Between the Seminary, the Sanctuary and the Streets: Reflections on Alternative Theological Education

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This brief reflection proceeds from the conviction that the goal of theological education in the North American context today should be to equip everyday disciples to overcome their sense of disempowerment and denial in order to engage in the evangelical works of mercy and service, advocacy and resistance, community building and social reconstruction. As such, theological study represents a form of leadership development, but only secondarily. Its primary purpose should be *populist*, that is, to nurture widely a more critical and grounded Christian literacy in Word and world in order to build capacity for the community of faith in its mission and witness.

I. Problems. The above clearly does *not* describe the thrust of contemporary tertiary theological education in the First World. Broadly speaking one can point to at least three major aspects that are problematic from a populist perspective.

- *How theology is studied:* Three decades after Paulo Freire introduced the perspectives of popular education, the pedagogical practices that prevail in North American seminaries still tend to breed dependence rather than empowerment, privilege content over process and nurture intellectualizing rather than praxis.
- *Where theology is studied:* The social location of most seminaries make them accessible only to educated, middle class persons and remote from the life of the poor, as well as insulated from social movements.
- *What theology is studied:* Most seminary curricula fail to address the whole range of practical skills needed for contemporary ministry: one can learn preaching, pastoring and theology, for example, but not community organizing, social analysis, electronic communications skills or nonprofit administration.

Most troubling, however, yet rarely addressed, is the pervasive *ideology of professionalism* that characterizes institutional theological education.

In a landmark 1977 study entitled The Rise of Professionalism, sociologist Magali Sarfatti Larson of Temple University wrote:

> Because marketable expertise is a crucial element in the structure of modern inequality, professionalization appears also as a collective assertion of special social status and as a collective process of upward mobility… (Its) “backbone” is the occupational hierarchy, that is, a differential system of competences and rewards; the central principle of legitimacy is founded on the achievement of socially recognized expertise, or, more simply, on a system of education and credentialing (pp xvi-xvii).

The production of knowledge has become a “standardized commodity” in the modern university, steadily displacing the older ethos of apprenticeships and guilds with that of credentialing monopolies. Larson identifies the three main components of the ideology of professionalism as individualism, elitism and a psychology of entitlement. Thus “education is now the main legitimator of social inequality in industrial capitalism.”

This drift has only intensified over the last decade because of the way North American tertiary educational institutions have been impacted by neoliberal economic and political forces. It is not too much to speak of “structural adjustment” in the political economy of higher education, seen in such trends as:

- *privatization* (e.g. increasing university/seminary dependence upon corporate financing for endowments, infrastructure and research grants);
- *debt* (the skyrocketing costs of undergraduate and graduate school drives students to get through school and into the job market as quickly as possible to begin repaying their debt burden, a pressure that erodes incentive for creative or “non-practical” inquiry, activism, service or other commitments that may not have direct “market” value); and
- *competition* (the meritocratic struggle for resources and/or professional prestige pits students, departments and institutions against each other, undermining collaborative learning, research or writing).

University culture is thus moving further away from traditional liberal notions of a community of critical scholarship and toward an economic rationalism that sees the institution as a degree factory for the managerial, technocratic and academic classes.

Because of the close relationship between the evolution of the university and theological academies, ministers and theology professors have historically been virtual charter members of this elite class of “knowledge professionals.” Today the goal of most seminaries is, more than ever, the professional credentialing for parish ministry and/or for academic teaching. The forces of elitism and structural adjustment have thus taken seminary culture steadily further away from the life of the church. Indeed, there is a conflict between the values of economic rationalism and those of the community of faith that (at least ideally) promotes the communal over the private, the economics of gift and grace over that of debt and merit, and the practices of cooperation and consosociation over those of competition and individualism.

Nevertheless, seminaries (driven in part by the standards- and credentialing-management of the Association of Theological Schools) continue to move *away* from their traditional accountability to the church, and *toward* the professionalist standards of the secular university. This means that the gulf between seminaries and the life of the church (including local congregations, practical ministry and public advocacy) is deepening dramatically.

