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How Do We Educate and for What? Reflections on U.S. Graduate Theological Education

The question put before us for discussion at this point in our Colloquium on Theological Education here in Cuba is "How and why do we educate?" This is no small question, for it compels us to look at what we are doing as educators, and to ask if our methods of theological education are consistent with the substance of our teaching and with our concerns for liberation education in global community.¹

Let me begin by situating our discussion around three small words in the question I was asked to discuss: *we*, *how*, and *why*. For we need to look at our context as U.S. participants in this *encuentro*, as well as how and why our institutions seem to be educationg.² After looking at the way liberation theologies shift the method and purpose of our educational praxis, I want to turn to a discussion of education as exodus and how we can be at work on this important task of doing liberation/feminist theology together with others.

The Context of U.S. Theological Education

In beginning to look at the context of those of us from the U.S. we must first of all be aware that most of us teach in graduate schools which could be characterized as white, male dominated, liberal theological institutions. These institutions are generally part of what is called "malestream theology" in a recent book on theological education entitled,

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² In Cuba, the term *encuentro* is preferred to *dialogue* in order to stress encounter through action and not simply words. Cf. Alice L. Hageman and Paul Deats, "Marxist-Christian *Encuentro* in Cuba," in *Three Worlds of Christian-Marxist Encounter*, eds. Nicholas Piediscalzi and Robert C. Thobaben (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985).

God's Fierce Whimsy, to which both Beverly Harrison and Carter Heywood contributed.³ John Diamond teaches at The Interdenominational Theological Center and finds his context with the Black Church and Alice Hageman practices theological education through advocacy law and pastoral work, but the rest of us are located within white, middle-class, seminaries with Protestant backgrounds. We earn our living by keeping those institutions alive, while at the same time we seek to subvert and renew them. As Richard Snyder has put it in an article on "Theological Education in Caesar's Household,"

Being involved in theological education in the U.S. today is like being in Caesar's household. The dominant product of our labors appears to be more in service to the controlling values, mores and purposes of our society than in service to the gospel. Like those Christians in Rome, it is not that we are uninformed by the gospel, nor that we intend to serve mammon rather than God, but that we are caught in an untenable situation that often subtly and unwittingly turns what we do into the service of a master other than the One we proclaim to serve.⁴

The "how" of this malestream system of education is well known to us all. As Paulo Freire has put it, western educational systems tend to follow the "banking system," a form of academic capitalism that seeks knowledge and professional credentials and inculcates a two-class system of professional and laity.⁵ The focus of learning is on the individual student who competes to succeed according to the rules of the academic and/or church establishment. Seminary education seems to be an inadequate preparation either for congregations or for what Pablo Oden Marichal emphasized here yesterday as service to the people. The patriarchal dualisms we experience in our systems of theological education have divided church and academy, and have led to exaltation of the ideas about the church and to devaluing of the actual church and the preparation for ministry in actual congregations. Marjorie Suchocki has pointed out that this is similar to the sexist dichotomies between intellect and body that allow such things as the exaltation of Mary and the denigration of ordinary women.⁶

Why theological education appears to function in this way is a difficult question to answer. These liberal theological establishments, described by Beverly Harrison and Carter Heyward in their papers, appear to

³ The Mud Flower Collective, *God's Fierce Whimsy: Christian Feminism and Theological Education* (New York: The Pilgrim Press, 1985).

⁴ Richard Snyder, "Theological Education and Caesar's Household," *Witness* 62 (October 1979): 4.

⁵ Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1970), 57-74.

⁶ Cf. Majorie Suchocki, "Friends in the Family: Theology, Church and Theological Education." Unpublished paper presented at the Consultation on Theological Education, Emory University, Atlanta, Georgia, June 3-5, 1985.

serve the interests of the white, middle class society, as well as patriarchal social patterns that are part of the status quo of U.S. society. At the same time these establishments are having financial, theological and educational difficulties keeping this old model alive.⁷ New models are needed, and one of these is the praxis model of theological education on behalf of the oppressed. So I would like to turn now from this litany of problems, to look at method and purpose in liberation theological education.

