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# THE CULTURES OF SOCIAL CLASS AND RELIGIOUS EDUCATIONAL PRACTICE

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## ***Abstract***

Although social class impacts the assumptions, values, and normative practices of Religious Education, the lack of public discourse on class diminishes awareness of and critical reflection on this impact. This article describes social class as a largely unarticulated and embodied performance of identity inflected through hierarchical practices of race, gender, and commodity consumption. The author provides examples of the impact of social-class bias on the practice of Religious Education in the context of youth ministry.

As an aspect of political and social identity, social class has a profound impact on community identity and formation, the kinds of knowledge that are valued in a community, and appropriate manners of address and conversation in a teaching/learning situation. However, broader cultural ideologies about social class in the United States allow persons to know their social-class standing only through social practices, manners, stylistic performance, and other embodied forms of understanding rather than through critical and conscious reflection. Because social class is a fluid and complex phenomenon, it is often difficult for religious educators to understand and articulate the variables impacting their own social-class identity, much less consider consciously the impact of social class in the practice of Religious Education in a local community of faith.

In addition to educational concerns, the lack of critical capacity around social class also causes suffering for individuals and communities. Often, an experience of class oppression or class injury gets defined as personal or communal deficiency when individuals do not understand the class structures that are impacting a given situation. At the same time, talking about social class and classism causes people to narrate experiences that are defined culturally as individual “failures” rather than instances of oppression, which can evoke a sense of shame rather than liberation. The capacity of religious leaders to

recognize class injury, develop self-awareness about their own social location in terms of class, and minister effectively across class boundaries becomes a critical aspect of pastoral formation. This article puts a literature-based analysis of the nature of class identity into conversation with insights and examples from my own youth ministry involvement in order to consider the relationship of class identity to religious educational practice.

### **KNOWING AND NOT-KNOWING SOCIAL CLASS**

Social class, like race and gender, is not an essentialized identity marker that can easily be categorized. Rather, social class is a cultural and political identity marker that is fluid and historicized. Social class is powerfully and hierarchically active in human interaction. However, it is a socially performed variable rather than a “categorical” variable (Connell 1987). No complex-enough schema exists to locate people by such variables as educational attainment, income level, preferred forms of entertainment, sources of authority, and so on, in a way that would enable us to engage in religious educational ministry that took social class into account in a nonpatronizing way. Despite the lack of a convenient categorizing schema, I hope that religious educators might develop a critical awareness of social class that allows them to work across “the shadowy lines that still divide” (Times Books 2005) in a way that enables more culturally appropriate forms of ministry.

The classic Marxian understanding of class as relationship to the means of production emphasizes material reality and access to economic resources as key to understanding social-class identity. This formulation was broadened by other sociologists to include “common sense” understandings, cultural and social capital, and bodily practice, leading us to understand social class as a form of cultural identity as well as a descriptor of access to economic resources (Bourdieu 1984, 1998; Elias 1998). The individual material variables of class identity (educational attainment, income, profession, etc.) are important, but the ways that they combine and are inflected through other identity markers are critical to understanding the status granted by social class. The four-category schema of upper class, middle class, working class, and poverty class has limited value in describing the status granted in social class because such plentiful variations occur within each of the categories.

One powerful way that social class is experienced is through cultural identity markers such as lifestyle and taste. Julie Bettie, a sociologist working on understanding how social class is inflected through gender and racial identity, notes: "One's experience of class may be expressed not only in terms of work identity and income but also in terms of familial relations, social relations unrelated to those of employment (such as school and peer relations), and in leisure and consumption practices, including the 'identity formation material' offered up by popular culture" (Bettie 2002, 42). Bettie notes that class identity among the adolescents in her research context was often indicated by the kind of clothing they wore, whether they were tracked into college preparatory or vocational tracks in schooling, and even their choice of hairstyle and nail polish color.

