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The Myth of the Saving Power of Education: A Practical Theology Approach

Abstract

U.S. political discourse about education posits a salvific function for success in formal schooling, specifically the ability to "save" marginalized groups from poverty by lifting them into middle-class success. The link between education and salvation is grounded in the historic relationship between Christianity and the establishment of public education in the United States. Initially, churches invested in schooling to form a Christian society. Today, the public institutions of education operationalize the ideology of meritocracy and promise individual success in the economic realm. Discourse analysis of political speeches and charter school programs demonstrates that education primarily offers its salvation to racial minority or working class students from communities deemed deficient because of their failure to adhere to dominant culture values. Theologically, this inadequate criterion for salvation embodies idolatry of the market and false belief in the saving power of human institutions. Depending solely on education for individual economic salvation overburdens formal schooling at the expense of considering other communal approaches to economic and social justice. An alternative theological vision seeks to free education from its role of credentialing savior to instead offer a more robust type of liberation, one that has been witnessed to throughout the history of popular education movements, and to chasten its public role as the sole path to economic salvation.

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THE MYTH OF THE SAVING POWER OF EDUCATION: A PRACTICAL
THEOLOGY APPROACH

A Dissertation

Presented to

the Faculty of the University of Denver and the Iliff School of Theology Joint PhD

Program

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In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

by

Hannah Adams Ingram

November 2016

Advisor: Katherine Turpin

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U.S. political discourse about education posits a salvific function for success in formal schooling, specifically the ability to “save” marginalized groups from poverty by lifting them into middle- class success. The link between education and salvation is grounded in the historic relationship between Christianity and the establishment of public education in the United States. Initially, churches invested in schooling to form a Christian society. Today, the public institutions of education operationalize the ideology of meritocracy and promise individual success in the economic realm. Discourse analysis of political speeches and charter school programs demonstrates that education primarily offers its salvation to racial minority or working class students from communities deemed deficient because of their failure to adhere to dominant culture values. Theologically, this inadequate criterion for salvation embodies idolatry of the market and false belief in the saving power of human institutions. Depending solely on education for individual economic salvation overburdens formal schooling at the expense of considering other communal approaches to economic and social justice. An alternative theological vision seeks to free education from its role of credentialing savior to instead offer a more robust type of liberation, one that has been witnessed to throughout the history of popular education movements, and to chasten its public role as the sole path to economic salvation.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

I am a first-generation college graduate who grew up with the expectation that I would, without a doubt, go to college. All four of my siblings also had this expectation and have similarly sought undergraduate and graduate degrees. To succeed and surpass the opportunities afforded our parents, they taught us that college would be essential. When my father reflected on his own professional life in relation to his hopes for his children, he explained: “I hit a glass ceiling. And after that, I did not want you kids to be in a job that no matter how well you did, you couldn't move up. You have to go to college no matter what, or you're going to be stuck... We didn't care what [you majored in], as long as you had that paper [degree].” My mother added, “It was your generation. We were told you had to.”¹

While I am incredibly thankful for my experiences of education and the expectation that my parents instilled in me, I grew skeptical of the implication that higher education was solely responsible for creating social mobility, particularly when I began to study critiques of education as reproducing social difference and reinforcing specific cultural values.² I was troubled that my advanced degrees implicitly gave me more cultural worth

1. Doug Adams and Julie Adams. Interview with Hannah Adams Ingram. Personal interview. Phone, February 2014.

2. Pierre Bourdieu and Jean Claude Passeron, *Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture* (Newbury Park, CA: Sage, 1990). Bourdieu, *Practical Reason: On the Theory of Action* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998).

than that of my parents or the majority of the students from my high school in a small, working class town in rural Indiana. If a person's worth was wrapped up in their educational achievement, then inequality would continue to be justified by the claim that people received what they earned. This presumed meritocracy does not account for the persistent structural inequality in the United States; instead, there are different levels of access and different opportunities for various social groups that are particularly determined by social class and even more specifically affected by race.³ So even while the narrative in the United States is one that celebrates education as the ultimate key available for all people to unlock boundless potential, it seems as if these keys are held out of reach for some even while it is assumed that everyone has a key. This positive valuation of education as a tool for social mobility enables harsh judgment of poverty because the presumed universal access of education casts the blame for failure on those very persons who do not escape poverty, as the presumption is that they had what they needed to succeed, and they did not. In keeping with the key metaphor, it is as if even while the key is out of reach, the person who cannot reach it is blamed for not unlocking the door to his/her greatest potential. As a Christian theologian, this paradigm struck me as familiar. Both in the offering of the unquestionably true path to success and in the judgment at perceived failure to take that path, public discourse about education reflects Christian evangelical talk about salvation.

Most obviously, Christian salvation has often referred to the changing of a person's afterlife fate from hell to heaven; those who are saved are saved to an eternal heaven.

3. Stephen J. McNamee and Robert K. Miller Jr, *The Meritocracy Myth* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2013).

Christians have differed on how they interpret this basic claim, but it has remained a mainstay in the Christian tradition, whether Heaven is a literal place after death or a more metaphorical reality. If we were to attempt a broader definition of salvation based on the Christian theological understanding of salvation, we could say that salvation offers the changing of fate from something *undesirable* to something *desirable*.

I suggest that in addition to this theological notion of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ, Christianity in the United States has also offered a cultural salvation for those who are considered to be the lowest rungs of society: the changing of fate from a culturally *undesirable* identity to one that is *desirable*. While the specific terms of this cultural salvation have morphed, the offer of cultural salvation persists today. In the early life of the United States, theological and cultural salvation were linked. Post-millennialist theology motivated Christians to work toward the creation of the “kingdom of God” on earth to bring about the return of Jesus; the establishment of a new nation provided the opportunity to found a more perfect *Christian* nation. Theological and cultural salvation were not separate, but instead, they were conflated in ways that are difficult to parse.

Education was the primary vehicle in Christianity’s historic mission for the theological and cultural salvation of the nation. The earliest schools in the United States were founded by Christians and connected to churches. Sunday schools were established to teach literacy, particularly to poorer, rural communities.⁴ Since Christianity in the United States was largely Protestant, teaching literacy was rooted in Protestant mission because a person who could read the Bible could embrace and grow in the Christian faith,

4. Robert W. Lynn, *The Big Little School: Two Hundred Years of the Sunday School*, 2nd edition (Birmingham, AL: Religious Education Press, 1980).

which is in line with Protestant theology as it views individuals as ultimately responsible for their own acceptance of salvation. A clear example of this was the imposition of Christianity onto American Indians in order to “civilize” them. In this way, Christianity functioned as more than concerned with eternity; Christians did not force boarding school on Indian children purely out of concern for their eternal souls. Instead, forced schooling of Indian children served a socializing function; there was a certain ideal as to the kind of person to be—constructed by white Euro-Christian norms.

As the United States grew more pluralistic and less ubiquitously Protestant, theological salvation was either relegated to a function of institutional Christianity in churches or a matter of individual concern. It is tempting, then, to dismiss altogether the cultural influence Christian theology of salvation continues to wield in the United States today. We no longer teach Christianity in schools, and even public displays of religion, such as in the political sphere, are theoretically meant to be inter-religious and not evangelically Christian. However, a subtler but no less persuasive cultural salvation persists, and it persists even more strongly than the offer of theological salvation because theological salvation has been privatized while cultural salvation is still a public project. If salvation offers the changing of fate from something undesirable to something desirable, then cultural salvation in the United States offers the changing of fate for people living in poverty to success. Success is an ambiguous term, and it is often implicitly defined by those who society has decided have reached it. Historically then, success has been defined largely in white, male, and capitalist standards, and so, the values produced by this conception of success have been shaped through the white, male,

capitalist experience. One danger of this sort of cultural salvation, then, is that to be saved, one must learn to conform to or pass in a society that has already decided what values and traits are most worthy, and these narratives are racialized, gendered, and classed. The other danger of this cultural salvation through education is that it overly burdens the education system beyond what it alone can deliver, and while doing so, it undercuts the full potential of education outside of formal schooling.

Methodology

This dissertation uses a practical theological methodology. Practical theology begins with a situation or social problem, creates a thick description through different lenses from cognate disciplines, explores its theological significance or relationships, and makes constructive proposals for change in practice or theological constructions.⁵ For this project, the thick description of the relationship between education and understanding of salvation is explored through a discourse analysis of speeches from political leaders and mission statements from charter schools. In my project, discourse refers to the broad societal conversation about education as it appears in widely distributed materials supporting education. The discourse analysis demonstrates significant cases of “uplift,” “saving,” and “rescuing” language in public documents and speeches. The descriptive task in this dissertation also requires analyzing and mapping the nuances of this discourse

5. Richard R. Osmer, *Practical Theology: An Introduction* (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2008).

as a type of cultural salvation that serves as a support for the American Dream narrative.⁶ As part of the descriptive task, I also trace this view of salvific education to the foundation of public education in the United States, showing the transformation of its salvific power from eternal salvation to social salvation. I have chosen programs for analysis that target racial minorities or working/poverty class communities because there the link between salvation and education is most clearly articulated. In this material, I code these samples for both manifest (explicit) and latent (implicit) content, taking note of themes that arise from the texts and speeches.⁷ As my objective for using discourse analysis is to demonstrate the ways education is publicly spoken of in salvific terms, I am not concerned about analyzing specific statistical occurrence of such language, nor does it detract from my stated purpose to use excerpts from different types of sources, such as State of the Union addresses, speeches delivered to nonprofit groups and governmental agencies, and school promotional literature.

As practical theological methodology frequently draws upon cognate disciplines, my work deploys the fields of sociology of religion and educational philosophy. The field of sociology, as well as the sub-discipline of sociology of religion, provides frameworks for analyzing the function of the American Dream and meritocracy narratives in the United States. Educational philosophy traces various ways education has been conceived of and reimagined throughout the history of the United States, and the sociology of

6. The American Dream narrative will be further defined in Chapter 4, but for now, I am simply referring to the narrative that maintains that anyone who works hard in the United States has a fair opportunity to succeed; often this includes moving up the social class ladder.

7. Earl Babbie, *The Basics of Social Research* (Belmont, CA: Cengage Learning, 2013).

education offers a critique of the cultural reproduction role education plays in a society. Together, these cognate disciplines support the interpretation of education as socially salvific because of its historic relationship with Christianity. A complex reimagining of education in Christian theology may offer a way forward: one that supports a liberative philosophy of education. A liberative philosophy of education offers more to all people through a variety of paths, rather than insisting upon the singular path of social uplift that is offered now through formal schooling and college success. I do not offer this “other way” to maintain a singularly Christian understanding of the role of education but to offer one possible social justice framework that could serve as a counter-narrative to the cultural holdover of Christian ideas.

Snapshot of Inequality in Education

In part, it is the race and class inequality that already exists in the educational system that renders the promise of education ineffective to solve race and class inequality disingenuous. An important metric in measuring educational equity is in the comparison of achievement figures. In 1990, the high school dropout rate for white students was 9.0%, while for African American and Hispanic students, it was 13.2 and 32.4 respectively. Even though those numbers have fallen significantly, the Hispanic student dropout rate was still double the dropout rate of white students in 2014 (10.4% dropout rate among Hispanic students vs. 5.2% among white students). In 2015, 95% of white 25-29 year-olds and 93% of African American year-olds had high school diplomas or their equivalent, but only 77% of Hispanic people of the same age group had a high school diploma or equivalent. Perhaps the divide grows more stark when we look at bachelor’s

degrees—in 2015, 43% of white people in the same age group had a bachelor’s degree or higher, while only 21% of African Americans and 16% of Hispanics had the same.⁸

It is trickier to gauge the impact of social class on student achievement than race, as social class is not a clearly defined demographic category. However, there are class indicators that point to disadvantages for students from lower income families. The average level of educational attainment is not as high for students with parents that do not have college degrees than for families with college degrees. In a study of students who were high school sophomores in 2002, 60% of the students in the highest socioeconomic status quartile had earned a bachelor’s degree or higher by 2012, while only 14% of the lowest socioeconomic quartile earned a college degree.⁹ In the same study 33% of those in the lowest socioeconomic quartile predicted that they would earn bachelor’s degrees. There is obviously a disconnect between student expectations of their chances for succeeding through the path of education and the number that actually do.

Significance

My concern is for those who are systematically disadvantaged by cultural narratives so entrenched in dominant worldviews that have protected status; these narratives are not often articulated and critiqued, even when they might be working against the very people

8. All of these figures were taken from “The NCES Fast Facts Tool Provides Quick Answers to Many Education Questions (National Center for Education Statistics).” Accessed October 7, 2016. <http://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=27>.

