each particular movement. Of particular interest are the varied perceptions of the person, of human nature, or the “who” or “subject” of religious pedagogical practices. Long before the social sciences became acceptable bedfellows, CRE was driven by anthropological and psychological assumptions. As we look at the present, with an eye toward the future, the question of how the “who” of Christian religious education has shifted remains significant for consideration. ***“Who”—not “what”—are the “subjects” of Christian religious education today, and how has the postmodern temperament impacted our “subjectivities”?***

In *Educating in Faith*, Mary Boys delineates four major “classic expressions” of CRE in the modern era: Evangelism, Religious Education, Christian Education, and Catholic Education.² According to Boys, the tradition of Evangelism manifested in two modes—Revivalism and Evangelicalism—during the period of religious Awakenings in America (1730-60; 1800-30; 1890-1920). The religious temperament of this time was marked by a distinct focus on religious conversion, revivalism, personal morality, and the humanization of persons. As Calvinist anthropology and Puritan moral ethics dominated Christian theology, the central concerns of the Christian faith were sin, damnation, and conversion. As humanity was considered morally depraved and tainted by original sin, individuals were perceived as sinners and passive repositories of unitary truths. Hence, education in the church aimed at inspiring religious conversion, inculcating moral values, and transmitting Biblical content.

Education in the Church encountered a different expression with the rise of liberal theology (e.g., Schleiermacher, Harnack) and the emergence of progressive education (e.g., Dewey). Theologically, there was increasing optimism in the “infinite worth” of the person and the immanent revelation of God from within the world. An Armenian emphasis on grace and human goodness tempered the fire and brimstone of revivalism and evangelicalism. Enlightenment scientific methods and social scientific research inspired experiential learning and progressive teaching methods, contributions which a number of Christian educators readily embraced. Increasingly, with seminal works from scholars such as H. Bushnell (*Christian Nurture*), H. Elliot (*Can Religious Education be Christian?*), G.A. Coe (“democracy of God”), and S. Fahs (child-centered education), and particularly with the founding of the Religious Education Association in 1903, this

¹ Jack L. Seymour, *Mapping Christian Education: Approaches to Congregational Learning* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1997).

² Mary C. Boys, *Educating in Faith: Maps and Visions*, 1st ed. (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1989).

new movement of education in the Church reflected a maturationist understanding of the person and an immanentist theological perspective. Education aimed at Christian nurture and growth in the home. Human experiences were the starting point of learning, as opposed to Bible facts. Change or transformation was targeted at a social level, beyond individualistic personal piety.

War and poverty—among other calamitous social conditions—tempered the optimism of many during the early twentieth century. Sin and evil, it appeared, could not be lightly dismissed, for as Evangelicalism only produced mechanistic knowledge of the Bible, Religious Education could not account for Hiroshima or the Holocaust. Thus, within the period ranging from the 1930s to the 1950s, there emerged within Christian theology a neo-orthodox movement (e.g., K. Barth, the Neibuhrs, P. Tillich) which revived the emphasis on salvation, grace, revelation from above, and the centrality of Jesus Christ. Within Christian education, the need for a “relevant theology” in the interpretation of experiences came to the forefront for many scholars, as indicated by R. C. Miller’s insistence that “theology” be the new clue for Christian education. With writings from educators such as Miller and J. Smart, it became evident that this expression of Christian Education aimed at grounding persons within the biblical and theological traditions of the Christian faith. With serious attention to biblical scholarship, the goal was to ground Christian faithfulness in theological understandings, as the endpoint of educating faith was salvation and faithful commitment to Jesus Christ.

