WHAT ONLY THE POOR CAN TEACH

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Introduction

I just wanted to say a quick word of thanks to the organisers of ACHEA for creating the space for students such as myself to be involved. The world of conferences and writing papers for presentation is daunting, but this introduction has been very gracious and I particularly appreciate the helpful feedback and encouragement from Dr. Harris regarding my initial submission. If what follows is cringe-worthy, I take full responsibility; if it is in anyway a helpful contribution, then he certainly deserves acknowledgement.

I want to begin by highlighting a fundamental weakness in my paper today; and that is, I am not involved in delivering any Christian Higher Education, and I have not undertaken any formal training in this area. Indeed, my critique of Christian Higher Education that follows is subjective and based only on my experiences as a student; and so I readily welcome any replies and responses that offer an alternative view.

Statement of the issue

But my question is whether students at Christian Colleges in Australia are encouraged to learn along the revelatory paradigm that I believe is inherent in the *Missio Dei.* My experience of Christian Higher Education leads me to believe that the current paradigm of learning might best be described as hierachical. Students like myself are encouraged to learn almost exclusively from those who Robert Chambers would term 'uppers'; those in positions of power, influence and authority. We are encouraged to emulate them, read and learn from renowned scholars and work our way up the clearly demarcated educational ladder. Grading criteria, course content and publishing standards are controlled by 'uppers'. Those who are rich, speak English, can employ the Western academic style and logic, are skilled in the jargon of their particular field of study, have access to grants, the internet, libraries and people of influence – these 'uppers' are significantly more likely to get better grades and publishing or speaking opportunities. While students like myself are encouraged to share learning with other students through tutorials and group assignments, I also distinctly remember being told rather forcefully as an undergraduate that it was impossible that I could have an original thought and that my essays must simply be a neat collection of citations. In short, I would argue that Christian Higher Education in Australia includes the hidden lesson that knowledge primarily flows from 'uppers' to 'lowers', from 'educated' to 'uneducated', from 'expert' to the 'unschooled'.

While I wish to quickly offer a caveat that my first-year undergraduate arrogance probably needed the rebuke from that lecturer, and that this hierachical model has many significant benefits and should not necessarily be done away with, I do want us to reflect on the way in which this model fosters what Chambers calls the 'learning disability' of uppers. While Chambers is writing in the context of poverty alleviation, I believe his observation is readily transferable to the Christian Higher Education sector. Chambers argues that uppers are highly susceptability to experiencing "acquiescence, deference, flattery, and placation from lowers" (2003, 76). This significantly hampers their capacity to learn from those further down the educational chain. Students are equally at risk of contracting this learning disability, for they are immersed in the academic culture and readily adopt its preferred learning paradigm. The dominant

Australian culture supports this learning disability, the evidence of which can be seen in things like our cultural wariness of challenging the views of someone who has undertaken formal education on any given topic. This is not a global phenomenon, but is most visible in cultures that value Western modes of expertise.

I find this hierachical model of learning particularly intruiging in light of the self-revelationary methodology of God in the biblical narrative, for there appears to be a juxtaposition between God's method of self-revelation – *his* way of teaching people about himself - and the way in which Christian Higher Education – broadly speaking – seeks to equip students by teaching them about God so that they might participate appropriately in his redemptive agenda.

Theological impetus for learning from the marginalised

At first glance, the hierachical model of education with clear lines of knowledge transfer from uppers to lowers might find biblical support in the narrative of Jesus learning in the temple and the strong support for teaching roles within the Christian community that are present in the New Testament letters. I wish to acknowledge the validity of those passages and modes of teaching theology. But I also want to encourage a consideration to go beyond these modes of theological education delivery.

Because if we zoom out from the biblical narrative and look at God's methodology of self-revelation, an interesting pattern emerges.

God's missiological preference for self-revelation through the marginalised

This interesting motif is God's apparent missiological preference for self-revelation through marginalised people. Perhaps the earliest clear example of this phenomenon in the biblical narrative is God's choice of Abraham and Sarai – a shrivelled, childless couple seemingly cursed by God. With incredible irony God chooses these very people to be the parents of a great nation 'through whom the whole world would be blessed'. This continues with Yahweh choosing the Hebrew slaves as his people, and his selection of a stuttering deserter called Moses as his spokesperson. Our familiarity with these narratives can easily foster contempt for Sarai's laughter and Pharaoh's scoffing, but they were – in many ways – appropriate responses to the parody that God had set before them. What God was doing in each case was akin to choosing a double amputee for an Olympic marathon. We are conditioned to pick a Samson, a Saul, the beautiful, strong, powerful, smart, clever ones, the ones who would be an asset to our cause. But God's response to Samuel as he searched for a second king echoes consistently throughout the biblical narrative, and perhaps continues to speak to our preferences today: 'the one I'm looking for isn't here.'

