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Elizabeth Conde-Frazier is a religious educator who integrates the discipline of religious education with theology, spirituality, and the social sciences. She has written on multicultural issues, Hispanic theological education, and the spirituality of the scholar. She also teaches at the Latin American Bible Institute in La Puente, California, and has taught in Kazakhstan. Her scholarly passions involve her in doing participatory action research with communities working on justice issues, such as immigration and ecumenism, as they relate to religious education. She is an ordained American Baptist minister with more than ten years experience in the local church. She is the author of Hispanic Bible Institutes and co-author of A Many Colored Kingdom: Multicultural Dynamics for Spiritual Formation

In a class on religious education at Claremont we were discussing a paradigm that facilitated teaching persons in congregations how to become involved in social justice. The paradigm invites us to look at the brokenness in the world. The conversation had gathered the different passions of students and inevitably one issue clashed with another until a very heated discussion around issues of racism was ignited. Questions turned into accusations and stereotypic remarks, which angered even the quiet students into explosive speech. What should I do? I could become apprehensive and cut off the discussion as inappropriate. I could intervene, name what was taking place in the discussion, and suggest ways to foster fuller listening. I could overpower the other voices with my authority as professor by offering theoretical expertise and shutting out the emotions as if these had no knowledge to offer. What was my role as professor? How did my personal experience with conflict and racism shape my inner conversation?

Dealing with multiculturalism is not only about having students from different cultures in the classroom or the inclusion of peripheral materials outside of the accepted curricular canon. Multiculturalism develops through human interaction. In the book *Becoming Multicultural*, Terry Ford reminds us that it is a way of being, perceiving, thinking, and acting in the world. Becoming multicultural indicates changing from a dominant perspective which has been shaped by our socialization process to a view that includes multiple realities and perspectives. This suggests

that we need a shift from learning that is conceived as transmitting knowledge, to learning that has as its goal the co-construction of knowledge. In knowledge construction, the learners are viewed as active participants in the creation of their own knowledge. Because learners interact with and interpret the world, knowledge is a function of the learner's background and purposes.

This makes the learning process a transactional one. It means that in classroom dynamics we will engage the historical, social, and cultural backgrounds that learners bring with them since these factors influence how learners engage one another and the content material of the course. In a transactional teaching/learning context, teachers must recognize that we bring to the learning context our own values, meanings, and interpretations which our histories, cultures, and communities have helped to construct. This is the stuff of which becoming multicultural is made. To be multicultural, a person must become aware of their social location and the life experiences that have shaped that positionality. This requires much reflection. The goal of this reflection is to become more conscious of ourselves and the process by which that consciousness is brought about and shapes how we and others operate in the world. It includes becoming aware of how and to what degree we have been made in the image of others. It is in critical reflection of one's experiences, and the meanings and origins of the past interpretations of these, where one begins the multicultural becoming.

Pedagogical Considerations

To begin the process of critical reflection, I use a social location exercise which explores gender, social orientation, class, networks, and political and religious stances. We look at how these things were taught, reinforced and enforced in our lives. "The Cycle of Socialization," by Bobbie Harro in *Readings for Diversity and Social Justice*, helps us discuss what it would mean to change our socialization. This knowledge makes us aware of the personal projections we place upon texts and contexts. It teaches us to identify the conceptual context of a writing, i.e., the writer is immersed in Neoplatonic thought that dominated the tradition in which he was trained. When students and I understand where we are coming from and why this is important to us, we are able to respect different views even when they make no sense to us because we honor that view as a way for the person to make meaning for their life. This is a starting point for critical thinking and dialogue.

Critical thinking about the cultural construction of meaning is a rite of passage from innocence to awareness. New awareness can be frightening and liberating. It may begin with inner conflict. I create rituals in the classroom where persons can bring symbols to help articulate their new awareness and stances. I also make space for moments of reflective silence; meditation and journaling may be part of this time. There is a small altar in the center of the classroom and students decorate it with symbols that are meaningful to them. On occasion, they place pictures on it that represent their emerging understandings. From these moments come deep

commitments and involvement in community projects. Students may also come to powerful moments of repentance, at which time they write their preconceived judgments on pieces of paper and place them at the altar. They can burn these in a litany of confession and forgiveness.

