

Book Review

A Pedagogy of Faith: The Theological Vision of Paulo Freire

by Irwin Leopando,
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A Pedagogy of Faith: The Theological Vision of Paulo Freire is an intriguing book-length study that investigates Freire's educational theory and practice through his religious lens. The issue the author Irwin Leopando tackles is the misconception of many Western readers and the academic left in restraining or completely dismissing Freire's theological dimensions when discussing his theory or practice. Emphasizing his religiosity is important, because Leopando asserts that Freire's praxis can only be fully understood by recognizing the Catholic thought that established the source of his moral vision, social concern, and worldview. The book is divided into five chapters: (1) Paulo Freire's Life and Educational Praxis; (2) Freire and the Brazilian Catholic Left Movement; (3) Freire and Catholic Theologies of the Person; (4) Freire and Liberation Theology; and (5) Freire, Neoliberalism, and Integral Pedagogy.

The first chapter opens on Freire's younger years in the Brazilian Northeast. The context describes the high levels of inequality and poverty in the region and his personal family life. His father believed in Spiritism and his mother

was a devout Catholic, but both were tolerant and open with their children. Freire eventually embraced the Catholic faith on his own at the age of seven with the support of his parents. In his twenties, he developed his academic interests in the philosophy of education, as a university student and teacher. Freire's formative years as the director of the Department of Education and Culture of Pernambuco's Social Service Ministry for ten years and his doctoral studies and professorship at the University of Pernambuco is reviewed. Leopando also outlines Freire's involvement at the Movement for Popular Culture, where he focused on adult literacy with other active volunteers, who were mostly middle-class Catholic University students. The author then describes Freire's conscientizing literacy method and program, its national implementation in Brazil, imprisonment after the 1964 military coup and finally his exile. The author spans Freire's many achievements abroad, including scholarly and professional work in education. His permanent return to Brazil in the 1980's led to further professional success and major academic activity in the 1990's, until his death in 1997. The chapter was a methodical review of his life in relation to his work in education and his Catholic faith, which gives the reader, regardless of previous knowledge, a relevant and thorough context.

The second chapter outlines the period of the conservative Catholic Electoral League and the rise and era of the Catholic Left Movement, Catholic University Youth, Popular Action, Movement for Grassroots Education, and Freire's Literacy Programs. The Brazilian Catholic Left Movement organized efforts to mobilize and educate the poor for a more just and democratic society, which the author claims had shaped Freire's worldview, identity, and educational praxis. He was influenced and became an activist and intellectual during these movements in the 1950's to the 1960's. The author is able to give a detailed analysis of the Catholic Church and its entities in Brazil from the twentieth century to 1964, especially in regards to its ideological tensions and the major theological and ecclesiological developments. Though the chapter focuses extensively on Brazilian Catholic Left Movement and other Catholic entities, it allows the reader to understand the fluctuating time period in which Freire developed professionally and academically. Catholic elites and Freire then, 'drew on the latent resources of their religious heritage in order to break with their Church's prevailing conservatism and authoritarianism' (p.48). This break in conservatism and authoritarianism and embrace of a modern theology is discussed further on.

The third chapter demonstrates the influence of the less conservative French religious thinkers: Jacques Maritain, Emmanuel Mounier, and Pierre Teilhard de Chardin on Paulo Freire's theory and practice. Maritain's ideas of liberal pluralism, universal human rights, Catholic involvement in the modern world and social issues, alongside his views on the goal of education, are all outlined. Next, a summary of Mounier's advocacy for Christian personalism, with his ideas on personalist anthropology, civilization, praxis, and education are given, in addition to the groundwork he laid in the dialogue between Christianity and Marxism. Finally, Jesuit paleontologist Chardin's push for the Catholic church's engagement with the modern world and his production of constructive theology of human existence and nature is reviewed. After presenting each Catholic thinker in-depth, the author concludes the impact of the three on Freire. Further, also influenced by the three Catholic philosophers, Almeri Bezerra and Henrique Caludio de Lima Vaz's impact on Freire's thoughts and ideas are presented.

The former chapters outlined Freire's life, his academic and professional work in relation to his faith, the developments of the Catholic church and entities in Brazil, philosophical Catholic influences, and the fourth chapter explores Freire's theology and embrace of Marxist praxis. The focus is on the relationship between liberation theology and Paulo Freire's pedagogy. Initially, a review of the historic Medellin conference and documents in 1968 display the church's transformed progressive stance, which included a Freirean vision of social action. Freire was designated as a founder of the liberation theology movement by liberation theologians, as his conscientizing practice was adapted as a basis for their work. Throughout the chapter the author claims that Freire's faith laid the groundwork for his awakening and embrace of Marxist praxis and analysis, which he incorporated into his philosophy. His vision of a prophetic church is one that is on the side of the vulnerable and poor and is the 'only historical manifestation of the Church that has manifested the Gospel's original vision of justice, freedom, authenticity, and human well being. "Christ," he [Freire] asserted, "was no conservative" (p. 176). His faith here aligns with his Marxist praxis.

The fifth and final chapter discusses Freire's post-exile years in Brazil as the secretary of education and the neoliberal decade from 1990 to 2000. Freire's opposition to the neoliberalization of the education system is discussed, where he compares it to 'animal training,' like Maritain had done (p. 203). He found capitalism to violate essential human capacities for community, solidarity, and

self-giving. An extended discussion on neoliberalism follows with its impact on the education system in Brazil. Freire's final vision of pedagogy is then examined at full-length. The author concludes the book with a final thoughts section. In this segment, Leopando asserts and maintains the general argument of this book, that the Catholic faith deeply influenced Freire's ideology and outlines his humanizing and person-centered pedagogy and theological stance in education.

The author's religious background, which is being based on the acknowledgments section where he states, 'My warmest thanks to St. Bartholomew's Episcopal Church for two decades of spiritual nourishment and radical welcome,' Leopando offers an often missing religious voice in the Western intellectual left dominated academic world (p.221). Further, as an Assistant Professor of English rather than expert on Freire, he brings a diverse perspective to the table. Leopando has however worked with Ira Shor, who was the co-author with Paulo Freire to *A Pedagogy for Liberation*. Over the five chapters, he provides a thorough analysis of Freire's pedagogy and theological stance. The author brings readers to acknowledge the role of Freire's Catholic faith in the formation of his consciousness, activism, and worldview. The fourth chapter was especially convincing in Leopando's claim, as it gives less context and rather his direct views and ideas in theology that laid the groundwork for his pedagogy.

Certain sections, such as the three French Catholic philosophers reviewed in the third chapter or the neoliberal ideology in itself, were much more lengthy than required, without adding much depth to the relevant discussion. On the other hand, the author does not assume that the audience has familiarity with Freire or any of the significant ideologies, entities, or figures discussed, which did lead to a thorough context. This well-written book avoids overly specialist phrasing, which allows it be accessible to a wide audience. Those who read *A Pedagogy of Faith* will gain valuable insight to Freire's esteemed pedagogy, which is especially vital for teachers, school administrators, and education students and researchers.