

# Christian Religious Education's Enchanting Duty : A Curriculum of Hope from the Underside of Civic Polarization, Moral Disimagination, and Learned Helplessness

Le Tran Mai Anh  
(Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary)

## Abstract

This study addresses the crucial role of Christian Religious Education (CRE) amidst civic polarization, moral disimagination, and learned helplessness. It begins her personal background as a 1.5-generation Vietnamese American and her academic engagement in immigrant faith and the challenges of teaching faith in violent contexts. The work underscores the public dimension and impact of religious education, highlighting its potential for fostering critical capacities for public engagement. However, that study observes a prevalent disconnection between congregational culture and the aim of public engagement, leading to a form of learned helplessness among students and communities. The researcher draws on Paulo Freire's concepts of "critical hope" and the need for a curriculum that transcends mere content delivery to foster transformative engagement with societal issues. The document critiques the disimagination machine that undermines critical thinking and collective resistance, as articulated by Henry Giroux, and explores the concepts of "learned helplessness" as a barrier to environmental and social activism. The researcher advocates for a theopoetic and theopolitical approach to education that nurtures hope and practical engagement with the world's injustice. She emphasizes small acts of theopoetic and theopolitical hope as transformative practices, using an example from Ferguson, Missouri, to illustrate how public liturgy and protest can mediate hope and justice. The document concludes with a call for a life-long, life-wide, and life-deep curriculum of enchantment towards responsible participation in societal repair, rooted in Christian hope.

## Key Words

Christian Religious Education, Critical Capacities, Public Engagement, Learned Helplessness, Critical Hope, Responsible Participation

---

This paper is an edited and expanded version of a presentation made at the 2023 Korean Society of Christian Religious Education (KSCRE) annual conference on November 25, 2023. The conference theme was public Christian religious education, with an emphasis on hope. Some materials are taken from *Reset the heart: Unlearning violence, relearning hope*. © 2017 Abingdon Press. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

**Received** March 7, 2024 **Revised** March 28, 2024 **Accepted** March 29, 2024

**Author** : Le Tran Mai Anh, Professor, Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary, [maianh.tran@garrett.edu](mailto:maianh.tran@garrett.edu)

## 책임을 노래하는 기독교적 종교교육 : 시민적 양극성, 도덕적 무감각, 학습된 무력감의 저변에서 시작된 희망의 교육과정\*

레 트란 마이 안\*\*  
(미국 게렛복음주의신학교)

### 논문 요약

기독교 종교교육의 중요한 역할은 시민적 양극성, 도덕적 무감각, 그리고 학습된 무력감 속에서 발견할 수 있다. 북미 베트남 1.5세의 개인적 배경과 이민자로서 기독교 신앙에 대한 학문적 참여 그리고 폭력적 상황 속에서 신앙의 교육은 도전과 장애에 직면한다. 종교교육의 공적 차원과 역할이 주목되면서 공적 참여를 위해서 비판적 역량을 증진하는 종교교육의 역량에 관심이 집중된다. 이와 동시에 회중 문화와 공적 참여의 목적 사이에 있는 광범위한 분리가 관찰되며, 학습자와 공동체 가운데 있는 학습된 도움 없음의 양식이 무엇인지가 논문의 주요 쟁점이 된다. 파울로 프레이리의 “비판적 희망”의 개념은 사회적 쟁점이 지닌 변형적 참여를 증진하는 교육과정의 요구를 충족하여 주고, 이것은 단순한 전달의 한계를 넘어서서 비상상력이 지닌 교육 환경의 한계를 비판하고, 비판적 사고와 집단적 저항의 장애물을 제거하는 실천적 역할을 수행한다. 이러한 교육 모형은 앙리 지루에 의해서 정교하게 된 것으로 환경적이며 사회적 행동주의에 대한 장벽으로 “학습된 무기력”의 개념을 탐구하는 것이 된다. 연구자는 세계의 부정의에 대한 희망과 실천적 참여를 교육하는 것으로 신학적 예술 접근과 신학적 정치 접근을 강조한다. 변형적 실천으로서의 신학 예술적 그리고 신학 정치적 희망의 작은 행동으로 미주리 퍼거슨에서 사건을 예시로, 공적 예전과 저항이 어떻게 희망과 정의를 소통하게 하는지를 보여준다. 이 논문은 생명의 길이, 생명의 폭, 그리고 생명의 깊이를 기독교적 희망에 뿌리내린 사회적 회복 속에 있는 책임적 참여를 호소하는 교육과정이 되어야 한다는 점을 강조하며 결론을 맺는다.

### 〈 주제어 〉

기독교적 종교교육, 비판적 역량, 공적 참여, 학습된 무력감, 비판적 희망, 책임적 참여

□ 2024년 3월 7일 접수, 2024년 3월 28일 심사완료, 2024년 3월 29일 게재확정

\* 본 논문은 2023년 11월 25일 한국기독교교육학회 학술대회에서 발표한 내용을 편집, 확장한 것이고, 일부 자료는 ©2017 Abingdon Press의 허락을 받아 Reset the heart: Unlearning violence, relearning hope에서 사용함

\*\* 미국 게렛복음주의신학교 교수, maianh.tran@garrett.edu

## I. Introduction

Reiterating the power of aesthetic education for contemporary ponderings on embodied consciousness, the late American educational theorist Maxine Greene cited the influence of French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty on her thinking: “He stressed the fact that the body is no longer merely an object in the world under the control of some separate spirit; it is rather our point of view on the world” (Greene 1999, 5). Persuaded by this notion that the body is not simply an instrument that views but rather our very point of view, I begin this essay by situating myself in some context to explain my slant on the world.

