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Jesus: Pedagogue of Prophetic Imagination

Abstract: If education in faith includes a tutoring of the imagination, then Christian religious education must attend not only to the prophetic content of Jesus' own imagination, but also to the ways in which he kindled such imagination in others. The prophetic task entails both a critique of the dominant "false" consciousness and an animation of a community with an alternative consciousness. In particular, a Christology that centers on Jesus' empowering of his disciples in imagining and practicing the Reign of God prompts us to retrieve from Jesus principles for teaching with and for a prophetic imagination. Religious educators and the institutions in which they function must prioritize marginalized knowledge, engage in practices of communal hope, and afford learners the opportunity to do the same.

In the US, the calls from political consulting firms are coming thick and fast. “Would you be MORE or LESS likely to vote for Jeb Bush if he said that he supports small-business owners?” “Would you approve of Hillary Clinton MORE or LESS if she called for ‘middle-class tax cuts’?” There is no outlet for me to ask what “supporting small-business” owners means in practice, or to say that I am willing to trade tax cuts away to enhance the social safety net but not to increase defense spending. My choices are quite limited.

It is a situation akin, says Howard Zinn, to a flawed multiple-choice exam. None of the possible answers “a,” “b,” “c,” or “d” is quite correct, but there is no “e,” “f,” or “g.”[1] The premise that my vote would have to go to the slightly left-of-center party’s candidate or the slightly right-of-center party’s candidate is unchallengeable. That a third-party candidate might be viable, that drastic cuts in defense spending might be possible, or that the election might hinge on the question of the growing prison-industrial complex or education funding are not reasonable; they are not even part of the conversation.

Whatever choices Americans are offered necessarily rest heavily on a widespread and unspoken consensus that the status quo will remain largely in place. What is missing, then, is the opportunity to critique the prevailing assumptions wholesale and to offer and act upon a vision of different assumptions. By and large, the ability creatively to imagine a different reality has been squeezed out of us.

Walter Brueggemann considers it to be part of the prophetic task to enable and enact this new vision. He calls for us to foster what he calls the prophetic imagination. This paper insists that Jesus not only had a prophetic imagination, but also that he *taught for* a prophetic imagination. Drawing on the prophetic ministry of Jesus, then, this paper asserts that a pedagogy that educates for the development and practice of a prophetic imagination ought to be part of Christian religious education today. I also suggest three principles for our use today in empowering the prophetic imagination, with implications for institutions, educators, and learners.

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[1] Howard Zinn, *Passionate Declarations: Essays on War and Justice* (San Francisco: Harper Perennial, 2003), 1–8.

[2] Brueggemann focuses on prophetic speech as generating alternatives to the structures and ideologies that are generally taken for granted in social consciousness. Prophetic action, however, is at least as powerful as the speech.

[3] Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination, 2nd Edition*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: FORTRESS PRESS, 2001),

Prophetic Imagination

Taking Moses as the prophetic paradigm, Brueggemann places the alternative consciousness formed among the Hebrews in juxtaposition with the "royal consciousness" of Pharaoh's empire.[2] Because so often those structures and ideologies are simply the cultural air that we breathe, envisioning an alternative is an act of imagination. This imaginative vision must look beyond what is typically viewed as "reasonable" and ordinary. For Brueggemann, this taken-for-granted worldview is generally perpetuated by a hegemonic authority, and so the prophetic imagination critiques it.[3]

The dominant "royal consciousness" against which Moses cultivated an alternative was one that normalized economic exploitation blessed by a triumphalist and domesticated religion. Moses sought to replace the economics of divisive affluence with equality; the politics of oppression with justice; and a religion that domesticated the divine with one that recognized God's freedom and sovereignty.[4]

Moses' criticism, his deconstruction of Pharaoh's regime, began with voicing the genuine grievances of the Hebrews, the pain of the oppression they suffer. It continued, through the Plagues, with the demonstration of the regime's ultimate impotence: Pharaoh and his magicians cannot do what Yahweh can do. Royal power is de-legitimized.[5]

Deconstruction alone is not sufficient for the prophetic task. What Brueggemann calls the "energizing" element of the prophetic imagination emerges not from lament and de-legitimization but in the proclamation of "amazement" at the new possibilities. This movement in the prophetic task rests on symbols of hope to break through the despair and lament. Giving voice to the people's real yearnings is the beginning, but tapping into symbols of newness and nourishment is necessary for making the transition from the expression of yearnings to hope for their fulfillment.[6]