Those of us from the U.S. at this *encuentro* are committed in one way or another to work against the banking system of education and to work for alternative forms of liberating theological education. In so far as we are marginalized by our race, sex, class or by solidarity with oppressed groups, the questions become: how and whether we can find a political/educational base for the change needed in white, male, liberal theological establishments. Fortunately, I was not asked to answer that question, for I could probably go no further than Beverly Harrison in pointing to the importance of network building and the development of a base for alternative theological education.

In the brief span of this paper I still want to pay particular attention to the "how" and "why" of such an alternative as it is being practiced among liberation/feminist theologians today in the U.S. The "how" has also long been symbolized by Freire in the phrase, "problem posing education." This is a praxis education in which action and learning are taking place concurrently in the continuing spiral of theological/social/political/economic conscientization described by Dora Valentin in her paper at our *encuentro*. This takes the form of "academic socialism" that seeks to share information and learning together. The focus is on how learning can take place in ways that are cooperative, that encourage critical thinking, and that are rooted in a commitment to those at the bottom of society. In most cases (including our own) this learning process is remedial. For we face the same problems highlighted by Odén Marichal: dualism, old values, hierarchy, misunderstanding of the Bible, and so on. The purpose is not just to serve the academic or ecclesial establishment in a system of meritocracy that benefits those who are shaped as professional clones of the system. Rather, the purpose is to serve the people and to work for justice for all people. One way I try to make this clear is by saying that theological education takes place, not just in communities of faith, but also in communities of struggle. Many bearers of the gospel message are found in communities of struggle, those "putting their bodies on the line" as their spiritual worship in concrete struggles against oppression (Romans 12:1).

⁷ The Mud Flower Collective, *God's Fierce Whimsy*, 32.

This is a crucial task, for as the writers of *God's Fierce Whimsy* have said,

. . . theological education is, in some fundamental ways, a bad experience for women and men of all colors and cultures who seek primarily to know and love a God of justice.⁸

I want to initiate a response to this challenge by indicating a philosophy of education that corresponds to the fundamental methods and commitments of liberation theologies.

Education as Exodus

Education as exodus. My understanding of liberation theological education draws me toward the metaphor of *exodus* and the rich imagery of oppression, slavery, flesh pots, pyramids, struggle, celebration and pilgrimage that it evokes for us. I prefer this to the concept of *educare* which often refers to the education of children. *Educare* is understood to mean "leading out," and can also be seen as a journey. But education as a praxis of liberation is not just leading others out. It is going out together as part of God's freedom movement. In this sense, liberation education is *exodus*.⁹

From this point of view there is much that liberation theology and education have in common. The false dualism of teaching a subject and then expecting educational experts to tell us how to "market the product" is gone. Instead, the struggle for Christians of all walks of life is to participate in God's freedom movement, learning as we go what it means to

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The method of liberation and education is one method or praxis and not two. Each of us would describe this in a slightly different way, and the description would vary with the context or setting of the shared learning. But for the purpose of discussing "how we educate" I would like to mention four aspects of the method of liberation theologies and liberation education.

First, they both begin with *commitment* to do theology at the points of pain and struggle. In this I would not agree with Carlos Camps, my partner on this panel, when he says that theology is "second act" reflection, after active involvement. Theology is not second act, because it is the action informing the reflection, and the reflection informing the action. The commitment itself is part of liberation theologies. This is a

⁸ Ibid., 209-210.

⁹ Letty M. Russell, *Growth In Partnership* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1981), 70-74.

commitment to theologize with those who are oppressed, in order to articulate the hope against hope that is born of struggle with principalities and powers. Like all theologies this method is biased, but here it is articulated as bias on behalf of the poor, marginal and oppressed, and then incorporated into the theology itself.

