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CONVERSATION WITH PAULO FREIRE

Edited by William B. Kennedy

Union Theological Seminary

3041 Broadway

New York City, NY 10027

Paulo Freire: An Introduction

Although Paulo Freire's work and writings have focused primarily on general education, he has been influential in challenging religious educators to analyze their own work more deeply. In this issue Religious Education makes available three articles that reflect more directly Freire's concern for and commitment to the church and, more broadly, to the educational work of religious institutions and movements in society.

The first is an informal response to the William Rainey Harper Award at the Conference of the Religious Education Association in 1983.

The second is "Education, Liberation and the Church," written in 1972 and published by the World Council of Churches in Study/Encounter in early 1973. It needs to be read with that date in mind, with the Medellin meeting of the Episcopal Conference of Latin America (CELAM) just past, and the Chinese Cultural Revolution and the Cuban and Chilean developments under Castro and Allende offering promising new ventures in education.

The third is a very brief note written to four young German theological students in 1977, containing some continuing reflection which Freire thought would be useful along with the 1973 article.

Another collection of Paulo Freire's writings, and an interview, will be forthcoming as The Politics of Education, to be published by James F. Bergin Publishers, Inc., 670 Amherst Road, South Hadley, MA 01075.

The theme for the 1983 Conference of the Religious Education Association had been chosen by the Board of Directors in 1981, and refined to be Pursuing Justice and Peace: Challenge to Religious Educators. After considerable work by the Planning Committee and some discussion of the way the William Rainey Harper Award might be tied into that theme, Percel Alston suggested that we honor Paulo Freire for the stimulation his educational work and writings had provided for religious education around the world. The Committee liked the suggestion, and the Board approved awarding it to Paulo and Elza Freire, together, because of their rich educational partnership through the years.

So in the evening session on Sunday, November 20, 1983, the award was given to Professor Freire. He brought Elza's regrets that she could not be pres-

ent. His responses to the award came in an extended informal interview conducted by William B. Kennedy and Carman Hunter. Will had been his staff colleague in the Office of Education of the World Council of Churches in Geneva for more than six years, and Carman had translated his latest book, *Pedagogy in Process*. Carman was able therefore to move back and forth between English and Portuguese and freed Paulo to use his mother tongue when he chose to do so.

This article has been edited by William B. Kennedy from the tape of that interview, in order to invite the readers into the dialogue with Paulo and to enable them to get to know him as a person as well as an educator.

Paulo Freire: Responses on Receiving
the William Rainey Harper Award

Randolph Crump Miller, REA Executive Secretary, presented
the award and read the citation:

The Religious Education Association
of the

U.S. and Canada

presents the

William Rainey Harper Award

to

PAULO AND ELZA FREIRE

Educators and Prophets

of the Pedagogy of the Oppressed,

Champions of Justice and Peace

Paulo Freire responded: "First of all I want to thank everyone in my own name, in Elza's name, in the name of our daughters and our sons and our grandchildren for this honor that you have paid us. I want to underline that we receive this honor from you not proudly but in the nature of a challenge. It's as though you were saying to us, 'This honor is not for you to stop, but it means to go on struggling, trying.' Thank you."

Once you said that you learned what you know about education from Elza. . . .

"Yes, in great dimensions Elza shaped me. Of course it's impossible to shape without being shaped. I did not write this or that chapter with her. She taught me the way to love and to understand the uniqueness of the human being. In this way Elza has been a fantastic educator. I remember when I was writing in Chile, I wrote three chapters of a book in fifteen days. Sometimes Elza came to my small library room and said 'Look, do you know that

you did not sleep since yesterday?' I was not convinced about that. And she gave me a good breakfast and a smile and I continued to write. But sometimes I worked until two, three a.m. and I went to sleep. Then at 5:30 Elza came, and I said, 'No, I want to sleep.' And she said 'No, I am waking you to tell you that I read the pages, and I am not quite sure where is the place for your next exile! By writing this book I am not quite sure where you can go!'

After all those years, how was your experience of returning home to Brazil?