I write as a scholar from the United States (US), albeit one who identifies as a diasporan, shuttling back and forth between multiple belongings. In sociological terms, I am a 1.5-generation Vietnamese American whose family arrived in the US through what was called the Orderly Departure Program devised for the resettlement of Southeast Asian refugees and immigrants after the end of the war in Vietnam. In ecclesiastical terms, I am an ordained United Methodist elder, but more significantly, a bona fide pastor’s kid who whizzed through my home church’s elaborate Sunday School system and even skipped a couple of age-specific grade levels due to habitual meanderings through the halls of church school. I may have been too precocious (or entitled) to attend all of Sunday School, but I learned more about hope as a child watching grownups around me navigate uncertain political futures in a refugee processing center in the Philippines where my family stayed for over five months; and later as a teenager and young adult observing immigrant congregations navigate racialized identity and religious affiliation in the face of public discrimination, marginalization, bigotry, ignorance, and at times downright hate in our newfound country. In academic terms, I am currently a professor of Christian religious education and practical theology at a US seminary, having spent the last twenty years of my career teaching and writing (and always learning) about immigrant faith, religious identity, educational imagination, and, in recent years, the challenges of teaching for faith in the crux of intersectional, multiscalar violence.

From such embodied consciousness—described all too cursorily here—I attempt

to make a case in this paper for Christian religious education (CRE) to look for and to model after small acts of enchanting hope emerging from the underside or interstices of organized public and religious life. Drawing attention to ordinary actions that contribute to cumulative enduring change, I invite us to see the potentials of what I describe simply as the theo poetic and theopolitical power of those who exercise agency from the indeterminate “undercommons” of civil society.

## II. What Does It Mean to Speak or Step into the Public with Hope?

Ten years ago, religious education scholar Jack Seymour insisted that “[r]eligious education always has a public dimension and public impact” (2013, 109-110). In fact, US Christian religious education scholars have long urged the field and the Christian communities of faith that the language of faith is necessarily bilingual—one for internal communal discourse, and another for public engagement—and that Christian religious praxis is both that of faithful discipleship and responsible citizenship (Boys, 1989). To quote Seymour at length, from his field-framing work:

Christian education must provide open spaces where people can learn the faith tradition, engage that tradition with issues of life, and seek to live together in ways that are faithful to God... Through Christian education we face into the world, explore the deepest meanings of our lives, engage one another, and partner with a God seeking wholeness and meaning for all life. (Seymour 1997, 118, 121; emphasis added)

And yet, anecdotally and empirically, Christian religious educators awkwardly admit that for the academic discipline and the religious communities about whom we care deeply, it still seems optional that Christian religious education would have as its central curricular aim the cultivation of critical capacities for meaningful, passionate, and even transformative engagement in public life.

Every time I study Seymour's words with seminary students, I inevitably get blank stares. Apparently, they have grown used to congregational cultures in which public engagement is the least important aim within the busy programs of disciple-making (Foster, 1994).

I simplify and over-exaggerate this conundrum, which Catholic theologian John A. Coleman characterized as an *aporia*—a “perpetually unresolvable tension” (Coleman, 1989)—between discipleship and citizenship, because I witnessed the paralysis resulting from it in 2014, when many Christian communities within the region where I lived and taught at the time seemed unable to respond publicly to the combustion of racialized violence in our city, or, colloquially speaking, in our own back yard.

To be fair, public life has become increasingly fraught. Sociologist Robert D. Putnam summarized it so in his survey of American religious trends: the more the society grows pluralistic, the more politicized and polarizing it becomes, despite the generally accepted notion of liberal tolerance (Putnam, 2010). In 2014, I reflected with the members of the international Religious Education Association that we live in a time when the earth is quaking from human tantrums, the public sphere is polluted with cacophonies of discord, communities fractured by manipulated fear and manufactured insecurity, and individuals feel bereft of possibilities for the future. It is 2023, war is raging (again) in Israel-Gaza, shrouding momentarily other ongoing geocolonial incursions. In my state of Illinois, a man was presumably so incited that he targeted Muslims in a killing fit, tragically stabbing to death a six-year-old boy (Bowman, 2023). It goes beyond interpersonal violence: the deadly tit-for-tat violence of warzones has been transported to college campuses, in which protest and counter-protests have ended in bloody melees, arrests, cancellation of public dialogue, and vigilant supervision of departmental studies in the interest of risk management (Pettit, 2023). As if geocolonial historical conflict is not enough to stymie the educational enterprise, in the US, state policies are tightening the regulation of textbooks in public schools (Goldstein 2023), effectually short-circuiting generative conditions for the cultivation of critical, curious, courageous teaching and learning. Higher higher education is vexed by scandals of abuse, coverups,

violation of academic freedom and integrity (French, 2023). Students are assessed, rewarded, and punished by the metrics of “free market fundamentalism” (Giroux, 2021)—all the while becoming routinized to lock-down drills in the event of mass shootings, in milieus in which teachers and staff may be allowed to carry licensed concealed weapons. Public school teachers are low-paid, under-resourced, stretched thin, and burnt out. As one New York Times editorial warns, “Job satisfaction for teachers is at a 50-year low. They are leaving the profession while fewer and fewer college students are interested in joining the field” (Grose, 2023).