Second, as Beverly Harrison has emphasized, these theologies and their educational methods are *contextual*. They are rooted in the particularities of social, economic, political and ecclesial systems and in the groups taking steps to change them.¹⁰ Our *encuentro* here can discuss the human being as *econome*, making use of the word used in the recent "Confession of Faith" of the Presbyterian-Reformed Church in Cuba.¹¹ But we know that our translation of the Greek word *oikonome* depends on our particular contexts. In Cuba it takes on the language of economic materialism, while in capitalist settings it often refers to stewardship of God's resources, or in a feminist setting it might be understood as "good housekeeping" in God's creation. There are, of course, connections, and as we attend to one another's contexts, we are able to deepen those connections and to share our respective points of pain together in the search for a common understanding of faith in action.

Thirdly, and very obviously, liberation theologies seek to be *critical*, and their educational methods seek to develop critical perspectives through conscientization. Beginning with the contradictions in our situations and seeking to find the causes, they identify the historical, cultural, and economic roots in order to work for conceptual as well as material change. Of particular significance here for feminists is the critique of the patriarchal paradigm of reality that lies underneath the political, racial, and economic oppression which is experienced. In the patriarchal world view women share the status of the men to whom "they belong," so that poor women of color find their oppression doubled.¹² Learning to think critically and to question our reality is crucial to the exodus journey.

Lastly, the concern to "keep method and substance together," as described by Beverly Harrison, leads to a theological and educational stress on methods of *collective* leadership, research and theologizing. In order to be truly critical, one must listen to the questions of those on the underside and work together with them on their issues. To be contextual, one needs to enter deeply into solidarity with constituency groups. And in order to be committed to social change, one must be willing to work

¹⁰ Letty M. Russell, ed. *Changing Contexts of Our Faith* (Philadelphia: The Fortress Press, 1985).

¹¹ "The Confession of Faith" of the Presbyterian-Reformed Church in Cuba (La Habana, Cuba: Editoria Crbe, 1978), 6-8.

¹² Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, *Bread Not Stone: The Challenge of Feminist Biblical Interpretation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1984), xiv.

collectively and to participate in communities of faith and struggle as they develop their theology. Liberation/feminist theologies are collective because they know that theology (like liturgy) is the work (*econome*) of *all* the people.

The method of both liberation theologies and liberation educational praxis is a collective method based in concrete contexts that involves commitment to the oppressed and critical assessment of the structures that deny freedom and life. Such a method is never easy, and it is certainly not simple, but it is possible to point to places where such exodus education is taking place, as we continue our own learning in the midst of action.

Doing Liberation Feminist Theologies Together with Others

Doing liberation/feminist theologies together with others. In seeking to give some indication of how this method seeks to overcome the contradiction between teaching and practice, I want to use the work of the Women's Theological Center in Boston as a case study. This is not because the center is perfect, or because it is the only place working on this task, but because it is trying to act out a new philosophy of theological education that more clearly articulates the aim of justice and the inclusion of the oppressed in their own process of learning. This is also an invitation to others who have such programs to join in this continuing dialogue about the method and content in liberation/feminist theological education.¹³

The brochure of the Women's Theological Center describes it in this way.

In study, action, and celebration, the Women's Theological Center is an ecumenical gathering of women of diverse racial, ethnic, and economic backgrounds. Through its Resource Center and Study/Action Program, [it] provides a learning community where issues of faith and social justice are raised from a feminist perspective. In addition, [it] reaches women in this country and other nations through its newsletter and occasional printings.¹⁴

This center is known to many of us at the *encuentro*. Carter Heyward and I are serving on the Board, and it is through the Center that the idea for the book, *God's Fierce Whimsy*, came into being.

¹³ For instance, the AAR/SBL in 1982 included reports on "Feminist Alternatives in Theological Education" by Francine Cardman for the WTC, Rosemary Ruether for the Feminist Theological Coalition of the Chicago Theological Schools, and Jacquelyn Grant for ITC, Black Women in Church and Society. A similar consultation will be held at the AAR/SBL in 1985 on "Institutional Structures and Women's Movements: Contemporary Transformations."