9. “Postsecondary Attainment: Differences by Socioeconomic Status,” The Condition of Education (National Center for Education Statistics, 2015), https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/pdf/coe_tva.pdf.

that hold on to them. Investigating the roots and effects of these narratives provides an opportunity to reduce their unquestioned power by allowing person to choose which parts of the narratives positively affirm their values and which do not.

This project also touches on identity; I am troubled that a person's felt sense of value or worth may be connected to the educational degree attained. This link reinforces feelings of shame when "success" is not achieved. While Christian theology may support these cultural narratives that evaluate people, determining who is worth more and who is worth less, the Christian tradition also offers a counter-witness is that people are deemed good, or worthy, before any act can otherwise determine their worthiness. When Christian theology somehow supports a conclusion that is antithetical to core doctrines in Christianity, mainly the sanctity of human life and dignity, theologians must stand ready to counter. This dissertation critiques the salvation ideology implicit in the narrative that education is the determinant of meritocracy in the United States and that the uncritical reproduction of dominant values through education is either neutral or a positive good for society. The concepts of salvation, education, and liberation have the power to disrupt dominant culture (including race and class supremacy), and yet, they are currently being used to justify the status quo. This level of analysis makes room for new and creative interventions in education and public theology by untangling uncritical Christian support from dominant national ideologies that may contradict theological commitments to disrupting the status quo and oppression. Furthermore, more than just an exercise in social critique, a critical view of these narratives may free those who have been

marginalized by the narratives from their experience of shame related to the lack of educational attainment and the dominant culture's moralization of poverty.

Chapter Outline

I begin this dissertation by demonstrating the ways in which education is discussed in salvific terms as a type of social or cultural uplift, explaining this narrative through the historic connection between Protestant Christianity and public schooling. Chapter Two contains a discourse analysis that includes attention to sixteen years of State of the Union addresses, speeches in which (former) Secretary of Education Arne Duncan connects the purpose of education with the question of inequality, and promotional language from two prominent charter school movements. In Chapter Three, I examine the history of education and the church in the United States, emphasizing mission work in the early 19th century, the rise of the Social Gospel in the late 19th century, and the rise of universal access to education in the 20th century.

In the next part of the dissertation, I analyze the sociological and theological supports for the salvific education narrative. In Chapter Four, I name meritocracy, the American Dream, and cultural supremacy as three main pillars that have positioned education as a tool for social uplift. I then explore how educational scholars have already responded so far to critiques that education reproduces the unequal social order by perpetuating dominant race/class values. In Chapter Five, I build a case for why salvific education fits squarely within dominant Protestant theology, not coincidentally, but in such a way that theology codifies the status quo and the goals for education as social uplift. It is my hope that excavating these theological roots of dominant cultural

narratives actually provides educators, policy makers, and Christians a wider view of how the narratives are currently functioning, particularly illuminating the negative outcomes of these narratives. My theological call is for Christians to re-engage with the question of social salvation and what it means in an increasingly pluralistic society because a true concern for the inequality of our current structures would demand attention to more than just education.

Furthermore, in the conclusion chapter, I call for the “liberation” of education from the schooling/credentialing model, echoing the belief of others before me that education has more to offer than the limited role of categorizing people and what they are worth that I argue is the primary role of education in its salvific mode. While formal schooling should not be heralded as the salvation for the poor and marginalized, education itself has always been a catalyst for social change and may still have a role to play in the more just world we seek.

CHAPTER TWO: HOPE AND SALVATION IN PUBLIC DISCOURSE

This project was inspired by my uneasy observation that middle class Americans championed higher education as the single best way to escape poverty to the exclusion of any other option. A casual observation, however, is not a sufficient foundation for scholarly argument, and so I embarked on a targeted discourse analysis to discover the ways in which education is heralded in salvific terms in public discourse. The State of the Union addresses, speeches by the Secretary of Education, and marketing materials from certain charter school movements targeting low-income neighborhoods promote education as the great equalizer of society, and the role it can play is particular and unrivaled: a panacea for poverty. In these documents, President Bush, President Obama, and Secretary Duncan each acknowledge an inequality problem, propose that education can level these inequalities, and state that only education has the power to do so. Education, particularly college, is what has the power to save poor people from their poverty and lift them into middle class life. In this chapter, I share the results of the discourse analysis to describe the narrative of education that this project critiques, demonstrating that a practical theological examination of educational discourse in the United States is warranted.

Scope and Evidence

My focus is not simply on K-12 education; nor is it simply on higher education. The complicated truth is that the rhetoric of both of these are related. The most generative location of the rhetoric has been in the overlap of the two, in other words, in what public figures say about *going* to college, or college access. I am interested in what we say K-12 education is for, as many say it is for college preparation, and I am interested in the people and programs that are trying to encourage underrepresented students to attend college. University admissions material is designed for those already convinced of the value of higher education, and so, it is not the emphasis of the discourse analysis.

I selected samples for my discourse analysis from two different sources: federal speeches and two charter school movements.¹ Because the federal level of educational policy primarily funds state and local level initiatives, I have chosen to focus on political speeches at the federal level rather than programmatic discourse; that is, I focused on what political leaders suggested about the purposes of funding education rather than the details of specific educational grants offered to the states. I chose to look at the transcripts of the State of the Union Addresses from 2004-2015 to ensure that I was not only looking at the rhetoric from one presidential administration. I also expanded my discourse analysis to include speeches from former Secretary of Education Arne Duncan for an

1. My original research also included state college access programs funded in part by federal initiatives. However, what I found was that the language of government-funded programs was much less value-laden and evocative. The most evocative language comes from those who are seeking funding, rather than simply offering resources. So then, the most fruitful results were from the federal speeches that were meant to garner financial and political support and charter schools that also seek private funding.

even more current barometer of educational policy.² A limitation I faced in including speeches from Secretaries of Education was that the transcripts from the current administration are much more available; the archives seem to only include all of the speeches from the current administration and only selected speeches from former secretaries. However, I am not overly concerned with this limitation as the objective of my project is not to exhaustively analyze the rhetorical differences between administrations or even political parties, but rather, it is to demonstrate that the themes of inequality and uplift arise regularly and across the political spectrum. In this way, the State of the Union Addresses provide a broader perspective of two different party administrations, and the included speeches from Secretary Duncan serves only as a snapshot in time of particular discourse that reveals an emphasis on the power of education to uplift people.

Secondly, I chose to analyze the language used on the websites of two charter school movements: Harlem Children's Zone (HCZ) and Knowledge is Power Program (KIPP). These two were chosen because of their reputation and their reach; HCZ has been featured in news stories and documentaries, as well as inspiring President Obama's Promise Zone initiative, and KIPP has branches across the country. Since charter schools are both publicly funded and privately run, the perspective we gain from these samples is one that is more explicit with values and beliefs because the schools want to appeal to certain audiences, and yet, they are not removed from political pressures and policy since they receive state money. It is also worthwhile to look at charter schools because of the

2. He was the current Secretary of Education when I conducted the research. He held the position from 2009-2015.

questions about education they rose as a reform movement within public education in light of public schools failing underserved communities.³

Federal Speeches

Since I am looking at different types of rhetoric in this brief analysis, it is important to acknowledge that the purpose and audience of the samples makes a difference as to the content. Specifically, political speeches are usually delivered for the purpose of gaining funding or political support, many times both. The language, then, might be stronger and more passionate than language used in policy briefs that are simply meant to inform or give structure to the implementation of a program or grant. In this way, political speeches are an invaluable source for me because good politicians are able to call upon commonly held beliefs and narratives in order to spur action.⁴ Federal speeches are significant for my discourse analysis because what politicians say in their

3. Charter schools are controversial because they are receiving public funds but are not regulated in the same ways as public schools are; this results in differences in teaching staff, standardized testing, and more. The role of charter schools, particularly in relation to public schools declared to be “failing,” is a live political debate.

4. One action that is important in this case is the allocation of federal funds for different programs. The federal government invests in education largely through the funding of state and local programs that fit the criteria set forth by specific grants. The largest program that is relevant to my project is the Federal TRIO Programs. “The Federal TRIO Programs (TRIO) are Federal outreach and student services programs designed to identify and provide services for individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds. TRIO includes eight programs targeted to serve and assist low-income individuals, first-generation college students, and individuals with disabilities to progress through the academic pipeline from middle school to postbaccalaureate programs. TRIO also includes a training program for directors and staff of TRIO projects.” (“TRIO Home Page,” Programs; Offices; Reference Materials, (May 18, 2016), <http://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ope/trio/index.html>.) The Department of Education awards money to public and private institutions for the establishment of TRIO initiatives. One significant program of the eight is Upward Bound, which is meant to increase the number of low-income first-generation college students that enroll and graduate from post-secondary institutions. (“Upward Bound Program,” Program Home Page, (December 9, 2015), <http://www2.ed.gov/programs/trioupbound/index.html>.)

speeches have real cultural import; they must connect well with their audience or they have missed their mark. Concepts like American Dream and middle class, though largely undefined, are often called upon in public spaces because they are ideographs that invite audience investment and interpretation. *Ideograph* is a term used in rhetorical theory to describe these singular terms that bear much more meaning than is even explicit.⁵ These are terms and concepts that connect deeply to the intended audience that can hear beyond the words and read into what is said a whole host of implicit meanings.

In my analysis of the chosen political speeches, the purpose of education is often articulated in very functional, economic terms. The two most common ways that Presidents Bush and Obama and Secretary Duncan spoke of education was by describing it as vital to global competition and as the great equalizer in the United States. This second described purpose of education relates most directly to theological notions of salvation. Education as the great “equalizer” may be functioning as a type of ideograph that represents something so much more—the belief that education is the cure to poverty.

Inequality Problem

President Bush, President Obama, and Secretary Duncan each portrayed concern over inequality and acknowledged the achievement gap and an inequality of educational access and opportunity between minority group students and their wealthier classmates.⁶

5. Michael Calvin McGee, “The ‘Ideograph’: A Link between Rhetoric and Ideology,” *The Quarterly Journal of Speech* 66, no. 1 (February 1, 1980).

6. While each official spoke of education in their speeches, President Bush addressed education far fewer times proportionately per speech as President Obama did. We could speculate about why, but any speculation would be only that because of the variance of personal priorities for any president and because of the topical demands on any administration. It might not be that

President Bush did not often speak of education in his State of the Union addresses, but he did speak of education both as a way to address global competition and as something connected to inequality in both performance and career potential.

To make our economy stronger and more dynamic, we must prepare a rising generation to fill the jobs of the 21st century. Under the No Child Left Behind Act, standards are higher, test scores are on the rise, and we're closing the achievement gap for minority students. Now we must demand better results from our high schools, so every high school diploma is a ticket to success. We will help an additional 200,000 workers to get training for a better career by reforming our job training system and strengthening America's community colleges. And we'll make it easier for Americans to afford a college education by increasing the size of Pell grants.⁷

The language of “ticket to success” is particularly interesting in the context of this project, as it imbues education with the power to determine success. Even though Bush names the high school diploma as the ticket, later, Obama and Duncan will increase the demand to post-secondary education. Bush later credited the D.C. Opportunity Scholarships for helping “more than 2,600 of the poorest children in our Nation’s Capital” attend better schools, alluding to the importance of increasing educational access for poor children as they procure their own tickets to success.⁸

President Obama cared more about education more than President Bush, but that President Bush focused his speeches on the current wars of his administration, particularly in light of his education policy No Child Left Behind being passed early in his tenure in 2001. Furthermore, the nature of my limiting the study to ten years means that I have more speeches from President Obama than President Bush.

7. George W. Bush, “George W. Bush: Address before a Joint Session of the Congress on the State of the Union,” The American Presidency Project, February 2, 2005, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=58746>.

8. Bush, “George W. Bush: Address before a Joint Session of the Congress on the State of the Union,” The American Presidency Project, January 28, 2008, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=76301>.

While “inequality” language occurs across political lines, President Obama also speaks directly of social class, language Bush did not use in any of his 2004-2008 State of the Union Addresses. However, Obama only uses class language when addressing what he wants to do to bolster the middle class; when he speaks of people in poverty, he avoids labels related to class and instead uses narrational language or only indicates class status by suggestion. For example, in his 2013 State of the Union Address, he advises that in order to “grow our middle class... citizens have to have access to education.”⁹ This is direct and to the point. However, in naming early childhood education as important for future success, Obama worried that “most middle class parents can’t afford a few hundred bucks a week for a private preschool.”¹⁰ He added that “poor kids who need help the most” will feel this absence for “the rest of their lives.”¹¹ The term “class” was not used, nor were parents mentioned then; rather, the focus was an empathetic call about the children who are poorer. When Obama advocated for the revitalization of community colleges, he praised them as “a career pathway to the children of so many working families.”¹² Yet, soon after in the same speech, he announced a new “task force on

9. Barack Obama, “Barack Obama: Address before a Joint Session of the Congress on the State of the Union,” The American Presidency Project, February 12, 2013, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=102826>.