Litanies of social woes can be paralyzing if not scaffolded by deeper analysis for strategic action. In this paper, I bring together a few key ideas germane to our wrestling with Christian religious education’s public duty amid the diminishment of hope. My considerations here are based on work shared in *Reset the Heart* (2017) and the many conversations since its publication. COVID-19 and the social pandemic of racialized violence and political insurrection in the US stretched the themes to further limits between the years 2019-2021.

The late Brazilian education philosopher and reformer Paulo Freire reported that when a friend learned that Freire was following up on his ground-breaking work *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* with a book on hope, the friend exclaimed: “But Paul...a *Pedagogy of Hope* in the shameless hellhole of corruption like the one strangling us in Brazil today?” (Freire, 1999, 7) It is true for us now as it was true for Freire then, hope gains more clarion ethical, pedagogical, and ontological bearing if and when we have a firmer grasp on the hellhole of our life together.

#### **IV. Is Hope Possible (or Desirable) in an Age of Disimagination?**

Nine years ago—while I was engaged in sabbatical travel and research—it was the paradigmatic events of racialized violence and shooting deaths of minoritized black and brown bodies in the United States which confronted my educational imagination and turned me to the study of violence and the violent

pedagogies embedded in Christian religious educational praxis. The events then, with (re)new(ed) variations in current events today, suggest that global societies continue to be caught in what cultural theorists Antonio Gramsci and Stuart Hall have termed conjuncture: “a period in which different elements of society come together to produce a unique fusion of the economic, social, political, ideological, and cultural in relative settlement that becomes hegemonic in defining reality” (Giroux, 2014, 45). In pedagogic terms, it is a moment in which a new paradigm of public pedagogy is in full force—and critical pedagogue Henry Giroux labels it the “disimagination machine.”

Dissecting the educative and systemic machination of social, cultural, political, and economic forces which actively erode individual and collective civic imagination, Giroux drew on the concept of French philosopher Georges Didi-Huberman to assert that “[a] politics of disimagination has emerged, in which stories, images, institutions, discourses, and other modes of representation are undermining our capacity to bear witness to a different and critical sense of remembering, agency, ethics, and collective resistance” (2014, 26-27). The implements of this disimagination machine are “a set of cultural apparatuses”—or public pedagogies—that “short-circuit the ability of individuals to think critically, [to] imagine the unimaginable, and [to] engage in thoughtful and critical dialogue, or, put simply, to become critically engaged citizens of the world” (27).

According to Giroux, in this conjuncture, neoliberalism’s “dollarocracy” corrupts critical capacities for dialogue and participatory action in service to fundamental human rights and social responsibility. Self-help individualism effectively normalizes irresponsibility toward the public good (Giroux, 2014, 63, 73). Disimagination is actively taught when public schools operate like what Giroux calls “youth control complexes” (190). Teaching is authoritarian, transactional, punitive, and, as Freire parsed it, “mechanical,” “focalistic,” “taming” and “lulling” with the teacher’s “high-sounding pretentiousness” (Freire, 1999, 69, 71, 118). Lockdown drills perpetuate a state of constant fear, surveillance, mistrust in spaces that are supposed to be safe for learning. Textbooks are censured and sanitized to sustain selective historical amnesia which serve the status quo. In socio-economically stigmatized and under-resourced neighborhoods, schools become tox-

ic incubators for routinized, ritualized violence (Paulle, 2013), and serve as a pipeline for the nation's prison industrial complex (Alexander, 2010).

In recent recapitulations, Giroux is more brutally direct: "Education has lost its moral, political, and spiritual bearings"; "ignorance" has become the rewarded virtue, and "experience no longer has time to crystallize into mature and informed thought" (Giroux, 2016). Dialogue over difficult issues impacting public life is too easily reduced to the spouting of opinions and misinformation. Two instances in the US illustrate the point. For one, authorities on infectious diseases lamented how state legislators endorsed disinformation regarding COVID-19, which impacted policies on school re-openings. In effect, they "injected a new infection" into the population, putting lives literally at risk (Giroux, 2021). For another, universities within states that have passed laws permitting authorized personnel to carry licensed concealed weapons now must have protocols for counseling professors on how to navigate "sensitive topics" within the curriculum, advising them to drop topics if necessary when "sensing anger" (Gubler, 2016).

Giroux calls out the disimagination machine for its stealth yet potent mis-educative power: it distorts the long arc of historical memory; it suffocates critical thinking, critical self-reflection, and critical conviction; it paralyzes difficult, dissenting, divergent dialogue; it chips away moral courage and social agency; it debilitates strategies of political resistance, thereby snuffing out possibilities for an educated hope (Giroux, 2014, 60, 83; Tran, 2017, 32). Under such conjuncture, we eerily remember the words of educational philosophers like Theodor Adorno, who warned of societal "relapse into [a] barbarism" that can produce such events as Auschwitz and the Holocaust (Adorno & Tiedemann, 2003); or Hannah Arendt's caution that totalitarianism is about the "production of thoughtlessness" (Giroux, 2016).