While Bettie's adolescent informants were clear about the distinctions between social-class groupings in the school and had their own shorthand for referring to various groups, they were not able to utilize the language of social class to talk about them. Bettie's adolescents make a compelling case for the relationship between social class and the experience of "taste" first laid out by Pierre Bourdieu: "Taste, the propensity and capacity to appropriate (materially or symbolically) a given class of classified, classifying objects or practices, is the generative formula of life-style, a unitary set of distinctive preferences which express the same expressive intention in the specific logic of each of the symbolic sub-spaces, furniture, clothing, language or body hexis" (1984, 173). For Bourdieu, the set of distinctive practices that generate taste emerge from the formative setting of the social class of origin. While Bettie's adolescents could not talk about class distinctions within and between the racial/ethnic populations of the high school, they clearly knew that such distinctions existed based on the taste preferences enacted by each group.

Another difficulty in recognizing social-class identity arises in that persons often "pass," or perform social identities distinct from their social-class culture of origin. For example, Bettie discusses the ways in which the high school students in her ethnographic study did not necessarily perform their "inherited" class identity from their homes of origin in their "chosen" public identity at school (Bettie 2002, 50). Some girls worked hard to "pass" as more middle class despite their family's more working-class economic position, and some "passed" as working class even though their home status may have been more middle class. This experience led her to begin to conceptualize class as both performed and performative. Normally, social actors perform

the cultural capital that their context of origin has made available to them: "Cultural performances most often reflect one's *habitus*—that is, our unconsciously enacted, socially learned dispositions, which are not natural or inherent or prior to the social organization of class inequality, but are in fact produced by it" (Bettie 2002, 51). However, this is complicated by the fact that some persons choose to perform the cultural identity of a class group that does not closely adhere to their *habitus*. While people can "pass" as members of other class groups, passing inevitably involves anxiety because the required cultural capital is intentionally learned rather than habitually socialized, and there is always the fear of being discovered as being "out of your league."

To talk about social class as performance may imply that we are aware of the performance we are giving. However, class status is most often performed through the preconscious rituals of social interchange. Theologian Tex Sample notes that social class is performed through "rituals of inequality," such as giving and taking orders, getting and giving respect, and deference and demeanor (Sample 2006, 13–16). Deference may be indicated through verbal manner of address (use of titles or first name), but it is often communicated through very subtle bodily mannerisms, such as whether and how eye contact is made, and how much space is allowed another person as you pass in the street. Most of these forms of interchange happen without conscious awareness, although we know that things "feel wrong" if we violate our unspoken place in the hierarchy.

In addition to preconscious rituals of social interaction, social class is performed through learned bodily indicators of class. Bettie notes that "the use of standard or nonstandard grammar, accents, mannerisms, and dress (all of which are also racially/ethnically and regionally specific)," serve as expressive cultural practices that indicate class membership (Bettie 2002, 51). For example, many a person from the American deep South has dropped her or his regional accent intentionally because of its association with being "unlearned" or ignorant. Again, this is a place where social class and racial/ethnic heritage are deeply intertwined, as some rural Southern dialects are not distinguishable by race. To lose the accent might also remove one from an "undesirable" connection with persons of another racial group. Bettie noted that the hairstyles and makeup choices of the adolescents she studied were "key markers in the symbolic economy that were employed to express group membership," and the body "a resource and a site on which difference was inscribed" (Bettie 2002, 62).

While none of the young women in Bettie's study utilized the language of social class to describe divisions, she notes that their choices often functioned as resistance to middle-class norming imposed by the institution. In particular, Bettie focused on the ways that non-middle-class young people felt the inequality of classism and refused to validate the upper- and middle-class norms:

Las chicas, having 'chosen' and/or been tracked into non-college-prep courses, showed little interest in the formal curriculum offered at the school, finding a variety of ways to kill time. They employed rituals of girl culture [fashion, soap opera conversation, scrapbooking, makeup application] as an alternative to and refusal of official school activities, including the kind of classroom learning that prep students embraced (Bettie 2002, 60)

Their stylistic choices about dress, language, and mannerism express resistance that they do not articulate as a politics of class resistance. However, as Bettie notes: "These modes of expression can represent antibourgeois, antipatriarchal, or antiracist meanings even when social actors don't articulate them as such" (Bettie 2002, 44). The economy of symbolic performance routinely hides the class political ideologies, leaving the struggle between groups mediated through the commodities purchased and other modes of identity expression (Bettie 2002, 44).