10. Ibid.

11. Ibid.

12. Obama, “Barack Obama: Address before a Joint Session of the Congress on the State of the Union,” The American Presidency Project, January 27, 2010, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=87433>.

middle class families.”¹³ It would be assuming too much to think that “working families” and “middle class families” are two distinct groups, but he spoke of community colleges directly after calling education “the best antipoverty program around,” and he did not mention community college again after bringing up the middle class task force. These are the subtle ways Obama alludes to inequality in his speeches without always naming it explicitly. In a way, “middle class” could even serve as an ideograph, as there is skepticism that such a defined class even exists in the way we like to imagine.¹⁴

On the 50th anniversary of President Johnson’s declaration of war on poverty,¹⁵ Obama expressed that “in the richest nation on Earth, far too many children are still born into poverty” and “far too few have a fair shot to escape it.”¹⁶ However, in other speeches, he takes a more narrative approach to describing those “born into poverty.” In his speech announcing the Promise Zones Initiative, he described Harlem as a “place where the odds used to be stacked against [young people] every single day.”¹⁷ He then expressed a commitment to “changing the odds for every American child so that no

13. Ibid.

14. As will be discussed in Chapter 4, the definition of the middle class is fuzzy and subjective, and yet, still serves as a powerful term in political discourse as many people either consider themselves to be middle class or seek to rise to the middle class.

15. An important shift in educational policy came in 1964, when Lyndon B. Johnson declared “war on poverty.” This will be described further in Chapter 3.

16. Obama, “Barack Obama: Statement on the 50th Anniversary of the War on Poverty,” The American Presidency Project, January 8, 2014, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=104570&st=war+on+poverty&st1=>.

17. Obama, “Barack Obama: Remarks on the Promise Zones Initiative,” The American Presidency Project, January 9, 2014, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=104576&st=promise+zones&st1=>.

matter who they are, no matter where they are born, they have a chance to succeed.”¹⁸

Obama said,

There are communities where for too many young people, it feels like their future only extends to the next street corner or the outskirts of town; too many communities where no matter how hard you work, your destiny is—feels like it’s already been determined for you before you took that first step.¹⁹

Even when he doesn’t use class language for working, working poor, or poverty class, he is clearly aware that a person’s circumstances and opportunities are connected to where a person lives.

Duncan speaks more directly about what inequality in educational access looks like, and he repeatedly states a commitment to education as “the great equalizer in America.”²⁰ He asserts that “disadvantaged black and Hispanic students cannot have less

18. Ibid.

19. Ibid.

20. Arne Duncan, “Reauthorization of ESEA: Why We Can’t Wait | U.S. Department of Education” (U.S. Department of Education, September 24, 2009), <http://www.ed.gov/news/speeches/reauthorization-esea-why-we-cant-wait>. Duncan, “Crossing the Next Bridge: Secretary Arne Duncan’s Remarks on the 45th Anniversary of ‘Bloody Sunday’ at the Edmund Pettus Bridge, Selma, Alabama” (U.S. Department of Education, March 8, 2010), <http://www.ed.gov/news/speeches/crossing-next-bridge-secretary-arne-duncan%E2%80%99s-remarks-45th-anniversary-bloody-sunday-edmund-pettus-bridge-selma-alabama>. Duncan, “International Engagement Through Education: Remarks by Secretary Arne Duncan at the Council on Foreign Relations Meeting” (U.S. Department of Education, May 26, 2010), <http://www2.ed.gov/news/speeches/2010/05/05262010.html>. Duncan, “Working Together for Early Learning: Secretary Arne Duncan’s Remarks at ‘Early Childhood 2010 -- Innovation for the Next Generation’ Meeting” (U.S. Department of Education, August 3, 2010), <https://www.ed.gov/news/speeches/working-together-early-learning-secretary-arne-duncans-remarks-early-childhood-2010-in>. Duncan, “The Linchpin: The New Mission of Community Colleges” (U.S. Department of Education, October 5, 2010), <http://www.ed.gov/news/speeches/linchpin-new-mission-community-colleges>. Duncan, “Education in Indian Country: Prepared Remarks of U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan at Town Hall/Listening Session with Tribal Officials” (U.S. Department of Education, December 15, 2010), <http://www.ed.gov/news/speeches/education-indian-country-prepared-remarks-us->

opportunity to work and ready themselves for successful careers or college than affluent white students.”²¹ When speaking about vocational education, Duncan reported, “students of color and those growing up in poverty [are] far more likely to be pushed into the ‘work’ track—and far less likely to get access to the college-ready track.”²² On the 45th anniversary of “Bloody Sunday,” Duncan called upon the legacy of the Civil Rights movement to call for action against unequal education that is still persistent today.

In January, I was at Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta, Dr. King's church, to commemorate what would have been Martin Luther King's 81st birthday. Had Dr. King been there, he would have been thrilled to see that America had elected its first African-American president. He would have been heartened by the decades-long dismantling of Jim Crow. But I think Dr. King would have been disheartened to see that, 56 years after the Supreme Court decided *Brown v. Board of Education*, many schools are still effectively segregated in America.

Just a few miles from his church sat a high school where 94 percent of the students were black. He would have been disappointed to learn that less than 10 percent of the freshmen in the 2007-08 class at the University of Georgia were Latino, African American, or Native American—and that this inequality in educational access occurred in a state where minority students accounted for nearly 40 percent of Georgia's 2007 high school graduates.

Dr. King would have been angered to see that we all too often under-invest in disadvantaged students; that they still have fewer opportunities to take rigorous college-prep courses in high school; that too many black, and brown, and low-income children are still languishing in aging facilities and high schools that are little more than dropout factories. He would have been downhearted that students with disabilities still do not get the educational support they need—and he would

secretary-education-arne-duncan-town-halllistening-session-tribal-officials. Duncan, “The New CTE: Secretary Duncan’s Remarks on Career and Technical Education” (U.S. Department of Education, February 2, 2011), <http://www.ed.gov/news/speeches/new-cte-secretary-duncans-remarks-career-and-technical-education>.

21. Duncan, “The New CTE: Secretary Duncan’s Remarks on Career and Technical Education.”

22. *Ibid.*

have been dismayed to learn of schools that seem to suspend and discipline only young African-American boys.²³

Duncan uses the powerful narrative of Dr. King’s work for justice to remind the audience that schooling is still not equal for students of color. In the same speech, he further opined that school segregation has still not been resolved and that there is a “pervasive achievement gap between today’s black and white students.”²⁴ He called the achievement gap “a cancer that imperils our nation’s progress.”²⁵ He clearly declared during that speech, “It doesn’t matter what your race, wealth, special needs, or zip code is—every child is entitled to a quality education.”²⁶ While Obama mentioned neighborhood as a point of inequality, Duncan also repeatedly mentioned race, income, and ability in his speeches.

Neither presidential administration, that of President Bush or President Obama, denied a connection between societal inequality and education. In fact, inequality is most frequently connected to education for reasons that will be articulated and critiqued later in this dissertation.²⁷ This understanding of the inequality of education, as reflected at least in part by each of the three speakers, likely reflects a public understanding of education as unequal. The need for political speeches to connect to their audience

23. Ibid.

24. Ibid.

25. Ibid.

26. Ibid.

27. In short, the pursuit of education is how one demonstrates their worthiness in a presumed meritocracy. This idea will be expanded upon in Chapter 4.

necessitates that the message not be unrecognizable. In this way, the relationship between societal inequality and education is apparent, yet perhaps the details of how they are connected are not always agreed upon. Is education unequal because of where a child lives? Is education unequal due to some sort of continued systemic oppression—racism, classism, ableism? Is education unequal due to an inherent problem or character flaw connected to poverty that perpetuates itself over time? While each of these speeches alluded to inequality and differences in achievement between groups of students, it seems that audiences are often left on their own to determine why these differences in access and achievement occur, which could be politically expedient for the same reason ideographs are—the greater number of people reached by implicit messages than explicit ones. People will hear speeches through their own perspectives, so if the message is generic, they have the space to fill in the blanks with their own views. Additionally, while these speeches imbue education with the power to bring equality to society, the specifics of how this happens is left unsaid. When Secretary Duncan refers to education as the “great equalizer,” he is not so much calling for all people to be made equal as he is calling for the pulling up of those who currently do not have as much, materially or credentially, as those in the middle class or higher. He does not seem to suggest that the wealthiest or most advantaged in the nation should come down to meet in the middle, as the literal language of equalizing might suggest. It is a call for uplift—which demands that those who are lower find a way up or for those on the top to help pull up those on the bottom. Either way, the demand for change or the impetus for movement is on those who

are in lower social positions. This is not a humbling of the powerful, but an insistence that those who are lower do not need to be there.

Universality of Access

Even with inequality in access among students of different social locations, President Bush, President Obama, and Secretary Duncan each agree that the United States must prioritize quality education for every child, for everyone. Bush proclaimed that through No Child Left Behind,²⁸ the country was “making progress toward excellence for every child in America.”²⁹ During the same speech, he refused “to give up on any child,” and instead, open “the door of opportunity to all of America’s children.”³⁰ When addressing the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in the 2006 State of the Union Address, Bush acknowledged that “many of our fellow citizens have felt excluded from the promise of our country,” and he named the answer to this problem as “schools that teach every child and job skills that bring upward mobility and more opportunities to own a home and start a business.”³¹ Bush is acknowledging that the United States has, officially or not, promised certain expectations to citizens, some citizens have felt

28. No Child Left Behind, passed in 2001, reauthorized the Elementary and Secondary Education Act and tied additional funding for low-income students to academic achievement as measured by standardized testing.

29. Bush, “George W. Bush: Address before a Joint Session of the Congress on the State of the Union,” The American Presidency Project, January 20, 2004, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=29646>.

30. Ibid.

31. Bush, “George W. Bush: Address before a Joint Session of the Congress on the State of the Union,” The American Presidency Project, January 31, 2006, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=65090>.

historically excluded from that promise, and part of what could fix that failure is quality schooling for every child. It is important to remember here that Hurricane Katrina disproportionately devastated poor communities, particularly those of color. So while he did not mention race or class as barriers to access to the promise, his concern for those who feel excluded from it does allude to this demographic reality.

When Obama remarked on the universality of educational access, he both called for more equality of opportunity and for more personal agency and responsibility to pursue education. On more than one occasion, he asked “every American to commit to at least 1 year or more of higher education or career training. [W]hatever the training may be,” he added, “every American will need to get more than a high school diploma.”³² In fact, for him this call was a call to citizenship: “Dropping out of high school is no longer an option. It’s not just quitting on yourself, it’s quitting on your country, and this country needs and values the talents of every American.”³³ This is an interesting juxtaposition to Bush’s acknowledgment that some Americans felt excluded from the promise of American opportunity; here Obama is starting with the expectation that every American would pursue education before addressing the possibility of systemic unequal access. It is not that access issues are not important to Obama, but he often connects systemic access issues with personal action. “[E]ducation policies will open the doors of opportunity for

32. Obama, “Barack Obama: Address before a Joint Session of the Congress on the State of the Union,” The American Presidency Project, February 24, 2009, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=85753>.

33. Ibid.

our children,” Obama said, “but it is up to us to ensure they walk through them.”³⁴ He connects student success to what their schools and society expect of them, and still, it is for and of every student no matter what: “[I]f we raise expectations for every child and give them the best possible chance at an education... America will once again have the highest proportion of college graduates in the world.”³⁵ This is a complicated claim, as students of color are not simply choosing to drop out of high school, but rather, they are excluded from opportunities and may be pushed out in certain ways—inequitable tracking, overly punitive disciplinary actions, etc.³⁶

For Obama, both the government and the individual bear responsibility in the goal of higher education or training beyond high school for every American. These are intimately connected; he does not speak of society or government owing it to some people to create fair education policies, nor does he excuse the lack of individual pursuit of education because of unfair policies. In 2013, Obama said, “It is our unfinished task to make sure that this Government works on behalf of the many, and not just the few... and opens the doors of opportunity to every child across this great nation.”³⁷ It is not that Obama is unaware of the challenges of unequal access that poor and minority children

34. Ibid.

35. Ibid.

36. Nancy A. Heitzeg, “Education or Incarceration: Zero Tolerance Policies and the School to Prison Pipeline,” *Forum on Public Policy Online* 2009, no. 2 (2009), <http://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ870076>.

