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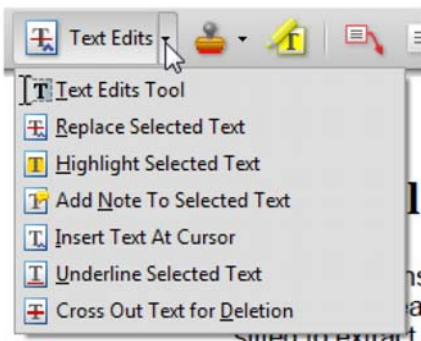
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The critical spirituality of Paulo Freire

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Starting from the premise that Paulo Freire's capacity for hope in the face of personal struggle and exile issued from his spirituality, this paper examines Freire's spirituality through the lens of Michael Dantley's concept of critical spirituality. The concept of spirituality as discussed in the literature is explored, followed by an explication of Dantley's concept of critical spirituality, which is an integration of critical theory and African-American spirituality as articulated by Cornel West and others. After briefly reviewing Freire's religious and cultural background, the paper compares Dantley and Freire in terms of their perspectives on hope, conversion to or solidarity with the oppressed and prophetic vision. The paper concludes by offering four implications of Freire's critical spirituality for educators seeking to work for social change.

Introduction

I attended my first political rally as a teenager during the Vietnam War. At the time marching for justice and peace was heady stuff; we thought we could change the world right then and there. Nearly 40 years later I find myself in a similar position, working for educational justice and seeking to reduce the violence on the streets of my city, but the difference now is that I realize the struggle will continue long after I have moved off the scene. I realize more clearly now than I did as a young adult that one must be well equipped to stay at this work for the long haul.

One figure who has helped me appreciate the value of a long-term perspective is Paulo Freire. Despite decades of literacy work among the world's poor, spending much of that time under threat or exile from his own government, Freire was generally known as a joyful, hopeful person. One of his contemporaries wrote the following about him:

> How is one to account for the optimism of Paulo Freire? Freire's life and work as an educator is optimistic in spite of poverty, imprisonment and exile. … On a planet where more than half the people go hungry every day because nations are incapable of feeding all their citizens, where we cannot agree that every being has a right to eat, Paulo Freire toils to help men and women overcome their sense of powerlessness to act on their own behalf. (Collins 1977: 3)

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I believe that in large part Freire's optimism and capacity for hope issued from his spiritual life, or what Reinhold Niebuhr has called the 'sublime madness of religious imagination' (Niebuhr 1932: 255).

Scholars have noted Freire's resonance with liberation theology (Aronowitz 1998, Giroux 1985, McClaren 2000), and religious thinkers and teachers have drawn insights from his writings (Goodwin, 1978, Gutierrez, 1971, Schipani, 1984). Fenwick and English (2004: 51) note that Freire 'saw his work as spiritual' and Welton (1993) has explored the parallels between Freire's concept of conscientization and the Christian concept of conversion. However, the nature of Freire's personal spirituality and the influence that spirituality had on his life and his work has yet to be explored. While Freire wrote only a handful of theologically oriented essays, he was significantly guided and energized by a personal spirituality that informed his generally hopeful perspective in the face of many barriers and personal struggles. By examining this aspect of Freire's personal life, progressive educators may find a model for nurturing their own spirituality as they work for positive social change in our world.

A primary reason for the lack of research on Freire's spirituality is no doubt due in large part to the fact that Freire never used the word 'spirituality' in his writings; when he did speak of his spirituality he referred to it as his 'faith'. Furthermore, he wrote and spoke about his faith infrequently, and admitted he was reticent to discuss it publicly (Freire 1992). Thus, any glimpse we have into Freire's personal spirituality is at best partial and in some cases indirect.

Additionally, in academic circles there exists what Keating (2008) has called 'spirit phobia'. In her study of Mexican feminist popular educator Gloria Anzaldua, Keating notes that in the rational and empirical world of academia, writing about spirituality can cause a scholar to lose standing and credibility with his or her peers. She quotes Alexander, who writes: 'there is a tacit understanding that no self-respecting postmodernist would align herself (at least in public) with a category such as the spiritual, which appears so fixed, so unchanging, so redolent of tradition' (Keating 2008: 55). Even though Anzaldua was quite open about the spiritual influences on her life, Keating notes that scholars often dismissed her spiritual language as nostalgic, backward, traditional and naïve. However, Keating contends that Anzaldua's spirituality fed into her political activism and 'enabled her to make meaning out of the apparently meaningless events of her life, especially those situations … that caused her most pain' (2008: 56). I would contend that much the same can be said about Freire: while he is generally quiet about his spirituality, one cannot fully appreciate the depth of his moral vision or his perseverance in the face of rejection, exile and imprisonment without exploring the spirituality that informed his life and work.

While this hesitancy to write about spirituality is still generally present in academia, the concept of spirituality has gone through a redefinition in many professional and academic circles. Those scholars who discuss the religious influences on Freire (Elias 1994, Jeria 1986) generally describe his faith in traditional religious terms. However, in recent years scholars have begun to speak of spirituality in broader and more eclectic ways. Ngunjiri (2011) notes that it is no longer uncommon for spirituality to be discussed in disciplines as diverse as business, education, nursing and social work. This change is not due to the fact that people in these circles have necessarily 'gotten religion', but rather that the concept of spirituality itself has been separated from its traditional religious

roots, and has been expanded to become a more inclusive term not necessarily tied to any one religious tradition or institution.

