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**Pursuing Racial Justice in the US: What Religious Educators Need
to Learn from the #BlackLivesMatter Movement**

Mary E. Hess

Introduction

Article 2 of the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights makes clear that racial injustice is prohibited, and Articles 18, 19, and 27 are particularly pointed in their articulation of rights related to communication practices.

Article 2: Everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration, without distinction of any kind, such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status.

Article 18: Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship, and observance.

Article 19: Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive, and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.

Article 27: Everyone has the right freely to participate in the cultural life of the community, to enjoy the arts and to share in scientific advancement and its benefits. Everyone has the right to the protection of the moral and material interests resulting from any scientific, literary, or artistic production of which he is the author.

The argument of this paper is that the practice of and advocacy for these rights in relation to religious education has much to learn from recent experiences in the US with the #BlackLivesMatter (hereafter, #BLM) movement.

#BlackLivesMatter

The #BLM movement in the US provides a distinctive example of the ways in which the social construction of meaning, entangled with the rapid and diverse dynamics of digital media, heightens what anthropologist Michael Wesch has labelled ‘context collapse’ (Wesch, 2009, 19-34). Communication aimed at specific audiences is now accessible in utterly unexpected ways by audiences who previously might not have encountered it. Context collapse helps to describe the paradoxical reality that digital media can empower people to experience human freedom in ways never before possible, and yet at the same time promote a level of public performance of hatred never before imagined. We have seen *both* arise within and in response to the #BLM movement.

The #BLM movement began in 2013 after the acquittal of George Zimmerman in the death of Trayvon Martin. This was an event in which an unarmed African-American teen was shot to death walking home from a convenience store by someone who felt he was protecting the neighbourhood. Subsequently this man, George Zimmerman, argued in court that the ‘stand your ground’ provision of state law exonerated him. When the court refused to find him guilty of a crime, three Black community organizers – Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi – started tweeting their anger, frustration, and pain using the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter in response to what they believed had been an intentional action which devalued Black lives (Cobb, 2016).

In the following four years, the hashtag has become a catalyst for national organizing, making possible the widespread sharing of individual stories of violence and even death at

the hands of police, deeply contextualized within a vibrant affirmation of Black people (Demby, 2016). The movement has highlighted the painful reality in the US that there are sharply differing perceptions of racialization (Fiebigger, 2016). Multiple polls repeatedly emphasize how pessimistically many Black people view policing, versus how optimistically many White people do (Lauter & Pearce, 2015). At the same time as national polling has made clear how sharp this divergence is, it is also possible to see in digital media the invitation to listen across such lines.

Over and over again, White people have ‘woken up’ to this reality, expressing anguish at the ignorance of the divergent ways in which different communities are not only perceived, but in fact responded to within the criminal justice system (Hess, M., 2016). There is clear evidence not only in polling, but in the sheer numbers of people who have begun to show up for multi-racial street protests and other forms of public gathering, that shifts are occurring in the consciousness of people who are not themselves Black, but choose to stand in solidarity with Black people, and other People of Colour.¹ Indeed, the #BLM movement has spread beyond the US into many other settings, including Canada, Britain, Germany, the Netherlands, and South Africa, to name just a few (Tharoor, 2016; Winsor, 2016). Not long after the #BLM movement began to sweep across the US, however, a counter protest – #alllivesmatter – began to circulate (Brown, Y., 2015), with the concomitant frustration in Black communities that once again their stories were not being heard (RacismReview, 2016). This conundrum – that our forms of knowing and learning are at once deeply contextual, and yet easily floated on a digital sea which tears them out of context – permeates contemporary societies.

¹ The language here – Black people, White people, People of Colour – is admittedly rather awkward. For the foreseeable future in the US it is necessary to remain within this awkwardness rather than to ignore the analyses such language makes possible. For a useful exploration of the issue, see: ‘What racial terms make you cringe?’ *New York Times*, 26 March 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/26/us/cringeworthyraceterms.html>.

