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Course Goals

In several of my Christian ethics courses that are offered to seminary students, I include the topic of domestic violence. If they are not already doing so, most of the seminary students in my classes will work as religious professionals when they complete their current theological degree program. In their professional capacities, it is likely that they will not only encounter situations of domestic violence but be entrusted with responsibility for responding in some manner that helps to stop it.

However, in teaching about domestic violence my goal is to do more than train effective service providers for families in crisis. Undoubtedly, I want religious professionals to be taught some basic information about domestic violence so that fewer of them will further endanger women and children's lives due to ignorance or failure to consult the appropriate community resources. Yet, religious leaders also function as "organic intellectuals" within our communities. As such they need to be equipped with the intellectual skills to offer theological analyses of that which fosters violence within intimate human relationships as well as that which nurtures nonviolent, just relations. Hopefully, this will enable them to become leaders who discourage the former and promote the latter. Moreover, they need to develop their abilities to decipher and articulate how sociocultural, economic, and political factors infuse those theological claims and Biblical interpretations that foster violent or nonviolent behavior within intimate relationships.

Pedagogically, I try to incorporate opportunities for learning that combine these ingredients of practical training and theoretical facility. Specifically, I guide students through experiential exercises that we enact in the classroom and written assignments based on course readings. One of the biggest challenges of working with this experiential method is the ways in which the varied social experiences that students bring to these exercises impact their learning process. All learning is filtered through the prior experiences that the students bring. Experiential exercises can provoke student engagement of attitudes and opinions to which they are already predisposed in more obvious ways. This can open the way to greater possibilities for teaching and learning, for, even when one encounters a stubborn impasse to student learning, at least the roots of the "blockage" become more easily recognizable and may be directly addressed.

Methods and Practices

One written exercise that I have utilized concerns male violence against women (which is only one form among many that domestic violence takes). This exercise is a component of a basic course introducing Christian ethics to seminarians.

Responding to Violence against Women: A Sample Exercise

The students are asked to read selected articles in an anthology called *A Troubling in My Soul: Womanist Perspectives on Evil and Suffering* edited by Emilie M. Townes (Orbis Books, 1993). Then they are given an accompanying written exercise that requires them to choose one of the assigned articles that they have read in the anthology. Then, based upon the ideas in that article, the student answers the following question: How would you respond to a woman who comes to meet with you and tells you that her husband, the church treasurer, has hit her? The students are instructed to assume that they are part of the pastoral staff of the church where the woman and her husband are members.

My goals for this exercise include exposing students to creative methods for doing Christian theology that engage issues of gender, race, violence, and power, and inspiring critical thinking about theology specifically related to suffering. The exercise gives them an opportunity to “try on” these creative theological ideas and apply them to a concrete situation where violence has occurred. Perhaps most importantly, the students are able to practice their skills for making ethical judgments that link theoretical ideas about faith with sound church leadership practices. They rehearse what it means to decide that a particular theological approach prompts a certain ethical response. And, conversely they must think about how the particular ethical problem of violence against women could and should inform them in formulating the theological foundations of their response. For instance, if part of their response is to have a discussion about faith or prayer with the woman, what theological ideas will they uphold in the language that they use? In writing their papers, students can explain their process for making ethical judgments and articulate the theology that forms the basis for that judgment. Because the students are “trying on” the ideas of theologians they have read, they are provided with a range of theories about suffering and resistance that include experiential examples — they do not start “from scratch.” But, they also do not have to commit themselves to the theology that the exercise requires them to use. An additional goal of mine is for the students to be able to think through what constitutes right action. As they are confronted by the exegesis of suffering in the readings and the problem of male violence presented by the hypothetical congregant, what actions on their part would help to diminish suffering and harm? What actions should they take that would promote just, nonviolent conditions?

