



Research Articles

Liberating Faith and the Journey of Inconclusion: A Close Reading of Paulo Freire’s Essay “My Hope and Faith”

Lionnell Smith

University of Memphis

INTRODUCTION

Paulo Freire, often referred to as the “father” of critical pedagogy, is popularly recognized for his work in education and is known worldwide as one of the most significant educational thinkers of the 20th century. What is less known about Freire, but equally important, is the influence of his Christian faith on his overall educational philosophy and vision (Kirylo & Boyd, 2017). While there are only a few works in which Freire explicitly writes and speaks about his religious beliefs, those writings, nevertheless, are enough to make clear the spiritual dimensions of his thinking that had a profound influence on him. Boyd (2012) notes that 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. In this essay, I aim to contribute to the small pool of scholarship that focuses on Paulo Freire’s understanding of faith, spirituality, and theology through a close reading of his essay “My Faith and Hope” found in his book *Pedagogy of the Heart*.

In *Pedagogy of the Heart*, Freire (1997) addresses issues such as the joys and difficulties of studying and learning; the need for what he calls ‘unity within diversity’ among progressive groups on the left; the difficulties of exile; and, most of all, the enormous challenges facing Brazilian society (Roberts, 1998). Freire also reflects on exile and return, democracy and education, curiosity and learning, elections and politics, pedagogy, technology, racism, and socialism. According to Herrera (2018), Freire composes these “cogent and at times prescient essays in Portuguese during the 1990s, a period marked by the demise of the socialist world, the rise of a more hegemonic global capitalist order, and a period of political transitions and paradoxes about how to move

forward” (p. 697). One persistent theme in the book is the need for hope in the face of corruption and adversity. This is especially salient in the final essay which Freire calls “My Faith and Hope” in which he discusses his faith, while admitting to feeling less than comfortable doing so, and urges others to continue in the struggle for a less racist, sexist and classist world. The entire collection contains elements of a memoir mixed with far-sighted observations on politics and community.

Freire uses this essay to argue for a type of faith that sustains, motivates, and challenges people engaged in the struggle for a just and democratic world.

Among the last writings by Paulo Freire, “My Faith and Hope” introduces a myriad of conflicts and struggles along the journey of a liberating faith. Despite his discomfort, Freire reveals the tenets of his faith and theology which help him to grapple with issues of fatalism, racism, sexism, and nationalism. In short, Freire uses this essay to argue for a type of faith that sustains, motivates, and challenges people engaged in the struggle for a just and democratic world. In my reading of his essay, I condense Freire’s thoughts into three major themes: a) the complexity of becoming unsettled, b) the challenge of being in faith, and c) the courage of battling through hope. In my estimation, these themes represent the summation of Freire’s vision of who and what God is and the purpose of faith and hope in the fight for liberation and freedom. In the following sections, I offer a summary of literature that centers on Freire, faith, and liberation theology, a thematic analysis of Freire’s “My Faith and Hope,” and the implications of a Freirean liberating faith on racial equity in education.

PAULO FREIRE: FAITH AND LIBERATION THEOLOGY

Faith and theology had a significant impact on Freire’s worldview and political participation. As a youth, Freire became involved with an activist lay Catholic movement that had grown dissatisfied with “traditional” Catholicism, which they deemed irrelevant in the face of their nation’s pressing ills. Leopando (2017) notes that this cohort was largely composed of urban intellectuals, university students, and young professional. He writes:

These idealistic Catholic elites underwent far-reaching changes with their interpretation of faith in the modern world...they came to believe that theology must be grounded in day-to-day history and that faith cannot be confined to personal piety but must be lived out in the public sphere. (p. 45)

The general ethos of institutional Brazilian Catholicism, at the time of Freire’s birth in 1921, reflected elitism, domination, and the subjugation of the poor. The church did not view transformation of society as part of its mission; on the contrary, most clergy vigorously opposed social change as undermining the traditional Christian order (Mainwaring, 1986). As a child, Freire witnessed priests urging working-class people to accept their lowliness and poverty as God’s will—a way of earning heaven. Freire later responded:

...the truth of the matter is that we have to earn heaven here and now, we ourselves... Salvation is something to achieve, not just to hope for. This latter sort of theology is a very passive one that I cannot stomach. (Freire, 1972)

Freire, like most Catholic children, participated in catechism classes. In response to this religious training, Freire remarked that he was ‘formed and deformed’ by the Catholic Church (Freire, 2007 cited in Boyd, 2012) recalling an incident in which a priest tried to frighten students into faith through the threat of eternal damnation in hell for those who did not follow the way of the church (Freire & Hunter, 1984). Given his introduction to Christianity, there is no question as to why Freire commits to a more liberating theology and practice of faith. McLaren (1994) notes that while Marxism was a major influence on Freire, “the impact of Latin American liberation theology is less known” (p. 203).