37. Obama, “Barack Obama: Address before a Joint Session of the Congress on the State of the Union,” 2013.

face, but his use of the “open the doors” metaphor suggests his conviction that there is a personal responsibility component to success and poverty as well. In a speech Obama delivered regarding the Promise Zones Initiative, modeled after the Harlem Children’s Zone charter school in New York, he spoke of the purpose of the initiative being to “chang[e] the odds for every American child so that no matter who they are, no matter where they are born, they have a chance to succeed.”³⁸ Later in the same speech, he suggested that “a child’s course in life should be determined not by the zip code she’s born in, but by the strength of her work ethic and the scope of her dreams.” By 2014, the message that opportunity and education should be for every child tightened just a bit, perhaps just reinforcing his continual message about personal responsibility, by praising nonprofits and other groups that “made concrete commitments... to help every hard-working kid go to college and succeed.”³⁹ The qualifier “hard-working” suggests that there are children who do not work hard, and these children do not demand anything of society; their “laze” sacrificed their right to “go to college and succeed.”⁴⁰ In these instances, we see Obama’s interweaving of public policy and personal responsibility.

Obama did express commitments to ensuring that every child has a chance to succeed in education and adulthood. He indicated that the way to “prepare tomorrow’s

38. Obama, “Barack Obama: Remarks on the Promise Zones Initiative.”

39. Obama, “Barack Obama: Address before a Joint Session of the Congress on the State of the Union,” 2014.

40. Using “hard-working” as a qualifier about which child should be invested in raises many questions: Who is the determinant of the hard work? Could other life circumstances influence how hard a child appears to be working? What if the child does not have a bed in a home or breakfast in the morning, and this is why s/he seems not to be working hard? Do we want to have qualifiers on “hard work” when it comes to determining the futures of children?

workforce” is to “guarantee every child access to a world-class education.”⁴¹ He reported that his administration had “set out to change the odds for all our kids” when he became President.⁴² He shared that he and the First Lady “want every child to have the same chance this country gave [them].”⁴³ Like Bush, he acknowledged that some feel like they are offered an “empty promise,” and he said that it is for that reason we must “make sure our economy honors the dignity of work and hard work pays off for every single American.”⁴⁴ The next year, Obama said that through the policies and commitments he sets forth in his speeches, he wants “our actions to tell every child in every neighborhood: your life matters.”⁴⁵

As Secretary of Education, Duncan’s speeches echoed Obama’s commitments. For example, he reiterated Obama’s encouragement that every American obtain “at least a year of higher education or post-secondary career training.”⁴⁶ He also reminded those convened for the Early Childhood 2010 Meeting of President Obama’s declaration: “It will be the goal of this administration to ensure that every child has access to a complete

41. Ibid.

42. Ibid.

43. Ibid.

44. Ibid.

45. Obama, “Barack Obama: Address before a Joint Session of the Congress on the State of the Union,” The American Presidency Project, January 20, 2015, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=108031>.

46. Duncan, “The New CTE: Secretary Duncan’s Remarks on Career and Technical Education.”

and competitive education.”⁴⁷ Again, this is reflective of Secretary Duncan’s persistent claim that education is “the great equalizer.”⁴⁸

In light of the relationship between inequality and education, we see attention given by Presidents Bush and Obama and Secretary Duncan to improving educational access and opportunity for all children. However, the problem with this focus on all children is that it comes at the expense of articulating that, truly, some groups of students have faced real marginalization in the education system. When President Bush says we must prioritize quality education for every child everywhere, he does so without acknowledging that society has prioritized quality education for some children in some places, or naming in particular which groups have been advantaged and disadvantaged. While he mentions that some in New Orleans felt like the promise of America did not extend to them, he stopped short at naming what the promise was or on what grounds people felt excluded. In the context of New Orleans, racial discrimination and segregation caused people to experience education and the potential success in very different ways. Similarly, when President Obama expresses the goal to tell every child that his/her life matters without explicitly mentioning those that feel like their life matters less because of their race or class, he risks affirming “all lives matter” instead of “Black Lives Matter,” which has been rightfully critiqued because of its insistence on the good of the whole at the expense of articulating the particularity of being left out that has been the experience

47. Obama, “Barack Obama: Address before a Joint Session of the Congress on the State of the Union,” 2009, qtd. in Duncan, “Working Together for Early Learning: Secretary Arne Duncan’s Remarks at ‘Early Childhood 2010 -- Innovation for the Next Generation’ Meeting.”

48. See footnote 22.

of people of color. On the other hand, the generic language of these speeches, as I have said before, serves the function of allowing the audience to connect and to hear what they want to hear, and it may be that President Obama used the ideograph of “lives matter” without saying either all or black in hopes of connecting to the larger discourse of Black Lives Matter, since he was speaking of inequality when he used the phrase. Whether these speeches always explicitly recognize the specifics of inequality in education, however, they do prioritize education for all children, and they do recognize the importance of education for all children as connected somehow to the problem of societal inequality.

Particularity of Education

We have seen now that inequality of access to good education is a problem, and that the discourse claims that every person deserves a chance to transcend their circumstances. The vehicle for this transcendence, according to these political speeches, is education. Educational access is lauded as the hope of the nation’s poor, *the* way out of poverty. There is something about education that is unlike any other policy focus, and Bush, Obama, and Duncan are convinced education is the resolution to the problem of social inequality.

In 2008, Bush declared that education is the “only hope” for boys and girls with dreams across the country.⁴⁹ Later in the same speech, he spoke of the D.C. Opportunity Scholarship that allowed “more than 2,600 of the poorest children in our Nation’s Capital

49. Bush, “George W. Bush: Address before a Joint Session of the Congress on the State of the Union,” 2008.

[to find] new hope.”⁵⁰ In speaking of Afghanistan, Bush claimed that “people are looking to the future with new hope,” in part because more boys and girls were going to school. Bush did not speak of education frequently in his State of the Union addresses, but when he did, it was often in conjunction with language about hope. Though this language is not explicitly Christian, it possesses currency in religious circles and itself elicits an emotional response and buy-in from many in the audience.

Additionally, Obama often conveyed the belief that education was not simply one way to succeed, but that it was the best way. In 2010, he declared that “the best antipoverty program around is a world-class education.”⁵¹ In 2012, he said that “a great teacher can offer an escape from poverty.”⁵² It is not a big leap, then, to go from saying that higher education is the best way out of poverty to suggesting that it is essential. That same year, Obama stated, “Higher education can’t be a luxury. It is an economic imperative that every family in American should be able to afford.”⁵³

Again, the State of the Union Addresses are particular by presidential priorities and contextual demands, so the speeches from Secretary Duncan are useful for seeing a larger picture of the Obama administration’s approach to education policy. It is through Duncan that we most clearly see that higher education is lauded as the best, and

50. Ibid.

51. Ibid.

52. Obama, “Barack Obama: Address before a Joint Session of the Congress on the State of the Union,” 2010.

53. Ibid.

sometimes only, vehicle for social equality. Duncan insists time and time again that “education must be the great equalizer” in the face of systematic inequality in the United States.⁵⁴ When addressing the NAACP, Duncan called education “the one investment that can really transform whole communities and create real and lasting opportunity.”⁵⁵ Duncan echoed Bush’s hope language in the same speech, saying “Education is our best and only hope for achieving the more perfect union at the heart of the American promise.”⁵⁶ When addressing the Council on Foreign Relations Meeting, Duncan emphasized education as “the only way to secure our common future,” going so far as naming education as “the one true path out of poverty—the great equalizer that overcomes differences in background, culture, and privilege.”⁵⁷

Because the role demands it, Duncan delivered many speeches to many groups, and it is common for him to repeat core phrases and commitments to different groups. The declaration that education is “the one true path out of poverty” is one such repeated assertion, and it is one that will continue to be important in this dissertation because it echoes theological salvation language. In fact, he used this same quote during his

54. See footnote 22.

55. Duncan, “Equity and Education Reform: Secretary Arne Duncan’s Remarks at the Annual Meeting of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP)” (U.S. Department of Education, July 14, 2010), <http://www.ed.gov/news/speeches/equity-and-education-reform-secretary-arne-duncans-remarks-annual-meeting-national-association-advancement-colored-people-naacp>.

56. Ibid.

57. Duncan, “International Engagement Through Education.”

“Reauthorization of the ESEA: Why We Can’t Wait” speech.⁵⁸ Calling upon presumably shared narratives, Duncan went even further saying, “Whether it’s in rural Alaska or inner-city Detroit, everyone everywhere shares a common belief that education is America’s economic salvation.”⁵⁹ In this instance, education is not just referred to in terms that are similar to how we speak of salvation, it is explicitly named as a type of salvation connected to economic well-being in places that struggle economically.

The speeches analyzed here lead me to a three-fold conclusion about the purpose of education in current discourse: 1) there is an undisputed link between education and economic inequality, 2) education can fix inequality if all children have access to it, and 3) education is not just one way to address inequality, it is *the* way to address inequality.

Charter Schools

Charter schools are publicly funded, yet self-governing outside of the traditional public school system. They act through a “charter” agreement with the government, and the establishment of charter schools is one approach to educational reform, particularly a part of the school choice movement. I chose charter schools because of their unique freedom to speak openly about particular mission, in this case, getting minority students to college, while also being funded publicly.

Geoffrey Canada founded the Harlem Children’s Zone (HCZ) to address the systematic inequality in education faced by minority children in Harlem, New York. The

58. Arne Duncan, “Reauthorization of ESEA: Why We Can’t Wait.”

59. Ibid.

Harlem Children’s Zone takes a holistic approach to keeping children in school and closing the achievement gap⁶⁰ by providing academic support, health care, family programming, and intensive focus on individual success. Canada promises that each and every student that comes through the program will graduate college. HCZ is of particular interest because it provided a model for poverty initiatives undertaken by the Obama Administration. Mike Feinberg and Dave Levin, two Teach for America alumni, founded the Knowledge is Power Program (KIPP) as a national network of charter schools to help “students from educationally underserved communities develop the knowledge, skills, character and habits needed to succeed in college and the competitive world beyond.”⁶¹ There are currently 183 KIPP schools in 20 states and the District of Columbia; its reach and reputation make it an interesting case study. For the purposes of this discourse analysis, I simply looked at their public promotional materials as displayed on their website; since I am most concerned with the language used to justify and fund these educational efforts, it seemed most appropriate to focus on their public presence rather than internal documents or reports.

Findings

HCZ and KIPP strive to serve children and communities in poverty and to increase the number of poor kids going to college, reinforcing the belief in education as

60. The “achievement gap” refers to the disparity in testing levels between different groups of students, particularly between white and black or Latino students. Editorial Projects in Education Research Center, “Issues A-Z: Achievement Gap,” Education Week, accessed June 21, 2016, <http://www.edweek.org/ew/issues/achievement-gap/>.

61. “About KIPP - KIPP Public Charter Schools | Knowledge Is Power Program,” KIPP, accessed June 21, 2016, <http://www.kipp.org/about-kipp>.

the panacea of poverty expressed in the political speeches. On the front page of the HCZ website, they name themselves “a national model for breaking the cycle of poverty.”⁶² They see themselves as part of the “fight against poverty,” and they want to create a “pipeline to success.”⁶³ This pipeline language parallels the concept of the “prison pipeline,” a concern in communities of color that the disproportionate discipline that children of color face in elementary school set them on a path to criminalization later on.⁶⁴ HCZ also declares that they are “disrupting the cycle of generational poverty” and instead creating “a new cycle of generational mobility.”⁶⁵ This language itself admits something larger about the nature of poverty—it is more than an isolated problem for an individual. Rather, poverty is referred to as generational because the children of poorer families are more likely to stay poor themselves. Because HCZ is a singular system in a particular location, they spend less time than KIPP does about defining the population

62. “Home,” Harlem Children’s Zone, accessed June 21, 2016, <http://hcz.org/>.

63. “About HCZ - Helping Kids Succeed | Harlem Children’s Zone,” Harlem Children’s Zone, accessed June 21, 2016, <http://hcz.org/about-us/>.

64. Johanna Wald and Daniel J. Losen, “Defining and Redirecting a School-to-Prison Pipeline,” *New Directions for Youth Development* 2003, no. 99 (September 1, 2003): 9–15, doi:10.1002/yd.51.

