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CRITICAL THEORY IN CHRISTIAN EDUCATION

Eugene S. Gibbs*

Richard E. Allison should be honored for his years as Christian education professor, pastor, and denominational leader. In my years at ATS I have heard numerous students comment on things they have learned from Richard's classes. These have been, for the most part, not general statements about his "good courses," or "I learned to like CE," but specific descriptions of content meaningful to the student. One recently told me that the discipling course with Richard had "changed my life." Another mentioned Richard's visit to the student's church. Students have always known that he personally cared about them and their ministries.

One quality that has impressed me since coming to ATS in 1994 has been Richard's ability to keep up to date in the field. This is not easy since Christian education is multifaceted. Think about having to be expert in childhood, youth, and adult education; in curriculum development, leadership training, and educational psychology. In addition, ATS has courses that look at biblical foundations of CE, history, and philosophy of education as part of the CE program.

One way Richard did this was by keeping abreast of the latest textbooks. He rarely used the same text two years or even two quarters running. If new materials come to the market on a regular basis, this takes up much time and a lot of energy. Occasionally he asked my opinion, but he often had already seen the new text and had some ideas of his own. He always looks for something better for the students.

The purpose of this paper is to continue in the academic spirit of Richard E. Allison by examining a perspective fairly new to education and almost completely new for consideration in Christian education. It is called "critical theory." Before getting into critical theory, one should review the position of Christian education within the discipline of education, broadly defined.

I like to say that Christian education is the use of the discipline of education in the accomplishment of church-related ministry. This is similar to the use of biblical studies or theology or writing to accomplish ministry. This means that we want to use the structure and processes for our own ends. Our

*Eugene Gibbs (Ed.D., University of the Pacific) is Professor of Christian education at ATS.

"ends" as Christian educators is the spiritual growth of Christian people. All the art and science of education need to be brought to bear on the task. For Christian educators, all we can know of biblical studies and theology need to be brought to bear also. In fact the biblical/theological disciplines and education with its social science and philosophical foundations need to be brought together in compatible, or sometimes parallel, ways to impact spiritual growth and ministry.

To use the discipline of education means learning as much as possible about that discipline. It means learning beyond the knowledge or recall level through the levels of comprehension and analysis to evaluation. That is the level at which we educators judge the value of material or activities according to specific criteria. This would include appraising, assessing, critiquing, examining, and validating. Thus, it is not limited to rote memory exercises, as valuable as memory is when appropriately used. Educators in the church must have thoroughly internalized the basic content and practices of education. By doing so they will be able creatively to use both content and practice to meet the needs of given contexts, and do so in a complimentary way to biblical/theological understandings. It can be said that the study of God's Word and theology is using God's *special revelation*. The study of education with its foundation subjects is using God's *natural revelation*. This is especially the case when human development and learning are the foci. These topics help us understand how humans are created. Their study allows us to "work with God rather than against God" in the matter of creation. Even so, the special revelation of God's Word must be held as superior and normative for practice. We might say that we judge our understanding of natural revelation by special revelation.

Since education as a discipline is both multi-faceted and dynamic, one must be a life-long learner to keep hem being left behind. It is especially at this point that the consideration of critical theory is useful. Influential books and articles by Giroux, Wexler, Aronowitz and Apple have been published recently in the United States, by Misgeld in Canada and Bates in Australia. These authors tend to see critical theory in education as a movement. It is quite strong at universities such as the University of Wisconsin and the State University of New York campuses.

Critical theory in sociology can be traced to the Frankfurt School of social theory in Europe prior to World War II. Its roots go back further to social egalitarian movements in the 19th century. Its influence specifically in education are largely a product of the 1970s and, even more so, the 1980s (Morrow and Torres, 1995). The Frankfurt emphasis was on authoritarian

structures and practices in families, especially of the working class. This flowed over into schooling and its structures. These academics believed that all this was the natural result of historical materialism within the centralized education system of Germany.

The Frankfurt family studies took the position that families had lost their inherent authority to the materialistic state so that authority became a source of domination rather than playing a constructive role. Some authority forms were labeled "irrational" and were seen as ends in themselves. Other authority forms were labeled "rational" and were seen as voluntary dependence and in one's own best interest. Rational authority should serve in education as a means of enlightenment. Irrational forms would not lead beyond themselves. Authority should gradually abate as the learner matures. Critical theory became the study of means to resist the production and reproduction of irrational authority. All this work faded for decades when the chief proponents, Horkheimer, Adorno, Marcuse, and Pollock, failed in their attempts to mobilize the working class against the authority of Hitler (Friesenhahn, 1985). It was taken up again in Germany in the 1950s, but not with the earlier fervor. In the late 1960s, due somewhat to radical student movements, the debate rekindled and continues up and down even today.

