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Education for Liberation

Faithful to the traditions of the training for the ministry of many Protestant churches in Argentina, I started my theological career during the eighties as a Freirean educator, working in poor areas of Buenos Aires. According to Paulo Freire, the Brazilian philosopher of education, one of the keys for social transformation lies in the educational processes of a nation. By that he meant that the content and the style of education were neither neutral nor passive elements, but powerful ideological contributors to the lives of our societies. After all, indifference or solidarity as resignation or active citizenship is taught to us at an early age from schools and pulpits.

Freire developed a style of work called 'education for liberation' which involved dialoguing with adult people as part of a critical awareness process. The key was that the poor and marginalised of our societies should learn to interrogate and discover the mechanism of oppression which has rendered them as excluded from society. This seems to be a worthy but secular project, and one may ask how it could relate at all to Christian education. However, in many poor countries such as those in Latin America, 90% or more of those excluded communities living in ignorance, fear and poverty also happen to be committed Christian communities. Therefore the contribution that Freire has made to education, and more specifically to Christian education, has brought to the churches the challenge of understanding Christian education as an integral task which cares for the spiritual and material health of the believers.

From this perspective, Christian education has been challenged to become much more than finding ways to teach dogma. Christian education for nations suffering from violence and social deprivation has understood its crucial role in processes of social transformation. In other words, dogmas are for people, and not people for dogmas. The religion of

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Jesus Christ is for living people, and to be learnt and lived as a profound experience of conversion. However, the *metanoia* needs to exceed the individual, transforming unjust structures of power and unequal relationships amongst people.

TEACHING REDEMPTION IN A DEPRIVED URBAN COMMUNITY IN SCOTLAND

Some years ago, I was walking with a group of women in a deprived area of Scotland where I was working at the time as a Freirean community educator. It was one of those dark afternoons in winter when few people are in the streets of poor neighbourhoods. The lack of facilities (except for a local pub, a bakery and a drugstore) contributed to a sense of insecurity for the few daring to go out. While we were walking, we were confronted by that aesthetic experience of many Scottish deprived areas, the billboards. In the slums of Latin America we might have been confronted with grottos dedicated to the Virgin Mary, or crosses adorned with flowers, but in a secular Britain, adverts occupy the central place in the lives of people. It happened that a poster advertising a new brand of washing up powder had appeared in the neighbourhood, claiming that a new brand 'cleans even cleaner than your favourite washing powder'. That advert became then our topic of conversation. Has anybody tried this new brand? Which one do you use? I offered the comment that my grandmother in Argentina only used a Castilla bar of soap, and her clothes were always immaculate. Cleaning is such an issue for women that the conversation went on with gusto, until I realised that we were talking about more than clothes. We were women talking about cleaning rituals and meaningful constructions of everyday domestic lives so closely associated with religious understandings about women and pollution. So I asked if they were familiar with the phrase 'the blood of Jesus cleanses your sins'. And some were. Next day, we had our small community gathering discussing issues of cleansing, pollution and redemption, although not necessarily using those terms. We read the Bible outside the Bible, as we read from magazines and newspaper adverts for cleansing powders and liquids and interrogated their meanings. Then, we went to our religious experiences as women. If we wanted, we could continue reading and interrogating the Bible, the teaching of Jesus and what we can loosely call the religious traditions we have grown up with, which were most of the time not strictly related to the teaching of Jesus. We spoke about obsessive cleansing behaviour, and everybody shared a story which linked cleansing to a religious experience which did not fit our real lives. We asked questions. Is the concept of sin

facilitated or impeded by metaphors of cleanness which have racial, gender and class biases? After all, dirt is also a positive reference to the sweat of people's honest labour, and women's bodies have been religiously constructed as polluted instead of marvelling at the wonder of the female power of giving birth and life. White means clean, while black is associated with dirt. Surely, that was not right and required some challenges. Our discussions on issues concerning salvation and redemption lasted several weeks.

Freire could have considered this story as part of a dialogic Christian educational community experience. Starting not from a catechism or a dogmatic list of points to be learnt and repeated, Christian education for liberation is a process that begins at people's lives, and from there goes on to reflect on the fundamentals of our faith, enriching us with new meanings and metaphors which arise from our communities. More importantly, Christian education for liberation aims not just to teach dogmas, but to allow dogmas to be rediscovered in order to change our lives in a communitarian, meaningful way. It was in this spirit that Latin American theologians in the late twentieth century challenged the traditional methods and perception of Christian education. For instance, Leonardo Boff published *La Oración del Señor* (The Lord's Prayer) as an educational work to help to understand what prayer is, while Carlos Mesters contributed to a series of Biblical commentaries which related people's lives to the message from the Bible. For these theologians, Christian education was and still is part of the spiritual journey of our people. Its function is to illuminate and transform the lives of our communities, in a material and spiritual way.

We are living at a time in which globalisation processes have taken poverty to a new dimension of social exclusion, while our whole environment suffers under the weight of humankind's own greediness and disrespect for life. Christian education has never had a more demanding task to fulfil, that is, to become instrumental in the process to become doers and not just hearers of the Word. It was Thomas Groome who reminded us that the nature and purpose of Christian education demands a knowledge which results from a tension between past and present and the future, promoting creativity, vision and responsible actions in our world. We can do more than teach the Lord's prayer; we can put it into action in the present, while considering where are we coming from and which is our vision for the future. In this, Christian education has the responsibility to transform whole communities looking for peace and justice.

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