In US settings, far too much work on racial justice in the context of religious education has devolved into a discussion of appropriate ‘communication’ (Salomon, Quiroz, Potapchuk, & Villarosa, 2014): that is, a focus on interpersonal forms of racial harassment rather than institutional and/or structural elements of a system of racialization. Indeed, much of the concern raised in recent years over ‘political correctness’ can be seen as a form of hegemonic resistance to legitimate issues being engaged, by keeping those issues focused on the interpersonal level rather than the systemic/structural levels. Similarly, while communication rights are a key form of human rights, most of the attention being paid to human rights in the communication sphere in the US has to do with notions of ‘intellectual property’ rather than the institutional and/or structural elements that thoroughly constrict – or empower – participatory communication. One rare exception to this observation is the World Council of Churches (2005) document *Love to Share: Intellectual Property Rights, Copyright and Christian Churches*.

The advent of digital social media has provided a major disruption of these ‘taken for granted’ assumptions, making it possible to see in new ways dilemmas that attend to widespread communication practices. But here, too, the focus has often been at the individual level, rather than the social or collective one.

Authority, authenticity, agency

Media scholars point to three dynamics which are rapidly shifting in the midst of digital media – authority, authenticity, agency – and these three offer some clues to the dilemmas (Hess, M., 2016). When authority no longer accrues automatically to structural roles it must instead be earned, and increasingly authority becomes entwined with experiences of authenticity. It is then all too easy to fall into perceiving authenticity as a purely personal

criterion for authority, with little connection to structural and systemic dynamics (Hess, M., 2013).

It is the third force, however, that of agency, which should hold the most claim on our attention, because ‘agency’ – or the ability to have an impact on something, to produce an effect, to take action – is at once both widely trumpeted in digital media in individual terms, and yet nearly invisible in collective terms (Shirky, 2008; Jenkins, 2006).

Discerning the extent to which a particular speech-act is authentic is but one part of the challenge, it is also necessary to consider how authoritative that speech-act is in a given context and, further, what form of ‘act’ it really signals (Carrington, 2015). It is the third of these three dynamics – agency – which is both far more complicated in religious settings, and more pressing. When human agency is considered in solely individualistic or for that matter economic terms, how does one speak of transcendence? Or of divine agency?

In public school settings in the US, discourse about transcendence is practically forbidden. While information *about* religion is permissible, although rarely built into the standards at various levels, creating environments in which students can speak of experiences of transcendence in religious terms is generally ruled out of order. The same is true of popular culture. Most instances in which divine action is represented are confined to specifically religious discourse, as in films which are explicitly marketed as Christian. Perhaps a counterpoint to this statement would be so-called ‘super hero’ films, but the power of ‘the gods’ in such films is hardly equivalent to a thoroughly religious understanding of divine transcendence. Further, taking action in obedience to divine command – particularly if such obedience contests secular law – is highly condemned in the US. A powerful and newly emergent example I would note are the state-level legislative attempts in the US seeking to outlaw *sharia* law, when scholars confirm that there is no way such law could ever overrule

the US constitution. Such efforts are clearly aimed at driving cultural perceptions and encouraging Islamophobia.

Collective agency

Yet the context of representations of collective action is where #BLM is particularly interesting. Digital media have been an essential element of #BLM's impact, and have created room for representation, resistance, and demonstration of collective agency, as well as granting authenticity and hence authority to what had been, up until this moment, highly marginalized voices.

That this is the case is largely because what began as a hashtag used by three women as a form of individual expression on Twitter, became a tool for organizing broadly and organically, and doing so in such a way that the impact of #BLM was deeply felt in the midst of the 2016 US political campaigns. Questions of mass incarceration, of systemic racial injustice, even of reparations, would not have been part of national debates then were it not for the #BLM movement (Anderson, 2017). But even beyond pushing national figures to discuss issues they otherwise would not engage, #BLM has become a movement that is actually drawing people into collective action that is deeper and wider than mere consumption (Brooks, 2016). Indeed, there has been some analysis which suggests that the ascendancy of Donald Trump to the US presidency can in large measure be traced to a racist backlash against this emerging consciousness (Taub, 2016). Certainly, the stunningly large and widespread protests which arose in the immediate aftermath of his election drew on lessons learned earlier in #BLM.