As indicated by the example of losing a Southern accent, class is always mediated by racial/ethnic, gender, and sexual cultures, place in history, geography, and national identity and other factors that affect the way the social-class culture is constructed and performed by individuals and communities. Class inequality is often organized by race and gender projects, and at times our conversation about class is encoded in conversation about racial or gender inequality because we have much better public discourse for describing those forms of oppression. To talk about class outside of its relationship to other identity markers that are performed within hierarchical power relations is to risk flattening a complex topography into a single line on a map. None of these other distinctions can be reduced to class, but class is a powerful independent strand interwoven among them.

Class distinctions exist within racial groups and between them. For example, Christian education scholar Evelyn Parker notes the class distinctions in her home congregation with helpful clarity:

The schisms among the middle class, the working class, and the very poor send strong signals of who's in and who's out. My cousin Jose, for example,

comes from a poor family and never felt that the St James congregation and youth group offered a place where he could flourish Jose's experience significantly contrasts with my experience in the way our church and community nurtured hope (Parker 2003, 6)

However, U.S. dominant cultural discourse often fails to make careful distinctions between racial and class analysis. Bettie discusses several instances in popular culture in which the two categories are collapsed and race becomes shorthand for geographic and class identity: "On the *Oprah* show, as on the magazine cover, the same set of binaries surface repeatedly: white is middle-class is suburban; black is lower-class is urban. But a slippage occurs in which class references are dropped out, and white stands in for middle where black stands in for lower, or suburban stands in for white and urban for black" (Bettie 2002, 47). These overly simplified expressions begin to construct broader cultural notions of "authentic" class identity, making other social locations, such as middle-class youth of color or rural White persons living in poverty invisible and nearly unthinkable (hooks 2000).

Class status differences are something we know and do not know at the same time. Among the Mexican-American students that Bettie interviewed, class differences were often "expressed as issues of assimilation (who was more or less 'traditional'), language fluency, gang antagonism, and acting white" (Bettie 2002, 89). The lack of critical and analytical category of social class led the young people to reach for more readily available categories of analysis to describe the differences between them. Most often, class distinctions within racial minority groups were described in terms of "acting White," with racial categories substituting for class distinctions. Likewise, teachers in the school were likely to dismiss the "girl culture" forms of resistance expressed by the Latina young women as being "typically female" behavior rather than to address them as class-based practices of resistance to middle-class educational expectations in the classroom. Rather than maintaining the tension between multiple identity variables at work in any given behavior or practice, the social actors generally turned to categories that seem more fixed and natural, such as gender and race, for causal explanations (Bettie 2002, 85).

In trying to teach about social class, I have found that students often resist acknowledging class identity, noting that class mobility in the United States makes class a meaningless category for understanding any element of identity or behavior. The language we use

to talk about class is inadequate and fraught with evaluative meaning. Everybody wants to be in the middle, because to be poor or to be wealthy is a source of cultural shame. Depending on either social welfare or a trust fund for your income evokes unfair images of laziness and moral decline. Class is a category that is often maintained socially through somatic knowing, gesture, and social practice, rarely theorized or brought to conscious, articulated attention. Because there is not much broader cultural conversation about class that uses the analytical categories of class and classism, students have little sense that it is a valuable topic. We do not “know” class, even as it is a powerful social structure generating subjectivities and cultural styles of being.

### **CLASS IDENTITY AND RELIGIOUS EDUCATIONAL PRACTICE WITH ADOLESCENTS: FOUR EXAMPLES OF ITS IMPACT**

The previous discussion indicates that the initial steps of thinking about class as a religious educator are particularly unclear. There are no easy categorizations or shared understandings on which to draw. Class is intricately interwoven with regional, racial/ethnic, gender, and orientation identity performances of meaning and significance. On an individual level, many people have experienced a fair amount of class mobility in their lifetime, and find it difficult to articulate their own experiences of loss, gain, and stability through these transformations. The lack of cultural discourse on class often simplifies the complexity of its intersection with gender, race, geography, and orientation in ways that are unhelpful. At the same time, the complexity of these intersections in combination with the ideological stance of U.S. culture (e.g., to discuss class at all is to engage in “class warfare”) makes approaching the topic difficult at best. And yet, despite all of these concerns, I believe that social class has a profound impact on the work of Religious Education.