It could be said that since the 1960s, CRE has experienced multiple expressions. As Sara Little puts it, there is no longer one dominant clue or one dominant theory. With emerging awareness of cultural, religious, and theological diversity, the Christian Church recognizes multiple approaches to envisioning “truth claims” and to sustaining or transmitting such claims within the community. “Christian Education” as a phrase is adapted for general use and no longer refers to the specific theological emphasis of the earlier movement. In this era, classic expressions continue to evolve. Evangelism finds its own niche within certain Christian circles, with its emphasis on Bible-based education, conversion, and a “Christ-against-culture” perspective. The characteristics of Religious Education is continued in the work of scholars who emphasize the political nature of CRE, whose main aim of education is social transformation and human liberation (e.g., Freire, A. Moore, D. Schipani, G. Moran). The emphasis of the earlier Christian Education expression is continued in the turn to the faith community as the site of education. However, with contemporary modifications (Boys), there is greater attention on the process (rather than content) of education and on involving the entire life of the church in the educational process (Westerhoff, Foster, Nelson, Harris). Rather than prioritizing theological language above all else, the emphasis is on ecclesiastical language and commitment. Importance is placed on Christian faithfulness, the Christian traditions (creeds, symbols, rituals), and the acknowledgement of the social responsibility of the Church in actualizing the Christian vision of the “Kingdom of God.” The spiritual needs of individuals are taken seriously, as “faith” is understood to be more than scholarly engagement or rote learning of Scripture. Faith is now associated with themes of meaning-making, vocation, agency and praxis.

A POSTMODERN TURN IN “SUBJECTIVITY”

Increasingly, there has been serious attention across religious and secular disciplines to the emerging developments and critiques of a postmodern temperament. Christian religious education as a discipline has also given a nod of acknowledgement to the significant discourses of feminism, pluralism, postmodernism, ecumenism, and, albeit ambivalently, postcolonialism. ***Of interest would be an honest self-examination of how well CRE actually recognizes the changing “subject” of its discipline—the “who” that engages in the “what” and “how” which we explore.***

Prior to the turn of the millennium and Sept. 11, 2001, the challenges confronting the Church were summed up by Seymour in the following categories:³ new technologies, eroding community (increasing individualism), pluralism and globalization, socioeconomic stratification, and an aging Church. Surely, these challenges are not new or exclusive to the postmodern era, for each historical period experiences some manifestations of them. We could add to these categories the concerns of economic interdependence and ecological interdependence,⁴ postmodern social saturation,⁵ and an increasing realness of a “mobile consciousness” resulting from the material realities of diasporic experiences, globalization, and transnationalism.⁶ In looking at this grocery list of challenges, it appears that the *fear of “erosion”* serves as an undercurrent in our anxieties or ambivalence about the postmodern condition. Perhaps most pointedly, the fear of the “eroding self” has fed into the fear of eroding community and eroding clean-cut racial-socio-political-cultural-sexual-economic-national borders and boundaries. ***Perhaps a look at these “erosions,” specifically the “eroding self,” will yield a better “subjectivity” and a renewed understanding of “subject” for Christian religious education.***

THE “ERODING SELF”

As the postmodern temperament swept the academic disciplines, it gave rise to significant contributions in the psychological understanding of identity or the human “self.” In *The Saturated Self*, Kenneth Gergen compares and contrasts the perceptions of the self throughout three historical periods—romanticism, modernism, and postmodernism. According to Gergen, the romanticist self is one of the interior, of passionate and intrinsic worth, and of connection with nature. In contrast, the modernist self is concerned with external authority, empirical truth, and positivist methodologies. In the postmodern condition, however, the self experiences “social saturation.” Here, there is an erosion of truth, community, and the self. The self is no longer a fixed, indivisible entity with essential characteristics or a transcendent, universalized entity. It is “populated” by the voices of others and is divided among multiple commitments (a condition of *multiphrenia*). Identity is necessarily fragmented due to multiple commitments and multiple global interactions. Both reality and the self are subsumed under the process of social construction. In the midst of what seems to be a schizophrenic fragmentation of the self and of individual identity, Gergen finds promise in this “free play of being” which opens up for

³ Seymour, *Mapping Christian Education: Approaches to Congregational Learning*.