What #BLM has made possible is a national conversation about race – a conversation that, as heated as it has been in certain settings, has also been tremendously constructive. How has it done so? In part by taking seriously the open ended, utterly transparent nature of

Twitter which has supported a distributed form of networked leadership that is difficult to constrain. By sharing first person accounts of violence by police towards Black people and Black communities, often accompanied by the inclusion of video, #BLM has built awareness that defies suppression. Such accounts are easily distributed across multiple contexts, and they have galvanized specific shared action. Van Jones makes this point in the recent award-winning documentary ‘13th’ – a film about the systemic rise of mass incarceration in the US – when he notes that:

the difference now is that somebody can hold up one of these [points to his smartphone], get what’s going on, they can put it on YouTube, and the whole world has to deal with it. That’s what’s new, it’s not the protests, it’s not the brutality, it is that we can force a conversation about it. (Van Jones, as quoted by Ava DuVernay, 2016, approximately 9 minutes prior to the end of the film).

This kind of communicative practice – using audio and video captured by amateur bystanders – is perhaps the best example in recent years in the US of what global activists working on communication rights have labelled ‘participatory communication’ (Sam, 2015). Such examples are also a clear illustration of ‘context collapse’. The meaning of specific stories is often widely contested, and activists need to find ways to re-contextualize such stories, to draw on the wider context by ‘filling in’ the missing pieces, particularly those of which the White community has been largely ignorant.²

To return to the specific enumeration of human rights with which I began this essay, freedom of expression and freedom to participate in the cultural life of one’s community are

² The Racial Justice Collective in Theological Education is collecting a number of such pieces that have been circulating in social media at this website: <http://rjb.religioused.org/resources/>.

clearly what is at stake in the US context. The #BLM has demonstrated ways in which digital social media offer new modes and manners of exercising such freedom.

Lessons religious educators must learn

Religious educators can – and must – learn at least two lessons from the #BLM (Green, 2016). First, there is the basic reality that racialization has contributed to widespread oppression in the US, with profoundly differing consequences for different racial groups. Across the religious landscape the necessity of taking seriously these accounts is clear. Religious educators and religious communities who ignore this movement are contributing at a minimum to the increasing irrelevance of their meaning frames, and at worst are actively participating in racial oppression – surely something which not only denies basic human rights, but is also clearly at odds with most religious convictions (Campolo & Battle, 2005; Cone, 2011; Emerson & Yancey, 2011; Jennings, 2010; Wallis, 2016).

Second, religious educators can and must learn a new respect for the ways in which authority, authenticity, and agency are shifting in digital media (Cobb, 2016). We need to be attentive to both the opportunities and the dilemmas posed by such media. Helping our students to navigate these shifting dynamics can best be achieved by giving them practice in creating in these media, thereby supporting a fluency which can have collective impact, and at the same time helping a new generation to integrate these essential human rights into their daily practices. I have observed the following three pragmatic steps to have high efficacy with my own students and with teachers in other systems.

Invite structural analysis

First, we can engage structural analysis by inviting students to consider how they understand authority. Interrogating forms of authority is a great exercise for teaching about religious traditions, because authority is understood in differing ways within specific traditions, as well

as varying across multiple traditions. There are also myriad ways to collaborate with teachers in other disciplines, since being able to discern credibility and authority in relation to information is a key literacy objective in multiple spaces (Association of College and Research Libraries, 2017).

In religious traditions which have highly nuanced forms of authority – for example, the documentary tradition of Roman Catholics, or the levels of enlightenment in Buddhism – there may even be some advantage to exploring issues of authority with full attention to their complexity, given that there is significant evidence that young people growing up within various structures of social media have experience with the challenges of navigating competing forms of authority (Thomas & Seely Brown, 2011; Ito *et al.*, 2010). Using a social media site which is familiar to the youth in question – in the US context that might be Reddit, for example – offers an opportunity to do ‘compare/contrast’ exercises that are inherently interesting to youth, while making manifest some of the useful nuances in specific religious traditions.

Professor of Religious Education Leah Gunning Francis has written about some of the ways in which youth who were involved with the #BLM came to re-imagine their possible connections to faith community. She, in turn, saw her own understanding of leadership in the community shift as she came to recognize what one of her research interviewees labelled ‘group-centred leadership’ (Francis, 2015). This kind of engagement offers profound learning about ways in which authority is structured and credibility is deployed.

