

# Gnosis, ritual and faith: fundamental issues in the education and training of adult educators at universities in South Africa

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## A caricature

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J.G. Frazer, of *The Golden Bough* fame, and one of the first explorers of the perplexing hinterland of myth and ritual, contended that theories were like sandcastles waiting to be demolished by the rising tide of knowledge. I suspect that at this first conference of university based adult educators, whilst those assembled are undoubtedly knowledgeable and perhaps even wise, there are few present with any pretensions to having developed a theory of adult education, sandy or otherwise, and I doubt whether there is any consensus about even the existence of such a thing as adult education 'knowledge'.

If, therefore, we work in a primitive pre-theoretical age of South African adult education, attempts to describe the education of adult educators and their educators may sound like the quaint anthropological travelogue of some missionary explorer, desperately applying unwieldy intellectual and cultural templates to his new perceptions. However, our explorer may shed more light on the phenomenon of adult education than more scientific and objective studies, that at this stage of history would be anachronistic.

If we look at the education and training of adult educators at South African universities as we would look at the myths and rituals of a sect, can we, with some ethnographic insights and a modicum of charity, begin to understand more about what they (and hence we) are doing? The methodology may indeed be appropriate. Precisely because there is so little theory and recognized knowledge in the new discipline of adult education, essentially mythical-ideological and ritualistic forces must exert a potent influence (however unconscious or hidden) in the curriculum of the university training of adult educators in South Africa.

## Developing the discipline of adult education

In looking at the sect of university based adult educators it has to be situated. Where does it come from and where is it going (more particularly the latter)? Some sociology will not come amiss, not only for pinpointing the historical geography of the sect but also to expose the intellectual poverty of adult educators such as myself carrying around their kitbags of ideas looted from other disciplines. (It is said that one reason the European missionaries to Africa had such signal success in colonizing the continent with scarcely a martyr was that the only intellectual training they had was learning a vast quantity of tedious information about a patriarchal, polygamous, cattle rearing society of about three thousand years ago. By happy coincidence they landed in a world in which such seemingly irrelevant and obsolete knowledge was stunningly appropriate. Contemporary adult educators in South Africa trained in equally irrelevant disciplines such as English literature, theology, law, accountancy, business administration, classics, and so forth also sometimes land on their feet.)

Adult education is not a mature discipline. It has none of the usual characteristics of mature academic disciplines such as an agreed upon body of knowledge, a distinctive theory, a distinctive method, or even control over the certification of practitioners. Such successes that adult educators have (if I had time, at this point I would read out a series of testimonies from our Diploma in Adult Education class on the inestimable

benefits they have received as a result of their enrollment), cannot (at this stage) be attributed to the explanatory and predictive powers of the discipline.

Slaughter and Silva (1983) in their article on *Service and the dynamics of developing fields - the social sciences and higher education studies* draw a number of parallels between the development of the social sciences at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the current development of higher education as a field of study. The parallel is also applicable to adult education as a new university based discipline (a discipline, moreover, that borrows much of its current conceptual apparatus from the said relatively new social sciences – psychology, sociology, political science, economics).

Slaughter and Silva claim that the social sciences became disciplines by exchanging their research service to society for the resources to build the new disciplines. Their service to society allowed them to act as ‘experts’, bringing research skills to bear on pressing social problems. By so doing they were able to demonstrate:

- the usefulness of the new science,
- advertise their professional and technical competence,
- generate a need for such skills in a wide variety of organizations,
- point out career opportunities to prospective students

and thus, above all, were able to

- claim public and private resources.

These intellectual entrepreneurs selling service expertise provided:

- analytic and ideological skills in lieu of theory
- information gathering and processing in lieu of method.