Indeed, God chooses a Canaanite prostitute called Rahab and a Moabite widow called Ruth to be his earthly ancestors, though their cultural heritage, their gender, marriage status and employment choices make them the worst candidates for regal lineage in the Jewish tradition. He chose Hosea the husband of a prostitute and Amos, a simple farmer from the south to be his spokespersons. Jesus chooses Nazareth as his birthplace, making his messianic claim difficult for many, many people to accept. He chose Samaritans, an unclean woman, prostitutes, a woman facing the death penalty, despised tax-collectors, children who get in the way – Jesus uses each of these as *examplars to the uppers*, and in doing so revealed something about Yahweh and his way of working.

I don't know about you, but as a white, somewhat-educated and rich, English-speaking male I find that deeply confronting and unsettling. If my analysis of the biblical witness on God's methodology of self-revelation is correct – and I invite your critique - I am clearly in the high-risk category of contracting a theological strain of Chamber's 'learning disability'. If God's preference is for revealing himself through the misfits and outsiders, what lessons about God are missing in theology classes taught by uppers sourced from the theology of uppers for aspiring uppers? What lessons about God and his ways can only the poor teach, and how are we creating space to learn those lessons?

I am not arguing that uppers cannot teach theology at all – far from it; I owe much to the teachings of well-studied, brilliantly-minded lecturers and scholars past and present. Rather I am asking how our methodologies of theological education align with God's self-revelatory preferences and how we are creating space for our theology to be shaped by those God has historically often chosen to reveal himself through.

Study and findings

I was intrigued by these questions and pursued a small research project along those lines as part of my Masters studies. I work cross-culturally in the context of poverty, and so I was interested to see if Christian community development organisations actively and formally encouraged their field staff to learn from the people they are serving. In my area of work, we often speak of God's preferential option for the poor and the poverty of the rich, and so I was interested to see if these truths were permitted to shape the way we engage poor communities.

I conducted qualitative, semi-structured interviews with twenty-three people involved in seventeen different Christian Development Organisations. The interviewees comprised of three contingents: community development practitioners, program participants and donors in order to get an introductory but hopefully well-rounded understanding of whether the Christian Development Organisations encouraged mutual transformation – bi-directional learning - across the people they engaged.

While the context of this study was Christian Development Organisations, a number of findings from the study might be applicable to the Christian Higher Education sector.

The first key finding was that none of the Christian Development Organisations linked to the study had encouraged reversals in learning. I found it both significant and alarming that CDOs are not encouraging reversals in learning; if any sector is likely to encourage learning from the marginalised, I would expect that Christian Development Organisationss would be the among the first – but perhaps the Christian Higher Education sector in Australia is leading the way; I would be keen to hear from you about any indications of this occuring.

A second key finding is that some learning from the poor occurred regardless of the fact that the Christian Development Organisations involved in the study hadn't encouraged mutual transformation. Two possible positive correlates deserve mentioning here: 1) this typically occurred where people had a relational approach to the marginalised people they were working with and 2) the person had a particular vulnerability (either intentionally or otherwise) that meant they were dependant on the marginalised people for one reason or another.

A third key finding is that the study supported a negative correlate between learning from the marginalised and those who self-described as professionals and/or had a service-delivery mentality. Interestingly there was one practitioner who described a service-delivery approach, but spoke of the community using familial terms, indicating that there is possibly a continuum between relational and service-delivery approaches.

The final finding that might be helpful here is that all of those practictioners (uppers) who had experienced reversals in learning indicated in various ways that the lessons they had learnt from the marginalised were unique. As one practictioner said: "These people's lives have lessons that I would not be able to learn anywhere else."

Father Benigno Beltran, a Philipino priest, posits a similar sentiment from his 30 years with the scavangers on Smokey Mountain in the Phillipines. He wrote: "I needed these people to help me find the courage not to flee from my own brokenness, to keep me from mistaking classroom talk about the Trinity for the real openness to the triune God in prayer" (Beltran 2012, 8).