Teach forms of discernment

Second, we can teach forms of discernment that invite students to deepen and enlarge the criteria they bring to the task of ascertaining kinds and levels of authenticity. This is a particularly important task, as there is so much in neoliberal economics that seeks to

commodify various expressions of authenticity. Most dictionary definitions stress in some way that ‘authentic’ attaches primarily to affective elements of experiences. Yet for many people what is ‘authentic’ is determined in part by its opposite – that is, experiencing something as manipulative connotes a lack of authenticity. When authority is so strongly shaped by these forms of authenticity, it is possible to find ourselves in a situation in which a leader might assert with great passion and conviction something that is factually false, but which people accept as true.

When the further complication of voluntary enclosure within self-chosen social media is added into the mix, the challenge of competing realities comes into full view. Here again, religious traditions are rich sources to mine for pertinent practices. Within the Roman Catholic tradition, for instance, Jesuit practices of discernment can be profoundly useful as well as vitally interesting, as can various ways in which discernment is discussed in Buddhist practice (Bhikkhu, 2013). The goal is not so much to teach a specific faith – that is, this does not need to be a topic or subject area which can only be broached in catechetical or faith formative settings – as it is an opportunity to develop more agile capacities for genuine discernment.

Here again #BLM offers a useful example, because due to its widely distributed, grassroots nature, the questions of ‘who speaks’ for #BLM has become particularly pressing. In late 2016 more than 100 organizations from across the US came together as part of the *Movement for Black Lives* – a national policy effort which, as they write, ‘does not include every policy Black people should be working on, but elevates those for which there was shared energy and action in this political moment’ (Movement for Black Lives, 2016). The process of developing this united front took place on Twitter, in local organizing settings, and through a multi-faceted, digitally enabled infrastructure.

This example is not without its complications for religious educators, however, because when people become widely accustomed to participatory practices of decision-making and collective agency, the challenge of communicating and embodying respect for – let alone, perhaps, obedience to – transcendent power becomes that much more difficult.

I noted at the beginning of this paper that far too much of the engagement with communication rights in the US context has been caught up with issues of ‘intellectual property’, while at the same time far too much of the discussion around racial oppression has centred on individual communication practices. These are flip sides of the same coin. When communication is construed primarily as an interpersonal process (that is, as something under the control of the producer of a message, the speaker of a statement), then it is far harder to glimpse the systemic nature of the dynamics in play. If communication is a linear process owned by the producer, then protecting the ‘property’ of that ownership makes some degree of sense. Similarly, if racism is only an individual problem of individual persons doing and saying ‘bad’ things, then finding the ‘right speech’ has some salience.

The system of racialization that exists in the US, however, was created to make it possible to own human beings for their labour through processes of enslavement – it is, first and foremost, both structural and thoroughly systemic in nature (Jennings, 2010). Similarly, processes of communication are deeply relational, with meaning arising in the ‘in between’ of a speaker and the recipient of their speech – again, processes that are clearly implicated within systems. Consider: racialization exists to make it possible to own human beings. Intellectual property stipulates that ideas can be owned. Both concepts work together to fence in and control human beings and their speech, particularly speech which contests and resists such dynamics. The concept of human rights offers one major form of resistance to these dynamics, but is itself conceptually complicated and at times contradictory.

It is not possible in this short essay to explore substantially this deeper, underlying contradiction bound up with neoliberal imagination (Brown, W., 2015), but it is important to recognize that ‘intellectual property’ is in some ways a very strange concept, because unlike real property when you give away an idea you still have it yourself. The third dynamic that is shifting in the midst of digital media – that of agency – offers some small hope here, and it is this third practice that I would urge is specifically relevant.

Teach creative participatory forms of communication

Third, we can support our students in practising forms of creative participatory communication (Hess, M., 2014). Digital storytelling is a particularly powerful resource for religious educators when implemented as a practice of ‘workshop-based participatory media focused on self-representation’ (Vivienne, 2016, 1). This form of digital storytelling has been established through the work of Lambert, Weinshenker, and others associated with StoryCenter (previously the Center for Digital Storytelling). This specific process of telling stories using digital tools emerged from a community theatre group which was deliberately focused on evoking and empowering a personal ‘voice’ in the midst of communities. Since 1993, StoryCenter has taught the elements of this process in a myriad of contexts, estimating that more than 12,000 stories have been created (Davis & Weinshenker, 2012, 47). In contrast to some of what is labelled ‘digital storytelling’ in current commercial media contexts, the StoryCenter process is focused primarily on the storytelling part of that phrase. The digital tools might at first glance seem incidental or even merely instrumental to the primary learning. As Lambert notes:

