



Better Worlds: Education, Art, and Utopia

Roberts, Peter; and Freeman-Moir, John
Lexington Books (Rowman & Littlefield use this name for sending reviews.), 2013

Book Review

Tags: teaching with the arts | theological education | theories and methods

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Date Reviewed: December 16, 2015

Better Worlds: Education, Art, and Utopia does not immediately relate to theological education. However, it does cover interesting and thought-provoking topics of potential use for those working in the theological school classroom. Yearnings for utopia express a desire akin to awaiting the Kingdom of God. Therefore, looking at ways the trope of utopia is formulated in the fields of education and the arts can provide interesting parallels for the theological school classroom. The core question is what would a better world look like?

Roberts and Freeman-Moir take the reader through a sweeping survey of topics. In one section, John Dewey and William Morris's utopian philosophies provide a backdrop for the discussion of utopias as places where each person can practice skilled craftsmanship, developing a craft to the point where it becomes artisanal. In chapter 2, visual art as a dystopian tool is regarded as something that can evoke true sympathy. The authors invite readers into various imaginative spaces to consider how imaginative sympathy can propel us into action, or at least into moral discomfort caused by the difference between the present world and imagined utopian dreams. Chapter 4 discusses the role of images, showing their power as pathways to action that open the imagination to craft a space of deciding and reflecting. This is similar to the praxis-theory-praxis loop championed by many theologians and seminary educators.

For the theological educator, perhaps the most à propos chapters are those concerned with the liberation pedagogy of Paulo Freire and the literature of Fyodor Dostoevsky and Hermann Hesse. The chapter on Freire's liberation framework provides a useful overview of his life and work with a focus on his utopian realism. The chapters on Dostoevsky and Hesse provide

interesting analyses of their theologies and philosophies.

I have two main critiques of this text. First, the authors spotlight too few female utopian visionaries. Chapter 3 focuses on writer and philosopher Iris Murdoch, but this is by far the weakest chapter in the book. The authors are clearly aware of feminist (or at least female scholars') viewpoints in the various fields they describe. The book would have been stronger had they chosen at least one compelling female figure's utopian or dystopian vision to unpack and describe. My second criticism is that the chapters are fairly disjointed, each chapter representing a different topic and field, and there is no final conclusion that draws all the themes together.

The authors put forth education as "utopian curiosity" (107), where each opportunity for knowledge-building provides entry into a world larger, more spacious, and more creative than the one in which the student previously lived. Allowing these alternate worlds to wash over faculty imagination may provide ways to take critical looks at the contemporary roles of theological educators and to invite questions such as: What are the aims and purposes of theological education and how do they compare to utopian and dystopian visionary aims and purposes? What is the role of the theological educator in this process? What does pedagogy look like if faculty seek to go beyond simple information sharing to something more complex and critically reflective?

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