Of necessity they became careful and skilled **negotiators** with the political and economic interests outside the universities and built alliances (trading their expertise for opportunities to serve). Because they were institutionally **dependent** intellectual entrepreneurs they tended to align themselves with those groups able to deliver resources predictably (namely, the powerful, the rich, the stable) and thus with the existing order. I do not need to mention the names of certain South African academic luminaries in the social sciences and education who are adepts at this kind of negotiation.

If this sounds somewhat familiar, does Slaughter and Silva's ‘theory of academic prestige attainment and institutionalization’ predict that the sect of adult educators is on a trajectory towards establishment of an educational church in which the bishops all have master's degrees in adult education (you cannot become a **lecturer** in adult education at the University of the Western Cape without one!), and despite ritual incantations about ‘commitment to a non-racial, democratic society’ is locked in the gravitational field of the existing order.

## The missionary educators

Education in South Africa has been inextricably linked to missionary concerns. Faith in education as a good thing that will put to flight the realm of darkness and ignorance has remained remarkably unsullied. It is a faith held with equal tenacity by conservatives and revolutionaries. Adult educators are no different and exhibit the faith in one of the purest forms. Can one think of a cause more noble than educating adults, especially those that through no fault of their own were deprived of the possibility of education in their youth? Can one think of an enterprise in which the integrity of the human person is more highly respected. If one examines the origins of the centres of adult education at the universities the glow of altruism is positively blinding.

Given this evangelical ambience, the move towards 'academic prestige attainment and institutionalisation' that I have outlined above may seem somewhat incongruous. For missionary adult educators to become part of an institutionalized academic set up there must have been some powerful motivation. I believe that there was. Missionaries often need mission stations and the university provided just that base. It is a base relatively secure in a repressive political climate, the university's own rhetoric forces it to support the gospel of adult education, and it at one stage seemed above all to provide the infrastructure for a large scale gearing up for the **provision** of adult education. The De Lange report (1981), and the *National Manpower Commission Report: High level manpower in South Africa* (1980) that preceded it, are not now talked of very often and are fashionably sneered at. But de Lange captured the spirit of the age and those who moved into adult education in the late seventies and early eighties frequently did believe that they were going to train the 'leaders' and 'managers' of an alternative education movement/system that would have high impact on the adult masses. The modernizers of racial discrimination would meet their antithesis in the constructors of a liberated zone of alternative education.

Today, missionaries of an earlier age are universally condemned for not having the developed sensibilities and advanced political consciousness of modern revisionist historians. In future times it may be instructive to see what later occupants of historians' armchairs make of us. But we can make some tentative and snide descriptions.

Missionary explorers, I assume, read the *Church Times*. Modern adult educators and a lot of their students appear to read the *Weekly Mail*. This confirms them in their belief that they are committed to a non-racial, democratic society and allies them with others of their ilk (and the recent readership survey of the *Weekly Mail* identifies just who they are!). The *Weekly Mail*, ikon of the white new left high culture, also provides a fascinating survey of the world of private, voluntary, alternative education organizations that is the natural subculture and working environment of many adult education students.

G.K. Chesterton once described the ascetic progressive aristocrats of his time as leading a simple life and getting up early in the morning instead of giving the English

people back their land. We, equally incapable of giving black people back their land, work hard and long in alternative non-formal education. If, and I cannot offer statistics to back up my guesses, the dominant people, both as students and staff, in Adult Education Diploma and Masters programmes are such people – aristocratic liberals trying to identify with the educationally poor – then certain consequences seem likely. The most sure of these is that they are going to screw it up.

[In passing I must mention that in saying these unfortunate things about my kith and kin I acknowledge them to be the salt of the earth. For it is some of them who shoulder the call and responsibility of refraining from underwriting the self-deceptions of the poor and the ‘progressive forces’ in South Africa (for example Morphet (1987)).]

