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Pedagogical Integration of the Bible in Organizing: A Qualitative Case Study from the Movement to End Poverty

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Abstract

Through cross-case analysis, this research explores how organizations in the movement to end poverty led by the poor in the U.S. integrate the Bible pedagogically in their organizing work.

Keywords: Bible, poverty, social movement learning, organized poor, pedagogy

Leaders within the movement to end poverty led by the poor in the U.S. often express that the Bible is the only form of mass media that has anything good to say about the poor (Freedom Church of the Poor, 2021). Yet often the Bible is used to justify systems that create and maintain poverty while blaming the poor for their poverty. This contradiction is expressed by leaders as a battle for the Bible. The purpose of this research was to understand how poor people's organizations in the movement to end poverty led by the poor in the U.S. pedagogically integrate the Bible into their organizing.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this case study is situated at the intersections of the theory and praxis within the movement to end poverty led by the poor in the U.S. and social movement learning. The movement to end poverty led by the poor in the U.S. contends it is only through the uniting and leadership of the poor and dispossessed as a social force for transformational and political power that poverty can be abolished because it is the poor and dispossessed who have the least stake in the status quo (Baptist & Rehmann, 2011; Hribar, 2016). Leaders within the movement developed and utilize the intentional and strategic process known as the pedagogy of the poor (Baptist & Rehmann, 2011). Embedded within the pedagogy of the poor is an educational philosophy which explores key dialectical relationships including (a) theory and praxis, (b) conditions and consciousness, (c) contradictions, and (d) political education and leadership development. The methodology of reading the Bible with the poor (Theoharis, 2017; Williams & Yelich Binniecki, 2021) is one expression of the pedagogy of the poor within the movement.

Similarly, a review of social movement learning scholarship also revealed dialectical relationships within other social movements. The dialectical relationships explored include processes of (a) learning and unlearning (Foley, 1999), (b) individual and collective learning (Kuk & Tarlau, 2020), and (c) learning, education, and organizing in social movements (Choudry, 2015). Therefore, the intersection of the pedagogy of the poor as part of the movement to end poverty led by the poor in the U.S. and the dialectical relationships of pedagogical expressions within social movement learning literature provide the framework for exploration for how poor people's organizations integrate the Bible into their organizing.

Research Design

Foley (1999) argues that to analyze learning in social movements “one needs to write case studies of learning in struggle, making explanatory connections between the broad political and economic context, micro-politics, ideologies, discourses and learning” (p. 132). Therefore, this study consisted of a multiple qualitative case study guided by the question: how do poor people’s organizations in the movement to end poverty led by the poor in the U.S. pedagogically integrate the Bible in their organizing? The bounded cases within this research included three poor people’s organizations who were identified through a pilot study as exemplary in their engagement with the Bible in their organizing efforts. The organizations were geographically, religiously, and culturally diverse and focused on different key issues in their efforts to end poverty, including housing and homelessness, tenant rights and immigration, and the right to a living wage and a union. Data collection included two to four individual or group semi-structured interviews with organization leaders, observation of leaders’ participation in Freedom Church of the Poor services, and analysis of documents and artifacts written or produced by the organization during a 6-month period in 2022 which reference the Bible. Data were coded and analyzed in NVivo and a framework matrix was utilized for cross-case comparison and analysis to conceptualize themes and analytic generalizations (Yin, 2018) across the three cases.

Findings

Each of the three organizations included leaders and members who are Christian and view the Bible as sacred text, as well as those who practice other religions or are not religious. In fact, many of the members of the organizations had been hurt or oppressed by organized religion, often by those citing the Bible to do so. Yet the organizations each integrated the Bible in their organizing in distinct ways. One organization emphasized their use of the Bible to build a counternarrative about poverty and the poor to combat the dominant narrative of individualized moralism. Instead, their organizing work includes development and dissemination of a counternarrative, informed by liberative biblical interpretations, which promotes economic and human rights and systemic change led by the poor and oppressed. Similarly, an organization of low-wage workers in the South utilized the Bible in building culture within their organization. Because of the prevalence of the Bible within the culture of the South, the Bible facilitated the building of a culture of hope, collectivity, and solidarity for the workers in the organization. The third organization integrated the bible through building community and consciousness. The leaders emphasized biblical narratives which empowered them to build community, not simply through interpersonal connections, but quite literally through building the infrastructure of their community that had been neglected or threatened by local officials. Similarly, they integrated the Bible in their organizing to build consciousness about the conditions within their community. Taken together these findings express how poor people’s organizations in the movement to end poverty in the U.S. generally engage with the Bible, through (a) building counternarrative, (b) building culture, and (c) building community and consciousness. Additionally, specific pedagogical practices of how the organizations integrate the Bible in their organizing emerged during cross-case analysis.