Some of the Frankfurt interest can be seen in America in the work of Ivan Illich and "deschooling," in the radical critiques of modern education by Paul Goodman, Edgar Freidenberg, and Neil Postman, and in the structural-functional education model of Pasrons, the economic-reproductive theories of Althusser, and the cultural-reproduction models (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977). They seemed to have in common the view that formal rationalization systems (bureaucracies) tend to reproduce themselves at higher and higher levels through a process shaped and reinforced by social-class antagonisms. It is also clear in the non-education rights movements, e.g., civil, environmental, and feminist.

The current status of this movement in the U.S. is captured in a 1994 review by Barry Kanpol. Societies and their educational institutions around the world are experiencing upheaval, transition, and change. Even in the face of this, U.S. schools remain stuck in the social efficiency model of the 1920s. Their function seems to be to implement the most efficient ways to increase standardized achievement test scores. Besides the impact of this on students, it is commonly seen as a way of demonstrating teacher productivity. Teachers are judged by how well their students perform on the tests. Schools, in direct relationship with this model, prepare students for a market economy. They do

it, according to the argument of Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis (1976), in unequal ways. "That is, race, class, and gender are distributed unevenly and unequally into the work force in massive ways" (in Kanpol, 1994 p 26). This seems to expand year after year with over 100 million standardized tests given every year.

From the President down to local school authorities, and from pre-school to higher education, this model is applied and given support. So it has been since the 1920s. Fewer teachers and larger classes appear to mean a more efficient and productive school. These factors are joined to the idea that there is a single, or at least very few, curriculum and pedagogy that fits all students.

Critical theory in education is, in large part, a reaction and a response to the traditional social efficiency model and its attendant problems. The doing of critical theory in education, called critical pedagogy, takes seriously individual human differences. It seeks to "unoppress" the oppressed with the desire to relieve suffering with hope. It incorporates a moral vision of human justice and decency. It calls upon educators to have a prophetic commitment in humility to pit "decisions against despair...against oppression, barrenness, and exile from freedom...." to become a guiding light (Kanpol 1994, 27). Justice and compassion are the goals of critical theory in education. Its purveyors see it as a moral enterprise.

Postmodernism is generally supportive of critical theory, if support can come from so amorphous and rarefied a philosophical argument.

> Often, questions arising outs of postsmodernism are as follows: Whose world view is it we are trying to understand? How is singular and group cultural identity constructed? How is knowledge transmitted? How many ways do people learn? Can there be any form of knowledge? How many realities are there? In its most conservative sense, postmodernism only tries to understand forms of difference, multiple interpretations, multiple ways of knowing or constructing knowledge. This postmodernism could be called the phenomenology or hermeneutics of knowledge (Kanpol 1994, 32).

Critical theory in education seems built around several contrasts. These inform practice as well as theory. In this essay only a few of the most important will be considered due to space limitations. The first is hegemony contrasted with counterhegemony. Hegemony in education occurs when the elements of specifically public education (administrative, teacher and student experience) are not questioned and when the school's values and actions are

viewed as commonsensical despite the quest for community and enlightenment. This is related to what has in other places been called the "hidden curriculum." Those values, norms, and ideologies are passed on as common sense. These include competition, a limited definition of success, discipline, racial and gender and ethnic stereotypes. All school elements, including students, construct what it means to be a nerd, a jock, a brain, etc. These then form the unquestioned and dominant values and meanings of the educational setting. These are used, sometimes unconsciously, to alienate, wound, and subordinate people. Hegemony acts to control individuals and groups. In so doing feeling structures are constructed. These usually produce inequalities based on socioeconomic status (Oakes 1985 and Bowles and Gintis 1976). The commonsense quality of these feeling structures and inequalities typically leave them unchallenged.

Counterhegemony is the struggle of hope and affirmation that teachers and students or teacher groups or teachers and administrators themselves can make meaning of their social situation. It moves away from hegemonic control and it merges resistant groups. When done on a piece-meal basis it often results in sanctions against the resisters. But, even at that, gains, perhaps one step at a time, may well be made.

The next contrast is deskilling versus reskilling. Deskilling is when the teachers' work is reduced merely to its technical aspects. Teachers are excluded from curricular development, left to strive with someone else's plans for someone else's goals. The actual context for the teaching is not considered. This separates the concept from the execution. This all seems to be done with efficiency and mastery in mind without considering the great human differences, particularly in relation to ethnicities.

Reskilling occurs when teachers and others become aware of deskilling. Such things as technical control, decision making in regard to curriculum, use of stagnant methodologies, and the reproduction of values that oppress, alienate, and subordinate people. Next, when people practice those actions that move away from deskilling in ways such as using alternative methodologies, opening policy decisions to a wider audience, especially the local, encouraging group solidarity over value-laden issues. This should be passed on to students as part of the task of community building.

