

Courtney T. Goto  
Boston University School of Theology  
cgoto@bu.edu  
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***Teaching Love:  
Embodying Prophetic Imagination through Clowning***

Abstract:

Christian religious educators are charged with teaching the practice of loving as Jesus did—transforming what is oppressive and enacting radical, life-giving ways of being with and for one another. The author presents clowning as a liberative pedagogy that “tutors” learners to embody prophetic imagination, thereby approximating God’s new creation. The session explores a video of seminary students experimenting with clowning led by the author. In mimicking “fools for Christ,” they surprise themselves and those they meet by loving. The video is analyzed through interdisciplinary perspectives, drawing on D.W. Winnicott, Walter Brueggemann, Maria Harris, Paulo Freire and others.

In a world of unequal power and privilege, oppression and marginalization, one might assume that religious educators have no time for foolishness, but holy fools from Christian tradition would have us imagine and do otherwise. It is said that Saint Francis of Assisi (1181/2–1226 CE) and Brother Ruffino stood naked at the pulpit and were mocked by people who thought they “had gone mad out of an excess of penance.”<sup>1</sup> However, when Francis preached on the nakedness and humiliation of Christ, they wept with remorse. Not only did they glimpse Christ in Saint Francis, they also became aware of the ugly side of human nature that would humiliate another. Francis called his disciples to be “jongleurs of the Lord” [*joculatores Domini*], preaching, singing praise, and moving the hearts of the people to spiritual joy.<sup>2</sup> The kind of mirth in which Francis and others reveled was characteristic of a Western Catholic tradition.<sup>3</sup> In this vein, St. Philip Neri (1515–59) was known for constantly telling jokes, performing silly dances in front of cardinals, or wearing his clothes in ridiculous ways. He used to make people laugh by taking hold of someone by the chin, hair, or beard.<sup>4</sup> As the hagiography of holy fools suggests, these radical pedagogues orchestrated situations to unmask the hypocrisy of a powerful church that was failing to live up to Christ’s teachings, to provoke the faithful into questioning their own reactions to the marginalized, to make them aware of their hidden prejudices, pride, and self-centered preoccupations, and thus to consider the wisdom expressed in holy foolery.

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<sup>1</sup> Serge Hughes, *The Little Flowers of St. Francis and Other Franciscan Writings* (New York: New American Library, 1964), 107f.; John Saward, *Perfect Fools: Folly for Christ’s Sake in Catholic and Orthodox Spirituality* (Oxford: Oxford University, 1980), 85.

<sup>2</sup> Leo Shelley-Price, *St. Francis of Assisi, His Life and Writings* (London: A.R. Mowbray, 1959), 274f. Saward, *Perfect Fools*, 87.

<sup>3</sup> Saward, *Perfect Fools*, 95.

<sup>4</sup> Saward, *Perfect Fools*, 97-8; Beatrice K. Otto, *Fools are Everywhere: The Court Jester Around the World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 169-70.

Most but not all fools for Christ were Orthodox and Roman Catholic monastics who simulated folly and lived “as if” they *were* Christ.<sup>5</sup> Living secret lives, holy fools were deliberately playing by pretense, meaning no one knew whether they were encountering a saint or a crazy person. They pretended to be insane, gave up their wealth, never set down roots, and called into question the ways of the powerful and privileged.<sup>6</sup> They modeled themselves on Christ’s humility, poverty, and experience of being ridiculed. As the first “fool for Christ,” Paul argues that unlike worldly wisdom, which seeks power and fortune, God’s wisdom God speaks through what is weak.<sup>7</sup> The heyday of holy fools began in the thirteenth century and ended in the sixteenth, reaching its height in the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries.<sup>8</sup> Holy foolishness in Russia enjoyed its golden age from the fifteenth to the first half of the seventeenth century.<sup>9</sup>

Holy fools have counterparts in many other religions and cultures.<sup>10</sup> One can liken holy fools to the Sufi *majzub* and the Hindu *avadhuta*.<sup>11</sup> In Zen Buddhism, one might associate holy madness with the master’s use of shouting, *koan*, handclapping, or physical discipline to bring the learner to enlightenment.<sup>12</sup> Holy fools might also bear resemblance to what we might see as “ritual clowns” in Navaho, Pueblo, Hopi and Zuni sacred ceremonies.<sup>13</sup> In multiple religious traditions, fools challenge religious institutions and practitioners, not allowing them to remain comfortable and to rely solely on conventional ways of knowing, which in Christian terms is a prophetic role.