In this section, I utilize a case study in religious educational practice located at FaithTrek, a Lilly-funded program of theological education with youth at the Iliff School of Theology in Denver, CO. By all accounts, this was a strong and successful program that invited adolescents, many from social-class backgrounds that might be categorized as working and/or poverty class, to engage in theological exploration of vocation. However, a few aspects of the program continued to struggle despite the best efforts of the directors and program staff over the

years. My involvement as consultant and faculty liaison to the project meant that I led staff and mentor trainings, read participant and staff evaluations, interviewed staff and participants, engaged as participant observer, and generally heard stories of how things were going from the year-round staff. The following reflections indicate the ways in which I think social-class distinction was one factor influencing some of the struggles of the program. I describe four examples of the ways in which class analysis might have been a beneficial practice to improve our religious educational efforts in this program. To focus on class in this section courts the problem of speaking about class in ways that ignore the complexities that I so carefully delineated in the first half of the article. For efficiency's sake, I follow the lead of the authors I quote in using categories such as working and middle class, at times without the careful contextualizing of racial, gender, geographic, and other elements at play.

### **FORMS OF MENTORING AND "CONCERTED CULTIVATION"**

Each young participant in FaithTrek selected a mentor from her or his home community with whom he or she established a year-long relationship. This aspect of the program mirrored many other mentoring programs in which occasional pairings found great success. However, the adolescents were also often disappointed by absent mentors, or mentors who did not seem to take the same level of interest in them as those of their peers in the program. Year by year, the staff devoted considerable time and energy in training mentors, outlining clear expectations for the role they could play, encouraging them by talking about how important their role was, providing resource guides for mentor/mentee meetings throughout the year, and making phone calls to check in on mentors. Still, the problem persisted that many mentors did not seem to invest the kind of energy in relationship with the young people that we had hoped. We began to write it off as part of a larger cultural problem that adults seem to have little faith that adolescents want or need their presence in their lives.

Another explanation for the trouble with the mentoring aspect of our program could be that it drew primarily on middle-class understandings of the appropriate relationship between adults and adolescents. Sociologist Annette Lareau engaged in a study of parenting styles across social-class groups and articulated two distinctive sets of



cultural repertoires about how children should be raised. She notes a professional consensus on the broad principles for promoting educational development in children through proper parenting: "These standards include the importance of talking with children, developing their educational interests, and playing an active role in their schooling. Similarly, parenting guidelines typically stress the importance of reasoning with children and teaching them to solve problems through negotiation rather than with physical force" (Lareau 2003, 4). Lareau demonstrates how this professional consensus closely mirrors middle-class parenting styles across racial groups in her ethnographic study of parents of elementary-aged children, naming the style *concerted cultivation*. In the *concerted cultivation* model of parenting, parents share a cultural logic that primarily understands children as a project to be developed through actively assessing and fostering talents, skills, and opinions (Lareau 2003, 238). FaithTrek's vision of appropriate mentoring clearly grew out of the cultural logic of *concerted cultivation*. We asked mentors to listen to the dreams and opinions of the young people and to assist them in completing a year-long project designed to further develop those talents and visions that the young people identified as central to their vocational call.

However, *concerted cultivation* was not the primary style of parenting engaged in by the working-class and poor parents in Lareau's study. Rather, they participated in a cultural logic of child rearing that the sociologist dubbed the *accomplishment of natural growth*. In this parenting style, children's development is understood as unfolding spontaneously, and good parenting primarily requires provision of food, shelter, medical care, and other basic support. Given the economic and social challenges faced by many of these parents, these activities required much of their available energy (Lareau 2003, 238–239). While Lareau describes the clear benefits of such a model of parenting (less sibling conflict, children better able to negotiate free time and interaction with peers, less pressure and more freedom from assessment in everyday activities), these practices are not afforded respect and value by powerful social institutions such as schools, social service agencies, and medical institutions (Lareau 2003, 76).

Our program, like schools and other institutions, assumed that the model of concerted cultivation was a shared value with the mentors. However, we were asking many of the mentors to engage in a form of relationship with young people that was perhaps culturally foreign. Lareau's research would suggest that our request that adults move into a peer-like relationship with adolescents and spend time

providing adult direction for an enrichment project was not a normal form of relationship valued in working-class and impoverished communities. Given this possibility, it is not surprising that many of the mentors did not leave the cultural logic of their class culture of origin to embrace the concerted cultivation model. Because we coached the young people to expect adults to move into this role, many became disappointed when they saw their middle-class peers receiving adult attention and companionship that they were not receiving.