The third, and the last considered here, is negative competition versus positive competition. In almost every school there is the challenge to be the best. This might be in academics, athletics, drama, debate, what-have-you. Typically a status and a good deal of prestige go with these successes. To be the best of many is good and is rewarded (Prestige can be said to be the "currency"

of the school for students.). Not to be the best, especially if far below the best, means suffering social and academic consequences. This is negative because it is a form of survival of the fittest. One succeeds at the expense of others. This is what the "normal curve" is all about. Those above the mean are winners, some great winners (95 percentile, etc.), and those below the mean are losers. In this system there can be no winners without also having to have losers. This need to be the top winner is so strong in our society that "personal achievement and success includes an erosion of our traditional commitment to equality" (Purpel 1989). This kind of competition brings about negative feelings between people and it tends to rule out participation for enjoyment's sake. This is pervasive and carries over into the home, peer group, etc. This one issue may be what results in some adults remembering high school as the best times in their lives, never equaled, and some remembering it as a living hell.

Positive competition means seeing multiple aspects of competition. One aspect can be called "striving." This is where the person strives to do better at some task. The standard is past performance. This is one of the things people in the individual sports do. The sprinter may try to beat opponents, but also to set a personal best time. The high jumper may want the gold medal, but also wants to jump higher on each outing. From the perspective of critical theory this is acceptable only when each individual makes the choice to accept one aspect or another. Another aspect for teachers might include choosing to use alternative methodologies, changing grading procedures, organizing cooperative learning groups, etc. without "losing" to other teachers who focus exclusively on prepping students for some standardized test. The truly critical pedagogue will help to raise consciousness of students to the negative and positive facets of competition and warn about those that undermine equal social relations.

Other contrasts which cannot be mentioned here are deviancy versus resistance, multiculturalism versus similarity with difference, individualism versus individuality, authoritarianism versus authority, control versus democracy, traditional empowerment versus critical empowerment, and traditional literacy versus critical literacy.

Having only briefly and summarily reviewed critical theory, how, it might be asked, does this relate to Christian education? At least four concerns come to mind and follow: 1. Concern for all persons; 2. Care for the oppressed; 3. A vision of the church as a fellowship of "cognitive aliens;" and 4. Individualized education within a community of compassion. Critical theory seeks to value all persons. This is a Christian value, too. However, only one example need serve to show how that is not being lived out very well by the church. Sunday is often called the most segregated day of the week. Oh, but

people of different races and ethnic groups choose to be separate. I challenge that response. For many of the same reasons given by critical theory people are conditioned by "hidden curriculum" and hegemonic values to think that there are no alternatives.

Was it Christian concern or state and local laws that prompted churches to make their facilities available to people with physical limitations? How long has it been since churches started programming specifically for special ed. kids? Ten years, twenty, surely not much more even when these children have been obvious for generations. Why do we still have "social class churches?" How can such an affluent nation, full of Christians, have more homeless people than any other developed nation? Where are those Christians? The church and its educative institutions need to be much more aggressive in reaching out to their neighbors.

Critical theory is concerned for the oppressed. While some churches have begun to extend themselves to the oppressed, the idea of partnering with oppressed to the point of sharing the oppression in order to overcome it is not a popular church idea. We would rather give a little money to urban missions or sign a petition. How many church members, from "comfortable" churches, give of themselves to those who are truly oppressed, in this country and around the world? We might even vote for important issues or send a letter to congress, but how many belong to political action groups or those Christian organizations that work directly with oppressed people here and abroad?

Critical theory is concerned with thinking in new and different ways about the status quo. Christians need to support and be engaged in prophetic discourse concerning the values of the world (dominant culture) and its incursion into the church. The church ought to be influencing the world rather than the other way around. This should be done in word and deed, by the testimony of sound thinking and communication as well as by living Christlike lives. Pietism should be supported, but the world has convinced us that religion has to be privatized, held in individualism and not set the standard in values, interpersonal relations, and institutional structure.

Critical theory is concerned with the development of community. Churches need to give more time and effort at creating true, Christian community where compassion is the norm in all interpersonal relations. Covered-dish suppers, and Sunday morning worship contribute to community development, but much more must be done. The sense of community is so weak that many Christians put on their "church face" on Sunday and take it off for the rest of the week. Today's busy life style, at least for the middle-class, must be attacked. It is one of the obvious culprits capturing the time and energy

of Christians who could use that time and energy to contribute to compassionate communities of Christ in their churches. We maintain this busyness, I believe, because the world would apply sanctions if we did not. We would be thought to be poor parents, not interested in betterment, culturally backward, etc. We would be shamed. This must be overcome. Critical theory as applied to education is something that Christian educators need to keep an eye on. We need to be aware of how it might contribute to our purposes, especially when they approach those of critical theory. We have been captured by a schooling model of education for our churches and other institutions and often we bear the same problems. Critical theory is seeking to address some of those problems. The church certainly needs to break the schooling mold and critical theory might help us by giving some direction. On the other hand, we need to engage critical theory carefully and not "baptize" the whole of it. We must always carefully view all ideas through the lenses of faith. I think we can find Scriptural support for some of what critical theory in education has to say.

This essay began noting that Richard E. Allison successfully kept his seminary courses up to date, on the cutting edge. Much of this, I am convinced, was due to his inquiring mind. Richard wants to know. He wants his students to know. He wants his denomination to know. He wants the wider expression of the church to know. The task of Christian education in the new century is to lead the way in knowing.

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