Holy fools evoke what Hebrew bible scholar Walter Brueggemann has called “prophetic imagination.”<sup>14</sup> He writes, “The task of prophetic ministry is to nurture, nourish, and evoke a consciousness and perception alternative to the consciousness and perception of the dominant culture around us... the alternative consciousness to be nurtured, on the one hand, serves to *criticize* and dismantle the dominant consciousness. On the other hand, that alternative consciousness to be nurtured serves to *energize* persons and communities by its promise of another time and situation toward which community of faith may move.”<sup>15</sup> Brueggemann helpfully argues for imagination that disturbs, destabilizes, as well as galvanizes the faithful so that they might live into more life-giving possibilities.

Although the tactics of holy fools might seem radical and bizarre, especially by today’s standards of education, they set pedagogical, historical, and theological precedents worth examining in greater detail. According to Paul, habitual ways of being in the world—selfishness, self-deception, and self-righteousness—need to be challenged because they sustain structures and processes of sin and evil. The drastic measures of holy fools speak to their conviction of how deeply implicated their fellow human beings were. Unfortunately, these human issues were the same as they are today. As was true in the time of holy fools, faith

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<sup>5</sup> Seward, *Perfect Fools*, 25.

<sup>6</sup> Seward, *Perfect Fools*, 25-30.

<sup>7</sup> 1 Corinthians 1:26–30.

<sup>8</sup> Seward, *Perfect Fools*, 80.

<sup>9</sup> A. M. Panchenko, “Laughter as Spectacle,” in *Holy Foolishness in Russia: New Perspectives*, eds. Priscilla Hart Hunt and Svitlana Kobets (Bloomington, IN: Slavica Publishers, 2011), 42.

<sup>10</sup> See Otto, *Fools are Everywhere*, 157-86.

<sup>11</sup> Peter C. Phan, “The Wisdom of Holy Fools in Postmodernity,” *Theological Studies* 62, no. 4 (December, 2001), 740-41.

<sup>12</sup> Phan, “Wisdom of Holy Fools,” 732.

<sup>13</sup> Michael Bala, “The Clown: An Archetypal Self-Journey,” *Jung Journal: Culture and Psyche* 4, no. 1 (2010), 50.

<sup>14</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2001).

<sup>15</sup> Brueggemann, *Prophetic Imagination*, 3, my emphasis. As quoted in Jamie Gates and Mark H. Mann, *Nurturing the Prophetic Imagination* (San Diego; Eugene, OR: Point Loma; Wipf and Stock, 2012), xv-xvi.

communities in powerful countries are likely to exhibit the same myopia as the wider cultures in which they live. Correspondingly, in wealthy regions of the world, religious educators teach believers who are complicit (and may themselves be complicit) in cultures and structures of power, prejudice, and privilege. At times radical pedagogies may be called for to help the faithful imagine and embody the possibilities of radical love that Christ exemplifies.

The thesis of this paper is that *forming the faithful in dispositions of love must involve embodying prophetic imagination that transforms sinful cultures, processes, and structures and enables to people to be with and for others*. In the discussion that follows, I explore the challenges of teaching love and a proposal to supplement traditional pedagogies with those that invite embodied imagination that is both bold and prophetic. A video of a clowning experiment I facilitated with my students and their reflections serve as a basis for discussion. In the spirit of holy foolery, clowning involves donning a disguise and playing by pretense through mime and improvised antics. I analyze the experience of clowning through multiple analytic lenses (historic, aesthetic, theological, and psychoanalytic).

In a book project, I have explored how Christian life involves playing for the sake of faith, that is, practicing life-giving relationships with one another so that people can create and be created anew.<sup>16</sup> However, in this discussion I focus on the role of prophetic imagination, using an example from my own teaching, which I do not explore in the book. The paper is intended to contribute to religious education literature that addresses imagination by offering some thoughts about teaching love through playing.