Brueggemann sees in the life and ministry of Jesus of Nazareth this same dual dynamic of prophetic imagination – criticism of the dominant order and engendering energizing hope for a new and radically different order. In his ministry and in his teaching, Jesus pronounced judgment on the order of the day, but also announced, with the Kingdom of God, a new (or, rather, a return to an old) vision of sovereignty and order.[7]

Brueggemann's account of both the judgment and promise of Jesus' Kingdom ministry deserves supplementation in three ways. First, we see Jesus privileging local knowledge, including the experiences of suffering that need to be voiced. Second, and similarly, we must see how his ministry of the Kingdom of God involved instantiating practices of hope in the future that he was also envisioning. Finally, we ought to consider how Jesus, in the practice of this prophetic aspect of his ministry, empowered his community in their own experiences to discover and to spread hope in newness.

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[3] Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination, 2nd Edition*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: FORTRESS PRESS, 2001), x–xi.

[4] Ibid., 21–37.

[5] Ibid., 1–14.

[6] Brueggemann sees other prophets from the Hebrew Scriptures, particularly First Isaiah and Jeremiah, joining this language of lament with the de-legitimization of the dominant regime.[6] Ibid., 59–79.

[7] Ibid., 81–114.

Jesus as a Prophet Deconstructing the Given Order

Most of the history of Israel involves the threat or actuality of subjugation by foreign empires. By the first century, Palestine was a restive and troublesome edge of the Roman Empire, best ruled as much as possible by Jewish client-kings. Palestine's Jews expressed discontent over imperial rule, zealously asserting independence from foreign emperors and gods. Often the political, social, economic, and religious dimensions of this subjugation – and protest against it – converged.

Economically, Roman taxation took a heavy toll on the people of Palestine. Of particular concern to Jesus would likely have been the situation in the Galilee. Roman taxation put peasants who were barely operating at the margins of subsistence into debt out of which they could not pay their way, and eventually many lost their land. The land became concentrated in the hands of fewer and fewer owners; the rich-poor gap grew. The ready supply of day laborers in the parables of Jesus reflected the reality of the increasingly landless population and the growing underclass.[8] Religiously, the legitimacy of Herod's hand-picked (and Roman-vetted) high priests, who had not only religious but also political responsibilities, was often a point of contention.[9]

Jesus delegitimized the Roman Empire and its collaborators, the evidence suggests, in many ways, but in ways that would have been recognizable to a constituency predisposed for it. If we too easily hear Jesus' answer to the question about paying taxes to the emperor[10] as supporting our modern separation of church and state, we must listen again, this time with first-century ears. We must consider that Jesus could not safely have said either "Yes" or "No" to the question. However, any good Jew in the crowd would have known what belongs to God, and so what should be rendered unto God: *everything*. Caesar was not God.[11]

Such critiques, and especially the pronouncements and demonstration against the Temple during the highly-charged Passover festival, set the scene for the ultimate pronouncement against and rejection of Roman (and client) power, the politics of oppression and exclusion, and the economics of inequality: Jesus' crucifixion. In the moment when he said, "Not my will but yours be done," Jesus rejected the notion that the mentality, the system, the people that would execute him had any REAL power over him. He could refuse to answer Pilate's questions,[12] for he refused to recognize the legitimacy of Pilate's authority.

Local Knowledge, Dispersed Power

Part of this critique of the dominant consciousness rested on Jesus' empowering the voices of the marginalized, according respect to their experiences and their knowledge. Jesus expressed compassion for the plight of the poor, but also voiced outrage over an economic system that increased that poverty. Moreover, even granting that there is dispute over just how critical Jesus was of the Law and Temple, it is quite likely that Jesus' relatively "free" attitude towards the Law and his critique of the Temple system stemmed from a recognition that they did not always represent the interests of people in the countryside or other marginalized persons.[13]

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[8] Richard A. Horsley, *Jesus and the Spiral of Violence*, 1st Fortress Press ed (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Publishers, 1993), 1–15.

[9] Richard A. Horsley, *Jesus and Empire: The Kingdom of God and the New World Disorder*, First Edition (FORTRESS PRESS, 2002), 31–34.

[10] Mark 12:13-17 and parallels

[11] Horsley, *Jesus and the Spiral of Violence*, 306–317.