Considering these systemic conditions and insidious socio-political forces, the opposite of "hope" is not necessarily despair, pessimism, or even nihilism. Rather, educators might consider what psychology has suggested regarding a phenomenon called "learned helplessness"—a condition in which cognitive, emotional, and motivational reactions are reduced when one perceives that a situation is



existentially beyond one's control. Studies have been conducted in relation to environmental concern and workplace bullying. Researchers discovered that when individuals are confronted with traumatic events or ethical conundrums, the perception of "uncontrollability," or the conditioning of such perception, can result in the sense of "helplessness" (Maier & Tiedemann, 1976; Landry, Gifford, Milfont, Weeks, & Arnocky, 2018; Samnani, 2013). With psychosocial conditioning, subjects can come to believe that nothing they do would be of any consequence. Individuals might be concerned about the devastation of the environment, or they might have enormous empathy for those suffering in unjust situations around them; however, if they are led to believe that their actions would be of little consequence, or if they had experienced adverse consequence for attempts at intervention, then the likelihood is reduced that they would be willing to act.

More careful examination of learned helplessness might help Christian religious educators to avoid the moralizing attitudes toward presumed callousness, aimed at those who seem unmoved by social injustices. The systematic production of disimagination—in which public education and Christian religious education might be equally complicit—fosters a paralyzing inertia, a genuine psychological friction for those engulfed the death-dealing powers of necropolitics (Mbembe, 2019).

#### **IV. The Theopoetics and Theopolitics of Hope**

Theodor Adorno famously stated: "The premier demand upon all education is that Auschwitz not happen again. Its priority before any other requirement is such that I believe I need not and should not justify it" (Adorno & Tiedemann 2003; originally a radio-talk delivered by Adorno in 1966). These words are ominous, not only because of what is happening in Israel-Gaza, but because as educators after Adorno would admit, an education to ensure that such social "monstrosities" as the Shoah, or Holocaust, or the killing of innocent children baited by twisted religious fundamentalism would never occur again in any

modern society requires more than making sure that the events remain a selective topic in any annual teaching curriculum (Schweitzer, 2000). In other words, educating for hope amid pervasive cultural disimagination requires more than the mechanical content-based approach to curriculum planning, in which educators get to pick which topics of social concern we deem worthy of the time and space within our already-filled scope and sequence. We are teaching in a conjuncture in which both our public and Christian religious educational systems have become dispirited. Giroux (2016) calls it “despiritualized.” Yet, Christian religious educators are no strangers to eschatological hope. Perhaps we simply need to refresh ourselves on hope’s theopoetic and theopolitical potency.

First, a theopoetics of hope begins with the Freirean assumption that “critical hope” is “an ontological need” without which we lose our bearing (Freire, 1999, 8-9). Freire’s wise words are worth recalled at length:

Hope is something shared between teachers and students. The hope that we can learn together, teach together, be curiously impatient together, produce something together, and resist together the obstacles that prevent the flowering of our joy. In truth, from the point of view of the human condition, hope is an essential component and not an intruder. It would be a serious contradiction of what we are if, aware of our unfinishedness, we were not disposed to participate in a constant movement of search, which in its very nature is an expression of hope. ... Hope is an indispensable seasoning in our human, historical experience. Without it, instead of history we would have pure determinism. (Freire, 1998, 69)

For critical pedagogists in the tradition of Freire, Giroux, or bell hooks, hope as ontological seasoning marinades an active public, prophetic, and poetic imagination—for “what we cannot imagine we cannot bring into being” (Hooks, 2003, 195). For Freire, it is the capacity to “dream” of the “untested feasibility” of that which is not yet realized but is so compelling it propels us into action (Freire, 1999, 137, 206). This dreaming activity is sharp day-time vision (Morrison, 2019, 69), done fully in the public domain, in the company of those who recognize the “interdependence of humanity” (Giroux, 2021, 714). Citing Drucilla

Cornell and Stephen D. Seely, Giroux describes this “public imagination” as “a form of collective consciousness that is constructed around shared meanings, ethical horizons, [and] complex social relations” (700). Poignantly, it embraces the Freirean tensegrity of (coeur)rage and love—the capacity to be angry out of the capacity to love. Without said balance, according to Freire, “our struggle will be suicidal” or “sheer hand-to-hand, purely vindictive, combat” (Freire, 1999, 9-10). New Testament scholar Melanie Johnson-DeBaufre calls this a historical, literary, and theological trajectory of utopian social dreaming, in which such ideals as the “kin(g)dom of God” help to animate imagination for possible new worlds (Johnson-DeBaufre, 2015). It is an imagination that sees biophilic or life-loving possibilities rising from the ashes of death-dealing necropolitics. In *Reset the Heart*, I described it as “resurrectional consciousness” (Tran, 2017, 109-112)—the refusal to let death-dealing systems have the final word on the state of the world.