Experience-based Responses

I find that the nature of experiential exercises such as this, especially when discussions of

African-American communal experiences are included, invite students to reflect upon their own social identities. For instance, a few white students exhibited some resistance to the assignment because it appeared to them to be based upon writings about the experience of "people who are not part of my experience." There was considerable difficulty for these white Christian students in recognizing and thoughtfully engaging categories of Christian theology (e.g. redemption, sin, servant discipleship) that the initial step of the assignment required. The emphasis in the readings upon contemporary issues and historical experiences of African Americans seemed to make the theological ideas imperceptible. Perhaps it became a struggle to "experience" scholarly texts that privileged blacks in the position of the communal norm and center as authoritative theological sources. For most white Americans, the preponderance of their life experiences lack reinforcement for doing so. In a slight variation, a few white students found the readings theologically authoritative, but only for blacks. To my surprise I found that these students understood the exercise to be about learning "how black men like to make black women suffer." The mere discussion of an African American cultural context within the theological readings transformed ideas about race, gender, violence, and theology into stereotyped, over-generalizations about black male violence commonly asserted in our culture. Moreover, the cultural references in the text also appear to have been a help or excuse for avoiding substantive reflection on what their ethical practices would be in response to violence against women within their own predominantly white communities and congregations.

On the other hand, some of the Asian international students seemed to welcome the cultural self-consciousness of the authors. These students drew parallels between their own cultural contexts and the issues of power, gender, and culture that were at the core of the theological discussions in the readings. The ideas of the authors became a framework for comparing the sometimes similar, sometimes differing social and cultural supports for violence against women within their country of origin, and for scrutinizing the role of church leadership and their espousal of Christian theology in relation to those supports. The ongoing demands upon international students in a United States university setting to translate curricular material and social practices where the cultural assumptions are neither stated nor interrogated, seemed to peculiarly equip these students for readings that critically assert a direct relationship between culture and theological ideas.

Teacher as Learner

One of the most important aspects of this approach to violence education, and of the challenging, experience-based student responses it provokes, is how much I learn about teaching. If I truly want my students to develop their abilities to link theoretical ideas about faith with ethical church leadership practices, the cultural and racial issues that evidently fundamentally impede, enhance, or inform their ability to do so must be integrated into my teaching. I discovered that to teach about religion and violence against women, I must consult resources that I may not have originally anticipated. For example, I found that I needed theoretical assessments of how "whiteness" and white ideologies that saturate our cultural

context can shape discussions of contemporary violence, as well as more pedagogically-oriented analysis of how these racial realities can impact critical thinking in the classroom.

Similar to issues of racial and cultural experience, when gendered experiences surface in challenging ways, it provides opportunities for deepening the learning/teaching process. For instance, I was alerted to the need to delve into gender related questions about theory and experience with a few male students (across racial groups). Their approach to the exercise was dominated by their experience of women as dishonest with regard to sexual harassment and intimate violence by men. Thinking through the link between theology and ethical practice was only minimally possible for these students. In further discussions with them, I was able to probe how and why their descriptions of ethical practice were more informed by their perception of women as untruthful about having been harassed or intimately assaulted by men, than by the theological ideas about suffering.

In a somewhat parallel fashion, I also learned how experiences with issues of power for some women students (across racial groups) needed to be addressed in my teaching about violence. These experiences seemed to dominate their approach to this exercise, including their judgment about the vulnerability of the woman parishioner subjected to violence. I had intense dialogues with those who seemed wholly focused on contacting the husband immediately and expressing their objections to his behavior. Here theological discussion was not so much neglected as offered in support of their right to use their power to immediately tell the husband he was wrong. Moreover, not all of these students were convinced of the necessity to alter their position when warned in class about the inappropriateness of breaching the woman's confidence as well as the possibilities for harm to the woman if the husband were promptly contacted and notified about her revelation. These exchanges with students only led to further reflections that enhanced learning, examining questions like:

1. How should experience inform theology and ethical practice?
2. How do their experiences of sexism, if any, or other forms of disempowerment or discrimination based upon their social identities influence their judgment about how to respond to violence against women?
3. How should it?

Finally, these examples of student responses are in no way representative of the students with whom I worked. I have deliberately chosen to focus upon a few of the most challenging responses that were subsequently most fruitful for cultivating my objective of linking theory and practice in my teaching about violence and religion. If I ignore the profound experiential biases that mediate learning, it will severely obstruct the task of investigating a theological approach to

violence, ethical leadership practices, and the means for generally destabilizing a cultural tolerance for violence against women.