What we know is that when you gather people in a room, and listen, deeply listen to what they are saying, and by example encourage others to listen, magic happens. The magic is simple. We do not have many safe places to be heard. (Lambert, 2013, 83)

There are, however, elements of the dynamics peculiar to digital tools and digital distribution that add a layer of learning outcomes that were originally unanticipated by StoryCenter, and at the same time lend themselves to powerful use when engaged in faith formation (Gauntlett 2008, 256).

One very fruitful mechanism for taking seriously and developing capacity for advocacy on behalf of the communication rights enumerated by the United Nations Declaration within religious education lies in using story prompts that evoke connections to communities of faith. Because digital storytelling begins in learning to tell stories, and most frequently stories that have a personal foundation to them, the process is immediately accessible in almost any setting. Further, in learning how to construct a story – learning the basic elements of a story, working in a story circle to refine and hone a story, multiple rounds of editing as various elements are placed into a digital framework – learners are brought into a more critically engaged relationship with their own story, as well as the story of their community of faith. When the additional layer of distributing the story in digital format is added, the process can take on a deeply communal character (McQuiston, 2007). That communal character takes shape around the learner's personal agency. As Erstad and Silseth write:

Digital storytelling, then, both gives students the opportunity to learn how to use technology to make their own voice heard and the opportunity to use knowledge and experience acquired outside of school in the process of becoming citizens – a potential way to foster agency. ... The democratic potential of digital storytelling lies both in the way people might learn to express themselves and the way it challenges traditional conceptions of formal vs. informal ways of learning. (Erstad & Silseth, 2008, 218)

So far, there are only a few projects investigating digital storytelling in the context of religious education, but their findings are encouraging. Kaare and Lundby, for instance, in Norway, have been involved in studying one of the Norwegian Church's pilot projects in new forms of faith formation. Their work on a project that engaged digital storytelling suggests that:

By participating in the Story Circle, and negotiating how their stories should be constructed and interpreted, the young narrators are connected to the collective identity of the congregation. Identity in practice is defined socially not merely because it is reified in a social discourse of the self and of social categories, but also because it is produced as a lived experience of participation in specific communities. (Kaare & Lundby, 2008, 117)

Similarly, in a DMin project completed within the program at United Theology Seminary in Dayton, OH, where McQuiston used digital storytelling as the culminating project of a year-long confirmation programme, there was consistent evidence that the young people involved in the programme had very positive experiences in deepening their faith — a process which spilled over into the larger church community (McQuiston, 2007, 146).

I have been using various forms of digital storytelling in the midst of religious education for more than 15 years now, and while I have not been able to mount a full-scale, carefully structured research programme around these practices, I have significant amounts of anecdotal evidence that points to the efficacy of these processes for encouraging deeper reflection and communicative agility.

All three of these shifts – authority, authenticity, agency – are particularly evident in the ways in which #BLM has engaged personal stories. The stories lend immediate, personal connections – that is, authenticity – to the events. By weaving such reports into a national,

even international, narrative using the #BLM hashtag to develop a meta-narrative about justice and the destructive dynamics of police brutality and mass incarceration, the #BLM movement has emerged as a potent collectivity which has both credibility (authority) and power (agency).

Conclusion

The argument of this essay has been that the practice of and advocacy for human rights in relation to religious education has much to learn from the #BLM movement. Perhaps it is worth concluding with Nick Couldry's articulation of the 'five possible ways that the new digital technologies are enabling these processes and creating citizen-government relationship.' His research confirms the argument of this essay, and summarizes well these dynamics: the proliferation of digital and personal communication media has increased new voices in public spaces for a vastly increased range of people; a greatly increased mutual awareness of these new voices has emerged; easy circulation of digital content has enabled the emergence of new scales of organized political action against dictators, corporations, and elected governments; our understanding of what spaces are for political organisation is now changed; a generation of new intensities of listening (Couldry, quoted in Sam, 2015). Religious educators must take these new dynamics into account.

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