There are exceptions, of course, such as the Seminary Consortium for Urban Pastoral Education in Chicago, the Ecumenical Theological Seminary in Detroit, Memphis Theological Seminary or the Maryknoll School of Theology. There are also grass roots, non-accredited initiatives such as the Servant Leadership Schools (based in Washington, DC), the Alternative Seminary in Philadelphia, or the Jubilee Institute of

Greensboro. And there are educational exposure programs such as Witness for Peace, Borderlinks in Tucson or Journey into Freedom of Portland. But these exceptions only prove the rule. The worlds of the seminary, the sanctuary and the streets generally spin in very different orbits, with little engaged conversation between them—much less mutual accountability.

This insulation wreaks havoc in all directions. Professional theological and biblical scholars tend to ignore the demands of practice, and feel increasingly less obligated to interpret their work to lay Christians. Their students feel the pressure to get their degrees so they can get a job so they can begin paying off student loans, and usually receive little incentive to engage in "practical" diversions such as service among the poor or engagement in social movements. Meanwhile, faith-based activists who carry out the works of mercy and justice are themselves notorious for neglecting the disciplines of critical reflection—theological and political—on why and how they are trying to change the world. They are too tired, the needs are too overwhelming, the resources are too thin. And people in the pews—as well as their clerical and denominational leadership— too often ignore both the insights of academics and the challenges of activists, settling instead for the insular confines of religious entertainment.

All three spheres are profoundly impoverished by their isolation from each other, and the church as a whole is paralyzed. Key to the struggle to renew the church today, then, is the task of re-integrating the competences of these three alienated worlds of Christian witness. I believe the key is to return theological reflection to an organic, not a specialized, vocation. Specifically, its focus should not be credentialing, but community formation, conscientization and capacity building, in order to rehabilitate the church as a faith based movement of personal and social transformation.

II. Alternatives. In a consultation on this question recently held in Detroit, participants identified four main streams that have influenced the struggle for alternative theological education in North America over the last half-century:

1. the "freedom School" tradition of the black church, especially as it developed during the civil rights movement;
2. the "underground seminary" experiments of the anti-war and radical discipleship movements, which drew consciously upon the "confessing church" tradition in Nazi Germany;
3. the feminist pedagogies of the womens' movement and struggles for inclusion among sexual minorities;
4. the base community movements and liberation theology, particularly in the Latin American tradition.

These strands have profoundly influenced all of us who today are trying to form approaches that integrate biblical literacy, social analysis, and political organizing.

The problem is that those who have chosen populist over seminary-based theological pedagogy have had to figure out how to operate with little or no institutional support (this has prompted my colleague Bill Wylie Kellermann to refer to us wryly as the "lumpen profesoriat"). We are too practical for the seminaries, too political for the churches and too evangelical for most activist organizations. So we itinerate, facilitating workshops, seminars, conferences, and retreats that become excuses to invoke a sort of "floating alternative seminary." We employ a pedagogy of popular education, in which participants sing and pray; critically reflect on issues from the perspective of their different contexts and traditions and histories; and re-read the scriptures in order to embody them in the world. We collaborate with musicians, performance artists, body workers, and liturgists, and use different media in order to offer a range of voices and approaches. In this work, worship, analysis and practice meet again and embrace.

This style of education is necessarily a form of *organizing*. Our dream is to help rekindle and "consociate" faith-based movements for social change here and abroad. We try to help groups network, sometimes in the same town, sometimes across the country, forging ongoing relationships with diverse local communities. Not only is our approach fundamentally ecumenical, but also reaches and across race, class and gender lines. We work with local communities and parishes; with faith-based activist groups such as Pax Christi, Witness for Peace, and Jubilee 2000; and with denominational leadership. Like the freedom schools, the sole purpose of this educational work is to build capacity for the "movement," whether that is expressed in anti-globalization protests, direct action for disarmament, or immigrant's rights work at the borders. We exhort our colleagues to embrace the central spiritual and political discipline of movement-building: we must become more, not less, than the sum of our parts. To do that we must reach out to one another and find the connections between our work. And we must take care of each other.