While such an analysis might be interesting from an academic standpoint, there is also a practical reason for exploring Freire's spirituality. Awareness of Freire's spiritual perspective invites those who have embraced his pedagogical philosophy to examine the ways in which their own spirituality may have shaped their perspective and approach to their work. While many of Freire's pedagogical concepts have been analyzed and explicated, the well from which they flowed has not. What was the source of Paulo Freire's moral vision? How did his ideas about conscientization, humanization, history, hope, utopia and learning intersect with his person? Where did his inner strength, joyfulness about life and persistence in the face of failure come from? And, what can one learn from Freire as to how personal spirituality offers us strength and resilience in the effort to work for social justice?

For many progressive educators, questions of spirituality may be discomfiting. Admittedly, organized religion has often been a barrier to efforts toward liberation and social justice, and thus many progressives have distanced themselves from anything remotely religious. Freire shared some of the same experiences with religion and the subsequent misgivings. However, Michael Dantley (2003a, 2003b, 2005a, 2005b) has proposed a perspective he calls 'critical spirituality'. Critical spirituality brings together the political insights of critical theory central to critical pedagogy and popular education and the unique insights of African-American religionists who found a way to reconcile the harsh treatment they received at the hands of their white Christian masters with the belief in a compassionate and just God. While the cultural and historical contexts of Dantley's spiritual views are quite different from those of Freire's, the concept of critical spirituality helps us to see how Freire was able to integrate radical politics and an authentic personal faith. Thus, it is through this window of critical spirituality that we can glimpse the personal spirituality of Paulo Freire.

I begin by reviewing various conceptions and dimensions of spirituality, and then specifically explicate the concept of critical spirituality. After describing critical spirituality, I examine the spirituality of Paulo Freire as presented in his writings. Dantley's and Freire's views on spirituality then are compared and shown to be distinct but comparable expressions of critical spirituality. I conclude with suggestions as to how critical spirituality can inform and empower progressive educators as they continue in their attempts to teach and work for social change.

What is spirituality?

Bean (2000: 72) states that 'spiritualty is a vague term encompassing a vast landscape of meaning', while Tolliver and Tisdell (2006: 38) call it 'an elusive concept'. While English and Gillen (2000: 1) likewise acknowledge a general lack of consensus over the meaning of the term, they define spirituality as 'something greater than ourselves, a sense that we are connected to all human being and to all creation'. Wilber (2006) uses the term primarily to refer to higher states of consciousness and transpersonal or peak mystical experiences. Fenwick and English (2004) have categorized the conceptions of spirituality into eight diverse

themes: life and death, soul and self, cosmology, knowledge, the 'way', practices of spirituality and the role of others, and responses. With these wide-ranging views of the term 'spirituality', several other authors have sought to bring some shape and meaning to what spirituality is and can be.

Spirituality is most commonly understood to be a dimension of life that is private and inward, often tied to specific religious practices. For this reason, spiritual practices or 'disciplines' (Foster 1978) are often seen as synonymous with spirituality itself——that is, spirituality is the set of practices which spiritually oriented people perform, such as meditation, prayer, worship and sacred reading. However, in seeking to present a broader and more inclusive understanding of spirituality, many authors make a distinction between the practices of religion and the concept of spirituality. For instance, Tisdell (2003) considers religion to be an organized community of faith that promotes certain beliefs and codes of behavior, whereas spirituality has to do with one's personal beliefs and experience of a God, higher power or higher purpose set apart from any set beliefs or institutional structures. Nash (2002) claims to be non-religious yet promotes the development of spirituality in his teaching and scholarship. Zwissler (2007: 51) notes that is common for people to indicate that they are 'spiritual but not religious'.

Milacci (2006) takes issue with the religion–spirituality distinction by arguing that the meaning of spirituality only becomes clear within a particular religious context, and that to speak of spirituality set apart from a particular religious tradition is to render it hopelessly vague. While Milacci contends that one must be practicing within a particular religious faith (a word he prefers to spirituality), Tisdell (2000) and Zwissler (2007) found in their research that even when individuals were no longer actively participating in a particular religious community, their conception of spirituality was frequently deeply informed by the religious traditions in which they were raised. Furthermore, Fenwick and English (2004: 59) contend that one cannot talk about spirituality without reflecting 'ways of seeing, believing and acting' related to a specific religious or spiritual tradition. Thus, instead of seeing spirituality and religion as markedly distinct, one can see them as overlapping influences: one more institutional and formal and the other more personal and experiential, but both intricately inter-related to one another. Indeed, one's spirituality often operates out of (Milacci 2006) or in response to (Tisdell 2000, Zwissler 2007) particular religious traditions.

Closely tied to the question of spirituality's relationship to religion is spirituality's relationship to theology. Nouwen (1992) suggests that spirituality tends to be based on one's experience, whereas theology is a reflection on that experience. In other words, what one believes about God and the world (theology) develops as one seeks to make sense of one's experience (spirituality). However, as Milacci (2006) points out, our spiritual experience often occurs within a particular religious and theological tradition; the theological tradition becomes the lens through which one interprets and evaluates his/her experience. Thus, while theology may be primarily cognitive and spirituality more experience-based, the meaning one derives from experience is either consciously or implicitly related to one's theological presuppositions.

In their classic study of American culture, Robert Bellah and associates (1985) found that there was a growing tendency for individuals to see spirituality as highly individualized; many people do not follow a particular religious

tradition, but rather pick and choose from various religious and spiritual tradi-
tions to create their own eclectic brand of spirituality. This individualized view
of spirituality reflects the Western idea of the separation of church and state,
and the notion that one's personal beliefs are private and should not be
brought into the public square. However, many authors have begun to challenge
that notion, seeing spirituality as both inward and outward (Bean 2000, English
and Gillen 2003), both public and private (Zwissler 2007). Moreover, others
have sought to make the link between spirituality and a person's commitment to
social action and social change. For instance, in his study of social justice advo-
cates across the US, Stanczak (2006) found that many people practiced an
'engaged spirituality' wherein they found spirituality a resource for their involve-
ment in efforts to bring about social change. Berry (1988: 111) refers to this
approach as 'public spirituality', where 'spiritual issues are those dealt with in
the … world of human existence'. Likewise, Bean (2000), Nangle (2008) and
Gutierrez (1985) insist that spirituality must lead to action. Keating (2008) refers
to this phenomenon as 'spiritual activism'. Thus, increasingly spirituality is
assumed to include both the inward and outward, both being and doing.