"I spent fifteen years and a half far from Brazil, without having passport, prevented from going there. When we finally arrived in Sao Paulo, many, many friends were there. My first contact with Brazil, with the people, with the smell of the land, my contact with the curves of the streets, with the Portuguese language. . . . Up till then anytime I had heard Portuguese spoken on the streets it was by a tourist in the whole context of the French language. I remember the time in Geneva when, without being noticed, I walked two hours behind Brazilians. They stopped to look in a window. I stopped too. They started walking again. I started again, just to listen to them speak in Portuguese. It's almost crazy, but it's enough to say what it means to me far from my land without having a choice. Refugees do not choose. Then suddenly in Brazil it was the whole context speaking Portuguese. Those first days we all experienced great psychological difficulty as we discovered that we were immersed in the Portuguese language. I had to say to myself, 'But Paulo, it's no more away, it's Brazil. They speak Portuguese!'

"In my encounter with my friends, with my relatives, it was difficult for me to identify the other people. The sixteen years had changed my face, made me lose my hair. I left Brazil with black hair, no beard, and I came back really old, but at the same time young. They were like me, too. I had to discover them. I said to the newspapers that I come back to Brazil in order to relearn it, to relearn the country. Before relearning my country, I could not say anything, because it's impossible for anyone to stay almost sixteen years, far from his country, and afterwards on arriving to begin to want to teach those who stayed there. It's arrogance. I am engaged in this process of relearning in my country, three years and half. And I'm very, very happy to be there."

In your recent writings you have not been using the word 'conscientization.' Is there a reason?

"I think that some people think I invented the word 'conscientization.' I didn't create it. What I did was sort of pluck it out of the air in Brazil and give it a special and different meaning.

"There is obviously an etymological relation between the word 'conscientization' and the word 'conscience.' In Portuguese we have only one word, '*conscientizacao*'; in English you have 'conscience' and 'consciousness.' Because of the origin of the word and its relationship, it runs the risk of being interpreted idealistically. Consciousness is neither the creator of reality, nor is it merely the reflection of reality. On the one hand we can't therefore interpret conscientization as something that happens simply inside you, but also we can't interpret it without understanding it as something which happens without critical reflection.

"In the 70s, I began to observe that in many places that some people, some institutions also, were developing some kind of practice which they were calling 'conscientization,' which had nothing to do with conscientization. I don't want to say that those people were not serious, nor make any kind of reference to their intentions. But I wanted just to understand the kind of action they were developing and calling conscientization. I asked myself about that, and how to overcome the misunderstanding. I thought that I had some responsibility. Maybe in my writings I had not been clear, or had been naive. I remember sometime talking with Elza in Geneva about that. I was sure that in order for one not to be distorted, not to be criticized, sometimes in a right way, sometimes in a wrong way, the only solution is not to do anything. You risk not to be understood.

"I remember that Elza said to me, 'Look, I see two ways for you to go beyond that. Always we will be distorted. One way is to be more and more clear in your next writings, in order to avoid distortions. And maybe the second way is to stop using the word "conscientization." ' I said, 'Yes, I think that you are right.' The last time I used the word was in 1974. But it does not mean that I reject the process, but the word I prefer not to use. It was the co-optation, not just of the word but of myself too. Then I had to say No, and I stopped using the word."

When your first book was published in English, you received many letters from women about your use of masculine language.

"I have a fantastic debt to women in this country. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* came out in September, 1970, and I began to re-

ceive letters from women all over the United States. It gave me the impression that there was a kind of conspiracy, but it was not. In all the letters they said to me, 'How is it possible to say that you believe in the ability which men have to transform, and not women, too?' I wrote to all of them, thanking them for the lesson, and saying 'Look, the only explanation I could give you, I right now can no longer give, because the only explanation I could give you would be a kind of ideology tract of *machismo*. And the explanation would be that when I say "men" I include "women." And it is a lie.'

"You cannot realize how the first letter I opened was a kind of explosion of light for me. That suddenly such a thing, so clear and obvious, which I spent years without understanding and perceiving, came up suddenly. It was also one moment in which I became angry, not because of the women, but because of my past. I said to myself, 'Is it possible to have lived such a quantity of years, ideologized in this way, explaining, giving classes on syntax, and lying like this?' This is not a question of syntax; it is a question of ideology, ideology through language. Then I wrote to all of them: 'This is an explanation I never gave after receiving your letter. Then what can I say to you? First of all, thank you very much again, and second, that I will stop today writing the way I have written.' In Portuguese it is difficult. Our languages are machistic. I say 'her/his,' or 'human beings,' and so on.