⁴ James W. Fowler, *Faithful Change: The Personal and Public Challenges of Postmodern Life* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1996).

⁵ Kenneth J. Gergen, *The Saturated Self: Dilemmas of Identity in Contemporary Life* (New York: Basic Books, 1991).

⁶ Ruth Behar and Deborah A. Gordon, eds., *Women Writing Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995).

multiple possibilities of being. As language and discourse are deconstructed to expose their hegemonic power relations, the focus is shifted toward individuals as participants of processes rather than on the processes themselves.

Like K. Gergen, Hubert Hermans advances a social constructionist view of the postmodern self.⁷ Working from Mikhail Bakhtin's notion of the polyphonic novel, Hermans argues for the notion of the "dialogical self" which consists of multiple authoring "I" positions (multiple authors of multiple life narratives existing in one individual). The voices within oneself are in constant dialogue with one another as different narrative plots are constructed, and there is not necessarily a unified integration of the voices.

The emphasis on *voice* validates the upsurge of *narrative* in psychology and related disciplines.⁸ Theodore Sarbin has gone as far as proposing that "narrative" is the new "root metaphor" for the study of the person.⁹ According to Sarbin, previous metaphors have been Platonic/Aristotelian formism, modernist mechanism, or organicism of developmental theories. A new paradigm now emerges in which human life is perceived not as a manifestation of ideal forms, nor a machine, nor an organic growth product, but a *dramatic act*. Following this narratory principle, humans think, perceive, and make moral choices according to a narrative structure. Meanwhile, in his frequently quoted *Actual Minds, Possible Worlds*, Jerome Bruner delineates two modes of thought: *paradigmatic* (logico-scientific) and *narrative*.¹⁰ On one hand, the paradigmatic mode of cognition is a "landscape of action," in which the rules of empirical data, logic, and scientific experimentation reign. On the other hand, the *narrative* mode suggests a "landscape of consciousness," which accounts for the vicissitudes of human intentions in time. It is within this mode that human beings operate as mythmakers and storytellers. Narrative cognition follows according to different rules of testability, falsibility, and believability. Great storytelling, according to Bruner, is about compelling human dramas and must remain open to the reinterpretation and retelling of listeners. In this mode, the self is a "transactional self," a "text" in context, and reality is "subjunctivized" in the sense that there is openness to multiple possibilities.

With regard to theories of identity, psychologist Dan McAdams extends the work of Erikson to delineate an understanding of identity as internalized *life story* coauthored by the individual and culture for the sake of unity and purpose.¹¹ Similar to Erikson, McAdams understands identity to be a continuous integration of the remembered past, perceived present, and anticipated future. This constructed narrative gives the individ-

⁷ Hubert J.M. Hermans, "Voicing the Self: From Information Processing to Dialogical Interchange," *Psychological Bulletin* 119, no. 1 (1996).

⁸ E.g., see Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1982), Jill McLean Taylor, Carol Gilligan, and Amy M. Sullivan, *Between Voice and Silence: Women and Girls, Race and Relationship* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1995). Mary Field Belenky et al., *Women's Ways of Knowing: The Development of Self, Voice, and Mind*, 10th anniversary ed. (New York: BasicBooks, 1997).

⁹ Theodore R. Sarbin, ed., *Narrative Psychology: The Storied Nature of Human Conduct* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1986).

¹⁰ Jerome S. Bruner, *Actual Minds, Possible Worlds* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1986).