## Gnosis revealed

Somebody has already complained about the esoteric and obscurantist title of my paper. To those wishing to know what ‘gnosis’ is, the true knowledge is about to be revealed. ‘Gnosis’ is the Greek word for ‘knowledge’, though as fellow expatriates from the world of theology will recall, it has a special and mystical flavour. To me, categories such as ‘gnosis’, ‘ritual’ and ‘faith’ (templates I am accustomed to) may be useful in illuminating the phenomenon of the courses for adult educators running at our respective universities.

Academic prestige attainment requires heavy consumption of knowledge, knowledge of a particular kind and consistency. It is ‘lettered’ knowledge, the stuff journal articles are made of. To it, Pericles is as appropriate to the world of adult education as Malcolm Knowles or Paulo Freire. Academic prestige attainment also requires a new discipline to create its own specialized language that enables it both to be identified as occupier of a certain academic terrain and also to insist on language instruction for new immigrants. Adult education has problems here because its writers show a certain retardedness in neologising and they tend to parrot words and catch phrases that have been put into the public domain from other disciplines (usually because they are outdated and have long been superceded by superior ones).

Yet most **students** of adult education exhibit the most basic level of alphabetisation in the field. If their course of instruction is dominated by group discussion rituals this literacy may never develop beyond certain simple words and phrases like feedback, evaluate, design, adult experience, enjoy, don’t lecture, participation, conscientize. This is a problem for their instructors, yearning to make them lettered, struck dumb by their creedal beliefs that book learning is not enough and that the life experience of adults is sufficient a text for illumination. Further gagged by a fear of being ritually defiled if they lecture, they listen to hour after hour of discussion with nary a new idea reaching the light of day. Compulsively, pathologically, driven by a loyalty to ‘knowledge’, they churn out the handouts, duplicate the reading lists and burn out the photocopiers. (Handouts for the Diploma in Adult Education at the University of Natal in Durban weigh eight and a half kilogrammes, representing some 1750 sheets of paper and at least 400 thousand words.) The command of the Law, “Become

lettered!” is yet another burden on both staff and students. And the voice of the tempter whispers to the staff, “Start a Masters programme. They will have to read for that!” The honest truth is that a majority of our students are not really interested in rational knowledge <sup>1</sup> about adult education (though they usually claim that this is why they enrolled in the first place and the philosophers in our classes are the exceptions that prove the rule). This is not to say that a powerful quest for gnosis is not present. But it is an illuminative knowledge that is closely allied to myths and rituals and, I believe, highly dangerous.

What a lot of them want, or discover, or already have is ‘gnosis’ in the sense used by the early Church of what their sectarian heretical offshoots lusted after, that is, an esoteric insight into ultimate reality obtained by initiation into the mysteries of a cult. It is an ‘intellectual’ participation in salvation, an inner enlightenment and a conversion.

The early Christians considered the more extreme adherents of gnosis as heretics because they made salvation dependent on intellectual enlightenment rather than on faith, love and moral activity in the world. For the early Christians, as much as for Marx, understanding the world was not in itself enough and true gnosis was related to faith and love and was in itself their fruit.

The middle class intelligentsia of today has always had gnostic tendencies. ‘Understanding’ South African reality and verbalising that understanding is considered in some way as being sufficient, as if it changed reality. In class after class in our Diploma course discussion about vast cosmic generalities are invariably preferred to mundane practicalities. The extent of this obsession with ultimate questions of God and the universe is masked by the secular language in which it is normally expressed. But when ‘socialism’, ‘participation’, community’, ‘People’s education’, etc. become detached from empirical reality we are in the presence of eternal religious entities.

The very ritual of the class and the myths and beliefs upon which it is based make it very difficult to break into this gnostic universe. Beliefs about the unconditional value of the life experience of adults simulate the gnostic belief that the individual is of divine origin and is to be awakened to knowledge of himself and having come to himself reaffirms what is essentially his own. In parodying my own (and I imagine most of your) beliefs that persons should be unconditionally respected and that adult education has something very important to say about valuing adult experience and helping people to ‘read’ their own experience more productively, I am warning against a kind of solipsism that ends up barring individuals from new ideas and learning and consequent action. There is this too ready assumption that liberation will come not by faith, love or deeds, but primarily, even solely, by an introverted and esoteric intuition that flourishes chiefly among the wealthier, leisured classes initiated into the cultic warmth of a small group such as a Diploma class.

