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For Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion



Teaching for Justice

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Blog Series: Social Justice and Civic Engagement

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Education is the process of learning and knowing, an undertaking unrestricted to our schools, curriculums and textbooks. Rather, it is a holistic process that continues all throughout our lives. Even mundane, regular events and occurrences around us are educational in some way or another. It wouldn't be an overstatement to say that our lives without education would be stagnant, hollow even. No change would occur, no milestones would be reached. We would float in the same place without meaning. Thus, we organize the dissemination of knowledge not just to give meaning to others, but to ourselves. When we educate a person, we can shift a world; to educate a person, passes on meaning from one person to the next; to educate a person, changes the world.

Teachers possess such a power. We teachers and professors should find immense meaning in our work—especially when the role has been recently reconstructed to something radically new. We must challenge ourselves to find inspiration again during a time when teaching and education has been entirely digitized to muted chatrooms and emails, forcing the traditional to become innovative, and the personal to become impersonal. In this moment when the comforts and familiarities of regular life has been put on pause, and slowly started again, we reflect on how to make use of the sudden changes brought on during the pandemic.

The fervent discussions about race in America remain at the top of our concerns. It's timely that attention to the racial and economic divide during the crisis have turned this omnipresent national issue into an urgent and revolutionary world protest given that Covid-19 cases and deaths have targeted black and brown communities. It reminds professors that we cannot forget to tackle basic struggles, and inform others that such a struggle even exists. We must

teach our students to be actively anti-racist, and even further, to understand how racism intersects with other forms of prejudice to create stronger forms of discrimination. Be it one's gender, body type, economic status or sexual orientation, we must remind ourselves and our students that no one issue stands alone, but converges with others.

Susan Shaw and I co-wrote a book, *Intersectional Theology* which talks about how there are no single axis issues, but multiple axis issues. Our identities are not dimensional but multi-dimensional; we understand ourselves through the very personal experience of our gender, sexuality, ethnicity, ableism, class etc., One's identity is the converging of multi-axis identities. These identities all shape us and define who we are. But these identities are also points of justice as racism, patriarchy, homophobia embed themselves in the fabric of our society. In doing intersectional theology, we recognize that it comes with the requirement to create social justice.

In the same way, we want our teaching to be meaningful, to address social issues and to further justice. How can we do this?

The books that we need to advocate for students to read must be racially and gender diverse, written by a diverse breadth of writers, covering a diversity of perspective and subject matters. The history of theology is mostly written by men. It is crucial that we listen to voices other than white men's to get a deeper and more expansive theological understanding. Therefore, pedagogically, we need to urge students to read non-white books[1]. We can strategically put them in our syllabus, include authors of color whose work touch on justice, and also select them for their assignments. Projects in class and outside the class can also incorporate social justice elements. I know in some seminaries and colleges, service learning is part of the curriculum. In those schools, part of the justice work is included in the courses throughout their studies. Early on in our schooling we are required to volunteer or participate in service learning, however this idea of justice work should also be upheld by professors in later education, adjusting the work for students studying for their bachelor's, Master's, or higher. Whoever the student or professor, whatever the format, setting or institution, informing and encouraging students to promote justice should be lifted as one of the highest priorities in our teaching.

Going forward, we can utilize social media as a vital tool to share information and ideas. We can encourage students to blog (for their seminary, church or denominational blogsite), share, or write social justice posts. Social activism on the internet can be a powerful source of information sharing, encouragement and engagement. Political petitions are shared online, protest events are shared and organizations who do the work can also be shared. These elements can be tied into the course content and assignments.

Another powerful tool is the media: movies, videos, music, etc. which used in teaching can make for a more poignant, dynamic tactic to promote social justice. I have used movies such as "Sophie's Choice," "God on Trial," and "The Mission" to raise awareness of the social injustices such as anti-semitism, slavery, and colonialism and how to move forward.

As we continue to teach during a pandemic, we can harness all the tools we have available online to express our plights, our activism, and our hopes for the uncertain future. We can be motivated by the challenges of virtual learning, and develop new ways to encourage community engagement, even at a distance. Community building, church building can be done online as COVID-19 continues to spread and spike across the United States. The professor has essential power not just in the classroom, but for the next generation. If the professor can also exemplify what they teach in their own lives, it will make a stronger impact in the classroom. Practice what you preach can also apply to practice what you teach. Teaching should be meaningful and substantive—but above all, it should be transformative. Let yourself be open to the quiet, and grand transformations in the everyday; the ones that shift your consciousness and provide an experience to learn from and be shared. In this way, we, as professors and learners, can continuously provide pieces of wisdom to promote justice and demand change.

[1]A few examples of books to consider reading and adding to your syllabus:

De La Torre, Miguel, *Burying White Privilege*, (Grand Rapids:Eerdmans, 2018)

Cone, James, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2011)

Kim, Grace Ji-Sun, *Embracing the Other* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015)

Townes, Emilie, *Troubling in My Soul*, (Maryknoll, Orbis Books, 2015)

<https://www.wabashcenter.wabash.edu/2020/07/teaching-for-justice/>