According to Boyd (2012), many scholars have noted Freire’s resonance with liberation theology. Leopando (2017) records that given Freire’s long immersion in Brazil’s progressive Catholic activist group, “liberation theology resonated powerfully with his evolving religious and political convictions” (p. 147). Liberation theology provided Freire additional discourse with which to reconstitute the oppressed as utopians—as prophets and messengers of hope (Freire, 1984). Of this, Freire writes:

But there are a growing number of people who, whether or not they still claim to be Christians, commit themselves to the liberation of the dominated classes. Their experience teaches them that being Christian doesn’t necessarily imply being reactionary, just as being revolutionary doesn’t always imply being demonic. Being revolutionary implies struggling against oppression and exploitation, for the liberation and freedom of the oppressed, concretely and not idealistically. (p. 532)

Boff (2011) maintains that Paulo Freire is considered one of the founders of liberation theology. According to Boff (2011), Freire was “a Christian that lived his faith in a liberating way...Paulo placed the poor and oppressed at the center of his method, which is important in the concept of preferential option for the poor, a trademark of liberation theology” (p. 241). As a result of Freire’s involvement with it, liberation theology was influenced by Freirean pedagogy with many of its leading practitioners adapting it as the methodological template for their interactions with the poor (Gutiérrez, 1971; Leopando, 2012; Segundo, 1976).

For Freire, faith was a necessity, but still a challenge. As he writes, “I do not feel very comfortable speaking about my faith...I do want to mention, however, the fundamental importance of my faith in my struggle for overcoming an oppressive reality and for building a less ugly society...” (Freire, 1997, pp. 57-58). Freire’s understanding of faith reflects transformation of the oppressed which

Freire was “a Christian that lived his faith in a liberating way...Paulo placed the poor and oppressed at the center of his method, which is important in the concept of preferential option for the poor, a trademark of liberation theology”

leads to a new awareness, a new consciousness of self and society. In his view of faith, there is no neutrality or fatalism. Faith is a persuasion that urges one to make choices and to pick sides in the fight for freedom and the hope of liberation.

PAULO FREIRE: “MY FAITH AND HOPE”

Freire (1997) begins his essay “My Faith and Hope” with narratives of a visit he once made to San Francisco, California. The first narrative is about a lunch experience he had with an American religious woman and two homeless people. He recounts their conversation being “interspersed with homelessness throughout” (p. 55). The conversation reminds him of his childhood of poverty in São Paulo. This undoubtedly explains why his second narrative is of a conversation he had with a poor woman in a Catholic house in San Francisco. He writes:

I visited a Catholic house in San Francisco where poor and relegated people received help. A white woman, frazzled and with difficulty articulating her speech, looked at me. “You are American, aren't you?” With teary eyes, a suffered sparkle, she answered: “No! I am poor.” That was the first time I heard poverty used as a nationality. Feeling guilty, rather accepting the guilt the system has attributed her for her lack of success, she said she was not American...She had been expelled from existence itself. This is the extraordinary power of ideology. That woman had introjected it to such a degree that, as she spoke, it was if it were not her any longer, but ideology itself that spoke. Here discourse manifested the dominant ideology that inhabited her to the point that she was all self-criticism. (p. 56)

The troubling connection between these two narratives is the defeatist response of the homeless. In both cases, Freire engages people who had fallen from society with no hope of returning. The latter conversation, in particular, leads Freire to grapple theologically with the construction of fatalism. Responding to his

In a fatalistic reality, the oppressed, the marginalized, and the minoritized are expected to sacrifice their happiness and fulfillment with no fight and no struggle; however, Freire’s radical view of liberating faith values rebellion against injustice and inequity—the faith of the unsettled.

experience with the woman he had encountered in the Catholic house, Freire says: “Her guilt inhibited her the same way a fatalist posture would” (p. 56). This posture of defeat and of resignation troubles Freire as he understands it to be generated

within the oppressive situation and nourished by those in power. According to Freire (1997), fatalism is not an invention of the dominant to impede rebellion from the dominated, nor is it an invention whose engineering is discussed in the offices of dominant leaders. Freire (1997) understands this philosophical doctrine to be something more. To this, he says:

The fabric of the oppressive situation is what generates a fatalistic understanding of the world, of a God strangely loving toward its children, for it tests them with pain, need, and misfortune... The comprehension of a God that punishes rebelliousness against injustice and blesses resigned acceptance of antilove is natural to fatalism. (p. 56)

Freire understands fatalism to be about how the oppressed are led to understand God—an understanding which sustains their oppression both mentally and materially. Freire (1997) argues that the situation which generates this intelligence of the world and of God does not offer those

immersed in it any way out other than settling for their own pain. For Freire, this is a misguided faith and a perverted conception of God. In a fatalistic reality, the oppressed, the marginalized, and the minoritized are expected to sacrifice their lives with no fight or struggle; however, Freire's radical view of liberating faith values rebellion against injustice and inequity—the faith of the unsettled.