65. “HCZ’s College Success Office,” Harlem Children’s Zone, accessed June 21, 2016, <http://hcz.org/our-programs/the-college-success-office/>. Much of Harlem Children’s Zone’s language about their mission and objective is combative; poverty is an enemy to be broken, fought, and disrupted. Poverty in this way is objectified, depersonalized, and sought to be defeated. Yet, poverty is personal; people experience and live in poverty. What do we make of those persons? Where are they during the grand battle between Harlem Children’s Zone and poverty?

they are serving. KIPP’s objective is to serve “underserved communities,” or in other words, “low-income families,” 96% of whom are African American or Latino.⁶⁶

There are seemingly two objectives for both HCZ and KIPP, and the most obvious objective is to get lower class students to college. HCZ says that the objective is for students to “get to and through college,” and that HCZ supports students from “birth through college.”⁶⁷ The methodology found on their website says clearly and succinctly, “college is the answer.” The question, presumably, is what to do about generational poverty. The College Success Office page of the HCZ describes a college degree as “the ticket to long-term success.”⁶⁸ The office commits to doing “whatever it takes” to help students graduate college. The page closes by explaining, “As the ultimate goal for all our youth, college graduation is not just an end, but the primary means by which we are disrupting the cycle of generational poverty.”⁶⁹

KIPP also commits to helping students get to and graduate college. KIPP explains that the extended school day and school year allows students the time to “acquire the academic knowledge and skills that will prepare them for competitive high schools and colleges.”⁷⁰ The website goes on to say that students are expected to achieve a level of

66. “Frequently Asked Questions - KIPP Public Charter Schools | Knowledge Is Power Program,” KIPP, accessed June 21, 2016, <http://www.kipp.org/about-kipp/faq>.

67. “About HCZ - Helping Kids Succeed | Harlem Children’s Zone.”

68. “HCZ’s College Success Office.”

69. Ibid.

70. “Five Pillars - KIPP Public Charter Schools | Knowledge Is Power Program,” KIPP, accessed June 21, 2016, <http://www.kipp.org/our-approach/five-pillars>.

academic performance that will enable them to succeed at the nation's best high schools and colleges."⁷¹ The expectation for KIPP students is that they are preparing for and will go to college.

The college objective is explicit, but there is something about personhood that both HCZ and KIPP materials allude to that may echo the cultural moralization of poverty.⁷² While HCZ does state that their objective is for students to "get to and through college," the second part of that expressed goal is that the students would "become productive, self-sustaining adults."⁷³ The way the community is talked about, too, implies something about the people that live in the neighborhood served. For example, HCZ includes teaching parents about child development as part of their methodology. When this type of parent education is an emphasis of a charter school targeting low-income communities and not a part of education as a whole, the inference is that lower-income parents need more help from experts to learn how to parent better, as if their parenting is somehow partially to blame for their poverty. HCZ names "building character" as an important part of their method, which will help them "achieve their dreams and be their

71. Ibid.

72. There is a helpful explanation of the presumed connection between morality and poverty in *Pedagogy of the Poor*, which describes the neoliberal and neoconservative blaming of poverty on those experiencing it for making the wrong choices in life. This idea continues throughout the whole dissertation. Willie Baptist and Jan Rehmann, *Pedagogy of the Poor: Building the Movement to End Poverty* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2011).

73. "HCZ's College Success Office."

best selves,”⁷⁴ suggesting that without the character education, the students would be lacking in this important component of full personhood. Additionally, by marking its objective as getting every child to college, HCZ defines the dream for all students as college, not that college is one possible dream among many. The resulting implication may be that college is how a person becomes their best self.

Likewise, KIPP describes their work as helping students to “develop the knowledge, skills, *character and habits* [emphasis mine] needed to succeed in college and the competitive world beyond.”⁷⁵ They pride their schools as having “a strong culture of achievement,”⁷⁶ suggesting that there is something different about the values of KIPP students than non-KIPP students. KIPP credits college success to those with “a powerful set of character strengths,” naming these as “grit, self-control, social intelligence, zest, optimism, and gratitude,” because these “enable students to stick with college even in the face of considerable obstacles.”⁷⁷ They believe “the development of character” is as important as “the teaching of rigorous academic skills.”⁷⁸ KIPP proclaims that “developing character strengths... is a key part of KIPP’s college-preparatory approach,” and that this formation happens by “integrating character development into everyday

74. “About HCZ - Helping Kids Succeed | Harlem Children’s Zone.”

75. “About KIPP - KIPP Public Charter Schools | Knowledge Is Power Program.”

76. Ibid.

77. “KIPP Through College - KIPP Public Charter Schools | Knowledge Is Power Program,” KIPP, accessed June 21, 2016, <http://www.kipp.org/our-approach/kipp-through-college>.

78. “Character & Academics - KIPP Public Charter Schools | Knowledge Is Power Program,” KIPP, accessed June 21, 2016, <http://www.kipp.org/our-approach/character>.

lessons to help students prepare for the challenges of college and life.”⁷⁹ While many public schools purport character education, KIPP’s materials explicitly express correlation between high moral character and college success. KIPP’s insistence on this correlation implies that a character deficiency is what prevents their target demographic of children living in poverty from going to college without extra help. This emphasis on student or family deficit seems to put the burden of educational success or failure on the individual students rather than the larger systemic issues that make it difficult for marginalized and underrepresented students to flourish in traditional educational settings. The problem with the insistence on character education from KIPP and HCZ both is that there is no single definition of character that is not already steeped in assumptions about what values and behaviors mark one person as having a higher character than another person. Character formation privileges expressions of character that are rooted in specific cultural values even while presenting itself as value-neutral and objective. So when KIPP seeks to fill the character deficiency gap that they themselves diagnose as responsible for the difference in achievement, they are promoting a specific view of personhood that cannot be separated from cultural values. In this way, character formation joins credentialing as part of the offer of salvation, but character formation itself risks cultural assimilation.⁸⁰

79. “Frequently Asked Questions - KIPP Public Charter Schools | Knowledge Is Power Program.”

80. The blurred lines between character formation and cultural assimilation will be explored further in depth in Chapters 3 and 4.

The charter school's mission language provides useful insight because it is filling a particular niche in the U.S. right now. People are disgruntled by they believe is a failing public school system, and the charter school's mission language is crafted to garner support for the movement, in both policy and funds. What we see in the charter school discourse is a commitment to uplifting, or saving, poor communities of color through the offer of college education. There is a focus on the individual student to be saved, and even when there is attention given to the family, it is for the sake of the individual student, not in hopes of helping the entire family out of poverty. An additional dimension of character education at play in both HCZ and KIPP is the belief that the student is poor because their family lacks the type of character that higher-class communities possess. This is at best naive, as it fails to examine the root causes of poverty that are systemic and connected to the ugly histories of racism and classism; but at worst, it's imperialistic, as it demands that students who seek a secure future must embrace the particular dominant values that are taught as universal good character.⁸¹

Conclusion

The discourse reveals the problem, poses the solution, and defends the solution. The problem is social inequality that is somehow generational and location-specific, as we see in the political speeches and in the mission of the two charter school programs. The solution is schooling beyond high school graduation—more specifically, a college degree. The way to work toward this is through increasing college access. We know this

81. This will be argued further in Chapter 4.

because college graduates have higher incomes than non-graduates,⁸² and so it makes sense to encourage college graduation for all.⁸³ College access is not currently equal for all students, and so this inequity needs to be addressed. The political speeches and charter school literature defends the solution by alluding to causes of wealth inequality and connecting them back to education. The political speeches did not give specific reasons for the inequality that exists, instead allowing the audience to fill in their own reasons.

The charter school discourse includes inferences of morality and character deficits, which supports this project's attention to the social component that involves values and narratives around poverty. Education is championed as the sole escape from poverty, and the cultural narratives in the United States moralize both poverty and success so that college graduation becomes a way to classify people as deserving of whatever their lot in life is.

While it is clear that there is an uplift narrative about education that is reinforced in public discourse, this alone is not enough to warrant a practical theological investigation. The theological component of this project is not justified solely because of Secretary Duncan's evocative language that names education as "the one true path" out of poverty and our "economic salvation." It is also justified because of the Christian church's historic relationship with public education in the United States. It is not just that

82 . "Annual Earnings of Young Adults," *The Condition of Education* (National Center for Education Statistics, May 2016), http://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator_cba.asp.

83 . However, this correlation does not explain causation. We cannot know if college graduates have higher incomes because they are better prepared for careers or if we are rewarding the type of personhood that I am arguing in this project is one outcome of education.

theological views may have indirectly impacted the structure of education in the US, but that theological views directly influenced education because public education in the U.S. is rooted in the missionary and social gospel movements of Christianity in the 19th century. Christians were at the forefront of literacy education in the U.S. and character formation through schooling. In the next chapter, I will analyze the 19th century Christian support for education as a means of social salvation in the United States in light of the suggestion that public discourse still posits a salvific function for education even in the twenty-first century.

CHAPTER THREE: THE EVOLUTION OF SALVIFIC EDUCATION FROM 19TH CENTURY TO TODAY

Chapter Two demonstrated that educational discourse in the U.S. uses salvific language, both explicitly and implicitly. Yet, the connection to the Christian church is still merely suggested at best; after all, it could just be a coincidental use of shared language in culture. Does the fact that Arne Duncan called education the “economic salvation of our nation” really point to something theological? If he had used “rescue” language instead, would this analysis still matter? In this chapter, I argue that the structure linking education and salvation warrants a theological analysis even if literal salvation language had not been used because the history of public education in the United States has been connected to the Christian church for far longer than the apparent separation of the two in more recent history. Because the project of public education in the United States was rooted in the notion of salvation in the Christian church from the beginning, traces of the original salvific project remain in the discourse today. Therefore, a theological analysis of the relationship between public education and the project of Christian salvation is imperative because of the powerful language and conceptual framing the Christian church has lent to the social ideologies that support education.

In this chapter, I will locate the infancy of public education in the United States in the second half of the 19th century, connecting it to an increased missionary zeal in the

first half of the century and a burgeoning social gospel movement in the second half on the century. I then demonstrate how access to public education in the United States grew universal and was championed as an institution that would improve the whole of society, rather than just the lives of elite classes. This brief history traces the shifting nature of understandings of the salvation offered in the project of public education over time. I am particularly focusing on the offer of salvation through education for poor people, or “the destitute” as they are called in the 19th century, as well as education for African Americans and American Indians, who were presumed to be lacking in both morality and material possessions.

The 19th Century and Evangelical Mission Work

The first historical trend of particular interest in the relationship forged between education and salvation is the increased evangelical mission work that came out of the revivalism of the Second Great Awakening. The revival movement that occurred in the late 17th and early 18th century inspired pietistic zeal and the belief that Christian faith should be consuming of the heart and soul and spread to all believers and non-believers alike. Many Christians at that time believed that they could create a good society through Christianity, and that this achievement would pave the way for the second coming of Christ. Sociologist of religion Christian Smith writes that though fundamentalists in the 20th and 21st centuries are known for being pre-Millennialist in their eschatology, their theological ancestors, the 19th century evangelicals, were post-Millennialists in their

eschatology.¹ Post-Millennialists maintain that believers will be on earth when it is made new and comes into perfection. The evangelicals of the 19th century believed that they were participating in the creation of a new earth, in which the new Kingdom of God would reign. Sunday schools were established as part of the mission to transform society into the new Kingdom of God on earth, and these Protestant pastors chose literacy as the primary tool for conversion that would have both spiritual and moral repercussions.

In this context and in this interpretation of history, salvation refers to the literal saving of souls for God's kingdom, for heaven after death and for the creation of God's kingdom on earth. Salvation is theological, but it is also social and political. If people believed that the establishment of the kingdom of God and the reign of Jesus Christ was possible, and indeed, imminent, as Smith suggests, then education was an effort for creating a Protestant Christian society free of sin and immorality in which Christ would reign.

Evangelical efforts in the 19th century after the Second Great Awakening emphasized conversion and mission, and so benevolent groups formed for "the conversion of every American."² In 1815 and 1816, the American Education Society and the American Bible Society formed. The 1820s saw the creation of the American Sunday School Union (1824), the American Tract Society (1825), the American Society for the Promotion of Temperance (1826), and the American Peace Society (1828). Each of these

1. Christian Smith, *American Evangelicalism: Embattled and Thriving* (Chicago, Ill: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

2. Mary C. Boys, *Educating in Faith: Maps and Visions* (San Francisco: Harpercollins, 1989).

formed in an effort to missionize people in the United States, but clearly the influence of the American Education Society and even more particularly, the American Sunday School Union, was in the emphasis on education for the purpose of evangelism. The Sunday School Union explicitly affirmed education's power to save people through literacy education. An 1847 report on the progress of the American Sunday School Union in missionizing the west articulates a commitment to the Sunday School as the hope for the destitute in the land.