A key aspect of spirituality is a sense of the transcendent or the sacred. For
many people, that transcendence is referred to as God or the specific name of a
deity. For others it may be an unnamed 'higher power' or a higher sense of pur-
pose such as love, justice or peace (Tolliver and Tisdell 2006). For some that
transcendence is experienced as a connectedness to other people, the natural
world or the universe as a whole (Bean 2000). In any case, spirituality engages
people in considering that they are part of something much bigger than them-
selves. As such, spirituality informs one's sense of ethics, morals and values. The
moral and ethical vision one has for the world is seen to come from beyond
one's personal choices——from a source that transcends and guides all human
endeavors (Gotz 1997, Stanczak 2006).

On the most basic level, spirituality is what gives a person meaning in life. Tis-
dell (2000) suggests that spirituality is characterized by awareness of self, and
that the task of spirituality is to help one make sense of the actions one takes
and the decisions one makes in the course of life. The ultimate goal of spiritual-
ity is that the person becomes more authentically human. For many individuals
meaning issues from one's sense of the transcendent or God, but for others,
such as Nash (2002), the search for meaning is in itself a spiritual quest.

Finally, it must be noted that spirituality is often tied to one's cultural back-
ground and milieu. In her study of Gloria Anzaldua's spirituality, Keating (2007)
stresses the inter-relationship between Anzaldua's spiritual expression and the
fact that she was a marginalized Latina living in the United States. Culture is
how one expresses oneself outwardly, as well as the identities and reference
points one carries around in one's mind. Speaking of her spiritual struggles,
Anzaldua wrote: 'the struggle has always been inner, and is played out in outer
terrains' (Keating 2007: 58). Tolliver and Tisdell (2006) note that spirituality
manifests the inner struggle through symbols, music, image and poetry, which
are all outward expressions of culture. Just as one's spirituality is nurtured and
emerges from a particular religious tradition, so too that spirituality finds expres-
sion in particular cultural forms.

Thus, while spirituality may be a difficult term to define, there are some clear
parameters. One's spirituality connects one to a higher sense of purpose and

being, and gives one's life meaning. Very often it is an expression of one's response to a particular religious tradition and theological understanding. Spirituality is that dimension of life that links one to the transcendent or the sacred, be that God, a higher purpose, the world of nature or the universe as a whole. Even though connected to the transcendent, spirituality is manifested in specific symbols and cultural artifacts, and moves one out of one's inner life to a sense of solidarity with others and a commitment to improve upon the world as it is, be it through individual acts of compassion or corporate efforts to establish justice.

As we will see, both Dantley and Freire speak of spirituality within these parameters. Both connect their spirituality to a higher sense of purpose and draw from the symbols and language of their respective theological traditions while seeking to connect to a wider audience in order to create the conditions for solidarity with others in the pursuit of social justice. While neither express their spirituality in what would be considered traditional terms, there is clear evidence that for both, their inner convictions and outward actions are motivated by a transcendent sense of purpose.

Critical spirituality

Recent scholarship has explored the relationship between one's spirituality and social justice work (Gottlieb 2003, Nangle 2008, Stanczak 2006, Tisdell 2003). This way of looking at spirituality provides a new lens through which to think about spirituality as something that is not simply inward and private, but also actively engages one in the needs and issues of the world. Instead of simply seeking to find God through prayer, meditation, reading sacred texts or worship, these authors discuss an approach to spirituality that encounters the transcendent in social justice and environmental activism. A further manifestation of what has been called 'engaged spirituality' (Nangle 2008, Stanczak 2006) is what Michael Dantley has called critical spirituality. From his social position as a Christian, an African-American and an educational leader, Dantley (2003a: 5) describes critical spirituality as 'the infusion of two radical perspectives, namely critical theory and prophetic African-American spirituality'.

While Dantley does not engage in an extensive discussion of his understanding of critical theory, it is clear that he draws heavily on Foucault, Horkheimer and others of the Frankfurt School. In this way he shares with Freire the radical critique of the dominant systems impacting his educational work with people marginalized and oppressed by those systems. Brookfield (2005) identifies five distinctive aspects of critical theory. First, critical theory is founded on a class-based analysis of the exchange of goods and services driven by capitalism; this analysis is usually informed by a Marxist economic perspective. Second, critical theory seeks to provide people with the intellectual tools that enable them to both interpret the socioeconomic nature of their world and to create new knowledge. Third, critical theory breaks down the distinction between persons as subject and object, stressing that oppressed persons can be the authors of their own liberation. Fourth, critical theory envisions a world that is characterized by equity, justice and participatory democracy. Finally, critical theory presumes that the validity of its claims can only be evaluated when its social vision is realized,

and may require long and protracted struggle. The implication of this last point is that critical theory continually invites one to experiment, engage in action-reflection and change and grow in the process.

Drawing on these elements of critical theory, Dantley (2003a) calls for a radi- 5
cal critique of existing educational administrative structures. He posits that all knowledge is socially constructed and must be analyzed for the values and beliefs current structures, policies and practices. He exhorts leaders, faculty and students to challenge and establish 'truths' and design new approaches that empower economically and socially marginalized students to participate in learn- 10
ing that affirms their identities and more directly speaks to their social situations. He stresses the importance of educators engaging in ongoing reflection on both their personal identity and their social identity in the context of the social, political and economic realities of their situation. At the end of each day he suggests that educational leaders reflect on their decision-making processes 15
by asking themselves questions such as: 'Whose interests are really being served by this decision? Does this decision silence discourse or encourage it? Are students' and teachers' lives positively affected by this decision?' (Dantley 2005a: 664).