The cultural logic of concerted cultivation undergirds many forms of religious educational practice with young people in communities of faith. Adult-directed enrichment activities are the cornerstone of many churches' children's and youth ministries. Lareau notes the largely unexamined benefits and costs of concerted cultivation: "For example, the close fit between skills children learn in soccer games or at piano recitals and those they will eventually need in white-collar professional or technical positions goes unnoted. Similarly, that middle-class children have trouble adjusting to unstructured time and that they often find it difficult to forge deep, positive bonds with siblings are largely unrecognized costs of concerted cultivation" (Lareau 2003, 64). In particular, Lareau's researchers were struck by the overscheduled middle-class children who were quite unable to entertain themselves and establish relationships with peers when not mediated by adults. Her work may inform religious educational practitioners who are frustrated with families for whom church activities are yet one more activity of enrichment among many for their children and with families who do not find such activities more valuable than free play with peers and cousins. Having some awareness of the cultural logics of parenting that Lareau describes may help practitioners understand and respond appropriately to these different cultural logics of childrearing expressed by families.

While I cannot speak for my colleagues at FaithTrek, I must confess that I did not have the kind of class cultural competency to recognize the ways in which our mentoring model was potentially class-biased. Lareau notes, "Perhaps there is little understanding of the ways in which the middle-class approach to child rearing intertwines with the dominant ideology of our society, making the idea that a middle-class childhood might not be the optimal approach literally unthinkable" (Lareau 2003, 65). Unfortunately, our funding and program ended before I recognized this issue, so I was unable to explore what other models of mentoring more appropriate to the other class groups represented in our young people's communities might

have been. My suspicion is that rather than mentoring in a concerted cultivation model, we should have worked with multiple models of “eldering” and “sponsoring” that might have been more culturally intelligible to the working-class adults with whom we worked. Although Lareau found the models across racial groups in her study, I also would suggest that a racial/ethnic-based cultural analysis of appropriate mentoring/eldering in various communities would have been important to further improve our work with the culturally diverse adult/adolescent pairings in FaithTrek.

### ENABLING AGENCY AND CULTURAL CAPITAL

Another element of FaithTrek’s program with young people that required adjustment based on the social class of our participants was the year-long projects that we invited young people to engage. The model stated that once participants had begun to identify their gifts and passions for how they might share in God’s work in the world, they would take on a “project” in which they would begin some of that work in their home community with the support and direction of their adult mentor. We hoped that this supported effort would enliven the agency of young people as they recognized that they could have a positive impact on the world. Particularly in the early years of the program, we did not always factor in how the young people’s efforts would be received in the community given their social-class status or their lack of cultural capital in terms of the skills of “entitlement” (demanding that institutions respond to them) more common among middle-class adolescents (Lareau 2003, 60).

One of the benefits of the cultural logic of middle-class parenting is that young people are habituated into practices and skills that are highly valued among the institutions of our culture. Lareau notes the effects of concerted cultivation on self-understanding of middle-class kids: “They learn to think of themselves as special and as entitled to receive certain kinds of services from adults. They also acquire a valuable set of white-collar work skills, including how to set priorities, manage an itinerary, shake hands with strangers, and work on a team” (Lareau 2003, 39). This is a powerful form of cultural capital that sets middle-class children in a place where institutions are likely to respond to their requests because they know the behaviors valued in those settings and because they carry an attitude that demands response from such institutions. Once our middle-class participants

had identified their projects, they often had an enormous amount of social and cultural capital to make them a reality. For example, they had contacts in non-profit worlds; they knew how to make phone calls to discover from whom they needed to get permits to throw a block party; they spoke more easily with adults in positions of power and authority.

Our participants from working class and impoverished settings often did not have these same sets of skills. In fact, they were often met with a double whammy: they lacked practice in navigating institutions and negotiating with authority figures and many of them were met with suspicion because of their racial background. Adolescent young men of color, in particular, do not often receive respect from middle-class institutions even if they are utilizing common forms of address and demonstrating cultural competence with middle-class processes. In the first years, as we listened to young people talk about how their mentors helped make their project a success, we learned that some of the strongly functioning mentors/elders of these youth provided direct instruction and coaching on how to navigate such situations, particularly given the sometimes racist response they received. Our program, however, had not initially recognized this need in the design of the project because we had assumptions about the basic skills that young people would possess, many of which turned out to be class-biased. While we learned that some mentors could provide the kind of eldering necessary to support young people, the projects our program envisioned required mentors to have certain kinds of class-based competencies that the mentors from working-class settings sometimes did not have.