My work is situated in the vicinity of and builds on the work of many religious educators, but I will mention two. First, my analysis of clowning follows similar contours as the work of Christie Cozad Neuger and Judith Sanderson who describe teaching a seminary course to nurture prophetic imagination.<sup>17</sup> Learners deconstruct oppressive images found in biblical, theological, sociological, and psychological texts and reconstruct them using creative imagination from a diverse group.<sup>18</sup> Though the authors focus on images and I on bodily experience and improvised encounter, our pedagogies attempt to help learners become aware of how injustice is perpetuated, using similar dual moves. Neuger and Sanderson facilitate deconstructing and reconstructing imagination, while I draw on Breuggemann's twin steps of "criticizing" and "energizing imagination." While Neuger and Sanderson guide learners to examine images in their theological and cultural world, I direct student to investigate their experiences of a situation created by clowning—a more Freirean approach. In this regard, my clowning pedagogy resonates with Maria Harris' appropriation of Paulo Freire's work.<sup>19</sup> She writes, "Teaching is the creation of a situation in which subjects, human subjects, are handed over to themselves."<sup>20</sup> Harris understands that learners must critically reflect on their own engagement of the world to better understand the world and themselves. Harris mentions the power of clowning with her students, though she neither theorizes the experience deeply nor pushes at the prophetic potential

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<sup>16</sup> Courtney T. Goto, *The Grace of Playing: Pedagogies for Leaning into God's New Creation* (New York: Wipf & Stock, 2016).

<sup>17</sup> Christie Cozad Neuger and Judith E. Sanderson, "Developing a Prophetic Imagination: A Course for Seminary Students." *Religious Education* 87, no. 2 (1992), 269-282.

<sup>18</sup> Neuger and Sanderson, "Prophetic Imagination," 270-71.

<sup>19</sup> Maria Harris, *Teaching and Religious Imagination: An Essay in the Theology of Teaching* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991).

<sup>20</sup> Harris, *Religious Imagination*, 33.

of clowning to expose oppression. She describes it simply as a practice in discovering the wisdom of foolishness.<sup>21</sup>

In general, clowning continues mostly among practitioners in religious education, not receiving much scholarly attention in the field.<sup>22</sup> Having been introduced to clown ministry as a teenager in my home church in the 1980s (probably when clowning was more popular), I am retrieving and revisiting a pedagogy that impressed me deeply and that newer, scholarly religious educators might not know. What has changed since then is the growth of scholarly interest in theology to address imagination, including prophetic imagination.<sup>23</sup> Especially in Protestant traditions, prophetic imagination has often depended on the power of words to evoke the senses—as a mental and spiritual exercise. By contrast, the physicality of clowning (costuming, silence, and gesture) shapes prophetic imagination through bodily knowing, which allows students to dabble in new ways of being with and for one another.

### ***The Challenges of Teaching Love***

Because much of life in Jesus is relatable to love, teaching love seems to be everywhere and all the time, yet knowing exactly how to form people to be disposed to loving is by no means straightforward. It does not help that love is so multi-faceted as to be mind-boggling, with many types of love overlapping sometimes and bearing close resemblance to one another. In Christian tradition, there is self-sacrificing love (*kenosis*), brotherly and sisterly love or neighborly love (*agape*), erotic love (*eros*), and love between friends (*philia*). Despite the different nuances, expressions, and implications of each type of love, they contribute to a disposition of caring and showing concern for the other, which is how humans are continually being created and re-created in the Spirit. Love is a symbol of God's new creation in which people are no longer captive to fear, ignorance, and oppression but instead live in response to God's grace. Love requires a person to be vulnerable, authentic, and empathic with others—so much so that the struggles and captivity of others becomes one's own struggle and desire for freedom. Moreover, the present and future of all God's people depends on loving, not just those in our community (who often look like us) but all people, and most especially those at the margins, which requires becoming aware of what inhibits us from being responsive to their well-being and needs.

Because all human beings fall short of God's new creation, prophetic imagination is needed in religious education, but imagination must be "tutored"<sup>24</sup> in the service of love. Ideally, prayerful reading of the scripture "schools" the imagination, as does liturgy, preaching, art, and the study of theology. One could argue that the teaching tactics of holy fools were especially effective because they tutored prophetic imagination not simply in one way but through

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<sup>21</sup> Harris, *Religious Imagination*, 153, 156.