It follows, almost as a matter of course, that where there is a lack of common schools, there is also a lack of churches and Sunday-schools, and a vast deal of ignorance among all classes. Christian benevolence is doing much for the destitute youth of our land, by means of Sunday-schools, and I cannot help seeing that there is a wide field for such operations here. Thousands of these children might be brought under the influence of the Bible, if such a society as the American Sunday-school Union could only send its agents here to awaken an interest in the minds of the people and their offspring, to form schools, and place in them a library of suitable books. I cannot see how they are to be reached in any other way.³

While there is a common cultural assumption that the United States was always very Christian and pious about church attendance, this simply was untrue for people moving west in the mid-1800s. Many were largely uninterested in religious authority and church attendance, and so what was The West at that time, including Missouri, was seen by these benevolent societies as fertile soil for missionary efforts. Christian missionaries moved West, following these settlers, and they established schools, churches, and hospitals. Christians in the east thought that they then could go to the west and “awaken an interest

3. American Sunday-School Union, *Annual Report of the American Sunday-School Union* (American Sunday-School Union., 1847), 56.

in the minds of the people and their offspring,”⁴ fearing that they could not be reached in any other way. This sentiment is not unlike the political speeches in the previous chapter that insisted education was the best way for people to achieve equality and success in the world. Schooling here is tied to the actual theological salvation of the previously unchurched in society, but it is also connected to the improvement of society at large.

The constitution of the ASSU states the “the good education of youth is of first importance to society.”⁵ The ASSU documented this mission even from early on in their tenure in 1825. In their first report, they wrote that Sunday schools “have restrained a banished immorality” and “introduced order and happiness into families,” and this is contrasted to households before Sunday school where “discord and vice once reigned.”⁶ For the ASSU, it seems that education was a means to salvation both theologically and socially, and this education happened in churches, and then Sunday schools, and later, common schools.

In many cases, Sunday schools preceded common schools and were people’s first introduction to formal learning and literacy education.⁷ While Sunday School sought to teach religious and moral values, people learned these lessons in the material through which they were taught to read, literacy being the primary lesson. When missionaries

4. Ibid.

5. American Sunday-School Union, *Annual Report of the American Sunday-School Union* (American Sunday-School Union., 1825), 16.

6. Ibid.

7. William Bean Kennedy, *The Shaping of Protestant Education* (New York: Association Press, 1966).

established common schools, they modeled them after the structure and success of Sunday schools. Clergymen often led the schools.⁸ Once public common schools were established Sunday schools took on a more explicitly religious curriculum.⁹ However, at this time, Sunday schools and public schools were not as separate in their religiousness or secularity as they are today. Instead, Sunday schools hoped to supplement the Protestant formation young people would gain in public schools.¹⁰ Bible study and character formation in the Protestant tradition were important subjects taught in common schools as well, so much so that Catholic schools were founded as a resistance to the explicitly Protestant nature of public schools.¹¹

Literacy as the primary focus of Sunday Schools had theological grounding: in Protestant theology, a person's agency over their own salvation was important, and the means to achieving this agency was through the ability of reading scripture oneself. The Protestant Reformation freed the Bible from religious clerics at the same time that scholasticism and a new interest in literacy and the written word gained traction. Literacy was vitally important to Protestant missionaries who believed a person could be saved through their reading of scripture. In the field of writing studies, Deborah Brandt writes of "sponsors of literacy," explaining that literacy has always been sponsored by those

8. Ibid.

9. Ibid., 26.

10. Ibid., 27.

11. Joel H Spring, *The American School: From the Puritans to No Child Left Behind* (Boston: McGraw-Hill, 2008), 110.

who would receive something back, directly or just by association, from a person's success in reading.¹² In this case, the investment in literacy was seen as worthwhile for the effects it would have on society and the creation of a better, more Christian nation. Even as literacy was taught, the Bible was used as a reading primer and the lessons were moral lessons related to the Christian faith, making the Christian missionaries the "sponsors of literacy" in the 19th century.

During this time, the "destitute" were to be pitied and helped; this aid came through the offer of salvation. The mission and reports of the ASSU repeatedly emphasize reaching the "destitute youth of our land."¹³ The Union strove to establish "a Sunday school in every destitute place where it is practicable, throughout the Valley of the Mississippi."¹⁴ This goal presumes that the destitute need help, and that help can and should come through education, an education that is tied to Protestant Christian faith. While destitute in this case can refer to either physical or spiritual poverty, for many people in the 19th century, physical and spiritual poverty go hand in hand.¹⁵ If physical and spiritual poverty present together, then the solution, or salvation, would need to be both social and theological. That is, both demonstrations of a person's poverty would need to be fixed, and education provided the needed dual-objective approach.

12. Deborah Brandt, "Sponsors of Literacy," *College Composition and Communication* 49, no. 2 (May 1998).

13. American Sunday-School Union, 1847.

14. Robert W. Lynn, *The Big Little School: Two Hundred Years of the Sunday School*, 2nd edition (Birmingham, AL: Religious Education Press, 1980).

15. This reflects the lasting influence of 18th century Calvinism that tied hard work to divine election, which will be discussed further in Chapter 5.

After the Civil War, Christian missionaries broadened their education efforts to include American Indian children, whom they attempted to reach via boarding schools. This is an even clearer example of Christian education being offered not simply for eternal salvation, but for a social-cultural salvation as well. Indigenous children were stripped of their native names and instead given Euro-Christian names, and they were taught Euro-Christian values and culture. Education in that instance was perhaps even more about a socializing component than a theological component, yet it was supported with theological commitments to missionary work and a theological assessment of indigenous culture as pagan and in need of salvation.

The socialization provided by education was meant to address what people then referred to as the “Indian problem,” or the problem posed by native peoples being in the way of Euro-American expansion and domination. In *Education for Extinction*, historian David Wallace Adams described a three-prong approach to this problem: land/relocation, law/legislation, and schooling.¹⁶ Education historian John Rury likewise describes schooling as a particular element in Indian policy. Relocation, Rury writes, “was accompanied by a series of campaigns to change their lifestyles and beliefs, to eradicate their traditional culture and replace it with the Christian and capitalist values of the nation’s dominant culture. The principle vehicle used to accomplish this was the

16. David Wallace Adams, *Education for Extinction: American Indians and the Boarding School Experience, 1875-1928* (Lawrence, KS: Univ Pr of Kansas, 1995).

school.”¹⁷ While efforts to solve the “Indian problem” included legislation and relocation initiatives, schooling was the approach taken to change values and culture.

Adams suggests that the reason schooling was attempted as a response to the “Indian problem” is because education was garnering so much support more broadly in the 19th century across the United States.¹⁸ Schools provided compelling potential to solve the “Indian problem” as schooling focused on children, who were infinitely more malleable than adults. Commissioner of Indian Affairs Francis Leupp lamented that though adults are already formed and set in their ways, “our main hope lies with the youthful generations who are still measurably plastic.”¹⁹ Adams named three phases in the Indian schooling movement: day schools on the reservation, boarding schools on the reservation, and finally, boarding schools off the reservation. What was quickly discovered through on-reservation schooling was that when children were still in close contact with their communities, they resisted the cultural education they were receiving in school. By and large this schooling was about Euro-Christian values and behaviors that seemed “undermined” when students went home overnight or during holidays. Adams described the policymakers’ discontent over the fact that students seemed to live in filth

17. John L. Rury, *Education and Social Change: Contours in the History of American Schooling*, 4 edition (New York: Routledge, 2012), 123.

18. Adams, *Education for Extinction*.

19. Francis E. Leupp, “Annual Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs, For the Year 1905” (Washington, D.C., September 30, 1905), <http://digicoll.library.wisc.edu/cgi-bin/History/History-idx?type=turn&entity=History.AnnRep05p1.p0012&id=History.AnnRep05p1&isize=text>, 2, qtd. in Adams, 19.

and were content to do so.²⁰ This was a problem in the face of a white preoccupation with cleanliness and purity.²¹ However, when Lt. Richard Henry Pratt turned his Indian prisoner-of-war camp into a school in 1875, he discovered a model of education removed from the reservation that had the potential to convert Indians into white Euro-Americans. He later established more boarding schools modeled after his POW schooling experiment, which emphasized interaction with white communities to eventually succeed in cultural integration, guided by the principle, “Kill the Indian in him and save the man.”²² In this manner, Indian schooling became a way to colonize, or save, Indian children by forcing their assimilation with Euro-American culture.

Again, the use of salvation language is not accidental or even an imposition on top of colonization rhetoric. There was a real concern in the second half of the 19th century that the forced migrations and what we would now name as genocide were not solving the “Indian problem,” and instead, something needed to be done to save the indigenous people that could be saved, the children. Some of this was connected to ideas of social Darwinism, or social evolution: the idea that humanity was evolving and that different social groups represented different levels of progress. This belief obviously categorized white Euro-Americans as being the most evolved race, while darker skinned people were accused of being less civilized and less evolved. The humanitarian project

20. Adams, 29.

21. Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Conquest* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 208.

22. *Ibid.*, 52.

under this perverse ideology, then, became one of helping certain groups that were deemed “savable to whiteness” evolve. Superintendent of Indian Schools John Oberly defended the mission of schooling for Indian children as freeing the child from “the degrading communism of the tribal-reservation system” and to imbue him “with the exalting egotism of American civilization, so that he will say ‘I’ instead of ‘We,’ and ‘This is mine,’ instead of ‘This is ours.’”²³ Adams further described this cultural salvation as one that was just as much about earthly existence as theological salvation. He writes,

It was not simply that philanthropists wished to snatch the Indians’ souls from a hellish fate; their commitment to Christianization was also rooted in the assumption that civilization, as the highest stage of man’s social evolution, was only possible when erected upon a firm foundation of Christian morality.²⁴

This multifaceted salvation was forced upon Indians through compelled schooling, one that was perhaps eschatological in content, but more than that, was cultural in process and pedagogy. A student “convert” described his salvation thusly:

When I was at my home, I did not know about church. When I was at my home, I did not wear good clothes. My hair was long. I know now to spell and read a little... At home, I did not know who Jesus was, I loved to hunt, shoot, and sleep on Sundays like other days, but the Bible God’s book has told me it was wrong.²⁵

This testimony seamlessly weaves theological and cultural salvation, reporting that knowing God now has changed the way he dresses, acts, and reads. The actions

23. John Oberly, “Annual Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs,” 1888, xxxix, qtd. in Adams, *Education for Extinction*, 23.

24. Adams, 23.

25. Quoted in Adams, 43. See also Pamela Holcomb Oestreicher, *On the White Man’s Road?: Acculturation and the Fort Marion Southern Plains Prisoners* (Michigan State University, 1981), 64-65; and Lawrie Tatum, *Our Red Brothers and the Peace Policy of President Ulysses S. Grant* (J.C. Winston, 1899), 196.

connected the actions he changed to knowing God, but in fact, he had simply adopted the customs of the white people who taught him that Christianity required these changes in customs and culture. In a letter to Captain Pratt, the leader of the school, a student named Kiowa thanks him because

In one more year I knew almost all your talk. And now I can write a letter like a white man, and when I open a book I can read a good deal of it... Now I am a white man—I think. Now I know that good white men live a good life—no steal, no lie, no hurt anything... By and by I hope I will be the same.²⁶

This schooling was not simply about Christian salvation, but instead, it required a conversion to whiteness. Salvific education in this context refers to the Christianizing of indigenous people not only in religious belief, but in cultural performance.

Furthermore, this cultural performance of whiteness is what demonstrated religious conversion. In *Missionary Conquest*, Osage scholar George Tinker explains, “Eventually it becomes clear that civilizing—that is, europeanizing—Indian people evidently took precedence over conversion, or was the proof of conversion.”²⁷ The testimonies given by Indian students showed their own internalized desire to demonstrate their new “civilized” natures. How well these Indian pupils could perform as white Euroamericans was a testament to the success of these schools, reaffirming education’s role in saving those relegated to a lower class of society by teaching them the ways of those higher than them. In that way, they would be uplifted.

26. Tsait-Kope-ta to Richard H. Pratt, April 1878, Pratt Papers, HA; Quoted in Adams, 46.

27. George E. Tinker, *Missionary Conquest: The Gospel and Native American Cultural Genocide* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 102.

During the same time period, African Americans struggled to gain access to formal schooling. The widespread prohibition of slave education before the Civil War reveals the social power that education already held at the time—both in its initial limits to higher class individuals and also in its political power. Slave education increased the danger of an insurrection, as educated slaves had led the Nat Turner rebellion.²⁸ After the war, efforts to educate newly freed slaves intensified, with white missionaries flooding the south to establish schools and the founding of black schools by black teachers.²⁹ Even while black leaders such as W.E.B. Du Bois and Booker T. Washington debated whether education should emphasize technical skills or classical education subjects, the concept of education as important in the context of racial justice and equality was undisputed. Du Bois asserted that a classically educated “talented tenth” of African Americans could inspire and lead the rest, which would improve the status of all African Americans in the U.S.³⁰ On the other hand, Washington argued that practical lessons would prepare African Americans for jobs rather than wasting time and resources through university education.³¹ Rury speculates that Washington’s views gained more popularity among

28. Rury, 72.

29. Here, again, we see white missionaries using education as a means to uplift the destitute and non-whites.

30. W. E. B Du Bois, *The Talented Tenth* (New York, NY: James Pott and Co., 1903).

31. Booker T. Washington, “Industrial Education for the Negro,” *Teaching American History*, October 1903, <http://teachingamericanhistory.org/library/document/industrial-education-for-the-negro/>.

white people because his views echoed the social order that whites wanted to maintain.³²

A generation later Carter Woodson would argue another point: education needed to be for the uplift of black communities in the face of schooling that otherwise prepared black Americans for careers in which white Americans would prevent them from succeeding.³³

These philosophies of education from Du Bois, Washington, and Woodson represent debates about education that persist to this day and are relevant to this project—that is, the dual potential of education (or formal schooling) for liberation from social inequality and imposed assimilation into the dominant culture that reproduces inequality. After the Civil War, the commitment to education, the struggle for equal access to education, and the ongoing debates about the purpose of education for marginalized groups like African Americans reflects the conviction that education had the power to change a person’s place in society.