While critical theory provides scholars with a cognitive framework with which 20
to analyze and challenge existing practices and structures, spirituality is generally considered an overall orientation toward life that includes not only the intellect, but also the emotions and even physical practices. As such, the concept of critical spirituality at first glance appears two distinct and the somewhat irreconcilable domains of the intellect and the emotions or, in more metaphorical terms, 25
the 'head' and the 'heart'.

Dantley (2003a, 2005a) transcends this head–heart tension by rooting his understanding of critical theory in the 'prophetic pragmatism' of Cornel West, who draws on philosophical (pragmatism), religious (Christian) and cultural (African-American) sources. (As we will see, Freire similarly draws on philosophi- 30
cal, theological and cultural sources for his spirituality in ways strikingly similar to Dantley and West.) Like critical theory, West's prophetic pragmatism rejects a notion of a priori truth that is transcendent and therefore beyond analysis. Pragmatism sees all knowledge as produced, acquired and achieved through social practices (Headly 2001). This integration of critical theory, pragmatism and Afri- 35
can-American spirituality is what Dantley calls critical spirituality. Drawing heavily on the writings of West (1988) and Stewart (1999), Dantley (2003a, 2003b) suggests that African-American prophetic spirituality's deep-seated moralism, prophetic resistance and pessimistic opportunism 'form the viscera of this hybrid theoretical construct called critical spirituality' (2003a: 5). 40

West (1988) argues that historically the black church provided African-Americans a means of survival in the face of the tragic and overt circumstances of racism in which they lived. Even when society at large regarded them as sub-human, the black church provided them with a sense of their 'somebody-ness'. The African-American prophetic tradition calls people to revolutionary action 45
tempered with a realistic pragmatism in the face of overwhelming oppression. Because of a firm belief in God's ultimate concern for justice evidenced in the Exodus experience of the Hebrew people in the Old Testament and the life and ministry of Jesus in the New Testament, African-American spiritual tradition remains hopeful that ultimately justice and equity will prevail. This enables 50

African-Americans to act in ways that look beyond their present struggles to an ultimate victory, as God works through legislative and judicial action, demonstrations, bus boycotts, imprisonment and even death. This 'aggressive pessimism' (a realization of the circumstances set against them, and yet an active resistance to those circumstances) leads to a subversive joy, evidenced in the celebrative freedom characteristic of many African-American churches. As Dantley (2005a: 656) contends, such an understanding of one's spiritual faith 'comes from one's internal belief that the *as is* of any given situation can be overcome for the better *not yet*' (italics original).

Stewart (1999: 30) identifies five key functions of African-American spirituality. First, African-American spirituality serves a formative function in forging blacks into a community of people with an 'alternative consciousness'; that is, they come to appreciate their own dignity and worth as persons and as a community. Second, African-American spirituality has a unitive function that brings together individual and community concerns in a way that is empowering for both the individual and the community as a whole. Third, African-American spirituality validates African-American life and culture as something inherently valuable. Fourth, having formed black people into an alternative, validated community, African-American spirituality empowers them to work toward the transformation of self and of the society at large. Finally, because one's sense of power to transform emerges from a deep religious consciousness, African-American spirituality enables blacks to see their lives as sacred, even in the face of dehumanization, degradation and oppression, and connects their lives to a larger sense of meaning and purpose as they engage with others in projects of resistance to deconstruct and reconstruct oppressive policies, practices and structures (Dantley 2005a).

While grounded in a particular religious and cultural experience, critical spirituality seeks to move out of sectarianism toward significant social change. As with Freire, Dantley's critical spirituality is both inwardly experienced and outwardly expressed. The source of motivation and strength is a transcendent belief in a God of justice, which provides marginalized people a sense of value, worth and meaning. Moreover, critical spirituality is both reflective, as evidenced by the use of the tools of critical theory, and active, in that it motivates people to act in hope despite resistance and live with a sense of freedom in the face of oppression. In that sense critical spirituality is inherently prophetic, resisting dehumanizing systems while hoping for and working toward a more humane and equitable future.

While Dantley (2003a) grounds critical spirituality in the context of African-American Christian experience, he suggests that the paradigm he presents can serve as a framework for educational leaders from other religious and ethnic backgrounds. That framework begins with a general understanding of spirituality that includes solidarity with those groups and persons marginalized and oppressed by the dominant society, a view of God or the transcendent that brings a sense of hope in the face of degradation and despair, a commitment to the prophetic role that deconstructs the status quo, a conviction to construct a more equitable social order and an ability to experience meaning, joy and freedom in the midst of an ongoing struggle for substantive social and political change. Building on this framework, I now want to explore the ways in which Paulo Freire's spirituality fits into Dantley's paradigm.

Paulo Freire's spirituality

Given that Dantley (2005a) draws on Freire for his understanding of critical theory, it should not be surprising that there is much that the two hold in common. Though they come from different religious and cultural backgrounds, both find their spiritual roots in liberation theories. Both are passionate in their commitment to equitable and empowering education for students from marginalized social groups. Finally, both draw on their respective religious traditions for perspective and the construction of a critical, prophetic expression of spirituality.

A philosophy of trace

As has already been noted, Freire did not talk extensively about his personal spirituality. Thus, while we will examine sources in which Freire talks about his faith, we will also use what Joldersma (2009) calls a 'philosophy of trace'. Generally, philosophers begin with universal or general concepts, which then are analyzed and deductively applied to concrete situations in a 'if A, then B' progression of thought. By contrast, a philosophy of trace takes a phenomenological approach in which the philosopher draws connections or allusions from something that is observed to something else which is not clearly evident; in essence, one 'traces' observable phenomena back to their unseen source. Thus, at points, statements that Freire makes will be examined in the context of his life and work and traced to what his underlying personal faith might be. In this way I hope to provide indicators of the spiritual basis behind Freire's profound and powerful insights.