¹⁴ Women's Theological Center, 400 The Fenway, Boston, Mass. 02115.

Plans for this center began in 1977, but it was only in 1983 that it began its Study/Action Program as an alternative year of graduate theological education, or of continuing education. The planning began when a group of Roman Catholic women were concerned about designing appropriate theological education for women clergy, but it slowly broadened in outlook. An ecumenical group finally proposed plans for a center that could provide a context of reflection and action where women of all colors and classes could develop their skills, experience and theological and analytical perspective and thus become more effective ministers and agents of social and ecclesial change. The program includes about 15 women in residence, as well as larger programs for the wider community. Presently it is struggling with white racism and seeking to make the Board and its program more truly a partnership of women of color and white women.

The WTC provides for us just one small and very imperfect example of education as exodus, as we seek to understand our various contexts in Cuba and the United States more clearly. Its exodus journey involves at least the four elements of liberation methodology already outlined. Perhaps its praxis of freedom can help us to see more clearly how these elements might happen in a concrete situation.

The Center itself states that it has a commitment to raise questions of faith and social justice from a feminist perspective. It expresses that commitment by working to be "an ecumenical gathering of women of diverse racial, ethnic, and economic backgrounds." Scholarships, recruitment, shifts in program, as well as make up of the Board, the staff, and the student body, are designed to address the pervasive structures of white racism. Women of color work to design programs that speak out of and to their own needs, such as the weekend program last year called "Sojourns with Black Women."

Beginning from the context of white, "malestream" theological education, the planners analyzed the findings of the report of ten Women's Centers in seminaries called, *Your Daughters Shall Prophesy*.¹⁵ They decided to locate at Emmanuel College, a women's college, and to design a program that was supported and run by women, yet connected to the Boston Theological Schools for accreditation purposes through the Episcopal Divinity School. Emphasis is placed on providing a feminist learning context, and trying to make it accessible to all women of color, both in seminaries and in the wider community.

Developing a critical consciousness in regard to the contradictions of race, sex, and class in society is the focus of the Center's programs. In

¹⁵ The Cornwall Collective, *Your Daughters Shall Prophesy: Feminist Alternatives in Theological Education* (Philadelphia: The Pilgrim Press, 1980).

the conviction that learning to be critical begins by working with the organized poor and disinherited, the Center places each student in an advocacy program for women or Third World groups in the Boston area. One of the courses is designed to work on critical examination of the social, political, and economic situation faced by the poor in the Boston area and beyond.

The curriculum is designed as a collective process of working and learning together with other Christian feminists. The integration course on theology is a collective enterprise in which everyone is invited to be a co-learner. This is a very difficult task, because the teachers and students alike have been trained in the "banking method" of education, but they have the courage to try over and over in their freedom school, so that method and content can become one praxis. In this Center the new creation has not arrived! But at least we can find here a small parable of theological education as exodus.

The question "How and why do we educate?" is not one that is answered easily, or in such a short discussion. Yet the question itself is important if we are to be self critical of the way we participate in our own academic institutions and in their philosophies of education. Where the educational purposes of this group are different from the institutions in which we work, this should be looked at carefully, or we will end up teaching one thing and doing another! There is no perfect educational institution or method, but we can be clear about the goal and method of our work.

Liberation education is for justice and shalom; for the mending of God's creation in all its very concrete, material, and specific groaning parts. We engage in this educational struggle as partners in God's freedom movement, taking part in small anticipations of that movement in history by articulating a praxis of faith among communities of faith and struggle. This is an educational process similar to what Oden Marichal has described as a process that never ends. Education is exodus. It is the pain of new birth, as well as the joy of finding ourselves in the midst of fellow travelers on a road toward freedom, and I thank you all for sharing in that journey.