"After reading the letters I came home, invited our two sons to have a private conversation in one of their rooms, and I said, 'Look, sons, I have something very serious to tell you. We are exploiting the women of this house. And the women of this house are your mother and your two sisters. We don't cook. We don't clean house. We don't make our beds. This is impossible. We must start anew!' I've become an excellent dishwasher. Before the arrival of the letters from the American women, I used to ideologize and justify and rationalize in this way: Elza washes and cleans the house, the girls do the dishes, and I write! It's an absurdity! But in spite of my attempt and intention, it was not possible for me to cook. I do just eggs, coffee. But I tried one day to cook. I bought one kilo of filet, enormous, and in Geneva tremendously expensive. It was absolutely lost. I don't know what I did to that meat. It became plastic material. Even Elza was not able to restore it. But I am convinced that my lack of ability to cook is just ideology. There is resistance, machist resistance. I am sure of that. But I am not the right age to go and be psychoanalyzed. I make my public

declaration but I have to accept myself as I am. I cannot cook. But at least I discovered it!"

When the Open University gave you the first honorary degree they ever awarded to someone who was not British, you told an interviewer that everything you know about education you learned from the peasants of northeast Brazil. . . .

"I was invited to work in a private institution in Brazil which gave educational and social assistance to workers. In that institution I could really meet the workers. It was then that I began to question the prejudice we have as academics. I remember that during a lot of times, even though I felt happy discussing with the workers, with the peasants, that when a worker said something good, something serious, something different, I was still surprised. One day I discovered the reason for my surprise. 'I asked myself, if this statement had been made by a university student, would you be surprised?' And I said 'No.' Why? Because the student of the university is supposed to be able say things like that. But if the worker says that, we become surprised. In the last analysis it is the question of the position of class which we have, it is the ideology.

"I remember I did research about the relationships between parents and children and the question of punishment. The results were very strong. Then after studying the results I began to talk about punishment to all the parents we invited to the schools of this institution. One night I started very seriously, and had begun to talk to the parents about the need to have dialogue with the children. I quoted Piaget about this, about the moral code in childhood, and I said that in a long speech.

"When I finished, one of the workers there put up his hand like this. I said 'Okay.' And he looked at the colleagues and said, 'Doctor, Doctor Paulo (in Brazil everyone who belongs to the ruling class, or is next to it, is 'doctor,' whether he or she is or is not), Doctor Paulo, you said beautiful words now. Beautiful words.' That man was one of the most important educators I had till today. 'Doctor Paulo, I don't know where is your house, but how many children do you have?' I said 'Five.' And he said, 'How many boys and girls?' I said 'Three daughters and two sons.' I was beginning to be afraid. And he said 'Okay. Your house first of all must be free on both sides [a free-standing house]. Secondly, your house must have a garden with grass. You must have a good room for you and your wife and two big rooms for the three daughters

and the two boys, at least two. I admit that you don't have five. And your kitchen must be very good with all the equipment, and also a shower, with electric hot water, even in northeast Brazil.' And he said, 'When you arrive at home, in the end of the day, your children, they are happy, beautiful, with clean clothes. They've had good food. At seven o'clock at night, you don't have any problems, everybody goes to bed, the children all go to bed. You don't need to force them to sleep because they really are sleepy. They are well, they have health, and above all, they ate. Then they sleep. When one of your children has some problem, the doctor comes immediately to see what it is.'

"'But, Doctor Paulo, this is not our situation. Our house doesn't have even one bedroom. One room, just one, for all the things or functions of the house. I arrive at home tired. I did not eat well. And my five children did not eat also. They are not clean. We can't be — we don't have water. They are hungry, and they are diabolic. The next day at four o'clock again I must be awake in order to go again to the manufactory. I have to beat them in order for them to sleep because I need to sleep. If I don't sleep, I can't work, and they cannot be alive. Then, Doctor Paulo, don't think that the workers beat the children because they don't love them. We love our children as well as you love yours. The question is that you have different material conditions to love, and we don't have. Then, for you, the fact of beating is as if we did not love them. I would like, Doctor Paulo, to know whether in our situation you would be very dialogical.'