¹¹ Dan P. McAdams, *Power, Intimacy, and the Life Story: Personological Inquiries into Identity*, ed. P. McAdams Dan and A. Pervin foreword Lawrence (New York: Guilford Press, 1988), Dan P. McAdams, "The Psychology of Life Stories," *Review of General Psychology* 5, no. 2 (2001), Dan P. McAdams, *The Stories We Live By: Personal Myths and the Making of the Self* (New York and London: The Guilford Press, 1993).

ual's history or life story a sense of coherence and followability. In the developmental trajectory, narrative tones are set in childhood, ideologies formalized in adolescence, imagoes/characters developed fuller in young adulthood, and the ending a concern of older adulthood. The life story as an expression of identity follows certain normative values and story grammars provided by culture. As such, narratives are dictated by certain cultural norms. However, ultimately, McAdams privileges the authorial agency of individuals in integrating disparate elements of their lives into coherent whole for the sake of unity and purpose.

The complexity of the postmodern self is further accentuated by the major critiques of the North American norms of psychological study—namely, cross-cultural, feminist, social constructionist, deconstructionist, critical theory, and systems theory.¹² In their own distinctive and integrative ways, these critical approaches have brought to the forefront important themes and issues related to more complex and multifarious understandings of the person. Of interest are several recurring themes pertaining to identity formation which make salient the intersecting dimensions of race, class, gender, religion, sexuality, among other categories, in our understanding of the construction of identity and life narratives.

Feminist critiques have made *gender* a significant factor in the study of life narratives. Mary Gergen advances the feminist argument by suggesting a difference between “manstory” and “womanstory.”¹³ According to Gergen, life stories are necessarily gendered due to cultural norms, so much that there are essential differences between the life narratives of men and women. The “monomyth” of “manstories” tend to be linear, individual-focused, echoing themes of journey, conquest, and victory, in which women serve as either trophies or obstacles. In contrast, “womanstories” tend to be multidimensional, communally oriented, and open-ended, with family and career interconnected. In a more focused research study with Swazi women who once served as domestic workers for white employers in Swaziland, Sara MKhonza points our attention to the interconnection among gender, race, economics, language/discourse, and power.¹⁴ As indicated in the life narratives of the Swazi women, their subjugation as racialized, working class women was sustained by language and discourse. Their lack of knowledge of the “master’s” language and their lack of social status kept them marginalized. The language used by white employers in reference to these workers indicates an attitude of subordinating the racial and economic inferior.

While some have a tendency for essentialism, feminist positions in general underscore the significance of the *social constructionist* critique, which seeks to expose the ways in which life narratives are structured according to cultural norms. George Rosenwald elucidates well the arguments and potential limitations of the social constructionist

¹² Edward E. Sampson, "The Deconstruction of the Self," in *Texts of Identity*, ed. John Shotter and Kenneth J. Gergen, *Inquiries in Social Construction* (London; Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications, 1989).

¹³ Mary Gergen, "Life Stories: Pieces of a Dream," in *Storied Lives: The Cultural Politics of Self-Understanding*, ed. George C. Rosenwald and Richard L. Ochberg (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1992).

¹⁴ Sara Mkhonza, "Life Histories as Social Texts of Personal Experiences in Sociolinguistic Studies: A Look at the Lives of Domestic Workers in Swaziland," in *Interpreting Experience: The Narrative Study of Lives*, ed. Ruthellen Josselson and Amia Lieblich, *The Narrative Study of Lives* (Thousand Oaks, London, New Delhi: Sage, 1995; reprint, 3rd).

position.¹⁵ According to Rosenwald, this position argues that cultural norms invariably dictate the kinds of life narratives people construct; inevitably, cultural norms are perpetuated by these coerced narratives. While acknowledging the possibilities of the social constructionist position, Rosenwald also points out its potential limitations. For one, it lacks attention to human growth or development and undermines agentic motivations. For another, it easily leads to nihilistic despair, for persons are doomed if they cannot change the status quo or challenge and subvert oppressive cultural norms.