The theo-poetics of hope powers an imaginal resistance to what Freire called the “narration sickness” of repressive social policies and “banking” educational practices which render learners “lifeless and petrified” (Freire, 1997, 52, 113). To educate toward critical hope is to activate public, prophetic, poetic imagination in learners, so that they no longer see themselves as “docile, passive” or helpless, but rather have within themselves the capacity to see reality in expanded “totality” rather than in “partialities” portioned by the teacher. It is the beginning of conscientization. This public, prophetic, poetic imagination is the ability to “read the world” differently upon realization that one is not an object being acted upon, but rather a “cognizing subject” who has within their everyday toolkit the practical wisdom and historical agency to intervene in social, cultural, political forces to improve the present situation (Freire, 1999, 42, 46, 69, 71).

Second, Freire was quick to point out that ontological hope “demands an anchoring in practice” (Freire, 1999, 9). Hope not put to practice is the state of “immobilism.” Here lies the requisite theopolitics of hope for an education that is understood as “moral and political practice” (Giroux, 2021, 714). In this vision, to invoke the words of Catholic scholar Mary C. Boys, CRE is about facil-

itating processes through which people can “realize the world is in need of repair,” “believe that something can be done to repair it,” and “form a community of persons who sustain each other in the work of repairing” (Boys, 1990, 349-59). Freire said that one of the tasks of the “progressive educator” is to “unveil opportunities for hope” (Freire, 1999, 9) through the exercise of astute political analysis. This orientation to a theopolitics of hope echoes the constructive turn of practical theologian James Poling, who grounded his theological vision in an understanding of Jesus as resister of systemic evil, through practices of intentional self-alienation, direct yet nonviolent confrontation, and nonalignment with status quo (Poling, 2011, 104-111).

This takes me to the work advanced by Stephen Brookfield and Stephen Holst (2011) in their book, *Radicalizing Learning: Adult Education for a Just World*. “Radicalized learning” is galvanized by a commitment “to create a democratic, cooperative, socialist society” (107). The commitment is socialist (specifically, anticapitalist) in that it challenges the cultural operations and economic policies which restrict learning toward the enforcement of inequitable social realities. Radical teaching is not abstractly theoretical but is “situated within and informed by particular struggles”; it exposes hegemonic powers; it facilitates participatory, collaborative learning and action; it supports structures and practices which advance “a truly democratic future” for a just and equitable society (109, 118-127). Radical teaching recognizes that practices of hope in teaching-learning settings are a rehearsal for the practices of hope exercised in public life.

Altogether, the theo-poetics and theopolitics of hope-filled education (and CRE) require a curricular overhaul in the way the late religious educator Maria Harris had prescribed long ago: curriculum not as the content which we inculcate others with, but curriculum as the entire life course of the faith community, as it nurtures distinctive identity and belonging through the stories and practices of the faith tradition, and as it reaches outward to build coalitions across difference for the sake of the common, public good (Harris, 1989; see also Seymour, 2003). In this comprehensive life-wide and life-deep curriculum, hope is not a topic of the day; rather, hope runs through the life course of the learning

community, serving as its ontological bearing, the organizing principle for its norms, values, rules, habits, and operations.

#### Small Acts of Enchanting Hope in the Undercommons

Hope is an action verb springing from an unrelenting grip on existence-possibilities even when none seems apparent. An important corollary to this is that acts of hope need not be grand or grandiose to be effective ontological bearings for individuals and communities engaged in theopoetic and theopolitical action to bring the impossible within reach. In this regard, I am compelled by the power of the ordinary—what Jewish philosopher Peter Ochs described as “small actions,” or attempts to “act in the fashion of human beings...who did not lose their integrity as human beings” in the face of violence (Ochs, 2002, 290-91). They are ordinary acts in extraordinary times—“saying no here, protesting there, enduring here, organizing there”—but they are actions “guided by a norm or an ethic” that has not succumbed to “the demoralizing weight of terror” (291). They are the small acts that yield power—and educator Gabe Moran reminds us that “power” means “possibility” (Moran, 2011, 49)—small acts that bolster possibility for resurrectional hope.

## V. Conclusion

Where do we look for examples of these small acts of theopoetic and theopolitical hope? I would say, we look at the “undercommons,” what Carol Azumah Dennis describes as “a space of self-organisation developed by the despised, the discounted, the dispossessed and the unbelonging” (2018, 196). The undercommons is not unlike the concept of “political society” or *minjian* proffered by Taiwanese cultural theorist Kuan-Hsing Chen (2010)—spaces of popular democratic action by subaltern groups. It is from these indeterminate, fluid, ever-shifting spaces of “negotiation and struggle” (Chen, 2010, 236) from which mobilizing action can spring. The undercommons defies the organized prestige of dominant institutions within civil society—including the academy and the church, which sometimes can be part of the cultural apparatuses producing

narration sickness. In the words of Carol Azumah Dennis (2018): “The diasporan wishing to decolonize education does not assert a fixed identity or space, she instead participates in an epistemic project that develops in exodus, in the maroons, the hidden crevices and alcoves of the university, in its constantly moving, shape-shifting spaces” (196). One wonders what the undercommons might be for Christian religious education—as a sometimes-overlooked subdiscipline of study within the curricula of theological study; a beleaguered ministry undertaken by the church seeking more effective formation of persons within specific faith traditions; and as a praxis of those convinced by the importance of religious knowing and religious learning for plural yet polarizing public life.