"I confess to you, I was so impacted. But in order for you to see how difficult it is for us to learn, and how when we are convinced about something, how difficult it is to change, because we need really to be sure in order to change — when I was going back home, I had the strange feeling of somebody who felt he had lost a battle, but felt that he had to keep on fighting. I said to myself, 'That was a very interesting man, but it's necessary to insist with him that dialogue really is necessary.'

"Once again, Elza: 'Look, Paulo,' she said, 'in the last analysis the man is absolutely right.' I said, 'But Elza, we have to change this country. How is it possible to create a democracy with punishment like this?' My goodness! How naive I was! And she smiled and said, 'No, no, it is another question, Paulo.' I spent times, many times, a lot of time to learn that so easy lesson which that man gave me that evening. I tell you the story with humility.

"Also it is good for us to know as educators that the process of

learning is a constant one. At the moment in which we break through our own resistance to learning, we never stop learning again. This is what happens to me. Until that night I was learning a little bit with difficulty. But at the moment when the lesson of that man came really into me and embraced me, invaded me, in a good sense, I never stopped learning with the people.

"I am a teacher at the university level, and I love to be. I think that I do something good also. I think that I learn a lot with the students, too, the people who are writing theses. It's very, very important too. But I tell you, if I had to do just that, I would not be happy. I also need to go to the people, to listen to the people, to learn their language, their metaphors, their symbology, their language, their richness, their ability to love.

"Look, there is no guarantee in the *favelas*, the slums, of Brazil, that mobilization and organization of the people there will result in a very clear political participation. But there is one guarantee: we don't need to teach them that they are poor. There is another guarantee: it's not necessary to tell them who are oppressing them. They know very well.

"Two years ago I had a beautiful meeting with some sisters in Brazil, discussing their practice and trying to understand it theoretically. In a certain moment, we talked about the difference of language, the social difference of language, a class difference. Basil Bernstein states that very well in his work in London. There are two syntaxes, of course, a dominating class syntax and a dominated class syntax. There are different structures of thinking. The question, nevertheless, is just to profile those who have power and those who don't have power. In history, never have the oppressed described the oppressors. I want to say 'described the oppressors' because we describe when we have power to impose our description on those whom we describe. Then when we don't have power we can have opinions about it, but those who have power don't accept being described. It is a question of power.

"In the profile, the dominating class states concerning the other that it is also a question of aesthetic taste, of cultural values, including the problems of language. The oppressors — let us not use the word, it is very hard, no? — the dominant culture, the dominant class, establishes what is called the erudite linguistic way of speaking and writing. But if there is one who is named erudite, it is because there is another named vulgar. The vulgar are the majority, but the majority cannot describe the other ones as bad because the majority does not have power. The minority,

resting on power, defines the others. In Brazil the difference between the two languages is enormous. And the intellectuals use language also as an instrument of domination, an instrument of power, imposing their understanding of the world through the language.

"One of the sisters said, 'Some days ago we had a very interesting meeting with peasants and the intellectuals. And of course, in ten minutes the intellectuals were fine in their language, their difficult language. One of the peasants put up his hand like this and said, in Portuguese, "Look, I think that it's impossible for us to continue this dialogue, because while you there are interested in salt, we here are interested in the totality of the seasoning. Then we cannot discuss." ' It was interesting that at the beginning the intellectuals could not understand the speech of the peasants.

"Last semester I asked the graduating students in philosophy of education to write a paper analyzing deeply what the peasant meant by that statement. In the last analysis the peasant was saying: 'It's impossible for us to continue our conversation because while you speak about reality in a parochial way, grasping the partiality as if it were the totality, we here think globally.' For us the question is how to get totality in order to understand the partialities which compose the totalities.

"The question for us teachers, as intellectuals, is how to understand the metaphors, the parables, how to see them as codifications in order to grasp the truth. The question is to overcome with a correct language the common sense knowledge, in order to go beyond knowledge at a much more rigorous level. For that we also need to understand the questions of the difference of language and also the problem of power.

"When *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* was circulated privately in Brazil, five Brazilian workers read the book together and wrote a fantastic letter to me in which they discussed some of the fundamental points of the book. Finally in the last part of the letter they said, 'Paulo, you don't need to write books like this for us. You have to write them for your colleagues the professors, and say "Please, stop going to the popular areas to think that you can teach the workers what poverty and exploitation mean. The workers know very well, to the extent that they are workers." We already know what you are saying.'