<sup>22</sup> One can find many versions of clown communions on YouTube, which suggests the continuation of clowning in local faith communities. Scholars in pastoral care have given some attention to clowning, mostly in the late 1980s to the late 1990s. Jerome A. Travers, ed. [Issue on Clowning], *Journal of Pastoral Counseling* 24, no. 1 (1989), 1-119; Angelika Richter and Lori A. Bonner, "Clowning--an Opportunity for Ministry," *Journal of Religion and Health* 35, no. 2 (1996), 141-148; Dan Feaster, "The Importance of Humor and Clowning in Spirituality and Pastoral Counseling," *Currents in Theology and Mission* 25, no. 5 (1998), 380-387. One recent exception is in homiletics, Johan Cilliers, "Clowning on the Pulpit?: Contours of a Comic Vision on Preaching," *Scriptura* 101 (2009), 189-197.

<sup>23</sup> See for example, Gates and Mann, *Nurturing*.

<sup>24</sup> Paul W. Pruyser, *The Play of the Imagination: Toward a Psychoanalysis of Culture* (New York: International Universities Press, 1983).

scripture, tradition, reason, and experience (John Wesley). Their practices were based in *scripture*, their stories became the stuff of a hagiographic *tradition*, they challenged social norms that were taken to be *reasonable*, and they did it by orchestrating personal *experiences* with the faithful. They were simultaneously forming the prophetic imagination of both individuals and the community.

Teaching love (or any other subject) is challenging because the religious educator must be prepared for the unique group of learners (s)he is teaching, which is different every time. In this particular case, learners come to the religious educator with a wide range of experiences of being open to their own and one another's feelings, histories, and needs. Students bring different capacities for introspection and critical thought and display a wide range of resistances to giving and receiving love in its many forms. Furthermore, the chemistry between and among learners is different in every group, as well as with the instructor. How receptive they are to taking risks together depends on who is in the group, how they relate to one another, and how well the teacher leads the process of learning. The task of the religious educator is to nurture individual and communal dispositions of openness, courage, and capacity for loving, even with the many differences and histories within a single group.

Facilitating dispositions of love might be understood in public terms as character formation for both individuals and groups of learners. From the perspective of liberal education, educators not only equip people with skills and knowledge but also form the character of learners. Often taken for granted, public education seeks to produce human beings who not only *can* but also *want* to contribute to society, which means inculcating dispositions that lead students to value what teachers value. The hope is to produce not only educated individuals but also an educated citizenry that values, for example, hard work, freedom, justice, and equality. The formation of groups is cultivated intentionally in fields such as business, athletics, and science—where learning and working as a team are essential. Religious education is no different, except for the values we hope impart to learners (in this case, love). Instead of building “team spirit,” I am advocating communal formation in which learners challenge implicit assumptions by relating to one another (and others, in this instance) vulnerably and authentically, which I am symbolizing as love. In secular frames of reference, teamwork is often for the purpose of producing a tangible product—for example, a marketing plan, a championship, or a scientific discovery. In religious education, embodying what a community hopes and imagines for itself in light of faith is the end goal.

### ***Clowning as an Experiment in Prophetic Imagination***

Emboldened by Maria Harris' precedent of clowning in her class, I recently engaged students in clowning as part of my Creative Pedagogy course, taught at a university-based Christian seminary in the northeastern United States. By this time in the course, students had already been introduced to the practices of holy fools, theories of playing, and other concepts that form the basis of the discussion that follows. Students were also accustomed to moving their bodies, engaging in improvisational techniques, and mutual risk-taking—capacities we (graduate teaching fellow Francisca Ireland Verwoerd and I) had intentionally nurtured and named from the first day of the course.

After a short warm-up of re-imagining and enacting a modern-day nativity in New York City, the main exercise was simply to engage people we met on the school grounds in playing. First, we costumed and came up with devices to interact with people without speaking. As a

group, we agreed to parade through the school, passing out flyers, enticing people to follow us to the “playground.” We would serve a “love feast” of juice and cookies along the way. At the playground, we would have multiple play stations that the students created (e.g., invisible catch, massage train). A few students came up with their own clown characters and signature gags that helped them interact. As captured at the end of the video, one student dressed as “Death,” offering her heart (a plastic anatomical model) to anyone as a gift of love. Another student costumed as a clown surgeon, who would diagnose someone and write a love prescription.

Having offered a historical perspective by discussing holy fools, I offer second, third, and fourth analytic lenses—esthetic, theological, and psychoanalytic. Video, analysis, and implications to be presented at the REA conference.]

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