Creating space for affecting one another is also important. One student writes in his blog about another student:

She was different from me in many ways. She was theologically more conservative and far more religious. She was one of those persons I may have never met except at this school. Subsequently, she added much to my first year and perhaps my life. That is kind of the point, Claremont uniquely brings together those who we may or may not have met otherwise. We come together and discuss topics, issues and ideas that are tough to face but could help transform the world. Each person different than myself has helped me transform.

Conflict is an inevitable part of becoming multicultural. We are speaking from and acting out of personal perspectives that do not match the perspectives of others. Exploration can be one way to channel the energy of conflict. "Tell me more" is a phrase we learn to use as we pause before exploding or coming to premature judgments. In my classes we construct rules for our dialogue that guide how we respond during conflict. Another source of conflict emerges when a person finds and uses his/her voice for the first time. This is a powerful and sometimes explosive experience. In order to allow for such healing while respecting others, we want to design the rules of dialogue such that they may accommodate confrontation with respect. This helps us to speak the truth in love. We can avoid "protecting" persons from what they need to be confronted with.

Perspective transformation is the miracle of multicultural teaching. It involves revealing and unraveling the assumptions that maintain the views considered normative in our culture and theology, which then allows us to change our minds and consider or incorporate alternative worldviews. I remember a student who consistently confronted me in class discussions. I soon learned that he did so because he trusted me to listen while also answering with strong honesty. I would challenge him and he would argue back. We modeled for the class what it meant to recognize our deep differences while engaging them so that both of us were able to expand, deepen, and at times transform our perspectives. Others in the class began to risk fuller engagement with each other as well as the theoretical content and the places where it intersected their personal experiences and ministerial contexts. Things seemed to be "making sense" for persons.

This "making sense" takes place as persons begin to reconstruct their ideas, practical

understandings, and spiritual practices. It can be seen in the reflections of a Nigerian student who traced his perspective transformation in a class on interfaith dialogue:

The indoctrination of my faith taught me that the Muslim is unfaithful, a devil....The indoctrination of the Muslim also taught that the Christian is an infidel and to kill an infidel is to go to heaven. We are devils to each other and to engage each other is to pollute each other. These are unquestioned doctrines on both sides. They become the biases that are ingrained in us about each other. Through these lenses we see each other. This violence destroys our communities.

He is able to trace his journey from this beginning to the recognition of the role that fear and political interests plays in the socialization of these prejudices (deconstruction). He began reconstruction by deep inquiry into both of the religious traditions, reading and comparing the histories and sacred writings. He continued by engaging Muslims in prayer and dialogue. His journal entry reads:

To realize the presence of God/Allah in the tradition of the Muslim allows me to fully participate in their practice of prayer and in dialogue. I can dialogue because I understand that I am listening to a servant of God and not to a devil....Education leads us to find common places. Now we can begin to talk about how to solve our common problems in the community.

The student has integrated past personal experience, course content and inquiry, and the skills of interfaith dialogue. He has come to understand that there is a journey from violent prejudice to communal cooperation, and he seeks to integrate and apply the elements necessary for constructing such a journey in a particular ministerial context. The journal becomes a place for integration — it allows him to trace his own journey of theological *metanoia*. He can identify his theological framework and the ways that it justifies and cements the elements of his group's identity into a cohesive, meaningful, and tangible world order. He can then create a strategy for bringing others on a similar journey of reconstruction that is sensitive to how the religious functions to mediate the absolute.

Conclusion

Multicultural engagement as a theological resource calls for a transformative process for teachers and students. It calls for connected knowledge where a teacher engages in authentic conversations with her students with the possibility of constructing shared perspectives. Such teaching is where the content of our disciplines intersects with the different perspectives garnered from our experiences and the issues and problems of our communities. It is forming students who can reinvest religious traditions with new meanings from which they construct ministerial strategies in response to changing circumstances in shifting contexts. This is the beginnings of what Craig Dyskstra refers to as prophetic and pastoral imagination in *Initiatives in Religion*

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