Throughout most of the 19th century, the salvific potential of education was two-fold: education could save people theologically, changing their fate from hell to heaven due to their new potential for reading scripture, and education could also save society by converting people who were both materially and spiritually poor into people with the right values and behaviors to fit in. This two-fold salvific education was targeted to poor, illiterate people first, and after its popularity grew, it was offered additionally as a solution to the “Indian problem” and later, for African American integration into society.

32. Rury, 72.

33. Carter Godwin Woodson, *The Mis-Education of the Negro* (Washington, D.C.: Associated Publishers, 1933).

The Social Gospel and the Offer of Social Salvation

Another major development in the 19th century was the social gospel movement, which was characterized by a theological concern about the social reality of a person's world even beyond their spiritual reality. Many trends fed the social gospel movement. The 18th century Enlightenment marked a monumental shift of thinking. The scientific method changed the study of theology from simply being declarations of faith to being influenced by other spheres of knowledge. This shift contributed to the formation of the field of social ethics with attention given to the social sciences. The postmillennialist views mentioned before increased emphasis on the structure of society in order to perfect it. The work of Karl Marx was spreading an awareness of the social order embedded in communities at the same time that social Darwinism justified such social order categorization. Social evolution proved to be a theological concern because it was making ontological assertions about humanity. Though the act of categorizing human groups in this way was not new, it came at a time during increased awareness of the dangers and pitfalls of such a categorization; this led to the rise of Christian Socialism in England and inspired the social gospel movement in the United States.³⁴

A marked difference occurred after the Civil War in how society was structured, where people lived, and what kind of jobs people had. More and more people were living in cities because of the work opportunities created by rising industrialization—there were factory jobs in which men, women, and children could all find employment. People then

34. Gary J. Dorrien, *Social Ethics in the Making: Interpreting an American Tradition* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 10.

lived in unsafe conditions: tenement housing and slums rose during this time. These living conditions caused health crises; the working conditions demanded more specialized training and something for younger children to do during the day. It is in this context that the Social Gospel movement came about and that public schooling continued to grow and define itself and its mission.

The rise of the social gospel differed from the emphasis on mission work that evangelicalism already had in the early 19th century. What was unique about the social gospel is what Dorrien calls the aspect of social salvation, that is, that the salvation of the individual was tied up in their social circumstances as well. This is again influenced by postmillennialism, as social gospel leader Washington Gladden claimed,

The end of Christianity is twofold, a perfect man in a perfect society. These purposes are never separated; they cannot be separated. No man can be redeemed and saved alone; no community can be reformed and elevated save as the individuals of which it is composed are regenerated.³⁵

“Social salvation” has been the term coined for this interdependence between salvation of persons and of society. More than just a commitment to mission work in the early to mid 19th century, the Social Gospel movement articulated a conviction that Christian faith required the creation of a more just society, that Christianity had a social dimension that threatened the status quo and was rooted in the social teachings of Jesus Christ in the gospels.

The social gospel influenced many initiatives that were both political and economic. Social gospel preachers encouraged their congregations to support labor

35. Washington Gladden, *Tools and the Man: Property and Industry Under the Christian Law* (Houghton, Mifflin, 1894), 1.

unions and the spread of democracy as projects for a Christian nation. Dorrien quotes Gladden shortly before his death as proclaiming that “the nation is being saved. It is not yet saved and its salvation depends on you and me, but it is being saved. There are signs that a new way of thinking, a new social consciousness, are taking possession of the nation.”³⁶ Gladden speaks hopefully of the salvation of the nation, and it is clear that he is not simply referring to individual theological conversion. So while the first half of the 18th century saw increased missionary efforts for the sake of evangelism, the second half of the 18th century brought liberal Christians who believed that Christianity would be the salvation of the nation, and that that salvation was just as crucial as personal salvation.

In the midst of these theological developments, formal schooling was on the rise in the United States, and it found support among Protestants even while the idea of its public funding met resistance in society.³⁷ While in 1800, the average American spent 210 days in schooling over a lifetime, by 1900, they spent 1050 days over a lifetime.³⁸ Rury ascribes schooling’s success to these theological trends explaining, “Animated by a Protestant commitment to social perfectibility and the republican spirit of national advancement... these men and women offered the school as a solution to a host of social

36. Washington Gladden, “A New Heart for the Nation,” in Gladden, *The Interpreter*, 145; quoted in Dorrien, *The Social Gospel Today*, 110.

37. Many people were resistant to publicly fund education when it was still considered mostly a place for the elite in society, a polishing school. (See John L. Rury, *Education and Social Change: Contours in the History of American Schooling*, 4 edition (New York: Routledge, 2012)).

38. Rury, 64.

problems.”³⁹ It is during this time that schools were imbued with the potential to resolve what was wrong with society. By the end of the 19th century, most large cities and towns had a public high school of some kind.

In the late 19th century public schooling began to serve a welfare purpose in light of growing urbanization and industrialization that saw many people living in unhealthy conditions. Kindergarten arose initially out of the play movement, but soon it was used as a way to influence poor children presumed to be living in conditions in which they were not being socialized properly.⁴⁰ “As a new educational institution,” education historian Joel Spring writes, “the kindergarten was to compensate for the supposed loss of socialization within the slum family, to protect the young child from the influences of the street, to provide preparation for entrance into regular elementary school classes, and to educate the parents.”⁴¹ This need to protect children and educate parents hearkens again to presuppositions made of “the destitute,” and the idea echoes the language of the charter school mission statements that implicate parents as part of the cause of poverty. As poverty reflects a moral character flaw, then children must be saved from the flaws of their parents, and through the education of children, parents may even be saved.

In the 19th century we find a growing emphasis on public education as a way to save individuals and society, even while the objective of the salvation offered evolves over time. What starts as an effort to save the destitute through literacy education that

39. Rury, 76.

40. Spring, 219.

41. Ibid.

might lead to pious personal Bible study leads to a conviction that schooling is the way to create the type of society desired—one that is already inherently biased by white supremacist values and behaviors.⁴² Schooling is offered to poor people and people of color to lift them out of destitution and what was perceived as character deficiencies of non-whites, as rooted in ideas of social evolution that emphasized the closer-to-perfection dominant white group.

The 20th Century and Education for All

The move toward education for all in the 19th and 20th century served functional purposes in addition to the ideological. While schooling was becoming more common as a means for moral and civic education, the rise also coincided with changes in the labor force. The industrial revolution called for more education and training, which schools could offer in part by ensuring that students were prepared with reading and arithmetic skills. In the 20th century, veterans returning from two world wars overwhelmed the labor force, and universal secondary schooling and increased access to post-secondary schooling delayed labor force entry of many people in order to secure jobs for those returning soldiers who needed them.

The 20th century not only ushered in a greater reliance on industrialization, but the first half of the century saw both a boom of wealth and a financial crash that threatened to ruin the solvency and survival of many US citizens. It is no coincidence, then, that the social solutions put forward after the stock market crash of 1929 not only centered around creating job opportunities, but also included a greater emphasis on

42. White supremacy as an ideology that supports the idea of salvific education will be further investigated in Chapter Four.

schooling. The National Youth Administration (NYA) and the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) were both established to provide unemployed young persons opportunities to continue their education. The NYA provided financial incentives for returning to school, while the CCC was a military-like social service group that also offered courses at night. Spring remarks that these New Deal initiatives launched an ongoing battle between the federal government and the educational community over who would control or more strongly influence the lives of young people. This time period solidified the expectation that youth would be spent some sort of government funded programming rather than simply in work.⁴³ Involvement in World War II, however, ended these education programs as extra spending was cut and most young people were enlisted in the military or involved in military support efforts. After the war, the Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944 (popularly known as the G.I. Bill) included funding for education, again in part to alleviate the flooded labor market. Granted, this increasing focus on education for young people in the first half of the 20th century was not about the type of individual social salvation that was sometimes at play in the 18th and 19th centuries, but it was about finding a solution to widespread social problems, cementing education's primary role as a cure to social ills.

Even while secondary education attendance was growing, there were still stark disparities of access along race and class lines. In fact, many battles around racial inequality were fought around the issued of schooling in the US. In 1954, *Brown v. Board of Education* established the unconstitutionality of segregated schooling, which

43. Spring, 345.

was important for improving access of African American persons to the resources and services that were superior in white schools. As part of President Lyndon B. Johnson's 1964 declaration of "War on Poverty," the Economic Opportunity Act paved the way for the nation's TRIO programs, which sought to increase graduation rates and college access for those that faced significant obstacles due to race and class.⁴⁴ Again, these movements toward not only the increased attendance of all US youth in schools but also toward increased educational access for minority groups emphasizes the important role education is believed to play in society, one that I am naming as both individually and societally salvific.

In the 19th century, religious instruction in the early common schools came through the content of what students were being taught to read, but what about the content of schooling in the 20th century? While the decisions of *McCullum v. Board of Education*⁴⁵ and *Engel v. Vitale*⁴⁶ decreased the explicit place of Protestant theology in the public school system, the emphasis on broad character or moral education did not go away. In fact, in the name of removing religious bias, character education was seen as beneficial because of its rootedness in values presumed to be universal. And yet, as we

44. In 1980, legislation reset the criteria for inclusion in TRIO programs to be for first-generation college students.

45. *McCullum v. Board of Education* (1948) established that it was unconstitutional to use time in public schools for religious instruction. A later case (1952) clarified that the issue is if religious instruction is done in publicly funded school buildings or with public school funds, which granted allowance for a New York school to permit Jewish students to leave during part of the day for religious instruction.

46. *Engel v. Vitale* (1962) established that it was unconstitutional for a public school to compose an official school prayer and encourage its recitation. The ruling has since been extended to cover most instances of organized led prayer in schools.

have seen in the earlier history of cultural education, these values reinforced Protestant theology without the religious language. Schools were a means for teaching individualism, progress, discipline, and American nationalism,⁴⁷ and these values persisted well into the twentieth century.⁴⁸ In fact, the philosophical debates around the purpose of education in the 20th century revolved around education as career preparation or education as civic development, and both of these emphasize a continued affirmation that education could provide economic and social/character uplift.

What we know now as public schooling may have started in the 19th century with a missionary focus on literacy and salvation, but the content and structure of formal schooling was cemented in the 20th century through tumultuous social demands, problems, and questions. What rose to the surface through amidst these problems and questions was education as a solution: education as a solution to preparation for the new industrial jobs, education as a solution to unemployment, education as a solution to cultural deviance, and education as a solution to inequality. When education is offered as the solution to all social problems, it is functioning as an offer of salvation, as salvation uplifts a person or group from something undesirable to a fate more desirable.

Education as a Vehicle for Social Salvation

While Dorrien describes the history of social salvation in the social gospel movement and its lasting impact on the field of social ethics, he does not name education as a vehicle for social salvation, which is one of the assertions of my project. Dorrien

47. Rury, 81.

48. The role of values in education will be further discussed in Chapter 4.

does differentiate the height of the social gospel movement from liberal Christianity today by explaining that the social gospels “refused to doubt that structural economic change in the direction of justice is possible.”⁴⁹ He questions how much faith people have in the social gospel hope of a “cooperative commonwealth” in present day when socialism is viewed negatively and “corporate capitalism is turning the entire world into a single market.”⁵⁰ However, he clarifies that social gospels did not put their faith in state socialism, but instead advocated cooperative ownership and profit-sharing strategies. He likewise advocates economic democracy initiatives such as community ownership and increased worker-ownership and participation as the keys to economic justice the 21st century, which in his argument would take the best from the social gospel era and integrate it with social advocacy today that “requires a multicultural, feminist, ecological consciousness.”⁵¹ While Dorrien’s perspective focuses strictly on economics, he points out that other social ethicists today do not emphasize economics. I would add, on the other hand, that any focus on the economic system of the United States and the attempts to make a more just system needs to include an analysis of the discourse surrounding education, as education is much more commonly considered to be an agent of social salvation in political discourse. If social salvation is as Dorrien portrays it to be a belief that a person’s redemption is tied up in the whole of society and their place in it, then

49. Rury, 81.

50. Ibid.

51. Ibid. 112.

education has grown to be the sole agent of social salvation, the determining factor of a person's level in society and the extent to which it might change.