The Complexity of Becoming Unsettled

The first theme that emerged from my reading of Freire's "My Faith and Hope" was *the complexity of becoming unsettled*. While these themes are not meant to be sequential in an operational way, I believe that among the first steps towards the kind of liberating faith that Freire writes about is the reclamation of one's voice. Freire (1997) defines the act of becoming unsettled as "*indicating* any doubt about the legitimacy of that [fatalistic] situation [which] would mean a sin against the will of God" (emphasis mine, p. 57). In this definition, Freire unlocks an essential element in the oppressive situation which is "indication." Fatalism, or one's oppressive state—whether by means of classism, racism, or sexism—is sustained in silence. Freire (1997) proposes the kind of faith that inspires one to speak up and dares one to question the perceived will of God. *Having* doubt and *indicating* doubt exist is what separates the radicalized from the resigned and the vocal from the silent.

Johnson (2017) describes a tenet of womanism called radical subjectivity which "reflects the journey toward identity formation, self-love, and self-worth, along with a moment of epiphany that empowers a woman to escape her oppressive situation" (p. 13). This radical subjectivity mirrors what Freire means by becoming unsettled; it is a coming into oneself and an exercise of one's agency to talk back to their oppression and their oppressors. Floyd-Thomas (2006) defines radical subjectivity as:

A process that emerges as Black females in the nascent phase of their identity development come to understand agency as the ability to defy a forced naiveté in an effort to influence the choices made in one's life and how conscientization incites resistances against marginality. (p. 16)

Conscientization is a concept developed by Freire grounded in Marxist critical theory which is reflected in critical consciousness. Conscientization refers to the process of learning to perceive social, political, and economic contradictions, and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality (Freire, 1970). By urging women to engage in a radical subjectivity, womanist theorists and theologians harmonize with Freire in promoting an unsettling, liberating faith.

Like radical subjectivity, becoming unsettled is characterized by resistance [to silence] and love [of oneself]. In refusing to settle for a classist-racist-sexist ideology of God, one

In refusing to settle for a classist-racist-sexist ideology of God, one is liberated from a fatalistic mental prison of self-hatred and freed from what Freire (1970) calls a "culture of silence."

is liberated from a fatalistic mental prison of self-hatred and freed from what Freire (1970) calls a "culture of silence." As a result of this unsettling, one is radically transformed and no longer

willing to be “a mere object, responding to changes occurring around them; instead, ‘they are likely to decide to take upon themselves the struggle to change structures of society, which [until now have served to] oppress them” (p. 33). Becoming unsettled is not motivated by revenge; to the contrary, one is compelled by the need to level the playing field—that is, to fight for equity and justice. Freire (1997) writes:

The issue around liberation and its practice is not fighting against the religiousness of the popular classes...but rather overcoming... the vision of a God at the service of the strong for a God on the side of those with whom justice, truth, and love should be. What marked popular religiousness—resignation and annihilation—would be substituted with forms of resistance to outrage, to perversity. (p. 57)

Liberating faith is mission-oriented as it is committed to the divine mission of a holy rebelliousness against injustice. As Freire (1997) puts it: “This way, submission-faith toward a destiny that would reflect God’s will makes way for a spurring faith of loving rebelliousness” (p. 57). In Freire’s view of liberating faith, one is empowered with the strength to resist the dominant ideology upon which their oppressive situation is founded. In coming to know oneself through a rebellious act of self-love, one is positioned to understand God in a more meaningful way. This is to say that in becoming unsettled one’s understanding of God is freed and their purpose, inherent in God’s relationship with humanity, is revealed. Freire (1997) explains this further when he says:

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. (p. 57)

Thus, becoming unsettled not only empowers one with the strength of resistance, but also with the burden of responsibility. Perhaps here is a good place to remember the function of “indication” in Freire’s definition of becoming unsettled. By indicating doubt in a submission-faith, one not only signals or vocalizes consciousness of their oppression but the way in which their silence sustains that oppression. Likewise, in becoming unsettled, one takes on the responsibility to transform the world with their new consciousness. Here, Freire seems to echo the Apostle Paul’s words to the Roman church where he says: “And be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God” (Romans 12:2, The King James Version).

A liberating faith instigates such an unsettling which motivates and challenges one to struggle for a more people-oriented society. Freire (1997) writes that this kind of faith never allows one to say “stop, settle down; things are because they cannot be any other way” (p. 58). Becoming unsettled means rejecting the temptation of such a fatalistic position. Recalling the negativity of troubles that he and his family had faced, Freire (1997) notes the resolve of being unsettled when he says: “Far from us was the idea that we were being tested by God. On the contrary, early on I found myself convinced of the need to change the world, to repair what seemed wrong to me” (p. 57). Freire reveals a kind of liberating faith that encourages one to become unsettled with the injustices of the world and to fight for freedom.