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<sup>1</sup> It is conventionally supposed that students enrol in university courses to get such knowledge. Whether this knowledge is objectively out there, waiting to be received, or is, as the sociologists of knowledge would now have it, in the process of being socially constructed, is irrelevant to my argument.

Gnosis of this type inflates unconscious forces in the psyche (which is why it is so compellingly addictive). In the very process of being assimilated by the new initiates such knowledge may well master and overpower them particularly when invested with the psychic energy that can no longer be devoted to obsolete forms of religion. And after that the magical passwords and amulets of small group methods binds the victim behind impenetrable ritualistic defences.<sup>2</sup>

Conclusions that can be drawn are that this type of knowledge (an element of which I believe to be inevitably present in the type of courses we would run) is in fundamental antipathy to the more rational quest for knowledge which is the essential feature of academic prestige attainment and that it will be linked to the ritualistic elements in our educational process. If such 'gnosis' is not to go rotten we have somehow to encourage (insist?) the linking of this quasi-religious illumination working mightily at unconscious levels of the psyche to more conscious and rational material and with practise in real educational activities in the real world (for in spite of the rhetoric I believe that few of our courses really connect with the educational reality of our students).

That was gnosis, now for the ritual.

## The ritual of the adult education class

On a set day in the week the class gathers together. They sit in a circle on chairs. This circle, or horseshoe shape in the event of one of the more experienced of their number wishing to address them or make use of the flipchart or the overhead projector, is an expression of their fundamental equality in the eyes of adult education. All are equal in experience. The absence of any desks or tables in the circle betokens that those present are meant to interact with each other without barriers or defences and desks are always a temptation to write and take notes as if this were a 'lecture' (an ancient practice used in the indoctrination of the children and youth of the old order). Young initiates have to be gently led away from dependency on the desk. The facilitators or co-ordinators (usually elderly functionaries who are paid by the university to look after the class facilities and print handouts for the class) are often seen hiding the desks before a class. Usually after six months or so, peer pressure is such that no class member would ever use a desk again. The class is seated. This is a development from the early days of the sect when chairs were less in evidence. Being seated on a chair indicates that it is mainly verbal (intellectual) intercourse that is expected. In the

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<sup>2</sup> The defences include a blatant anti-intellectualism (!) that makes it very hard to get any information across that is outside of their experience. The anti-intellectualism is often disguised as an antagonism to outdated and reactionary educational methods. I was recently judged wanting by a student who exclaimed "You lectured to us!" when I had the temerity to give a talk. I had done a bad, bad thing. It is more blatant in its prejudice against the body of knowledge that has emanated from American educational research that is dismissed simply because it is American. Technician is another swearword often applied not to the real thing but to anything that is not philosophical and grand or which requires some attention to detail. Bloom's taxonomy appears to be beyond most students' attention span. The universe, development theory and Marshall McLuhan (yes, our courses are eclectic) are all to be dismissed in 15 minutes 'inputs'.

sixties when the sect was into sensitivity training and T-groups all sorts of physical and emotional exchanges were allowed to which chairs provided a positive encumbrance. The high casualty rate among marriages led to the much more restrained (and possibly over restrained) practice in more recent times. Etymologically the practice of calling classes 'sessions' is related to this custom of sitting.