The need for a possibility of changing or subverting cultural norms suggests the importance of *agency*, or lack thereof, in narrative construction. Critiques of the old paradigm of ahistorical, non-contextual study of human lives are prevalent. The recognition that self-understandings are embedded in systems of power and power relations is useful, yet it simultaneously puts agency at great risk.¹⁶ Scholars have argued for linking power and discourse in analyzing narratives—e.g., that life narratives contain social codes and the telling of life stories could be interpreted as a social strategy of either sustaining or challenging such codes.¹⁷ Rosenwald writes of the dialectic of living and telling, in which actions yield stories, and the telling of stories lead to new actions.¹⁸ However, narration does not necessarily lead to change, and the narrative repair of an individual life story does not necessarily lead to social change. Life and story are not the same, and the storyteller may be liberated or deceived by his/her own story. Richard Ochberg argues that a life narrative is best understood as an act of “persuasion” on the part of the narrator.¹⁹ It is an attempt to persuade oneself and others to acknowledge the value and meaning of one’s life and actions. As such, it is an agentic act, but perhaps also a means of deception or self-delusion. Thus, life narratives are not to be taken at face value. More attention could be given to studying *why* people tell the story in the way that they did.

“INTERSUBJECTIVITY”

Overall, themes of “self,” “identity,” “subject,” “authorship,” “agency,” “reflexivity,” “voice,” “contextuality,” “positionality,” and notions of the “saturated self,” “dialogical self,” “polyphonic self,” or “narrated self” animate current discourses related to complicated subjectivities in the post-modern era. Perhaps a common thread across the board is the acknowledgement that the exigencies and vagaries of human lives defy clean-cut delineations of identity and self. That thoughts are uttered “narratively” and lives lived by stories heightens the interdependent and “intersubjective” nature of daily living. It is hardly feasible nowadays to argue for self-sustained, self-contained subjectivity. And this comes about not only because of shifting modes of cognition—that is, the postmodern selves are saturated, polyphonic, and multiply narrated because of rapidly changing

¹⁵ George C. Rosenwald, "Conclusions: Reflections on Narrative Self-Understanding," in *Storied Lives: The Cultural Politics of Self-Understanding*, ed. George C. Rosenwald and Richard L. Ochberg (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1992).

¹⁶ Ian Parker, "Discourse and Power," in *Texts of Identity*, ed. John Shotter and Kenneth J. Gergen, *Inquiries in Social Construction* (London; Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications, 1989).

¹⁷ Cf. Richard L. Ochberg, "Interpreting Life Stories," in *Ethics and Process in the Narrative Study of Lives*, ed. Ruthellen Josselson, *The Narrative Study of Lives* (Thousand Oaks, London, and New Delhi: Sage, 1996).

¹⁸ Rosenwald, "Conclusions: Reflections on Narrative Self-Understanding."

¹⁹ Ochberg, "Interpreting Life Stories."

material realities, not simply because people started “thinking differently.” Nonetheless, as material realities affect shifting consciousness, so may altering critical consciousness bring about material change.

The most poignant juggling with subjectivities, arguably, is made by those interstitially positioned within the fabric of their society, or, on a wider scale, within the global community. Postcolonial feminist theorists such as Aihwa Ong eloquently underscore the material realities that make necessary the development of “hybrid subjectivity,” “transnational, translational subjectivity,” “intermingling of subjectivities,” or “mobile consciousness” for those who live at the intersections of races/ethnicities, cultures, languages, geographic borders, religions, etc.²⁰ It could be argued that an *intersubjective* and *mobile* consciousness is required of every member of the global society today, but the degree of gracefulness and ease with which one comes to grips with such shift depends upon critical consciousness and social location. Traversing “borders” is a necessary reality in this postmodern era, which necessitates a mobile consciousness, and yet the ease of passage is contingent upon existing power structures.