The Challenge of Being in Faith

The second theme that emerged from my reading of Freire’s “My Faith and Hope” is *the challenge of being in faith*. Describing the active process of being in faith, Freire (1997) writes:

Still young, I read in Miguel de Unamuno that “ideas are to be had; beliefs are for one to be in.” I am *in* my faith, but because it does not immobilize me, being in faith means moving, engaging in different forms of action coherent with that faith. (emphasis mine, p. 58)

Here, Freire makes a clear distinction between *having* faith and being *in* faith. The latter requires movement and engagement. Therefore, in Freire’s vision of liberating faith, one must be committed to being active in the fight for the freedom of the oppressed. Cone (1986) contends that Christian theology is a discourse that centers on God’s liberating activity in the world on behalf of the freedom of the oppressed. He argues that “Any talk about God that fails to make God’s liberation of the oppressed its starting point is not Christian” (p. 4). Like Freire, Cone’s faith is steeped within a Christian worldview. Nonetheless, Cone’s assertion of a God actively working toward the freedom of the oppressed further explains what Freire means by being in faith. Freire (1997) understands God to be on the side of the oppressed; therefore, faith in God—or to be in faith with God—would mean being an active participant in the liberation of the disenfranchised. For Freire, this is a liberating faith—a faith in action.

Freire (1997) notes that it is to engage in action that *reaffirms* faith and never action that *negates* it. He maintains that *negating* faith is not being without it, but rather *contradicting* it through acts. So then, Freire’s view of liberating faith is a reflection of one’s actions in the fight for those on the margins of society. To cease action in this fight negates a liberating faith. As Freire (1997) writes:

Having faith, believing, is not the problem; the problem is claiming to have it and, at the same time, contradicting it in action. In this sense, coherence and a taste for it are indispensable in building a balance between what I preach and what I do. To give testimony against one’s proclaimed faith is to work against faith. (p. 58)

To question one’s proclamation of liberating faith is to question what they are *doing in* their faith. To be in a liberating faith is to fight for increased wages of low-wage workers and to advocate for the lives of people of color, LGBT+ people, and the poor. As Freire (1997) notes, “I have never

To be in a liberating faith is to fight for increased wages of low-wage workers and to advocate for the lives of people of color, LGBT+ people, and the poor.

been able to understand how it could be possible to reconcile faith in Christ with discrimination on the basis of race, sex, social class, or national origin” (p. 58). Being in a liberating faith is to weaponize one’s critical consciousness to fight for the equal

rights of all people. In short, a Freirean liberating faith requires action; it requires a response. Discussing the dramatic tension inherent in humanity, Freire (1984) says:

When this happens, many retreat, keep quiet, or adjust to the situation; others will react by undertaking new commitments. A basic difference between those who leave and those who stay is that the latter accept, as an integral part of existence, the dramatic tension between past and future, death and life, staying and going, creating and not creating...being and non-being. It is an illusion to think that human beings can escape this dramatic tension. (pp. 532-533)

Here, Freire notes that when faced with the violence of oppressors, everyone is forced to make a choice as to how they will respond. Here is his response:

I cannot permit myself to be a mere spectator. On the contrary, I must demand my place in the process of change. So the dramatic tension between the past and the future, death and life, being and non-being, is no longer a kind of dead-end for me; I can see it for what it really is: a permanent challenge to which I must respond...But rather than feeling disappointed and frightened by critical discovery of the tension in which humanity places me, I discover in that tension the joy of being. (p. 533)

Freire responds like one in a liberating faith. Committed to the process of change, Freire eschews spectatorship and finds purpose in participating in the struggle against oppression. Despite the daunting tension, he notes that there is a joy in “being” as being means doing and doing means engaging. For Freire, the joy of “being” is a consistent reaffirmation of his liberating faith, yet he warns that being in faith is not easy, as he writes “it is not easy due to the demands faith places on whoever experiences it. It demands a stand for freedom, which implies respect for the freedom of others...” (p. 58).