[12] Matthew 27:14

Jesus certainly felt the weight of that marginalization of local experience and local knowledge when he was rejected as Nazareth precisely because the people all knew him, and so he could not have great wisdom.[14] Jesus, however, valued the knowledge of the marginalized. The parables, for instance, speak not primarily to the experience of court and Temple and scribal authority, but to the agrarian reality that would have been the experience of most of Jesus' audience. Pedagogically, his use of agrarian language and metaphors was not simply so that they would be more comprehensible to that audience; it also emphasized that the knowledge and experience of the agrarian people mattered to God. It *counted* as real knowledge, and it was a source of real wisdom. To his disciples he noted, "Amen, I say to you, many prophets and righteous people longed to see what you see but did not see it, and to hear what you hear but did not hear it."[15] The disciples' experience, their knowledge is legitimate, and it is for them a source of power.[16]

Jesus as a Prophet Inspiring an Alternative Community Through Practice

In both his teaching and his actions, Jesus described and enacted an alternative vision to the dominant consciousness. It was not a radically new vision in some senses, but a radically conservative one – a return to a recognition of the true sovereignty of God and to covenanted communities of internal solidarity that would allow for resistance to the de-humanizing forces of outside oppressors. It is a vision that asserts a Reality beyond what is readily apparent, a vision that both requires and inspires hope in what was a time of despair for many.

With some variation, there is relatively solid agreement among historians and exegetes as to the basic outlines of key aspects of Jesus' active ministry. Among the actions for which there is general consensus about Jesus' ministry of the Kingdom of God are included healing of various types, an emphasis on the practice of forgiveness, and the radically egalitarian table fellowship that Crossan refers to as *open commensality*.[17]

These actions, in concert with Jesus' teachings, are not disparate strands of Jesus' practice. They are part and parcel of a plan and a movement for the renewal of Israel. Egalitarian social relationships were to renew local communities. Instead of hierarchical social and familial relationships, Jesus practiced and taught a radical equality. He rejected political domination and subservience not only in his community of disciples, but also in the community more generally.[18]

The mutual forgiveness and reconciliation that were part of this practice served not only as avenues of personal holiness. They renewed communities that were, in this imperial situation, beset by hard times. The enhanced cooperation of these communities would allow them together to withstand the misfortunes and injustices of political and economic domination, while division would make losers out of almost all. Forgiveness of debts was not just a metaphor for the forgiveness of sins; it was also quite literal, in the tradition of the Jubilee, and maintained egalitarian and cooperative relations in the villages of the Galilee that were so hard hit by the Roman occupation and were the center of most of Jesus' ministry.[19]

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[13] Luke 11:45-54, or also Jesus' critique of a narrow application of the *corban* rules in Mark 7:11-12

[14] Matthew 13:54-8

[15] Matthew 13:17

[16] See Michel Foucault, *Power/knowledge : Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977*, ed. and trans. Colin Gordon, 1st American ed.. (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), 83–106. Foucault addresses the "apparatuses of knowledge" that designate the ways of knowing of those in power as the sources of knowledge that matters.

[17] John Dominic Crossan, *The Historical Jesus : The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant*, 1st ed.. (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991).

[18] Horsley, *Jesus and the Spiral of Violence*, 209-245.

Jesus' Prophetic Pedagogy – A Person With a Movement

If there was something not so much new as radically conservative in Jesus, then we must ask why he came to be recognized as Christ. Tilley draws on but modifies the ancient Christological insight that Jesus is the personification of God's Kingdom, *autobasileia*. "Jesus' empowering practices realize the reign of God. Thus, he is *autobasileia*, not alone but in and through his relationships with others who live in and live out God's reign. . . . In this key, Jesus' remembered practices as carried on by his disciples are where the reign of God is."[20]

Knowing Jesus and his prophetic imagination comes not simply in watching him or reading about him. Following Jesus is a source of understanding Jesus.[21] In both his proclamation of the Kingdom of God and his denunciation of the "anti-Kingdom," Jesus is known and understood in the imitation. His prophetic imagination, then, is understood also in imitation.

Jesus himself was aware of the importance of this dynamic of understanding in action. Christology for Tilley begins in the "active imagination of the disciples." This imagination requires walking in God's ways and carrying out together the reconciling practices of God's Kingdom. What is essential is that Jesus empowered the disciples to do so, empowered their active imaginations.[22] This disciplined imagination is learned. It comes from getting things right in practice.[23]

Jesus invited, even commanded, others to do what he himself was doing – heal the sick, feed the hungry, make the lame walk and the blind see.[24] In all of the Synoptics he commissions the Twelve to proclaim the Kingdom of God and to heal.[25] Luke adds even more dramatically the Mission of the Seventy-two (10:1-20). This is not a hierarchy – this is a movement growing like a mustard plant. When the commissioned disciples return, they report, "Lord, even the demons are subject to us because of your name."[26]

Jesus' pedagogy empowers his disciples to envision and enact an alternative reality. He teaches with his words. He demonstrates with his actions. He encourages his disciples to perform. There is a constant dialectic between the imagining and the doing. To some extent, the disciples are inspired to act by the envisioned alternative reality, but it seems that the reverse is also true; in their actions, they are able to see and envision a new reality. New possibilities are opened up for them.