Freire's religious and cultural context

Just as Dantley's view of spirituality grew out of a specific religious and cultural context, so too Freire's spirituality was shaped by the particular context of the Brazilian Roman Catholic Church of the mid-twentieth century. Freire was raised under the influence of a devoutly religious mother and a father who called himself a spiritualist, both of whom impressed upon him the necessity for one's profession of faith to be consistent with one's actions (Horton and Freire 1990). When he was 13 years old Freire's father died, placing young Paulo and his family into circumstances of extreme poverty. Freire experienced the hunger and stress of poverty, and had to drop out of school for two years. When he was able to return to school, he struggled academically, especially with spelling. This experience of poverty and subsequent academic struggle deeply imprinted itself on him and his view of the world (Horton and Freire 1990, Elias 1994, Jeria 1986).

In adolescence he rejected his Roman Catholic faith, but he re-embraced it in college after being introduced to the writings of Catholic philosophers such as Maritain, Bernanos and Mounier (Elias 1994). While in college, Freire became involved with Catholic Action, a religious group that sought to express faith through actions of service toward others, especially the poor (Freire and

Horton 1990). Based on a model from Italy promoted by Pope John XXIII, Catholic Action was created to be a 'lay apostolate' bringing the message of the church to the common people. As such, Catholic Action was committed to spreading the ideas of Roman Catholicism among the laity and encouraging 'religiously approved behavior' (de Kadt 1970).

While Catholic Action was generally concerned with spreading spiritual ideas, in Northeast Brazil (where Freire was located) the group sought to address the conditions of rural poverty and the need for land reform. At that time rural peasants were in a feudal relationship with large and powerful landowners whose treatment of workers was unregulated by the state, thus making the peasants subject to the whims of the landowner. In exchange for land and protection, peasants were expected to remain loyal to their landowners, despite having to live in subsistence conditions. Catholic Action organized peasants into organizations called *sindicataos* that demanded greater control over land and the right to remain on the land permanently. At the same time, some leaders in Catholic Action were protesting the incursion of corporations from the United States and other developed countries that were exercising significant control over the use of Brazil's resources and the shape of the Brazilian economy. They espoused an anti-capitalistic position that called for nationalization of Brazilian industries and land reform initiatives. When the Roman Catholic hierarchy suppressed these overt political activities, many Catholic Action members left to join Acao Popular (AP), a socialistic political group with no religious affiliations. At the time these developments occurred Freire was not actively involved with Catholic Action and was directing government-sponsored literacy programs. While Freire had no formal relationship to AP, his political views were very similar to those in Catholic Action who had defected to AP. At the same time, although the literacy program he developed in the Northeastern states of Brazil had much in common with the Roman Catholic-sponsored literacy program, the Church formally distanced itself from Freire (de Kadt 1970, Jeria 1986, Kirkendall 2004).

Because of his close ties to the socialist government of Joao Goulart and the growing influence of the Brazilian Communist party, Freire's program was deemed too political, and thus dangerous, by conservative leaders in the Church. When the Goulart government was overthrown by a military coup in April 1964, Freire was imprisoned for 70 days, during which time his pleas for assistance were ignored by the Roman Catholic hierarchy. After spending only 20 days in Bolivia, he escaped to Chile, where he worked for four and a half years as a literacy coordinator. In 1970 he joined the World Council of Churches, providing consultancy to literacy programs throughout the developing world. Nonetheless, throughout these changes and his 16 years of exile, he maintained his Christian faith and his love for Brazil and was able to return in 1980, living and working there until his death in 1997 (Jeria 1986, Kirkendall 2004).

How Freire expressed his spirituality

Like most Catholic children, Freire took part in the catechism classes required of young people coming into the church. Speaking of that period of his life, he later remarked that he was 'formed and deformed' by the Catholic Church

(Freire 2007). For instance, he related one incident where he was offended by a priest who tried to frighten his students into faith by talking about the eternal damnation to hell of those who did not follow the way of the church. However, in the next sentence he commented that we was struck by 'the goodness, the strength to love without limits to which Christ witnessed' (Freire 1977: 547).

In adulthood Freire clearly identified himself as a Christian, a 'friend of Christ' and 'a man of faith' (Elias 1994, Freire 2007, Horton and Freire 1990). While he had an ongoing struggle with the Roman Catholic Church as an institution, some of his closest colleagues, such as Gustavo Gutierrez, Camilio Torres and Dom Helder Camara, were Roman Catholic clergy affiliated with the Latin American liberation theology movement (Jeria 1988).

Freire rarely talked of God, apart from God's relationship with persons in the context of history. He considered God a 'presence in history', but believed it was human beings——not God——who make history (Freire 1970). In essence, Freire believed that people themselves needed to work to change their circumstances and could not simply wait and rely on God to change them. He believed that God provided the vision by defining human completeness:

> [God's] transcendence over us is based on the fact of our knowledge of this finitude. For man is an incomplete being and the completion of his incompleteness is encountered in his relationship with his creator, a relationship which by its very nature … is always a relationship of liberation. (in Elias, 1976b: 41)

For Freire the purpose of both education and social justice work was to move toward this vision of completeness (Elias 1976b).

