Sustaining Hope in a “Hot Takes” World: 
Religious Education as a Practice of Purposeful Persistent Provocation

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Precis: 
Theological education begins in the world of the learner, but it must avoid the “soundbite” nature of public discourse that mistakes immediate reaction for genuine knowing. This shallow approach imperils a theological vision of hope grounded in expansive imagination. Deep, sustained engagement with culture and theology grounds a religious education supportive of the work of cultural transformation. In light of this critique of the presumptiveness of facile, reactionary religious education, this workshop explores strategies for educating for the sustained engagement that effects true hope.

Brief agenda for the session:
1. Presenters introduce the grounding concepts and theoretical orientation in order to name and describe the problematic of educating for hope in contemporary culture.
2. Participants engage in a “World Cafe” style brainstorming session as we think together through the implications of these realities and aim to address them pedagogically.
3. Ideas generated in the “World Cafe” are discussed among the large group.

Grounding concepts:
I. “Hot Takes:” Perpetually but Not Persistently Provoked
“The 'prototype hot take' is when news breaks, and then 'somebody will rush out an opinion piece a couple hours later that comes to some really grand conclusions based on this one thing that happened that maybe we don’t even have all the facts about yet.”

1. These “hot takes” may be egregious attempts to bait readers and/or solicit trolling.
2. Of greater concern for us are the more considered opinions that are rushed to publication. Such rushing prioritizes quickness over depth; these posts are intended to be seen as quickly as possible, briefly engaged, and then forgotten.

II. Cultural Milieu: The Digital Age Primes Us to Crave the Hot Take
It takes time and attention to take ideas, engage them, make meaning of them, and translate them into experience. Life in the digital age, however, quite literally seems to be rewiring our brains to militate against that very kind of thinking. The online milieu promotes “cursory reading, hurried and distracted thinking, and superficial learning.” The ability to read deeply, focus narrowly, and sustain critical thinking atrophies at the neurological level, and we cannot stand the silence where we used to think deeply. Instead, we fill the “downtime” with a stream of shorter and shallower content.

III. Paucity of Hope: Presumption and Despair Uninterrupted
   A. Theological Hope: “Hope is the desire for a future, difficult, yet possible good… Hope, then, is the movement toward something we long for but do not yet possess -- something that is hard to get, but not impossible.”⁴ Hope requires some sort of vision for that future.
   B. Hope resides in the middle between presumption and despair.
      a. Presumption tells us that we do not need to engage, that we need not really try to analyze, understand, and shape the events of our day, the signs of our times, because they will work out anyway. Such presumption seems most evident when those of us with material, economic, racial, gendered, or social privilege slide too easily into complacency.
      b. On the other hand, when we expect our comments and analyses to be short-lived, to be reacted to and forgotten, we have fallen into a cynicism that tends to despair. We have no belief that we can really shape the world, nor even that we can really reimagine it. We have no hope of writing the story; we just wait for the next story.

IV. Christian Hope for Transforming a Hot Takes Culture
   A. Christian hope is both a gift from God and a choice to orient oneself towards God.
      a. Hope requires a process of discernment - looking for God’s gifts in the world and then actively engaging in hope. In discerning hope in the world, we are always pointing towards and striving for the Reign of God.
      b. In discerning hope, we engage our imaginations. “[Hope] gives vigor and buoyancy to intelligence. It engenders a deep moral sense and points in the direction of a more passionate self-involvement in the making of the world.”⁵ This is what gives hope its prophetic character.
   B. This is what Christian hope must be: a grace offered by God that impels us, compels us, towards the reign of God. Christian hope, as a choice made by the discerning believer, foments action. “Hope’s disposition to act is what distinguishes it from mere wishing or fantasy. The person who hopes opts to start acting as if that which is longed for will come to fruition. She/he leans forward with hands ready, perceives possibilities, and steps into what is anticipated. In this way the choice of hope enlivens the present because it hastens toward a future that has not fully arrived yet.”⁶

V. Embarking on Collaborative Engagement: Educating for Hope in a Hot Takes Culture
   A. What are your best hopes for what sustained inquiry, reflection, conversation, and involvement can do?
   B. What would it mean and what are the consequences of having deeper engagement (inquiry, reflection, conversation, involvement) in various ministerial and educational contexts? What do you want to have happen for your students, your parishioners, your community, your world?
   C. How might we interrupt presumption and despair? How do we educate for sustained inquiry, sustained reflection, sustained conversation, and sustained involvement?

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