"I remember that I gave the first chapter to a student, a Black woman, to read. Five days later she came to me and said, 'Look, Paulo, I read the chapter but I asked also my son, who is fifteen

years old, to read the chapter. He read and I asked him, "Did you understand?" and he said, "Of course. This chapter of this book discusses me. I love to understand it."

"This is what I am stressing now: the conditions, the political awareness, the social situation, the material conditions in which we are, all have to do with the reading of a book. The question is that the language is not in itself so difficult. What is more difficult sometimes to understand is the dialectical way of life. How is it possible, for example, for one to grasp reality which is moving unless with a language which also moves? That is, if you don't use a formal way of writing, it is difficult for those who have a formal way of thinking. Nevertheless, I think it does not mean that I could not write much more simply. After that first book I think that the other ones are much more simple."

"Oppressed people know through experience that they are oppressed, that they are dominated. They know. But they have a different language of oppression, different ways of expressing it. But oppression is not just or exclusively a state of mind. No. Oppression is something very concrete, very real, very material. It's not a question of saying if you change the minds you overcome the oppression. It's a question of concreteness. In a few days millions of men and women do not eat. Why? It's not that people do not eat because their mind is against food! No."

In your writings you sometimes use the hyphenated words "educator-educatee" and "educatee-educator," and you criticize what you call "banking education." But you are a professor. . . .

"There's nothing that makes me ashamed of being a professor, a teacher. I am a teacher. I love to be a teacher. But above all teaching is absolutely fundamental. The question for me is how to be a teacher who facilitates the educatees, the students. In other words, how to teach without imposing on the students our knowledge, our political and ideological choices. But also without hiding them. I have nothing to hide my choice from the students. But I have also to respect their choice. If we understand teaching not as an experience of giving knowledge to the others nor of demonstrating knowledge about this or that, but of changing the students in order for them to grasp the knowledge that we all have: this task is for me a permanent one in the history of the humanities."

"There is a certain moment in which 'facilitators' have to teach something. If they don't do that, the process of engagement in the act of knowing stops. Epistemologically, it's impossible to know

without informing. There is a moment in the process of knowing in which the cognitive subjects need a second kind of information. Precisely at the moment the information is demanded, the facilitators have to teach, because they have to make possible the information. And this is teaching. This is the act of teaching. For me the problem is to know whether I am a democratic teacher or an authoritarian teacher. This is for me the question. Not to stop being teacher."

"I remember when I met Erich Fromm for the first time, in Cuernavaca in 1967. We had a beautiful conversation. In the beginning of the conversation he looked at me and said 'Please, tell me something about what you are doing.' And I spoke about ten minutes. He stopped me, and I said, 'Professor Fromm, if all my audiences were like you, I never would get tired, because in just ten minutes, you know everything.' And he said, 'Look, Paulo, I spent lots of time waiting for the educator with whom I dreamed to do that. In the last analysis what you are doing is a psychoanalysis, a psychoanalysis of a historic and cultural and political disease.' In fact it is. This kind of problematizing education is starting from the experience of the people in order to get after the *raison d'être* for the facts about which they talk. It is in the last analysis a kind of psycho-history course, and the cultural and the political."

How does that approach relate to religious education?

"My preoccupation was about the difference in the teaching of the gospels and the magisterium of the church. For me there is just one way to teach the gospels, that is to experience the gospels. I don't know another way. Verbalizing the gospels to make speeches about them, for me is not teaching them. To teach the gospels is to live them. It is to incarnate them. This is good for me to be a theologian, because I never studied systematic theology. I can be heretic! For me, teaching the gospels implies to reincarnate them. Teaching the gospels without experiencing them, without incarnating and reincarnating them, for me is impossible."

"For me one of the problems the churches have (maybe I am wrong) is that they always say about themselves that they are mothers but they reject to be daughters. Is it clear? For me it's impossible to be a mother without also being a daughter. It's impossible to live always with the authority of a mother without understanding also the humility of a daughter. For me, through history the churches have suffered the lack of the perception of the need to be daughters. That is in the last analysis, to learn, to