In perhaps his most succinct yet clear statement of faith, Freire wrote, late in his life:

> This is how I have always understood God – a presence in history that does not preclude me from making history, but rather pushes me toward world transformation, which makes it possible to restore the humanity of those who exploit and of the weak. (Freire 1997: 103–104)

Expanding on that perspective a bit more, he continued: '… the fundamental importance of my faith [is] in my struggle for overcoming oppressive reality and for building a less ugly society, one that is less evil and more humane' (Freire 1997: 104). In these words we see reflected the linkage between a concern for social justice and a spiritually inspired motivation, or what Keating (2008) refers to as 'spirit activism'.

When Freire began his literacy work, he did so motivated by his Christian faith (Elias 1994). Yet early in his career he explored how Marxist thought could inform his educational philosophy. This foray into Marxism impacted his view of faith. He described the impact this way:

> When I was a young man, I went to the people, to the workers, the peasants, motivated, really, by my Christian faith. .. When I arrived with the people – the misery, the concreteness, you know!. .. The obstacles of this reality sent me – to Marx. I started reading and studying. It was beautiful

because I found in Marx a lot of the things the people had told me – with-
out being literate. Marx was a genius. *But when I met Marx, I continued to
meet Christ on the corners of the street – by meeting the people.* (in Elias 1994: 42,
italics original)

While many of his Roman Catholic contemporaries considered this link between
Marx and Christ to be heretical, for Freire it was like fitting a hand into a glove.
Marx provided him a view of history and the world through which he acted out
the dictates of his Christian faith. Marx provided him a new way in which to
encounter Christ——in the lives of the people with whom he was working. As
Elias (1976a: 65) contends, 'As [Freire became] more Marxist, the religious
inspiration of his social philosophy [became] more explicit'.

This link between spirituality and social justice is further highlighted in Fre-
ire's comments about reading and responding to the Word of God. What Freire
referred to when he spoke of the Word of God is not entirely clear, but at its
heart the Word of God for him seemed to be the words of Christ recorded in
the gospels (the books of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John in the New Testa-
ment). Speaking of the gospels, he wrote:

I cannot know the Gospels if I take them simply as words that come to rest
in me … On the contrary, I understand the Gospels, well or badly, to the
degree I live them, well or badly. I experience them and in them experi-
ence myself through my own social practice, in history with other human
beings. (Freire 1977)

Just as all learning for Freire comes through the interplay of reflection and
experience, so too one understands the directives of the Word of God only as
one seeks to live them out. Freire wrote:

I think that my attitude cannot be the attitude of an empty being waiting
to be filled by the Word of God. I think also that in order to listen to it, it
is necessary to be engaged in the process of the liberation of man [sic].
(in Elias 1976a: 64)

For Freire this living out of the Word of God was not simply for one's personal
edification and benefit, but to impact the world at large: 'In the final analysis,
the Word of God is inviting me to re-create the world, not for my brothers'
domination, but for their liberation' (Freire 1972b).

AQ4

When it came to prayer, Freire rejected the 'magical thinking' that often
characterized much religious practice among the poor. This kind of prayer only
bound persons to their poverty, to passively wait for divine intervention, and
played into the hands of the dominant elite that oppressed them (Freire 1970).
Instead, Freire believed that prayer should not excuse or ignore oppressive prac-
tices, and should ask God for strength and courage to overcome injustice.
Speaking of his own attitude toward prayer, Freire (1997: 65) said: 'I have always
prayed, asking that God give me increased disposition to fight against the abuses
of the powerful against the oppressed'. Speaking of his prayers for the
oppressed, he went on, 'I have always prayed in order that the weakness of the
offended would transform itself into the strength with which they would finally

defeat the power of the great'. By the same token, Freire did not believe in asking God to bring about the liberation that human beings must alone work to achieve. God projects the vision of how society should be, but it is the role of human beings to 'make history' and bring about needed changes (Freire 1997).

The critical spirituality of Paulo Freire

In many ways Freire's spirituality reflects sentiments and dimensions similar to Dantley's concept of critical spirituality. Both thinkers take what Fenwick and English (2004: 53) call a 'life centered approach' in which spirituality 'spreads justice, benevolence, and equality, relieving suffering and fostering prosperity'. Like Dantley, Freire projects a moral vision of the world as it can and should be; he identifies closely with those who are oppressed, and seeks to speak prophetically to the institutions of his day. While Dantley's perspective was shaped by the prophetic pragmatism of African-American spirituality, Freire's views were informed by the Roman Catholic liberation theology of mid twentieth-century Latin America.

Hope

Just as African-American spirituality believed that God gave African-Americans a reason for hope in the midst of despair, so too Freire worked in hope toward what he called 'utopia'. From Freire's perspective utopia was not some far off, never-to-be-seen reality, but a vision of a free and just society that drew the oppressed away from their fatalism into liberating action. He characterized utopia as 'the aspiration for the radical changes in society in such areas as economics, human relationships, property, the right to employment, to land, to education and to health' (Freire 1998: 6). Furthermore, utopia resulted from the dismantling of the oppressive forces and structures that denied basic human rights to certain citizens. Utopia was not necessarily a reality that would soon be achieved, but rather a long-range vision that motivated one to act. Freire described his commitment to utopia as 'a dialectical relationship between denouncing the present and announcing the future. To anticipate tomorrow by dreaming today' (Shor and Freire 1987: 187). Thus, for Freire a proper understanding of utopia required one to maintain a clear balance between the imagined and hoped-for future and the critical analysis and concrete action that was needed to achieve that future.

On a personal level, this drive toward utopia expressed itself in a consistent attitude of hopefulness. Reflecting on the necessity of hope in his educational work, Freire (1992: 8) wrote, 'I am hopeful, not out of mere stubbornness, but out of an existential, concrete imperative'. In other words, hope was not simply a feeling or an optimistic outlook; it was a quality at the core of his work and his existence. He distinguished his understanding of hope from idealism by indicating that hope was an act of imagination that moved one to action, whereas idealism did not call for action.