An extraordinary model of being in faith is the Reverend Dr. Prathia Hall who is remembered for preaching against many forms of oppression including sexism, racism, classism, ageism, heterosexism, and denominationalism (Pace, 2019). A native Philadelphian, Prathia Hall grew up in a Christian home in which her father, Rev. Berkeley Hall, was a minister committed to a social gospel-oriented church ministry. According to Pace (2019), Prathia Hall’s father was her primary mentor who shaped her initial understanding of freedom faith, “the belief that God wants people to be free and equips and empowers those who work for freedom” (p. 1) Hall’s vision of freedom faith seems to correspond meaningfully with Freire’s view of liberating faith. As Pace (2019) writes: “Through Freedom Faith...Hall’s life’s work proclaimed truth to power, mobilizing thousands to do the same” (p. 5). Like Freire, Prathia Hall was in her faith. Evident in her struggle for the civil rights of Black people—especially Black women—Hall took on the mantle of “a more spiritual understanding of faith capable of facing death for the sake of life...” (Pace, 2019, p. 87). For Hall, there were two types of courage: “...the courage that’s lived when one *lays down one’s life* for a cause, and there is that other courage that is lived when one *lives one’s life* for a cause” (pp. 87-88). For Hall, living in the face of death was the most powerful expression of freedom faith.

Being in faith requires humility and solidarity, as Freire (1997) says: “If vigorous faith can authentically emerge among the abused, it is less likely to blossom among the arrogant” (p. 58). In Freire’s view, being in faith means relinquishing one’s power over others and embracing a

blessed humiliation, or abasement, which leads to liberation. In essence, Freire makes the argument that to stand for freedom of the oppressed one must first accept that they are in need of salvation from oppression. For this reason, Freire (1997) says, “*salvation* implies liberation, engagement in a struggle for it. It is as if the fight against exploitation, its motivation, and the refusal of resignation were paths to salvation. The process of salvation cannot be realized without rebelliousness” (p. 58). In Freire’s view, this fight and struggle against oppression occurs on the terrain of faith. This is what it means to be in [a liberating] faith.

The Courage of Battling through Hope

The third theme that emerged from my reading of Freire’s essay was *the courage to battle through hope*. A liberating faith not only motivates one to divorce from resigned silence and to act against oppression; it also encourages one to maintain hope in a future of liberation. In his essay, Freire (1997) recalls a conversation in which one of his friends questions his optimism for the future. According to Freire (1997), these questions came on the heels of two prominent political events that occurred in Brazil. The first was the acquittal of former president Fernando Collor who, according a 1994 article in the *New York Times*, had been charged with corruption which forced him to resign in 1992 after nationwide protests. The second event occurred later in 1995 when the execution of a young assailant was nationally televised. According to Escobar (1995) in *The Washington Post*:

[Cristiano Moura] Mesquita and two companions held up a store... and then became involved in a shootout with police, in broad daylight and outside one of the city’s principal shopping centers. Such public explosions of violence are a fact of life here. But when he was summarily executed on the street after his arrest by a military policeman – a scene witnessed by dozens of people and captured by a passing television cameraman – Mesquita ceased being a marginal and became a person, quite human and quite dead...he was dragged away from the camera and toward the back of a van. Although almost out of camera range when shot – only his legs were visible – the video clearly showed Cpl. Flavio Ferreira Carneiro firing three times. There were also witnesses to the killing who had a clear view of Mesquita. (p. A10)

Notice how Mesquita is discursively labeled as a *marginal*. Known for their awful, inhuman, and unchecked power, *marginals* hijacked busses, killed police officers, and dealt drugs (Escobar, 1995). In life, this is how Mesquita was known, but in death, he ‘ceased being a marginal’ and became something more—he became human. In *Pedagogy of the Heart*, Ana Marie Araujo Freire (Freire’s second wife) makes note of this event. She writes:

Even though we have broken the yoke of colonialism, we have not been able to overcome the day-to-day killings by those in power against the dispossessed classes that are labeled by the ruling class as *outlaws* and *marginals*. In truth, these so-called outlaws and marginals are excluded from the system and are forbidden to have knowledge, desires, power, and to be fully human in our societies. (p. 88)

Amidst scandals and government corruption, Paulo Freire also bemoaned the violent deaths of the oppressed, yet his inquiring friend came to hear that Freire's hope and optimism were still alive. Freire (1997) notes that: "[My friend's] question increased my responsibility because I realized that, in my hope, he was seeking support for his" (p. 59). Thus, in Freire's view, to sustain liberating faith, one must maintain hope.

Freire (1997) argues that hope is rooted in inconclusion, and that when inconclusion is accepted, it becomes critical to the potential of a perpetual hope. He says: "Critical acceptance of my inconclusion immerses me in permanent search. What makes me hopeful is not so much the certainty of the *find*, but my movement in *search*. It is not possible to search without hope..." (p. 59). If faith is a battlefield upon which one contends for the freedom of the oppressed, then hope is the way one moves on that battlefield. Hope, then, is about one's process or journey to liberation or freedom. In *Pedagogy of Freedom*, Freire (1998) connects the relationship of hope to the possibility of historical transformation: "Hope is a natural, possible and necessary impetus in the context of our unfinishedness. Hope is an indispensable seasoning in our human, historical experience. With it, instead of history we would have pure determinism" (p. 69). As noted earlier, Freire's understanding of God is rooted in the historical. God is a presence in history but does not preclude one from making history. Thus, hope is essential to one's ability to impact history in the fight for freedom and liberation. As Johnson (2012) describes it, this hope is pragmatic—a good earthly hope rooted in one's faith in God.