### **IF I NEVER HEAR THE WORD “REFLECTION” AGAIN...**

Another interesting form of resistance that we received from some of the young people was disdain at their sense of the overuse of the word and practice of “reflection” on the part of the staff. As one young man said at the end of the three-week residential element of the program: “If I never hear the word reflection again, it will be too soon.” We responded to this resistance in many ways. The first was to note that our context of graduate theological education valued reflection highly, and because most of our staff was currently engaged in the process of theological education, we may have gone a little overboard with it. Our second response was to remind ourselves that the program

was designed largely through the work of five or six adult women, and that perhaps this was a gender and age bias toward conversation rather than bodily action. Our programmatic response was to intentionally schedule more times of recreation and body involvement, which were gratefully received by later years of young people.

While I believe we found an appropriate response to the resistance, we continued to value reflection highly as a mode of being central to the practice of Religious Education. I have since wondered if there may also be an element of class analysis that would help us to understand better the resistance to reflection and to consider alternative forms of education. Here I turn again to Tex Sample: "The professional and managerial classes are noted for their use of introspective practices and an ongoing focus on their own interiority. While working-class people are not without self-insight and concern about their inward states, nevertheless they are not typically occupied with their 'innards' on the scale of the middle class" (Sample 2006, 27). Sample states this as if it were an essentialized identity experience of working-class persons. I think we might consider whether the more infrequent attention to interior states might be a by-product of the class injuries of disrespectful behavior toward working-class persons. If nobody cares about your internal response to a lack of respect or shows concern for your opinions and perspectives, over time you might learn it is not fruitful to spend much time thinking about them either.

The young man who made the statement about reflection bore certain working-class identity markers. He was tracked into vocational education in high school, and was planning to pursue a career as an auto mechanic. This path was in line with his parents' vocations and those of his older siblings. Sample indicates that drawing on the value of the craft tradition of knowing and the role of apprenticeship learning would be an important educational response to working-class traditions of learning (Sample 2006, 93). In fact, one of this young man's more meaningful connections to his home church was as a nursery worker working alongside adults in his community, a form of apprentice-based participation in the faith community.

As a religious educator, to consider the possibility that introspective reflection might be a class-biased rather than a normative mode of education has been a major source of consternation and consideration for me. I became aware of the ways that my social-class formation has prematurely foreclosed other possibilities and values in the practice of Religious Education. This is not to say that reflection is not valuable, or that working-class persons would not benefit from, enjoy,

or desire engagement in practices of introspective reflection. Rather, my concern is the extent to which religious education without intensive interior reflection had almost become “unthinkable” in my own mind.

### **“PREMATURE” ADULTHOOD OR PRACTICE OF RESISTANCE?**

Practices of resistance are an important site of knowledge about the impact of class identity in Religious Education. As Bettie noted, resistance may or not be articulated or even consciously understood within the category of class politics and still be powerfully active in a given situation. Tex Sample endorses ministry that joins working-class persons in practices of resistance:

Working-class people engage pervasively in practices of everyday resistance to the social inequalities of class. Incarnational ministry will discover the spaces of this resistance and join it in opposing the unjust and demeaning rituals of inequality. Indeed, to join such practices and to bless them can turn loose the congealed anger of working people in constructive directions for life together (Sample 2006, 62)

While Sample does not believe that the church should join in practices of resistance uncritically, he makes a powerful case for the importance of standing against classism in this concrete way. He notes that the worst choice a pastor (and I would add youth leader) can make is to fight against such resistance, which means to join the dominant culture and become identified as part of the problem (Sample 2006, 11).