One example of action springing from the undercommons, about which I have written—an example which changed my own ontological bearing—comes from a public action undertaken by a multifaith, inter-racial/inter-ethnic group of clergy and laity on October 13, 2014, on the streets of Ferguson, Missouri. It was an action nested in the movement of “Moral Mondays” in the United States, which originated in the state of North Carolina through the leadership of progressive civic leaders to raise public consciousness regarding historic injuries and injustices (Shimron, 2013). This event was held on October 13, 2014, the culminating event for a “Weekend of Resistance” in a series of “Ferguson October” actions held in protest to the pervasive violence against young black lives in the US (Sidner, 2014; St. Louis Post-Dispatch, 2014). For Ferguson’s Moral Monday, faith leaders across the religious spectrum took to the streets of Ferguson to express public solidarity with the local activism of the entire weekend. The result was a peaceful march from a local United Methodist church to the Ferguson Police Department, where the group of several hundred laypeople and clergy enacted a public liturgy of remembrance, lament, and repentance.

I have recounted this incident numerous times—as case study, as sermon illustration, as object lesson on CRE for social transformation. For four hours and thirty minutes—plus many more hours before and after—the protesters in Ferguson on that Moral Monday endured body-numbing torrential rain to enact multifaith leitourgia. Religious educator Thomas Groome reminded us that liturgy is pedagogy, and at root it is the “public work of the people” (Groome,

2011, 166). They may have located themselves at different ends of religious and ideological spectrums, but the individuals who joined that space of the undercommons on that day used their bodies as public witness against the unjust application of law. To invoke the language of Mary Elizabeth Moore (2004), these bodies became implements of “sacramental teaching”—bodies that “mediated the Holy” for a wide-eyed public, bodies enraptured in a state of hope that justice would be timely delivered.

We can detect two instructive aspects of the public liturgy of the Ferguson protestors on that Moral Monday (Tran, 2017, 16-17). First, their witnessing bodies served as formidable poetic devices for a public in need of mnemonic aids for collective remembering and collective conscientization. More than the words recited in their public lament, the bodies in rhythmic motion with arms locked, bodies on the ground, on the streets, on their knees, on their feet “urge[d], prod[ded], dare[d], and encourage[d]” the public to resist participation in organized forgetting: to not forget the historic injuries suffered by enslaved peoples, the insidious systemic disparities that privilege some and diminish the livelihood of others, or the complex societal technologies that manipulate fear and insecurity for young racialized lives. Second, the protesting bodies presented an enchanting mimetic opportunity for those watching. When the leader-full teaching bodies of Ferguson marched out into the streets, they activated mimetic reenactment elsewhere in greater St. Louis, the country, and the global community. I have described it as mimetic ecstasy (Tran, 2017, 140)—a mimesis of ecstatic re-enchantment, as bodies spilled into the streets to re-sacralize defiled grounds and re-consecrate degraded spirits.

“‘Ecstasy’ means ‘standing outside of oneself—without ceasing to be oneself—with all the elements which are united in the personal center’” (Tillich, 1957, 7). Countering the friction of inertia, the bodies of the individuals standing as multiracial, multiethnic, multigenerational, and multifaith allies pulled one another beyond themselves and toward ontological hope. And if “magic” is defined as “a direct manipulation of forces,” then it was magic through simple mimetic action of those persons of faith who desired to awaken their community from “a world disenchanting and losing magical significance” (Wexler, 2007,

51-52). This magical power to elevate us to such ecstatic state can be found in what is called “good mimesis.” Based on the theoretic framework of Rene Girard, and constructed for educational settings punctuated with violent conflict, the concept of “good mimesis” has been offered to describe the ways in which communities of diverse contrast cultures can model for each other alternative versions of freedom (Wilson, 2015). It is this positive mimesis and ecstatic re-enchantment which yield the possibility of mimetic ecstasy—“the capacity for persons in nurturing communities to look at each other and model themselves after the hope-filled actions that awaken one another to the vitality and sacredness of their life together” (Tran, 2017, 143). As I explicated in *Reset the Heart*, shared here in the language of re-spirited theopoetics and theopolitics:

After all, in protest actions, no one acts alone. It takes the linking of arms, the kinetic energy shared between bodies pressed tightly against one another in shared responsibility, the calling out of suffering through the language of grief and anger, the invocation to ancestors of suffering and hope, the petitions to the Spirit of a living God. Standing in the thick of such forms of theopoetic and theopolitical leitourgia, an individual may find herself [re-spirited with a hope that] ... the arc of the universe always bends toward justice and restoration. (143-144)

The public liturgy of that Moral Monday is an example of individual small acts of “good mimesis” which, when combined in magical force, activated if not agitated public conscience. No single individual needed to become a social revolutionary with grand acts of radical change; but together, they personified active hope against unjust social orders, merging momentum with the spirited hope of movements in prior years around the world against repressive regimes. Rather than succumbing to the inertia of learned helplessness, the individuals’ actions brought into public consciousness the gritty realities of an underside of a city that was heretofore “disremembered” in public disimagination (Moore, 2004). In doing so, they revealed the regenerative power of the streets, a literal and



figurative undercommons of dominant spaces in civil society.