Freire's understanding of God is rooted in the historical. God is a presence in history but does not preclude one from making history. Thus, hope is essential to one's ability to impact history in the fight for freedom and liberation.

In *Pedagogy of Hope*, Freire (1996) explains "Hope of liberation does not mean liberation already. It is necessary to fight for it... the more subjected and less able to dream [we] are, the less able will human beings be to face the challenges... the less hope there will be for the oppressed and the more peace there will be for the oppressors" (p. 44). Darder (2017) describes Freire's conception of hope as radical. She contends that:

Freire's radical hope is anchored in his lifelong held revolutionary commitment to struggle against all forms of poverty, to contest the arbitrary power of the society's ruling class, to overcome the dehumanizing forces of violence within schools and society, and to confront the destructive consequences of capitalist dominion over the earth. (p. 77)

Darder (2017) reveals that, for Freire, hope denotes strategy without which there are no possibilities or futures for the oppressed. Therefore, a Freirean liberating faith requires hope in the journey for liberation and freedom—the journey of inconclusion.

Freire (1997) proposes that to preserve hope it is necessary to deal critically with the "disrespect of the popular classes" evident in the "indecent salaries paid to teachers in basic education, the lack of respect for public property, the excesses of government, unemployment, destitution, and hunger" (p. 59). Hope, then, is not only reflected in *how* one moves in the fight for freedom, but

also *where* one moves on the battlefield of faith. That is to say that hope has targets and is intentional as it is used to supplant systems of oppression with a future of freedom. These targets of hope constitute what Freire (1997) calls “the pornography of our lives” as the oppressed are expected to perform their oppression at the expense of their humanity and for the pleasure of their oppressors. “And so does discrimination, be it against blacks, women, homosexuals, the indigenous, the fat, the old” Freire says, for historically, these comprise communities of the oppressed. Therefore, as Freire (1997) says, “It is imperative that we maintain hope even when the harshness of reality may suggest the opposite...the struggle for hope means the denunciation...of all abuses, schemes, and omissions. As we denounce them, we awaken in others and ourselves the need, and also the taste, for hope” (p. 59).

A LIBERATING FAITH: IMPLICATIONS ON RACIAL JUSTICE IN EDUCATION

In his essay “My Faith and Hope,” Freire (1997) centers more broadly on “the oppressed” as a conflation of social categories affected by systemic injustices in the world. In rarified cases, he identifies specific social categories such as race, class, sex, and sexual orientation. These are communities that Freire sees as historically and continually oppressed. Despite this conflation of social constructions, Freire’s critiques regarding faith, religion, and theology are undeniably more class-oriented. In this section, I offer a discussion of what I see as the racial justice implications of Freire’s liberating faith. Specifically, I imagine how the three themes of a Freirean liberating faith, as I have explicated, might be used to inform actionable measures towards racial justice in education.

Freire’s view of liberating faith is the need to become unsettled which is manifested in one’s choice to speak up about social and racial injustice.

Speaking Up: A Demonstration of Faith

As I noted, one aspect of Freire’s view of liberating faith is the need to become unsettled which is manifested in one’s choice to speak up about social and racial injustice. Becoming unsettled motivates one to abandon silence about practices that contribute to systemic and institutional racism. A great example of this is Dr. Christopher House, a Pentecostal pastor and an associate professor of communication studies. According to Post (2020), House, who taught as a part-time online instructor for Liberty University, announced his resignation on Facebook a day after the university’s president, Jerry Falwell Jr., tweeted an image of a face mask depicting figures in blackface and dressed as a Klansman. In his resignation letter, House responded to Falwell’s comments saying:

As an African American man and Christian pastor, I am horrified and appalled that the president of the largest Christian university in the world would knowingly and intentionally use images that evoke a deep history of racial terror for people of color in the U.S., specifically individuals who look like me, for the purpose of a political statement to the Governor of Virginia. (Post, 2020, para. 2)

According to Post (2020), House described how recent acts of racial violence made Falwell's tweet particularly abhorrent. For instance, House stated: "For [Falwell] to use those images right now in this moment when black and brown communities are grieving the murder of George Floyd is pure evil, ungodly and immoral" (Post, 2020, para. 8). House demonstrates a Freirean liberating faith by becoming unsettled with the taunting, racist discourse of the university's leadership. By resigning publicly and loudly, House sets a precedent for vocalizing intolerance for the racial insensitivity often performed by teachers, administrators, and students. This is becoming unsettled—divorcing one's silence to call out racists acts that occur in our schools, colleges, and universities.