Once started the class is characterised by lengthy periods of 'discussion'. Exemplifying once again the belief that all are equal, all are encouraged to speak. Those that speak overlong often manifest signs of guilt that they are being more equal than others so the topic of much of the discussion is about why some talk more than others. Such conversation is usually monopolized by those who usually talk more than others. In this discussion people are listened to with attention and this, in a world in which we are insignificant and ignored, is very attractive. Discussion, as educational methods experts often state, unlike the lecture, is a potent means of changing attitudes. Thus at the end of a course of classes many members will find that their original, unregenerate attitudes will have changed and that the class now all have the same attitude (except for a couple of unfortunates with rigid ideas who are gradually extruded from the group and usually leave the course). This process of attitude change does of course mean that the class becomes more boring though more unified.

The class is unlike any other in the university. It has a solidarity and warmth that is unique. However its very warmth and homogeneity leads to a dearth of new ideas and thinking and the insertion of such by the staff is frequently not well received (perhaps because presented in an agnostic propositional way that is perceived as being against the ethos of the class).

It is the triumph of a method, a process that has been canonized, a can opener of middle class emptiness and a search for communal warmth. And it is very hard to go beyond it. The procedures and methods and techniques that might be vital in mass adult education are not taken seriously. Those interested in learning how to teach say a class of illiterates how to read and write make plaintive squeaks that the course is not meeting their needs. They are right. How could it!

The staff, stunned by the success of their liturgical choreography, stand looking aghast at what they have facilitated. How high their aim. How right they are that the **process**, the ritual is all important! But is it the right ritual? Do the students even realise that it is a ritual and not reality? Will People's Education, duly instructed that it must "focus upon process as its intrinsic mode" (Gardiner, 1987, p. 9) also swoon into this ritual dance?

But, yes, it is better than three hours of lectures.

## Faith

The Bible claims that faith (and its consort, love) are somewhat superior to gnosis and ritual. Without it they do not produce the goods. I wonder whether a first step in the theoretical work ahead of adult education thinkers in South Africa is to clarify, and above all, make conscious what we believe about education and why we do the things we do. I believe that if we look deep enough we may find that we believe things rather more exciting than the sloppy bastardised liberal-marxism that is the stock in trade of a lot of current popular writing about education.

I also think we need to strive for a moratorium on 'high level adult education manpower training'. I am not sure that it is compatible with our faith beliefs.

Most centres of adult education run two sorts of programmes. The first type are aimed at, to use the phrase that has become *de rigueur*, 'community based organisations'. These are difficult to run, require educators who are seasoned practitioners, and are, to put it blandly, serving a useful purpose. The other type of course, the Diplomas and Masters courses, are an open invitation to self indulgence. They make the rich richer. They may be good, but at the present trickle down rate are likely to make an appreciable mass impact some time in the mid 22<sup>nd</sup> century. Maybe we need to stick to the first type and transform such programmes.

Lastly, to end on an even more ecclesiastical note, I shall quote St Augustine, an ex-gnostic. I use it as my apology to you and my students.

Let those be angry with you who do not know with how great toil truth is attained, or how difficult it is to avoid mistakes. Let those be angry with you who do not know how rare a thing it is, and how hard a thing, to be free from the phantasies which arise within us. ... But in order that neither may you be angry with me ...I must beg this one favour of you. Let us, on both sides, lay aside all arrogance. Let us not, on either side, claim that we have already discovered the truth. Let us seek it together as something which is known to neither of us. For then only may we seek it, lovingly and tranquilly, if there be no bold presumption that it is already discovered and possessed. But if I may not ask so much as this of you (Knowing Ones), grant this at least that I may listen to you, and talk with you, as with people whom I, at least, do not claim to know.<sup>3</sup>

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*Contra Epistolam Manichaei*, cap. 3. quoted in White, V. 1960. *God and the Unconscious*. London: Fontana, pp. 226-227

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.to add the cultural hegemony of the circle and what happens in it  
.what is rewarded by the knowledge craving staff - Peter Metlerkamp's ten page  
two-page assignments  
.relatively chaste orgies of the life in the park games  
.other symbols - tea  
.modest self effacing staff/immodest non-self-effacing students trampling on the few  
pearls of wisdom allowed to be dropped by the staff