“FLESH BECOMING WORD”...A RESEARCH IN PROGRESS

Perhaps within the panorama of discourses on “identity” and “self”, attention to the principle of *narrative* may help reconcile the opposing modernist and postmodernist positions with regard to the unitary vs. multiplicity of the self. Whereas modernists argue for a unified, integrated, indivisible self, postmodernists argue for multiple, fragmented self. Feminists of color tend to opt for the postmodernist position, contending that the lives of women of color—particular of women marginalized because of race, class, and gender—are necessarily fragmented, or, more popularly, “hyphenated.” Increasingly, however, the notion of “hyphenated mindset” is becoming evidently inadequate, as it seems to suggest that the identities women of color—Asian American women, for instance—are necessarily “dualistic” and “bifurcated” because of their conflicting loyalties to two distinct sets of cultural norms. This notion dichotomizes not only gender but also cultures, as it seems to assume that cultural norms do not collide nor collude in the process of maintaining normative “ground rules” for self-understanding, self-representations, and social relations. In order to move beyond such a dualistic and essentialist position, it seems necessary that some element of integration is involved—and integration that allows possibilities for continual reinterpretation and reintegration.

At the same time, the uneasiness with nice and neat—qualitatively “coherent”—narrative constructions still remains. The criteria of “progress” or “growth,” of “coherence,” of “credibility” or “historicity,” and even of “complexity” commonly posited to evaluate narrative accounts must be reevaluated in light of this need for agentic integration and multiplicity. (What is the standard of “growth”? To what degree is “coherence” an indication of “ego integrity”? Whose “history” must narratives cohere with?) And as life narratives are said to encode social norms, it would be interesting to look at issues of language, speech, narration, and silence. In which circumstances are social norms perpetuated, and in which are they tweaked for the individual’s own benefit? Is there a difference between the public and private performances of life narratives? Who/what acts as a “gatekeeper” between the public & private? Are there life stories that remain

²⁰ Aihwa Ong, “Women out of China: Traveling Tales and Traveling Theories in Postcolonial Feminism,” in *Women Writing Culture*, ed. Ruth Behar and Deborah A. Gordon (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995).

as a “gatekeeper” between the public & private? Are there life stories that remain untold?

To glean further insights for the understanding of identity construction and faith formation, this research project proposes to resource the lives of individual Vietnamese immigrant women as rich “texts.” The preliminary research claim reads:

Examining the life narratives of first-generation Vietnamese immigrant women will provide clues for the understanding of the multiple dimensions in which “religious stories” and “cultural stories” serve as exploitative as well as liberating “normative scripts” for individuals’ faith formation and identity construction.

The agenda is to explore how interfacing cultures and religious traditions can perpetuate hegemonic “scripts” which serve as normative and “normalizing” guides for people in the construction of their life narratives. The argument advanced here is that religious and cultural “scripts” can be brought together to assert certain forms of dominance—whether religious, cultural, or ideological—and to subjugate persons, particularly those least able to challenge such “normalizing scripts.” This argument is premised upon the theory “that life stories play a significant role in the formation of identity, that these stories may be constrained by oppressive cultural conditions, and that these stories—and the lives to which they relate—may be liberated by critical insight and engagement.”²¹ Thus, the central focus of the study would be to explore the ways in which cultural and religious norms are interwoven to sustain, legitimate, or subvert certain ideologies about race, class, gender, and sexuality. More specifically, this study resources the lives of Vietnamese immigrant women for clues about how intersecting cultural and religious “scripts” contribute to the ongoing discourses about women’s roles and identities in the family, in religion, and in society. Not only that, it is hoped that this exploration may yield further evidence that religious traditions do in fact provide liberative themes for the authoring of life narratives.

FRAGMENTS OF TWO LIVES

“HUONG”

Along with her children, siblings and parents, Huong immigrated to the U.S. in 1992, leaving behind her husband because immigration was possible only if she were divorced and claimed dependence upon her own family. Although the plan was that she would eventually sponsor her husband to the U.S. after it is legally possible and financially feasible, Huong’s husband remarried back in Vietnam without her knowledge. Over night, Huong became an “unofficial” divorcee and single mother of two young children. Unable to rely on her own family for financial and emotional support, Huong separated from her family and raised the children single-handedly. Drifting through odd jobs in restaurants and factories, Huong finally worked for someone whom she considered a friend and benefactor, who trusted her to manage a small start-up Vietnamese dessert restaurant. As it turned out, their relationship came to an end when the friend, apparently still covertly exploring her sexual identity, expected more than a platonic friendship with Huong. Now, at age 44, Huong lives with her children and a grandson, who was born to her daughter during a tumultuous relationship with a young Vietnamese international student