Perhaps the tall order of hope for a relevant Christian religious education for our vital political society can be summed up in simple words: to sustain a life-long, life-wide, and life-deep curriculum of enchanting one another towards responsible participation in a world that is in desperate need of repair. We practice this hope not in the safe confines of our inward-facing community, but in the crux of our public life together; and, perhaps more radically, in the undercommons of civil society, out of the Christian conviction that it is where the hope of the resurrected Christ is found (Moltmann, 1975).

## References

- Adorno, T. W., & Tiedemann, R. (2003). *Can one live after Auschwitz?: A philosophical reader*. Stanford University Press.
- Al-Karim Samnani, A-K. (2013). 'Is this bullying?' Understanding target and witness reactions. In *Journal of Managerial Psychology* 28(3), 290-305. <https://doi.org/10.1108/02683941311321196>.
- Alexander, M. (2020). *The New Jim Crow: Mass incarceration in the age of colorblindness* (Tenth anniversary edition.). The New Press.
- Bowman, E. (2023, October 16). The fatal stabbing of a Palestinian American boy is being investigated as hate crime. *National Public Radio*. <https://www.npr.org/2023/10/15/1206046190/boy-killed-anti-muslim-attack-illinois>.
- Boys, M. C. (1989). *Education for citizenship and discipleship*.
- Boys, M.C. (1990). The tradition as teacher: Repairing the world. *Religious Education*, 85(3), 346-355. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0034408900850303>
- Brookfield, Stephen., & Holst, J. D. (2011). *Radicalizing learning: Adult education for a just world* (1<sup>st</sup> ed.). Jossey-Bass.
- Chen, K.-Hsing. (2010). *Asia as method: Toward deimperialization*. Duke University Press.
- Dennis, C. A. (2018). Decolonising education: A pedagogic intervention. In K. Nişancıoğlu, G. K. Bhambra, & Gebrail, D. (Eds.), *Decolonising the University* (pp. 190-207). Pluto Press.
- Foster, C. R. (1994). *Educating congregations: The future of Christian education*. Abingdon Press.
- Freire, P. (1997). *Pedagogy of the oppressed* (New rev. 20th-Anniversary ed.). Continuum.
- Freire, P. (1998). *Pedagogy of freedom: Ethics, democracy, and civic courage*. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.
- Freire, P., Freire, A. M. A., & Freire, P. (1999). *Pedagogy of hope: Reliving Pedagogy of the oppressed*. Continuum.
- French, D. (2023, October 22). The worst scandal in American higher education isn't in the ivy league. *New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/10/22/opinion/liberty-university-scandal-education.html>.
- Giroux, H. A. (2014). *The violence of organized forgetting: Thinking beyond America's disimagination machine*. City Lights Books.
- Giroux, H.A. (2016). Defending Educators in an Age of Neoliberal Tyranny. In *Tikkun* 31(4), pp. 46-49). The Institute for Labor and Mental Health. <https://doi.org/10.1215/08879982-3676888>
- Giroux, H.A. (2021). The public imagination and the dictatorship of ignorance. *Social Identities* 27(6), 698-717. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13504630.2021.1931089>.

- Goldstein, D. (2023, October 25). Publisher scholastic backtracks on isolating works on race and gender. *New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/10/25/us/scholastic-book-fair-race-gender.html>.
- Greene, M. (1999). Releasing the imagination. *NJ: Drama Australia Journal*, 23(2), 9–17.
- Groome, T. H. (2011). *Will there be faith: A new vision for educating and growing disciples* (1st ed.). HarperOne.
- Grose, J. (2023, October 2). The great American teacher crisis. *New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/10/02/opinion/the-great-american-teacher-crisis.html>.
- Gubler, S. (2016, April 11). Philosophizing with guns. *New York Times*: <https://archive.nytimes.com/opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2016/04/11/philosophizing-with-guns/>.
- Harney, S., & Moten, F. (2013). *The undercommons: Fugitive planning & black study*. Minor Compositions.
- Harris, Maria. (1989). *Fashion me a people: Curriculum in the church* (1st ed.). Westminster/John Knox Press.
- hooks, bell. (2003). *Teaching community: A pedagogy of hope*. Routledge.
- John A. Coleman, S. (1989). The two pedagogies: Discipleship and citizenship. In M. Boys, *Education for citizenship and discipleship* (pp. 35-75). New York: Pilgrim Press.
- Johnson-DeBaufre, M. (2015). Dreaming the common good/s: The kingdom of God as a space of utopian politics. In M. Johnson-DeBaufre, C. Keller, E. Ortega-Aponte (Eds.), *Common goods: Economy, ecology, and political theology* (1<sup>st</sup> ed., pp. 103-123). Fordham University Press.
- Landry, N., Gifford, R., Milfont, T.L., Weeks, A., & Arnocky, S. (2018). Learned helplessness moderates the relationship between environmental concern and behavior. In *Journal of Environmental Psychology* 55: 18–22. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jenvp.2017.12.003>.
- Lee, Y. (2019). A critical dialogue with 'Asia as method': A response from Korean education. *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, 51(9), 958–969. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00131857.2018.1427579>
- Mbembe, A. (2019). *Necropolitics*. Duke University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1215/9781478007227>
- Moltmann, J. (1975). *The experiment hope*. Fortress Press.
- Moore, M. E. (2004). *Teaching as a sacramental act*. Pilgrim Press.
- Moran, Gabriel. (2011). *Living nonviolently: Language for resisting violence*. Lexington Books.
- Morrison, T. (2019). *The source of self-regard: Selected essays, speeches, and meditations*. Alfred A. Knopf, a division of Penguin Random House LLC.
- Moten, F., & Harney, S. (2004). The university and the undercommons. *Social Text*, 22(2), 101–115. [https://doi.org/10.1215/01642472-22-2\\_79-101](https://doi.org/10.1215/01642472-22-2_79-101)
- Ochs, P. (2002). Small actions against terror: Jewish reflections on a Christian witness. In V. L. Erickson & M. L.