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[19] Ibid., 247–284.

[20] Tilley, *The Disciples' Jesus*, 1, emphasis mine.

[21] Jon Sobrino, *Christ the Liberator : A View from the Victims*, trans. Paul Burns (New York: Orbis Books, 2001), 323. "The following of Jesus consists, in the first place, in remaking his life and praxis, and this remaking can bring about 'an inner knowledge' (as the mystics say). . . ."

[22] Tilley, *The Disciples' Jesus*, 123.

[23] Ibid., 92–3.

[24] John Dominic Crossan, *God and Empire: Jesus Against Rome, Then and Now*, 1st Paperback Edition (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2008), 117–118.

[25] Matthew 10:5-15 and parallels

[26] Luke 10:18

Pedagogical Insights for Today

Of course, there are many insights we could draw from Jesus' prophetic pedagogy. I propose three.

First, as Jesus not only took seriously the voices of the marginalized but also prodded them to take seriously their own voices, he thematized their pain but also their hopes and yearnings. Religious educators today must do the same, attending to the marginalized, yes, but also asking the marginalized to attend to their own hopes and to nourishing them. The failure of the system to nourish those dreams inspires critique. What is difficult is that, all too often, our dreams have become desiccated. As educators, we can help tutor the imagination with questions, with our own dreams, and by offering options and richer vision.

We cannot ONLY ask students the canned questions of a political marketing survey. We must ask questions that elicit the experience, the joys, the longings of our students, yes, but more, that put them in touch with experiences beyond their own, the experiences of those more marginalized. In the process, we must help them ask and pursue answers to the critical questions -- Who has had the power to define the narrative? Whose voices are not being heard? From this standpoint, then, they are in a position not only to answer questions but also to judge the adequacy of those questions, or of the narrow questions posed by the political consultant on the phone.

We must, then, also put ourselves in positions to hear the voices of the marginalized. As educators, we must nourish the prophetic element of our own imaginations. Imagination has been squeezed out of us no less than out of those with whom we are involved. As Ignacio Ellacuria reminds us, what we see depends on where we stand, and with whom we stand. So, what we see from the foot of the cross is quite different from what we see in the Praetorium. What we see in the parish, on the streets, and among families is different from what we see in the Academy.

The second principle is hardly new but is always worth repeating, and is always a challenge in that our settings so often militate against it: a prophetic imagination is best formed in the process of hopeful practices of reconciliation. In a profession that sometimes asks us to be observers of the world, we must not let our chronicling of history preclude our agency in it. Taking the long view is an essential aspect of a faith with an eschatological edge, but so is agential involvement in a world into which God reveals God's very self. If we want to enliven our own imaginations, we must continually challenge ourselves to undertake actions of Christian discipleship. In this light, religious educators must not only take it upon ourselves to be involved in practices of radical equality, reconciliation, and solidarity, but we ought also to demand of our institutions that we have space and time for these practices. Hence, when we place ourselves at the foot of the cross, we must act in ways that are radically healing, radically forgiving, participating in the building of communities, even communities where our academic or ecclesial status accords us no special value or voice. If we fail to do so, we are stuck with the same vision that limits us, at best, to incremental changes in the status quo.

Finally, of course, education involves action and reflection on that action. The conformity of those actions with a prophetic vision has much to do with the shaping of the imagination that reflects on those actions. As religious educators, then, we must not only perform but also enable others to live into the prophetic imagination. Service learning is the paradigmatic example here, and is no less effective for its being well-tried. We do it best in an environment where our own examples, the values of the wider institutions in which we serve, and the values of our students are in relative consonance. Such an environment is where students become members of a community of practice,[27] a community of practice and imagination that allows them prophetically to critique the status quo and to live into an alternative vision, and an alternative community. So, service learning itself is not sufficient. It should be encouraged and processed with an institutional environment that makes alternative framing of the experience possible. The imagination thus engendered will prompt a chafing at the politics of soundbites and small visions.

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[27] Etienne Wenger, *Communities of Practice : Learning, Meaning, and Identity*, 1st pbk. ed.. (Cambridge, UK; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

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