Biblical Organizing Strategies

The organizations in this study described integrating the Bible in organizing a movement to end poverty led by the poor through specific strategies including (a) counteracting shame and building hope, (b) multiracial organizing, and (c) multifaith organizing.

Shame and Hope

Each organization expressed how the Bible was used to shame the poor in their community and, therefore, the importance of integrating the Bible into their organizing strategy to counteract the shaming tactics. For example, one leader stated,

[The Bible] honors people's lived experience, which people have a lot of shame about. People have a lot of shame about the things they've had to do to survive, whether it's because they were incarcerated or they had to be involved in the drug economy or they use drugs or whatever...there's just a lot of shame and a lot of shaming that has come through the church. So, if you can take a biblical text to say, "You know what, what is shameful is the system. What is shameful is the system creating these conditions, not you for having to survive it," that goes a long way.

The integration of the Bible into their organizing provided a moral authority which also worked to combat shame and instill hope within individuals and the organization. Through interviews, Freedom Church of the Poor worship services, and artifacts, organizational leaders expressed the deep hope and joy that is a result of their organizing efforts and engagement with the Bible in organizing.

How I have witnessed joy at work on the ground is very much an assertion of dignity, an assertion of power, and an assertion to have "abundant life" right here and right now, despite the whole world telling people they don't deserve it.

Expressions of such joy and hope were echoed in various ways by each of the organizations. The Bible was central to the organizing work of counteracting shame and embodying collective joy and hope.

Multiracial Organizing

Second, the organizations expressed the strategic importance of multiracial organizing and integrating the Bible toward such efforts. Though each organization differed in primary racial demographic and local context, each experienced systemic racism through racial discrimination in employment and housing, white supremacist organizing, and policy violence. The organizations described how some faith communities and leaders upheld expressions of systemic racism, both incipient and explicit. Therefore, each organization expressed and embodied the importance of organizing across racial divisions and used the Bible to do so. Such multiracial organizing was undergirded with an analysis of how the Bible is rooted in narratives and actions of systemic racism, white supremacy, and colonialism throughout the U.S. The Bible was pedagogically integrated to counter-organize through a counternarrative, to "decolonize...the minds of our communities," and as a point of commonality and unity across racial divisions.

Further, the three organizations, while each multiracial, are composed of a predominant demographic within the organization. Because the organizations are each part of the movement to end poverty led by the poor and connected to one another through various projects and campaigns, such as Poor People's Campaign: A National Call for Moral Revival and Freedom Church of the Poor, the multiracial nature of the movement to end poverty was apparent. Through organizational exchanges and participation in national rallies and direct actions, leaders

of the organizations are building a multiracial movement and pedagogically integrating the Bible to do so.

Multifaith Organizing

The poor people's organizations in this study engaged the Bible as a means of organizing not just with people of the Christian faith, but also with those who were not Christian. One of the organizations engaged daily with poor and homeless individuals who practice other faith or spiritual traditions or claim no faith tradition. The organization understood that many people in their context have rejected Christianity because of how the Bible has been wielded against them. Yet many of those same individuals expressed a respect for the ministry of Jesus and an understanding of the Bible as moral authority. Therefore, the organization used the Bible educationally with people of other faiths in informal and nonformal ways to train and develop leaders in the use of the biblical narrative for their own empowerment and for the building of the power of the poor to change oppressive systems. A leader from another organization expressed,

A large portion of our membership are from the LGBTQ community and have been shunned by the religious institutions they were raised into. And so even among folks who may identify as Christian or have a Christian background, it can be a little dicey to reintroduce some faith-based stuff. But there have been a lot of folks who kind of found their religion again by being involved in [our organization], specifically LGBTQ folks... There [are] a lot of contradictions to navigate, both among our members and with the community at large [who] support the workers.

