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Critically Prophetic Action in the Public Square: Transformational Insights for School and Community Leaders

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Introduction: Education that Builds Upon Community Identities

In her influential book, The Dreamkeepers: Successful Teachers of African American Children, Gloria Ladson-Billings (1994) highlights the “culturally relevant” work of several teachers in an urban community. She portrays these teachers as being highly effective in a variety of ways, but most notably for their commitments to understanding and building upon the cultural backgrounds of their students. Ladson-Billings specifically focused on these teachers’ capacities for tapping into common elements of the “African American experience” in the United States. She cites the teachers as promising exemplars rather than representative practitioners, claiming that:

“The typical experience in the schools is a denigration of African and African American culture. Indeed, there is a denial of its very existence. ..The familial organizations are considered pathological. And the historical, cultural, and scientific contributions of African Americans are ignored or rendered trivial” (p. 139).

Ladson-Billings’ assertion that students’ familial and cultural identities must be recognized and more fully incorporated into the educative process finds much support in the community of progressive educational scholarship, as countless academics (including bell hooks, Paulo Freire, Peter McLaren, and Henry Giroux) and activists (including Myles Horton and Ernie Cortes) have critiqued generalist models of education that ignore community assets in their structures and delivery. Ladson-Billings and others insist that when educational programs (both school and community-situated) are designed and implemented as if they occur in social vacuums they implicitly ignore unique community identities and modes of understanding. They relegate these identities and modes of understanding to positions of irrelevance.

Particularly in traditionally marginalized communities (commonly communities of color and communities of lower socioeconomic statuses), then, educators and other leaders are called to build upon the understandings of “the people” (Freire 1970) in order to make social and educational transformation possible. This paper identifies communities’ faith traditions as core elements of their identities and cultural understandings, and examines some key issues to consider as educational leaders attempt to build upon these identities in the “public square.”

Faith Identities in the Public Square

There is a widespread literature which suggests that in traditionally marginalized communities in the United States, the values, needs, and identities of the people are often most substantially rooted in their spirituality and/or lives of faith (Cone 1984; Dantley 2003; 2005a; 2005b; 2005c; 2005d; Hayes 1996; Hopkins 2004; Shirley 2001; West 1993; 2005; Wilmore 1983). Although different in their institutional structures and foundational dogmas, those who are oppressed tend to frame issues of redemption,
emancipation, and upward mobility

religiously (McAdams 2006). That is, their language, practice, and core understandings of the desired and productive life flow from and are normalized in reference to their faith traditions. More than objective rubrics that measure daily thoughts and actions, faith traditions, for many Americans, serve as fundamental sensemaking (Weick 1980) frameworks. Lives are both guided by particular religious perspectives

and understood from these perspectives. So, within Gergen's (1991) claim that “we are saturated selves living in multiple communities of discourse” (p. 42), it appears that the most impactful discourses may be those attached to faith traditions.

Despite this widely recognized centrality of faith in individual and community identity – and the fact that the United States is one of the most religiously active countries in the world (McAdams 2006) – those who operate within the “public square” (Sillecchia 2006) in this country are reticent to recognize and respond to “religious selves.” This reticence is largely tied to the United States’ historical separation of church and state. Although this precedent specifically attempts to prevent churches from infringing upon citizens’ individual rights and daily lives, leaders of public institutions – public schools, for instance – often avoid

any open recognition and embracing of faith-related traditions and outlooks. Public leaders have ample reasons for these outlooks, for in addition to the legal conundrums that often characterize such issues (see Engel 2007), Dantley (2005) observed that “…religion has partnered with conservative vested interests to silence and marginalize and to even oppress people in society” (p. 653). A real dichotomy has developed, then, between the religiously-saturated individual lives of Americans (especially people of color) and the secular discourse of public schools and other institutions.

It is evident, however, that despite the legal and historical conditions that legitimately discourage discussions of “the spiritual” within the public square, school and academic leaders ought to not altogether abandon inquiries into how faith traditions and practices might expertly inform public practice. Especially in regard to issues of equity and social justice, the teachings, values, and traditions of major faith traditions can interrogate public policies and norms and expand public conceptualizations of people’s basic rights and responsibilities. Silecchia (2006) explains:

“The first role, and the most important function that religious groups may play in shaping law and public policy, is the critically important task of articulating those minimal standards against which society should set its laws. Religious communities are uniquely suited to articulating a vision as to those things which are moral absolutes, and toward which societies should consistently move. As an example, over forty years ago, in

Pacem in Terris, Pope John XXII articulated a basic set of human rights, applicable for all places and at all times. His list was [far more extensive than the [secular] American Bill of Rights, [because] this listing embodied the negative freedoms

from harm common in civil lists of rights . . . [but] it also . . . [included] affirmative rights to the tangible and intangible goods of the world. Predictably, it denounced threats to life, bodily
integrity, free speech, free press and free exercise of religion. However, it also went further and listed affirmative rights. These affirmative rights included the right to such things as food, clothing, shelter, medical care, rest and a good name. Further, it articulated rights to respect, culture, education, monetary support during involuntary unemployment, private ownership of property, freedom of movement, a just wage, and the right to emigrate” (p. 72).

