



Discerning Critical Hope in Educational Practices

Bozalek, Vivienne; Leibowitz, Brenda; Carolissen, Ronelle; and Boler, Megan, eds.
Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2014

Book Review

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Discerning Critical Hope is a continuation of the work of Paulo Freire, whose famous *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970) formed a basis for critical and liberation pedagogy. While his early work included hope, he reiterated the importance of that portion of his framework in *Pedagogy of Hope* (1992). A small but growing literature on critical hope is extant in the field of pedagogy, but this idea has not yet made many inroads into the published works of theologians, despite its connections with liberation theology and the other contextual and critical branches of theological discourse and activism. (Works on critical hope in the religious education and theology literature include: Bock, "Climatologists, Theologians, and Prophets," *Cross Currents*; Kim, "Seeking Critical Hope in a Global Age," *Religious Education*; and Kuhne, "A Community Pedagogy of Critical Hope," PhD dissertation). Many readers of the Wabash Center's publications will undoubtedly already teach in a way consistent with the critical and liberative themes in Freirean thought, critiquing oppressive social structures and advocating for a world grounded in God's justice and love. After deconstructing oppressive systems and our complicity in them, however, it can be difficult to provide hope in the theological classroom. I personally find it challenging to move students beyond critique and not simply leave ministry students and seminarians with the task of reconstructing their shattered beliefs and worldviews on their own.

Critical hope provides a way forward. Within this framework, critique and hopefulness cannot be separated: the point is that we need both. We need to be able to critique the world as it is, while retaining hope for a different future. Within this framework, the educator engages history with a critical lens, invokes students' imaginations, envisioning a different way, and provides space for practical steps to enact that vision.

Discerning Critical Hope includes chapters by a number of scholars, educators, and practitioners. The authors distinguish between critical hope, naïve hope, and false hope. Naïve hope is optimism without a sense of personal responsibility: expecting that things will turn out alright even if one puts forth no effort to make it so. False hope refers to the idea that working hard will result in one joining the oppressing class, a personal rather than systemic release from injustice. Several chapters critique neoliberal education and other forms of supposedly equality-based educational practices that promise merit-based successes, while in reality supporting colonial and patriarchal systems of power. These can serve as cautions for those who teach religion as well. Which of the forms of hope offered in classrooms are naïve or false hopes? Are faculty willing and able to be drawn to a deeper level of hope that can handle the paradox and mystery of critique, of looking in the face of real suffering and injustice, and struggling – hope-filled – toward a better world?

Although each chapter has its helpful points, I found chapters 2, 5, and 10 most useful. Chapter 2, “Teaching for Hope: The Ethics of Shattering Worldviews,” by Megan Boler, provides hope for my own teaching. Boler recognizes the real difficulties in engaging critical hope in the classroom: intentionally invoking a pedagogy of discomfort is, not surprisingly, uncomfortable for students and educators alike. Boler states that, when utilizing this pedagogical method, about a third of students will be receptive, about a third will be vocally and angrily resistant, and another third will be numb or apathetic. She shares a difficult classroom experience, including her fears and other feelings as she navigated dealing with resistant students. It gave me courage to continue practicing this form of teaching.

Chapter 10 provides a brief history of thinkers who have written about hope, from the Greek myth of Prometheus to Francis Bacon, Immanuel Kant, Georg Hegel, Karl Marx, W.E.B. Du Bois, Ernst Bloch, and Paulo Freire. This provides a helpful entry point into different explications of hope throughout history, especially since many of these philosophers had such a major impact on Western culture and on theology. This chapter delineates how and why critical hope differs from previous understandings of hope.

Chapter 5, “Plasticity, Critical Hope and the Regeneration of Human Rights Education,” by André Keet, explains critical hope through the lens of deconstruction, bringing Derrida and other philosophers into the conversation. Keet describes critical hope as that leftover form present after deconstruction occurs, that kernel of truth or “trace” that remains when one strips away all the systems and structures that get layered on top of that essential form. Forms must be physical, must be enacted: these traces cannot remain metaphysical or theoretical, but must be lived.

For theological educators, as we critique and deconstruct, we hope and trust there is an essential kernel there for our students to discover, a trace, a divine encounter or transcendent truth, a knowing that goes beyond the laws and organizational structures with which we so often burden our faith. As we critique, we also hope: we sense something there, something infinite, personal and universal, a never-changing essence and a dynamic Spirit of creative transformation. We can never pin it down; it is always a process of becoming. Hope is a means and an end, a way of being and a goal to strive for, but we cannot know for what we hope without critiquing the present context and imagining a different world. Nor can we truly hope unless we embody that hope in praxis, naming the problem, developing a solution, enacting it, reflecting, modifying, and trying again in a constant cycle of transformation.

Though the authors of this text do not often discuss religion or spirituality, these topics do come up at points, and the struggles to name injustice and enact a truly just and hope-filled form of education will be recognizable to many religious educators. I recommend this book to educators in the religious academy who want to enact a form of education that goes beyond the banking model, who want to challenge their students to engage in critical thinking, who need courage and a sense of solidarity from knowing they are not alone in this struggle, and who also sense a deep undercurrent of hope in taking one step, and then another, toward that imagined future.

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