Similarly, a leader from the third organization, which is made up of largely Catholic members, reflected on working with community partners who do not share the same religious expression.

At some of these events, we've had folks saying, "Well, it's religious; we don't want to be part of that." And for us, it's not the religious aspect that we're trying to push down your throat, but it is the community building process that I think you need to be part of because whether you like it or not a lot of [poor] folks are religious and if you want to interact with them in creating a different type of community and world, then you have to be part of some of these spaces. A lot of us have to leave our comfort zone to build something like this [movement].

Therefore, these organizations integrate the Bible pedagogically toward organizing not just Christians, but poor people of any and no religion. The Bible was utilized because of the faith traditions of some, as well as toward an organizing strategy which counteracts shame and division among the poor, as well as proclaims a narrative about poverty and the poor which counteracts hegemonic narratives which use the Bible to justify poverty.

Learning, Education, Organizing, and Leadership Development

Additionally, cross-case analysis revealed poor people's organizations' pedagogical integration of the Bible embodies dialectical relationships between learning, education, organizing, and leadership development. While the review of social movement learning literature expressed relationships between learning and education, and sometimes organizing, this study contributes the practice of leadership development as an integral component of the pedagogical praxis of the organized poor. Each organization described informal organizing conversations in which the Bible was referenced as an expression of learning and unlearning about how the Bible supports their organizing. The organizations also have structured educational opportunities which incorporate the Bible, including staff development, organizing academies, and reflections on current community conditions. Further, the use of the Bible in both informal learning and structured, nonformal education is interconnected to both activities of organizing, the leadership of the poor, and leadership development. Learning, education, organizing, and leadership development operate as interconnected actions of the work of the organizations. Pedagogical integration of the Bible serves as a specific example of how these four relationships are embodied within the praxis of the organizations.

Implications and Conclusions

Understanding the pedagogical integrations of the Bible in the organizing of the movement to end poverty led by the poor in the U.S. offers implications for adult education practice and research. First, for adult educators in other movements for social change, the findings suggest the need for an organizing and educational strategy which incorporates faith and religion. The organizations in this study integrated the Bible into social movement pedagogy because of their lived experience and analysis of the power of religion and sacred texts to either shame or liberate. Such contradictions are opportunities for social movements to expand their work, drawing upon religion or sacred texts ideologically, materially, and spiritually. As this case study shows, such work is not without its challenges and tensions, yet doing so provides opportunity for leaders and movements to grow in new ways and to challenge hegemonic discourses from sources of so-called moral authority.

Further, the findings offer examples of "critical revolutionary practice" (Holst, 2018, p. 88) which can inform anti-racist and interfaith education and praxis in adult education within and beyond social movements. The praxis of poor people's organizations in the movement to end poverty led by the poor in the U.S. implies that meaningful antiracist and interfaith education requires engagement in multiracial and multifaith organizations of the poor and dispossessed involved in political struggle, precisely to overcome the divisions created and exploited by systems that seek to prevent the unity of the poor for social change (Holst, 2020). Adult educators within a variety of settings might employ the pedagogical praxis of the organized poor toward antiracist and interfaith education to unite the poor and overcome the forces of white supremacy and white Christian nationalism.

Additionally, the findings of this study offer implications for social movement learning research to continue to explore the role of leadership development within social movement organizing, particularly within organizations led by the poor or other movements of "new social subjects" (Holst, 2018, p. 87). Such research of social movement learning may reveal additional examples of the dialectical relationships of learning, education, organizing, and leadership development within organizations and movements led by those most impacted by the injustices they seek to transform.

As white Christian nationalism deepens and spreads within communities, politics, and policies throughout the U.S., poor people's organizations in the movement to end poverty led by the poor in the U.S. offer theory and praxis for confronting and dismantling hegemonic narratives crafted and perpetuated through use of religious texts, particularly the Bible. The organized poor, united across race and religion to end poverty and its interlocking injustices, integrate the Bible pedagogically into their pedagogy as an organizing strategy. Adult education, too, can combat the influence and impact of white Christian nationalism through following the leadership, theory, and praxis of the organized poor.

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