One practice of class resistance common among working- and underclass adolescents is adopting forms of dress and demeanor that reject the middle-class norm of adolescence as extended childhood in preparation for a promised economic future. In Bettie’s study, one form this resistance takes is in non-prep adolescent girls wearing heavy makeup and sexualized clothing, thus violating middle-class norms by claiming their adult status “prematurely.” She notes, “For them, expressions of sexuality, and by extension motherhood, operated as a sign of adult status and served to reject teachers’ and parents’ methods of keeping them childlike” (Bettie 2002, 61). While Bettie notes that sexual activity was fairly constant across all of the class groupings that she studied, only those marked as racially nondominant and working or underclass were perceived as being *too* sexually active. In other

words, sexual morality was a site of class and racial injury, as well as a shorthand category used in the place of social class (Bettie 2002, 68).

When we had the culminating reunion of participants in FaithTrek at the end of the four years of residential programs, several of our male and female participants, from different racial groups but all either from working- or underclass backgrounds, had become parents. All of them were still in their teens. While we had considered parenthood as legitimate Christian vocation, we had never seriously considered the reality that some of our participants might become parents in the immediate future. For me, this marks again a class-biased understanding of appropriate forms of adolescence that limited our perception of what topics of conversation might be appropriate. Bettie notes:

Regardless of how a girl becomes pregnant (which occurs for a variety of reasons, including the use of birth control that fails), after the fact, having a baby can be a marker of adult status (just as sexuality was), and girls recognize it as such. For non-prep girls who do not have college and career to look forward to as signs of adulthood, motherhood and the responsibility that comes with it can be employed to gain respect, marking adult status (Bettie 2002, 69)

Bettie notes that the teachers at the school expressed surprise at how the babies were celebrated and did not become a source of shame for the girls. The expectation of adolescent pregnancy as a shameful experience lies both in the public acknowledgment of adolescent sexual activity (again, shorthand for “low- class” behavior) and the violation of middle-class assumptions about the norm of extended adolescence resulting in increased economic capacity to provide for children.

What would it mean for a religious educator to “find the spaces of resistance and to join the people in them” (Sample 2006, 35) in this situation? How could we have talked with the young people about the possibilities and struggles of entering the path of young parenthood without reinscribing class and racial injury through the equation of sexual activity with class status? We may have made the conscious choice not to address these issues because there was no way to do it without being patronizing or without inflicting class injury, but my concern is that adolescent parenthood became part of the null curriculum of our program without much conscious reflection on our part. Despite my own history of family members who became parents in their teenage years and youth ministry practice in the local church where this had also occurred, I did not imagine this possibility for our participants.

## CONCLUDING QUESTIONS AND QUANDARIES

Youth ministry in particular may be fraught with class-biased perspectives and blindspots because the life stage of adolescence itself is so bound up with middle-class economic history and cultural practice (Lesko 2001; White 2008). The widespread acceptance that extending childhood and educational preparation is the primary path to economic success and adult maturity is a relatively recent phenomenon in human history. Yet, in my youth ministry classes, I am often struck by my students' and my own middle-class assumptions about best practices. For example, I often have students say things like, "You can't do youth ministry without mission trips. Service is the best education for teenagers," without ever considering the class injury and expression of entitlement often performed in the uncritical practice of mission trips. While youth ministry has a particularly close interrelationship with middle-class perspectives, I think it is worth questioning the extent to which common models and practices of religious education might be significantly bound to middle-class cultural norms across age levels.

As the previous section of this article demonstrates, while I strongly desire the capacity as a religious educator to work across class boundaries without patronizing or "passing," I find that my social location in terms of class often limits my vision in ways that I do not even recognize at the time. Of course, this is true for other identity elements such as race, gender, sexual orientation, spoken language, ability status, and national identity. One response to this reality is a vigorous theological understanding of human finitude, particularly ongoing recognition that despite our best efforts at cultural competence our perspectives are inherently limited. This recognition means that we need conversation partners and critics across the shadowy lines of division to continue to broaden possibilities for good practice in Religious Education.

Additionally, religious educators can seek to become more critically aware of how class identity and class injury work. With increased understanding will undoubtedly come increased recognition of our own failures. However, without increased cultural competence about class identity and values, religious educators can fail in cross-cultural attempts at Religious Education without ever understanding why their attempts at ministry were not appreciated. Without increasing awareness that our values and perspectives are socially located in terms of class, we are vulnerable to relational misunderstandings



and practices of ministry that re-inscribe classism in our various contexts.

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