One distinction between Freire and Dantley is the degree to which they believed the oppressed could base their hope on God's direct action in their

efforts at liberation. Historically, African-American spirituality has seen God
actively involved in the liberation process. However, Freire had a more reserved
perspective on God's role in history. From Freire's perspective, God invites
human beings to 'make their own history, i.e. transforming the world in the
direction of justice' (Schipani 1988: 39). In that sense, for Freire, God sets the
table for action, but human beings themselves must take the action and make
change happen.

Dantley would agree with Freire that human beings must pragmatically
and critically deconstruct the unjust social structures that oppress them, and
then work to change them. He would also agree that the vision for change
comes from God. However, African-American liberation theology, from which
Dantley draws his concept of critical spirituality, tends to speak of God as
more actively involved in human liberation than Freire does. James Cone,
the founder of black theology, does not specifically take up the issue of
God's role in human history; nonetheless, he reflects a view held by most
black theologians that assumes God's direct participation in the liberation of
oppressed people. For instance, Cone (1986: 6) writes: 'God is *active in
human history*, taking sides with the oppressed of the land' (italics mine).
Speaking specifically about the African-Americans' struggle for racial justice,
Cone writes that 'black theology interprets [the immanence of God] to mean
our struggle for liberation is the *infinite participating in the concrete struggle of
human existence*' (1986: 78, italics mine). Both of these statements reflect a
view of God directly involved in the liberating work of human beings. While
one cannot say for sure that Dantley specifically shares this view, the tradi-
tion of black theology out of which his perspective comes assumes God's
active involvement in the struggle of oppressed people. The distinction
between Freire and black prophetic Christianity is subtle yet significant, and
does highlight the different degrees to which they believe God is involved in
the liberating process.

Conversion to the oppressed

Dantley writes from an African-American perspective, which was shaped by cir-
cumstances of overt and structural racism. Thus, he writes as one who comes
from an oppressed social position. Freire's social position was more complex. As
a child of a middle class father, and as an educated adult in a country of vast
illiteracy, he did not consider himself to be oppressed. Yet through his child-
hood experience of poverty, and his exile from Brazil, he understood experien-
tially what it was to be stigmatized and denied basic human rights. As a result,
while he was not from the oppressed class, he practiced and taught the need for
solidarity with those who are.

He expresses this most clearly in calling his readers to a 'conversion to the
people' (Freire 1970: 61). The use of the word 'conversion' implies that this
move to solidarity is not simply a cognitive decision, but also a spiritual transfor-
mation that brings one into identification, solidarity and common struggle with
those that are oppressed. Freire (1970: 61) believed that anyone who worked on
behalf of the poor must enter 'into communion with the people'. He elaborated
on this idea of conversion by saying:

> Conversion to the people requires a profound rebirth. Those who undergo it must take on a new form of existence; they can no longer remain as they were. Only through comradeship with the oppressed can the converts understand their characteristic ways of living and behaving, which in diverse moments reflect the structure of domination. (1970: 61)

This conversion, which he elsewhere referred to as an 'Easter', calls for a dramatic change in one's lifestyle and outlook. He wrote:

> Such an [Easter] implies a renunciation of myths that are dear to them: the myth of superiority, of their purity of soul, of their virtues, their wisdom, the myth that they save the poor, the myth of the neutrality of the church, of theology of education, science, technology, the myth of their own impartiality. From these grow other myths: of the inferiority of other people, of their spiritual and physical impurity, and of the absolute ignorance of the oppressed…... This Easter, which results in the changing of consciousness, must be existentially experienced. The real Easter is not commemorative rhetoric. It is praxis; it is historical involvement. The old Easter of rhetoric is dead – with no hope of resurrection. (Freire 1985: 123)

Put more simply, this Easter conversion meant 'repudiating the power structures, the establishments that represent the world of domination. It means siding with the oppressed, with the condemned of the earth, in a posture of authentic love that cannot possibly straddle both camps…' (Freire 1972a). Furthermore, Freire did not believe that one's conversion to the oppressed was a one-time experience, but rather an ongoing commitment to live and work in solidarity with those that are oppressed (Freire 2007).

A close friend and confidante of Freire, Gustavo Gutierrez, elaborates on this conversion experience by suggesting that it is at the heart of what it means to be a Christian. He writes, '[f]or many Latin American Christians at the present time the possibility of following Jesus depends on their ability to make their own spiritual experience of the poor' (1984: 30). He goes on: 'Above all, it is a question of making our own the world of the poor, and their manner of living out their relationship with the Lord, and taking over the historical practice of Jesus' (1984: 31). This decision causes one to make a break with past practices in the Church and to choose a new direction, at the heart of which is liberation for the poor and oppressed. For Gutierrez this commitment to liberation is not ancillary to the personal spiritual quest, but is at the heart of what it means to seek peace and salvation. Judging by the content of his writings and the substance of his life's work, one can easily make the same claim for Freire.

Thus for both Dantley and Freire, viewing the world through the eyes and needs of the oppressed is central to their spirituality. Dantley writes as one from an historically oppressed group, whose religious tradition has taught him a way through suffering to hope and survival. By contrast, Freire writes as one whose life experiences gave him a perspective of suffering that lead him to a deeper spiritual solidarity with those who have been and are oppressed.

Prophetic vision

At the heart of Dantley's concept of critical spirituality is the prophetic pragmatism of the African-American spiritual tradition. This tradition has given African-Americans an 'alternative consciousness' (Stewart 1999: 30) that empowers them
5 to advocate and work for a more just and equitable society. Drawing from the liberation theology tradition, Freire likewise took a prophetic perspective on the role that people of faith should play in the world, and indeed a way which he sought to embody in his life and work.