Faith in the Flesh: A Decolonized Perspective

A Freirean liberating faith not only motivates one to become unsettled about the racism that occurs in schooling and education, but it also encourages one to be in faith. Being in faith moves beyond raising one's voice; it requires engagement and action in the fight for liberation and freedom. In this view, being in faith is a symbolic interaction in which meaning is achieved in a social context. A Freirean liberating faith invites one to engage in *Koinonia*—a concept that refers to "fellowship" or "joint participation." In Freire's view of liberating faith, one fights alongside others in pursuit for racial justice. For educators, this can begin with curriculum reforms and actions leading to decolonized pedagogies.

Hanna (2019) questions how educators can promote what she calls "pedagogies in the flesh" in the classroom to actively participate in effecting change through the dismantling of hierarchy, entitlement, and privilege. She argues that pedagogies in the flesh "offer the opportunity to concretize theory into practice, allowing us to pursue actively a society that uses flesh and blood experiences to actualize our dreams for liberation and healing" (p. 231). She argues for teaching that moves students from theory to practice, or as Paulo Freire has called it, *praxis*. Freire (1970) defines *praxis* as "reflection and action directed at the structures to be transformed" (p. 126). Through *praxis*, teacher-students and students-teachers can acquire a critical consciousness to address racist ideologies that shape education practices and join the struggle for racial equity. Through the *praxis* of decolonizing pedagogies, educators exercise a Freirean liberating faith, and in the spirit of *Koinonia*, they do not fight alone in the struggle for liberation and freedom. The practice of decolonizing syllabi, curriculum, and pedagogy is an act of faith through which educators engage their students with a community of critically conscious voices that actively work together to transform systemic structures of racial injustice.

Hope for Educators: A Fight of Faith

Freire (1997) writes that "unhopeful educators contradict their practice. They are men and women without *address*, and without destination. They are lost in history" (p. 60). For Freire, hope gives educators direction, or strategy, for how to respond to social injustices. Hope, then, is essential to the life and work of an educator. For this reason, Freire (1997) continues in saying:

In an effort to maintain hope alive, since it is indispensable for happiness in school life, educators should always analyze the comings and goings of social reality. These are the movements that make a higher reason for hope possible. (p. 60)

Freire (1997) describes the historical events that perpetuate social realities such as racial violence, and more specifically, state-sanctioned murders of Black and Brown people, as movements that give reason for hope. For Freire, hope is not just a response, but it is the responsibility for those in faith. Therefore, Freire's view of liberating faith involves a commitment to the continual struggle for justice, for freedom, and for liberation.

In her book *Teaching Community: A Pedagogy of Hope*, bell hooks (2003) reimagines pedagogy as a liberatory praxis within and beyond the borders of traditional schooling—a praxis through which educators can contribute to the possible end of racism and white supremacy. For hooks (2003), this praxis is marked by educators' commitment “to study and learn new ways of thinking and teaching so that the work we do does not reinforce systems of domination, of imperialism, racism, sexism or class elitism have created a pedagogy of hope” (p. xiv). An ardent follower of Freire's philosophies on education, hooks (2003) acknowledges the need for hope in the battle for liberation and freedom, especially in education. She contends, “Hopefulness empowers us to continue our work for justice even as the forces of injustice may gain greater power for a time. As teachers we enter the classroom with hope” (p. xiv). This hope is what Cornel West (2004) calls a tragicomic hope which rooted in a love of freedom. It yields a courage to hope for betterment against the odds without a sense of revenge or resentment. These understandings of hope coalesce with Freire's view of liberating faith as hope becomes inextricably linked to pedagogy as an ongoing liberatory praxis and response to the racism that permeates our schools and our society. A Freirean liberating faith admonishes educators to address the systemic racism that afflicts us and our students with a radical hope, for as Freire (1997) writes, “whatever the perspective through which we appreciate authentic educational practice...its process implies hope” (p. 60).

CONCLUSION

While Paulo Freire is known worldwide for his educational philosophies, there is so much to learn from his theological ideas and religious views. As a child born into meager means, Freire found within his understanding of God a call to change the world and repair what he saw wrong with it. Freire's comprehension of God reveals the kind of faith committed to a lifelong struggle against any form of oppression—be it classist, racist, sexist, or otherwise. This is a liberating faith—a faith that disrupts silence, motivates action, and is sustained in hope. Through Freire's view of liberating faith, educators committed to social and racial justice are able to reimagine educational practices that respond to the injustices of society. By speaking up and talking back to racial injustices, committing to decolonization in education and schooling, and engaging in radical hope, educators embody a Freirean liberating faith which is committed to the journey of liberation and freedom—the journey of inconclusion.