²¹ George C. Rosenwald and Richard L. Ochberg, eds., *Storied Lives: The Cultural Politics of Self-Understanding* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1992), 265.

who got caught in drugs and gang affiliation. Huong stays at home to look after her grandson, for fear that the child would be abducted by his father if he were left in someone else's care.

“CHI”

Born in 1925 in Canton, China, Chi and her siblings were given away by her birth parents at age 6 because they could no longer afford to raise the children in the midst of a serious bout of famine in the region. At age 16, Chi was forced to immigrate with a female acquaintance across the border to Vietnam when her adopted mother abandoned her. By age 18, Chi married through matchmaking by a few elders in the neighborhood. Upon the birth of her first son, Chi, age 19, attempted and successfully found her adopted mother. Chi subsequently discovered that both her parents and a couple of her siblings had died in China during the famine. An adept street vendor, Chi built an efficient family business of her own, selling goods and sweets at open markets. When the War ended in 1975, Chi gathered up a large sum of gold (preferred currency at that time) to send her eldest son off for an escape by sea. A week after his departure, the local government confiscated her house and possessions, citing the “traitorous” action of her son. In 1992, Chi immigrated to the U.S. with her husband and remaining children through the sponsorship of her eldest son.

SHIFTING SUBJECTIVITIES: IMPLICATIONS FOR THEOLOGY AND EDUCATION

Some may argue that stories like those told by Huong and Chi are but reflections of experiences of recent immigration, and, naturally, new immigrants are subject to difficult cultural adjustments just as earlier waves of immigrants in American history. A convenient conclusion that follows this argument would be that once adjustments are made, things would be better for these individuals, particularly for their second and subsequent generations. That is, “subjectivity” may be blurry now, and “subject” hard to define, but that is only temporary until proper time is allowed for cultural adaptations to be made by these new immigrants. Time will heal all wounds, people say.

However, looking at America's social, political, and cultural landscape, one wonders if this linear progression would actually take place, and if it does, at what cost. The postmodern and global reality is such that “identity” or “subjectivity” cannot be defined within neat cultural, racial/ethnic, gender, socio-economic, national, or geographic borders. As the “gender lens” is not a propos woman only, a “multicultural,” “polyphonic,” “mobile,” or “multilayered” orientation is not a paradigm just appropriate for the “other.” Concretely situated within the context of Christian religious education, to whom is the task of exploring “postcolonial” or “multicultural” foundations for educational praxis popularly delegated? Educators of color, or “ethnic” congregations.

Perhaps one of the new agendas of Christian religious education could be a wider shifting of our collective subjectivities. Who are the “subjects” that we take for granted in theorizing about the educational contents and processes? How are our communities of faith reflecting with integrity the diverse “subjectivities” of individuals of faith? In what ways has Christian theologies (and Christian religious education) stifled life narratives and perpetuated oppressive norms? In what ways have they been liberative? How do religious communities act as gatekeepers in public and private performances of life narra-

tives? What “raw materials” does a religious tradition, through the vehicle of “religious education,” provide for individuals’ narrative construction? How might individual life narratives contribute to the dynamically changing Christian “faith Story” (or the “fundamentals” of Christian faith)? How might “culture” transform “Christ”? *If “saturated,” “polyphonic,” “narrated,” and “mobile” (or “diasporic”) are more apt words in describing the postmodern self-consciousness, then how will Christian religious education attend to these new (intertwining) “subjectivities”?* *What would be a faithful response?* *How would the “who” alter the “what” and “how” of religious education?*

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