Tenets and ideas from other traditions – such as the Jewish notion of “Tikkun Olam,”
the repair and healing of our world” (Shapiro 2005), and the African American Christian idea of “collective struggle for the collective good” (Hopkins 2004) – similarly spur the re-visitation of norms and practices that occur in public arenas. In that they extend most public conceptualizations of socially responsible action and they are core elements of individual and community identities, these broad tenets and ideas can be especially powerful movers toward justice in schools and communities. Therefore, conscious of Ladson-Billings’ (1994) call for culturally relevant educational practice, leaders should carefully consider how tenets of religious traditions can be used in the field of education.

Drawing from the Prophetic

It is vital, in these considerations, that leaders remain mindful of Dantley’s (2005) and West’s (2005) descriptions of the dilemmas that have plagued some past attempts to transfer faith dispositions to the public square. That is, as principals, academicians, and others seek guidance and support for our schools and communities, they need to draw not from the specific institutional dogmas of churches, but from their socially transformative prophetic traditions. Here we are talking about the elements of faith traditions that describe just action in the civic arena. Shapiro writes;

“An education imbued with this spirit has been called ‘prophetic’ after the role of the ancient Hebrew prophets. No one has described their quest with greater power than the late Abraham Joshua Heschel (1962) who wrote, ‘The prophet is an iconoclast, challenging the apparently holy, revered, and awesome. Beliefs cherished as certainties, institutions endowed with supreme sanctity, he exposes as scandalous pretensions...The prophet faces a coalition of callousness and established authority, and undertakes to stop a mighty stream with mere words. Had the purpose been to express great ideas, prophecy would have led to be acclaimed as a triumph. Yet the pursuit of prophecy is to conquer callousness, to change the inner man as well as to revolutionize history (p. 10).

The prophetic, then, is socially transformative because it is critical, subversive, and ultimately, hopeful. Although many of the major world faith traditions are fundamentally different in their beliefs, traditions, and institutional infrastructures, aspects of their social teachings tend to find common ground in this transformative advocacy for the poor and dispossessed.

The social teachings of faith traditions are critical in that they identify and reveal systems, structures, and conditions of oppression. As West (2005) writes, prophetic witness “calls attention to the causes of unjustified suffering and unnecessary social misery. It highlights personal and institutional evil, including especially the evil of being indifferent to personal and institutional evil” (p. 17). In this capacity, then, faith traditions can serve the vitally
important role of revealing and problematizing elements of the status quo as troubling and inequitable. Examples of this critical role were evident on the national level in several churches’ public statements which highlighted the lack of basic human rights for immigrant workers in the United States. On a local level, critical action was witnessed in the work of Reverend Tim Smith and the Center of Life Church in Pittsburgh as they researched, actively interrogated, and publicly disseminated the reasons for disproportionately high rates of school suspensions among African American students in their local schools. Such critical action – which can occur at national and local levels – exemplifies Silecchia’s (2006) claim that “within a democratic system, a religious group should view one of its roles as being a counter-cultural one, which defends unpopular ideas of justice and fights for core values when a majority threatens them” (p.74).

The prophetic is subversive in that it obliges leaders to step beyond critique, and to enter into participatory change-directing roles in the public square. It expands individual and collective social responsibilities – depicting non-action amidst oppression as being complicit in oppressive action. Being subversive, the prophetic not only suggests, but mandates transformation. In public schooling, for example, Shapiro (2005) asserts that the prophetic elements of the Jewish tradition lead to an “agenda for radical educational change” (p. 25). Silecchia (2006) further describes several historical examples of subversive, faith-inspired action in the public square:

“One need look only to the involvement of religious groups in joining the civil rights movement, supporting workers, protecting child laborers, advocating for migrants…to see that religious groups may, at times, be either the sole or the strongest buffer between a majority perspective and that of a more vulnerable group that needs support” (p. 75).

Importantly, prophetic faith traditions are hopeful in that they allow historic victims of oppression to conceive their situationality – their journeys toward prosperity – as “not yet” rather than “as is” (in Dantley 2003, p. 8). As Shapiro (2005) claims, prophetic faith is necessarily critical and subversive, revealing and attempting to change conditions of inequity and hardship, but it does this work

“from the vantage point of hope and possibility about a world of exile and injustice…(It) manages to fuse a celebration of survival, the demand to see the oppressions of our present world, and the imaginary re-envisioning of a world of wholeness and justice” (p. 25). Viewing life through prophetic lenses, those who are marginalized persist in their struggles through the mire. Their gazes remain fixed on ultimate redemption (McAdams 2006).

Building on Prophetic Traditions in Educational Contexts

Therefore, in that faith identities are culturally relevant and they expand public conceptualizations of social justice, it is apparent that schools and other community-based educational leaders should draw from and build upon them. To put some “flesh on the bones” of this conversation, however, it is worthwhile for future inquiry to ask questions such as:
What is the legal history and what are the potential social, educational, and legal implications of discussing and legitimating faith traditions to the public arena (schools in particular)?

How do prophetic faith traditions (critical, subversive, and hopeful) relate to secular theoretical frameworks? Are these languages of critique and transformation compatible? How might they become mutually influential in communities of practice?

What are some specific examples of how the prophetic is described and witnessed in different faith traditions?

What are some specific ways that prophetic faith traditions might be effectively “brought” to public education?

References


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