It is also a kind of *evangelism*. The prophets, Jesus and Paul all believed that the Word of God must always first be directed toward the household of faith. Sadly, the task of evangelism has been abandoned by liberals and trivialized by conservatives. Too many Christian institutions (Protestant and Catholic alike) are inhospitable to the gospel's invitation to the cross, to solidarity with the least, and to Jubilee justice. Instead, they tend to mirror the dominant culture's captivity to the public pathologies of "affluenza," white privilege and privatized consciousness. Nevertheless, we have seen repeatedly the power of biblical story to animate the church. Whether studying scripture with lively elderly nuns or confused Congregational youth, with disillusioned Presbyterian parishioners or weary Baptist urban ministers, we work hard to bring the sacred story to life. We examine contemporary cultural discourses critically and the ancient texts contextually, and find resonance through analogy and symbol and a constant analysis of power. And as we encounter the powerful intersection between Word and world, hearts rise to the vision, faith and social imagination are re-ignited, and lives are turned toward the tasks of liberation and peacemaking.

And this kind of theological education is *pastoral***.** If evangelism afflicts the comfortable, the other side of our work is to comfort the afflicted—those already in the struggle *for* compassion and *against* marginalization. These are the folk who staff soup kitchens, social service agencies or lobbying groups; who minister in prisons or go to prison for acts of conscience; who serve the homeless, offer hospice or do community organizing. For them these are discouraging times indeed, as our casino economy transfixes public gaze on the elite while rendering the poor increasingly invisible. Christians and others in the trenches are weary; our groups are disconnected; hope is fragile. So we spend an enormous amount of our energy out on the road listening, encouraging, commiserating and extending solidarity to those who are doing justice and peace work, in season and out. We try to pay special attention to the task of mentoring questing youth, who represent the next generation and who see so much we do not.

The radical democratizing of theological education does not obviate the need for leaders, facilitators and animators. An animator's role is different, however, from that of professional intellectuals whose work is primarily addressed to other specialist colleagues in the free market of commodified knowledge that is privately produced, distributed and consumed. A facilitator's task is to:

1. *critically reflect back* to the movement what is happening within and around it, helping assess who and where it is in the historical moment;
2. help *interpret* current events, trends and signs of hope;
3. *translate* some of the crucial concepts and fresh perspectives being generated in different academic disciplines into a more accessible form;
4. help forge a *creative theological synthesis* that weaves together political, socioeconomic, biblical, liturgical and experiential perspectives; and above all,
5. *elicit* the voices of and empower the practices of all in the movement.

What must always be kept in mind is that knowledge is nothing more or less than a form of power. As in the case of wealth or political access, the struggle is to distribute it widely rather than allow it to concentrate in the hands of a few.

"The most apostolic duty of all," my friends at Jonah House taught me, "is to keep one another's courage up." Perhaps this best describes the vocation of a theological popular educator. It is hard work, but when I get discouraged I remind myself of the example of the old civil rights organizers in the mid-20th century. They traveled widely and toiled tirelessly in small towns and little churches and freedom schools, naming the sins of racism, training regular folk in the disciplines of nonviolent resistance, and above all, exhorting folk to "keep their eyes on the prize." None of them could have anticipated that their unheralded efforts at mobilization would build into the most significant social movement our country has ever seen. But like the farmer in Jesus' seed parable, they faithfully prepared the soil, believed in the mystery of grace, and worked toward the harvest of justice that would surely come (Mk 4:26-29).

An experiment in alternative theological education —
bridging the gulf between the seminary,
the sanctuary,
. . . and the street.

***Note**: A similar article from The Clergy Journal (Sept, 2002) that describes the inception of the "Word and World People's School" as an experiment in the ideas expressed above is available at: www.wordandworld.org/articles.shtml.*