Freire's most extensive theological writings have to do with his critique of the
10 Roman Catholic Church in Latin America. Freire believed that the Church quietly aligned itself with the ruling elite and sought to remain neutral while reforms to assist the poor were crushed (Elias 1976a). By contrast, Freire allied himself with liberation theologians who believed that instead of supporting the status quo, the established church should ally itself with the oppressed and seek
15 a 'revolutionary transformation of their world' (Freire 1972c).

AQ6

The heart of his critique was a '[lack of] coherence between the church and the gospel' (1985: 131). As Elias (1976a: 59) states, '[t]he true gospel for Freire was prophetic, utopian, and revolutionary'. He was critical of the traditionalist church that dealt only with spiritual topics and did not take seriously the suffer-
20 ing of the poor. However, he was also critical of what he called the 'modernizing church', which initiated programs that sought to alleviate the suffering of select individuals, but did not challenge the existing socio-economic policies that caused the suffering of those they were helping (Freire 1985).

Freire believed the church should be prophetic. Schipani (1988) suggests that
25 for Freire a prophetic stance engaged one in a critical analysis of the political and economic realities shaping people's lives; this view is similar to Dantley's conceptualization of prophetic spirituality. A prophetic stance refuses to claim neutrality in socio-political struggles for the oppressed, and refuses to divorce the concept of spiritual salvation from socio-political liberation. The prime
30 example of the prophetic church is Christ himself, of whom Freire said: 'Christ was no conservative. Like Him, the prophetic Church must be a pilgrim, constantly on the move dying always for a continuous rebirth' (1972c).

AQ7

While Freire never went so far as to call himself a 'prophet', in many ways his work and writings demonstrated a prophetic spirit. His work was dedicated to
35 helping people gain the critical thinking skills to critique the existing order that was oppressing them, and gain the capacity and confidence to work toward bringing changes in the direction of equity and justice. As such, his work embodied the critical spirituality about which Dantley writes.

Conclusion

40 While Dantley's and Freire's spiritualities emerged out of different cultural and historical contexts, one can see the parallels between their two perspectives. Both men are educators who write from an experience of historical oppression. Both draw on the insights of particular cultural and religious traditions that offer a substantive critique of the status quo while calling individuals to create
45 new conditions where oppressed and marginalized persons can flourish and live

out the full dignity of their humanity; in that sense, both are prophetic. Both draw on a moral vision that arises out of their spirituality, informs their critique of present reality and drives them to call for what should and could be. Both look beyond present circumstances to a transcendent being (God) to guide, direct and inform their work, and in that way draw on the prophetic Biblical tradition. Both call for a pragmatic yet hopeful attitude in bringing about change for those who are marginalized and oppressed.

Dantley's (2003a) discussion of critical spirituality is directed toward a more dynamic and prophetic approach to educational administration. He suggests that any leadership that strives to bring about authentic and significant transformation must issue from 'something higher than her or himself' (2003a: 16). Freire does not make any such claims about his spirituality. Nonetheless, his work is directed toward bringing about personal and social transformation through a radical and critical pedagogy. Both educators, in their own ways, suggest that progressive educators need to look beyond their own commitments and skills to a source of motivation and strength that comes from a transcendent source.

Implications

How might progressive educators follow in the footsteps of Freire and discover their own expression of critical spirituality? First, progressive educators must look to their own religious and cultural contexts for the resources that shape their view of justice, the world and the nature of human beings. Like the subjects in Tisdell's (2000) and Zwissler's (2007) studies, one may no longer be an active participant in a religious or spiritual community, but there may still be resources for inspiration and motivation from which one can draw. What are the stories, symbols, rituals and practices of one's religio-cultural context that can lend weight and depth to one's work as an educator?

Second, progressive educators need to reflect on the sources of the moral vision that inform their work for social change. While that vision may emerge from the power analysis and critique arising out of a critical theory perspective, it may simultaneously arise from one's religious or spiritual tradition. All too often in the struggle against injustice and domination, progressives can be so focused on what they are against that they neglect to articulate what they are for. To use Freire's word, what is the utopia toward which social justice work should be heading? Where does one's vision or hope for the future come from? If spirituality links us to someone or something beyond ourselves, what is the source of that hope?

Third, like Dantley and Freire, progressive educators must continually reflect on and analyze their work in the context of the social, political and economic structures that define and limit them. In what ways does one's spiritual vision influence one's social, economic and political critique? How can one be 'prophetic' when social structures and policies put low-income and marginalized persons at a competitive disadvantage to their middle and upper middle-class peers? Likewise, what is the vision of a more equitable and just society toward which one works, and how does one's spirituality reflect or inform that vision?

Finally, persons seeking to bring about social change through teaching and social action need to come to grips with the deeper meaning of the work they do. They must be able to experience the subversive joy that West (1988) talks about. In the midst of frustration, suffering, disappointment and discouragement, they must, like Freire, choose to work and act in an attitude of hopefulness. How can one continue to live with a spirit of celebration and hope amidst the struggle to bring about change? What gives one's work meaning, and allows one to experience deep satisfaction in the face of resistance?

Rohr and Martos (1996: 97) write that '[s]pirituality is a matter of having a source of energy within which is a motivating and directing force for living'. Dantley (2003a: 6) writes:

> [spirit] is that intangible dimension of ourselves that connects us with something greater than ourselves. It literally becomes the nexus of inspiration, motivation and meaning-making in our lives. The spirit … establishes and prods our sense of justice and fairness, and it constructs for us our notions of calling, mission, or purpose.

Michael Dantley offers the concept of critical spirituality as a framework to enable progressive educators to look beyond themselves for the energy and insight to effectively carry out their work over the long haul. Paulo Freire provides a model of how one can apply that framework in a concrete cultural and historical circumstance, and serves as a guide for bringing the pedagogical, the personal and the political together in an integrated whole.

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