This has been my experience too. The profound hospitality of the rural poor in Indonesia has shown my own attempts at generosity for the sham that they are; their generosity is far more reflective of the profound and indiscriminate provision of our Creator Father. Jesus' instruction in Matthew 5 to 'give to the one who begs from you and do not refuse the one who would borrow from you' is quite doable for me in a cloistered, middle class context; but those words forced me question whether I truly wanted to follow Jesus when they were quoted to me by a homeless man on a cold winter's night asking if he could borrow a little corner of my double garage. I'm ashamed to say that I chose to shelter my two vehicles over sheltering one of 'the least of these'; and Jesus' promise that 'what I did to this man, I did to him' continue to ring in my heart and mind. My neatly crafted theodicy stood mute when it met the suffering of the poor, and when I opened my mouth, all that came out – and all that could possibly have come out - were prayers of lament. The reek of an alchoholic brother in Christ whose addiction causes him to regularly soil himself helped me come to grips with the stench of my own hidden, culturally-acceptable sin, and serves as a very visible and physical reminder of how incredibly powerful God's love must be if he is able to somehow embrace the two of us without the inner recoil that I often feel in the presence of my friend.

I love studying. I love books and learning. Both my undergrad and my Masters studies have been incredibly helpful and good for me, and I draw on the lessons of uppers weekly – probably daily. I rely heavily on the wisdom and knowledge of people like you. I am not an anti-intellectualist.

But I would argue there is some theology that only the poor can teach, and I am reliant on their insights and theology too. It is typically a theology of perturbation that cuts through the 'numbness of captivity to the royal conciousness' – if I might borrow from Brueggemann's *Prophetic Imagination*. Indeed, the theology that the marginalised teach is often times of a prophetic nature.

Practical suggestions

And so the question remains: what might it look like to create space for learning the lessons that only the marginalised can teach in the formal context of Christian Higher Education? Can I offer a few broad suggestions in light of the small study I conducted – and again, I look forward to your critique and alternative suggestions.

In the first place, I would argue that teachings of the marginalised cannot be learned in the lecture hall, for the lecture hall is the throne room of uppers. My research project supports a positive correlation between reversals in power and the possibility for reversals in learning. Ideally the uppers would be experiencing vulnerability and preferably be reliant on the marginalised in some fashion. I wonder if this is what Jesus had in mind when he sent the disciples out in in groups of two and instructed them to take no staff or wallet or bread with them (Lk. 9). This learning must be done outside the tidy college campus and in the seemingly messy and chaotic realms where the marginalised are more comfortable and confident.

Secondly, this likely involves going beyond the safety of a ladle at a soup kitchen. My research project suggests that there is a negative correlation between a service-delivery approach and learning from the marginalised; conversely a relational approach understandably appears to be a positive correlate. A relational approach opens the dangerous possibility of movement from Buber's I-it to I-thou; from Volf's 'exclusion' to 'embrace' and is by its very nature a redemptive act for everyone involved. For uppers to learn what only the poor can teach, they must be genuinely open towards the marginalised people they are engaging, and the embrace must be long enough for some of their perfume to stick.

I believe learning from the marginalised could readily be integrated into spiritual formation units, where it could add a more physical dimension to our desire to grow and walk in the ways of our God. I support Jeffery Greenman's assertion that:

> Spiritual formation at its best involves a reciprocal dynamic between gathering and scattering, contemplation and action, silence and speech, being and doing, receiving and giving (2010, 27).

Learning from the marginalised by being among them could add greater vitality to spiritual formation units while challenging some of the cultural assumptions of students regarding where and how we learn about the wonder and ways of Yahweh.

Conclusion

This is the God who revealed himself as 'I AM' at the burning bush to a lone, stuttering deserter in Moab; centuries later he revealed himself as 'I AM' under a midday sun to a lonely and rejected Samaritan woman by a well. I have no doubt that Yahweh continues to reveal himself through the careful and considered reflections of scholars such as yourselves; I have experienced this first hand. But I also have no doubt that Yahweh continues to reveal himself through the broken bowels of an alcoholic, the outstretched arm of a beggar, and generous portions of unaffordable rice in rural Indonesia.

My concern is that Christian Higher Education is missing the latter unveilings of God.

My concern is that Christian Higher Education might have developed a theological version of the 'learning disability' that uppers are susceptible to contracting.

And my hope?

My hope is that I am wrong.

Thankyou.

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