- Jones (Eds.), *Surviving terror: Hope and justice in a world of violence*. Brazos Press.
- Paulle, B. (2013). *Toxic schools: High-poverty education in New York and Amsterdam*. The University of Chicago Press.
- Pettit, E. (2023, October 30). How a heated Q&A on Israel and Hamas led to a department chair's resignation. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. [https://www.chronicle.com/article/how-a-fiery-q-a-on-israel-and-hamas-led-to-a-department-chairs-resignation?utm\\_source=Iterable&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_campaign=campaign\\_8160433\\_nl\\_Academe-Today\\_date\\_20231031&cid=at](https://www.chronicle.com/article/how-a-fiery-q-a-on-israel-and-hamas-led-to-a-department-chairs-resignation?utm_source=Iterable&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=campaign_8160433_nl_Academe-Today_date_20231031&cid=at)
- Poling, J. N. (James N. (2011). *Rethinking faith: A constructive practical theology*. Fortress Press.
- Putnam, R. D., & Campbell, D. E. (2010). *American grace: How religion divides and unites us* (1st Simon & Schuster hardcover ed.). Simon & Schuster.
- Schweitzer, F. (2000). "Education after Auschwitz"--perspectives from Germany. *Religious Education*, 95(4), 359-72.
- Seymour, J. L. (2003). Holding onto hope: Addressing theological conflict through Christian religious education. *Religious Education*, 98(3), 348-364. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00344080390217522>
- Seymour, J. L. (2013). Editorial: "Public Dimensions of Religious Education." *Religious Education*, 108(2), 109-110. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00344087.2013.767627>
- Seymour, J. L. (1997). *Mapping Christian education: Approaches to congregational learning*. Abingdon Press.
- Shimron, Y. (2013, June 24). NAACP's William Barber emerges as leader of Moral Monday protests. *Religion News Service*. [www.religionnews.com/2013/06/24/naacps-william-barber-emerges-as-leader-of-moral-monday-protests/](http://www.religionnews.com/2013/06/24/naacps-william-barber-emerges-as-leader-of-moral-monday-protests/).
- Sidner, S. (2014, October 13). Activist Cornel West among 49 people arrested at Ferguson protests. *CNN*. [www.cnn.com/2014/10/13/us/ferguson-protests/](http://www.cnn.com/2014/10/13/us/ferguson-protests/).
- St. Louis Post-Dispatch. (2014, October 13). More than 50 arrested at Ferguson police station on 'Moral Monday,' other events elsewhere. [www.stltoday.com/news/local/crime-and-courts/more-than-arrested-at-ferguson-police-station-on-moral-monday/article\\_c1752132-9731-542e-8525-1885fae7fd10.html](http://www.stltoday.com/news/local/crime-and-courts/more-than-arrested-at-ferguson-police-station-on-moral-monday/article_c1752132-9731-542e-8525-1885fae7fd10.html).
- Steven F. Maier, S.F. & Seligman, M.E. (1976). Learned helplessness: Theory and evidence. In *Journal of Experimental Psychology*, General 105(1), 3-46. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0096-3445.105.1.3>.
- Tillich, P. (2009). *Dynamics of faith* (1st HarperOne pbk. ed). HarperOne.
- Tran, M.-A. L. (2017). *Reset the heart: Unlearning violence, relearning hope*. Abingdon Press.
- Walton, H. (2011). Poetics. In *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Practical Theology* (pp. 173-182). Wiley-Blackwell. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781444345742>.
- Wexler, P. (2007). Religion as socio-educational critique: A Weberian example. In P. McLaren, P. & J. L. Kinchel

oe (Eds.), *Critical pedagogy: Where are we now?* (pp. 43-56). Peter Lang.

Wilson, D. (2015). Communities of contrast: Modeling reconciliation in Northern Ireland. In P. Antonello & P. Gifford (Eds.), *Can we survive our origins?: Readings in René Girard's theory of violence and the sacred*. Michigan State University Press.

Wimberly, A. E. S. (2003). Daring to lead with hope: Association of professors and researchers in religious education presidential address, November 3, 2002. *Religious Education*, 98(3), 277-296. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00344080390176393>