REFERENCES

- Boff, L. (2011). The influence of Freire on scholars: A select list. In J. Kirylo (Ed.), *Paulo Freire: The man from Recife* (pp. 235–269). Peter Lang.
- Boyd, D. (2012). The critical spirituality of Paulo Freire. *Int'l Journal of Lifelong Education*, 31(6): 759-778. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02601370.2012.723051>
- Brazil Ex-Chief Acquitted in Bribe Case. (1994, December 13). *New York Times*. Retrieved from https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A174508842/OVIC?u=tel_a_uofmem&sid=OVIC&xid=b_1a99d0c

- Cone, J. H. (1986). *Speaking the truth: Ecumenism, liberation, and black theology*. William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company.
- Darder, A. (2017). *Reinventing Paulo Freire: A pedagogy of love* (2nd Ed.). Routledge.
- Escobar, G. (1995, March 21). Marginal death in Rio: Televised police killing of young gunman confronts crime-torn city with moral issue. *The Washington Post*, A10.
- Floyd-Thomas, S. M. (2006). *Deeper shades of purple: Womanism in religion and society*. New York University Press.
- Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. Bloomsbury.
- Freire, P. (1972). Conscientizing as a way of liberating. *LADOC Keyhole Series*, 3–10.
- Freire, P. (1984). Education, liberation and the church. *Religious Education*, 79(4): 524-545. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0034408400790405>
- Freire, P. & Hunter, C. (1984). Know, practice and teach the gospels. *Religious Education*, 79(4), 547-548. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0034408400790406>
- Freire, P. (1996). *Pedagogy of hope*. Continuum.
- Freire, P. (1997). *Pedagogy of the heart* (D. Macedo & A. Oliveira, Trans.). Bloomsbury.
- Freire, P. (1998). *Pedagogy of freedom: Ethics, democracy and civic courage*. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.
- Freire, P. (2007). *Thinking with Paulo Freire* (Melbourne, Australia: ACC Commission on Christian Education).
- Gutiérrez, G. (1973). *A theology of liberation: History, politics, and salvation* (C. Inda & J. Eagleson, Trans.). Orbis Books.
- Hanna, K. B. (2019). Pedagogies in the flesh: Building an anti-racist decolonized classroom. *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies*, 40(1): 229-244. <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/719770>
- Herrera, L. (2018). Pedagogy of the heart. *International Review of Education*, 64: 697–699. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11159-018-9737-7>
- hooks, b. (1995). *Teaching community: A pedagogy of hope*. Routledge.
- Johnson, A. E. (2012). *The forgotten prophet: Bishop Henry McNeal Turner and the African American prophetic tradition*. Lexington Books.
- Johnson, K. P. (2017). *The womanist preacher: Proclaiming womanist rhetoric from the pulpit*. Lexington Books.
- Kirylo, J. D. & Boyd, D. (2017). *Paulo Freire: His faith, spirituality, and theology*. Sense Publishers.
- Leopando, I. (2017). *A pedagogy of faith: The theological vision of Paulo Freire*. Bloomsbury.
- Mainwaring, S. (1986). *The Catholic Church and politics in Brazil, 1916-1985*. Stanford University Press.
- McLaren, P. (1994). Postmodernism and the death of Politics: A Brazilian reprieve. In P. McLaren & P. Leonard (Eds.), *Politics of liberation: Paths from Freire*. Routledge.
- Pace, C. (2019). *Freedom faith: The womanist vision of Prathia Hall*. The University of Georgia Press.
- Post, K. (2020, May 29). Liberty professor resigns after Falwell's 'Governor Blackface' tweet. Retrieved from <https://religionnews.com/2020/05/29/liberty-professor-resigns-after-falwells-governor-blackface-tweet/>
- Roberts, P. (1998). Freire, P. (1997) *Pedagogy of the Heart*, New York, Continuum. *Australian Journal of Teacher Education*, 23(1): 44-55. <http://dx.doi.org/10.14221/ajte.1998v23n1.9>
- Segundo, J. L. (1976). *The liberation of theology* (J. Drury, Trans.). Orbis Books.
- West, C. (2004). *Democracy matters: Winning the fight against imperialism*. Penguin Books.



Lionell “Badu” Smith, *University of Memphis*, is a doctoral student in the Department of Communication and Film where he studies rhetoric, media, and cultural studies. In his research, he explores the intersections of language, race, power and identity; critical [communication and rhetorical] pedagogies; and media representations of Black men. He has published in *Departures in Critical Qualitative Research (DCQR)* and *Listening: Journal of Communication Ethics, Religion, and Culture*. He has presented papers at various conferences and spoken on a number of research panels. He is an award-winning educator with nearly 10 years of teaching experience and a 2018 Fulbright-Hays Fellow.