The salvation that education offers is two-fold: it is both economic and cultural. Education is economically salvific in its offer to help move someone up the ladder into higher paying and more prestigious positions in the labor force. While there is a correlation between level of education received and money earned over a lifetime, this guarantee is necessarily limited by relation. That is, higher paying jobs frequently go to higher educated persons because education is a highly respected means for credentialing and categorization. However, as more and more people achieve the same level of education, that level of education cannot guarantee higher wage potential. This is what people are referring to when they warn of degree inflation.⁵² While a high school diploma was once the norm, college graduation is now the goal for many more people, and it is currently compensated as such in a person's salary. However, some already fear that the increased percentage of people with college degrees necessitate another way of choosing people for higher positions, and so, graduate school increases in popularity.⁵³ Even while this is happening, it is not always based on the direct contribution of these degrees for the positions to which people are applying, as seen when a job requirement simply requires a college diploma without a specification about area of specialization. Again, there is a direct correlation between level of education and wage potential, yet this may be so

52 Stephen J. McNamee and Robert K. Miller Jr, *The Meritocracy Myth* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2013).

53. Ibid.

simply because of our cultural emphasis on education as credentialing and categorization, not always because of the specific knowledge acquired in schooling.

Education also offers a type of cultural salvation because of the longstanding history of the emphasis on certain values and character formation that happens in formal schooling. Schooling is not value-neutral. Just as white schoolteachers taught Indian children Euroamerican values of individualism and proper social conduct, so schools continue these practices when they prioritize individual student success through evaluation and competition, or when colleges prioritize the future success of an individual student at the expense of the student's family or community perspective.⁵⁴

The social gospel movement of the 19th and early 20th centuries advocated that social salvation was essential because of its interconnection to theological salvation—the perfection of a Christian society was the path toward redemption and the second coming of Christ. This movement emphasized cooperative ownership and labor rights and education as important ways to achieve a more equitable restructuring of society, and in the present day, Dorrien asks Christian ethicists to recommit attention to labor and cooperative ownership for the sake of economic justice.⁵⁵ However, Dorrien does not give attention to the heavy weight given to the education system and hope entrusted in it as a vehicle of social salvation and economic justice. I am suggesting that social salvation is still offered in the United States, influenced by the historical influence of Christianity,

54. For an example, see Elizabeth Bryan and Leigh Ann Simmons, “Family Involvement: Impacts on Post-Secondary Educational Success for First-Generation Appalachian College Students,” *Journal of College Student Development* 50, no. 4 (August 2009): 391–406.

55. Dorrien, “Social Salvation: The Social Gospel as Theology and Economics” in *Social Gospel Today*.

and that the singular path of this social salvation is through the educational system—particularly, through the attainment of a post-secondary degree.

Education is only a path to social salvation for those who are in most need of uplift. When someone is already middle class or higher, the decision to forego or delay college is not seen with the same sort of hostility or pity as those who are not in the position of easily making enough money to be considered a living wage. In *The New Prophets of Capital*, Nicole Aschoff argues that rare counter-narratives are often offered up as a way to support the idea that working hard does pay off or that everything about a person's life situation is within their control.⁵⁶ Mark Zuckerberg is an extraordinary example of a person who did not graduate college, yet still founded Facebook and became one of the most influential people in the country. However, he was already advantaged by having a Harvard University education that he could cut short and still go on to procure money, prestige, and a legacy. The realities of luck, talent, and privilege are obscured when his story is uplifted as an exemplar for not needing a college education to succeed. In this way, the primary role of education as categorizing a person and their value is masked.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I rooted my interpretation of the salvific role of education in the unique history of the United States, particularly in the religious and social contexts of the 19th and 20th centuries. It matters that schooling in the US has always had a relationship with the Christian church. Early proponents of schooling were Protestant missionaries

56. Nicole Aschoff, *The New Prophets of Capital* (London; Brooklyn, NY: Verso, 2015).

and the content of moral and character education linked back to the idea that poverty and character deficiencies were linked. The unique character of the salvific potential of education formed throughout these two centuries as people wrote of education's capacity to answer the perceived social demands of the times. Social and material poverty in western pioneer settlements demanded education that taught Christianity. The "Indian problem" demanded education that could socially assimilate Indian children in with white society. An unskilled labor market demanded education that taught skills to future employees, while a flooded labor market required schooling that kept students engaged for a longer period than previous generations who had quit schooling after primary grades. Racial inequality and unrest demanded that minority students be specifically targeted for educational opportunity like their white counterparts. Through all of this, education gained the unrivaled power to form students on multiple levels—morally, socially, and practically.

Education continues to play a socializing role by determining and reinforcing dominant cultural values. The history of public education in the United States, from early Sunday schools to forced Indian schooling to character and civic education in the 20th century, has continually proclaimed a power over the personal development of the student and the increased civilization of the wider society. Today, we see the battlegrounds of education being around what language(s) should be taught in primary grades, the purpose and agenda of US History courses, and even whether the humanities are worth pursuing in light of an increased emphasis on technical and science education. It is a great irony, or perhaps myth, that education is sometimes perceived as neutral in

agenda, and yet, so powerfully formative for all who pursue it and such a solution to so many social problems.⁵⁷

Education as the answer to social problems and the primary route to social mobility only makes sense in a certain cultural framework that holds particular beliefs about how society is currently structured and what changes are even possible. In the next chapter, I will analyze the ideologies and beliefs that support the salvific power of education in the United States: meritocracy and white middle class supremacy.

57. The myth of the neutrality of education will be further explored in Chapter Four.

CHAPTER FOUR: THE IDEOLOGICAL SUPPORTS OF SALVIFIC EDUCATION

Americans began to imbue education with salvific potential from the earliest establishment of common schools. In the 19th century, this education had the power and responsibility to assimilate subgroups into the dominant group, and in the 20th century, education had the power and responsibility to provide productive futures for individuals and resolutions to social problems for society. Because salvific education seems to be written into US culture, it is hard to pinpoint why it is so compelling or critique its helpfulness. In this chapter, I examine sociological theories of culturally held beliefs or myths, and I explore two ideologies that give particular credence to the discourse of salvific education: meritocracy and white middle class supremacy. Sociology of religion is particularly helpful because I am arguing that these narratives are not simply strong *like* institutional religion is, but rather, these narratives are strengthened *because* they anchor into Christian theological beliefs that are commonly held by the dominant cultural group of the United States.

Robert Bellah and Civil Religion

Sociologist of religion Robert Bellah is renowned for his concept of civil religion, though the term and idea faced heavy critique from the moment he published his 1969

article “Civil Religion in America.”¹ Bellah helpfully described how a wider collection of culturally held beliefs that were not overtly religious could provide community in a society that was increasingly pluralistic in religious belief and practice. This idea of civil religion at its most neutral could be understood as an attempt to explain the narratives and values commonly held by a broad subsection of people in a particular nation. These shared stories are called upon to elicit social and political action when people could not readily assume that their neighbors and others actually practiced within the same specific religious framework. The “civil” part of this descriptor serves a two-fold function: both a reflection of something common and recognizable happening in public life and something that civil life in particular can use to connect people around ideas of common good and political action. For example, we saw in Chapter One specific ideas being called upon by U.S. Presidents in the State of the Union addresses and by Secretary of Education Arne Duncan. Arne Duncan exclaimed that “everyone everywhere shares the belief that education is the economic salvation of our country.”² How can Arne Duncan report to know what everyone everywhere believes? He can only do so by tapping into culturally held beliefs and narratives that seem like a given for a particular cultural group, in this case, the people of the United States. Even then, there is no single narrative that resonates with or benefits every social group, so he is likely tapping into the culturally held beliefs of the dominant or majority social group. Duncan is referring to a specific

1. Robert N. Bellah, “Civil Religion in America,” *Daedalus* 96 (Winter 1967): 1–21.

2. Duncan, “International Engagement Through Education.”

tenet within a supposed shared belief system that could be called “civil religion.” The ideographs pointed out in the second chapter function as part of the civil religion.

The critiques Bellah faced when he published “Civil Religion in America” shape how I will use “civil religion” in this chapter. First, critics argued that Bellah was not simply describing a phenomenon that he named civil religion, which is the way I introduced the concept in the previous paragraph, but rather he was asserting that the U.S. needed to rally behind what formed its civil religion in order to create a more ideal society. Bellah believed that civil religion had the potential to play a formative role in a society, citing the civil rights movement as an example, but he also warned that civil religion could bolster blind nationalism and global conflict. An important critique lodged at Bellah is the prescriptive nature of his work that runs counter to the disciplinary objectives in sociology to provide description or analysis. Bellah has a vision for how civil religion should work in the United States; he is not simply describing it. While any critique of bias, particularly unacknowledged bias that poses as objective reporting, is important in determining scholarly ethos and credibility, I am not suggesting my own agenda as being objective description. I am explicitly seeking to critique the discourse of education as singularly salvific and offer alternative understandings of the role of education in social change. As a theologian, I am committed to finding ways to create a more ideal society, but this is within my own discipline’s normativity.

The far more relevant critique of Bellah’s description of civil religion is that while Bellah may have believed he was simply describing a neutral phenomenon, it is actually bound in complex power issues. That is to say, there is not just a singular set of beliefs

and values that make up “culture” in the United States, but what he was describing is instead a reflection of dominant Protestant-influenced culture that is even more particularly tied to whiteness and middle class status.³ These narratives wield normative power. There is a *coherency* to the narratives and values that are used to inspire particular social and civil action, but the narratives that are privileged in the public sphere are often those that advantage the dominant social group at the expense of those that are marginalized by these narratives. Every family, community, and larger cultural group has shared stories they use to educate and edify one another, but the dominant stories are the ones that maintain the social order and protect the power of those that already have it, while counter-narratives are limited to the smaller communities to whom they are most relevant.

How, then, to refer to these dominant stories that demand allegiance and comprehension? Civil religion as a theoretical frame is fraught by a history of academic critique, and yet, it offers a certain allure because it captures the extensive reach of discourse that I am describing. Critical studies of religion in the 21st century recognize the dominance of a Protestant-normative perspective, and so the term “civil religion” could still imply a forced dominance of those in power if understood in a critical way. A similar alternative to civil religion is that of “cultural religion,” which religion scholar Catherine Albanese uses to describe the wide collection of cultural rituals, holidays, and

3. Chernus, Ira. “Civil Religion.” In *The Blackwell Companion to Religion in America*, edited by Philip Goff. John Wiley & Sons, 2010.

customs in a society.⁴ In the United States, Christianity has influenced the cultural religion through its own religious holidays and calendar, yet, not all of the federally recognized holidays are rooted in Christianity, for example, Independence Day and Labor Day. So then, cultural religion refers to a complex combination of Christianity, nationalism, and other cultural influences. The term cultural religion could be helpful to this project because it includes nationalism without limiting itself to a nationalistic endeavor as “civil religion” implies. Instead, culture includes customs, ideologies, and values that are reinforced in public life through political action, social life, entertainment, etc.

Cultural religion, however, does not avoid the critiques of power and dominance lodged at civil religion. Some expressions of culture are privileged as more valuable and acceptable than others. For example, people are not as suspicious of displays of Christian culture as they are if someone demonstrates an allegiance to pagan or Wiccan traditions. In other words, people categorize each other based on how they demonstrate aspects of culture. So while Bellah’s civil religion or Albanese’s cultural religion are helpful in a way to describe the common ground that holds dominant ideologies and values, neither inherently deal with the issue of power, and instead, suggest that cultures simply exist without categorizing values as best, better, or worse. They simply exist in a neutral space, and yet, this neutral space does not truly exist. Instead, cultures are organized to prioritize certain values over others, and the values that are deemed dominant imbue those that hold them with social power.

4. Catherine L. Albanese, *America, Religions and Religion*, 2nd ed.. (Belmont, Calif: Wadsworth PubCo, 1992).

Pierre Bourdieu, Habitus, and Field of Power

While Bellah described a commonly held ideological system without attention to the power the ideology reinforces, sociologist Pierre Bourdieu paid special attention to the differences in power that are reproduced through culture. According to Bourdieu, the task of sociology is to “to uncover the most profoundly buried structures of the various social worlds which constitute the social universe, as well as the ‘mechanisms’ which tend to ensure their reproduction or their transformation.”⁵ Bourdieu responds to his own call by describing the reproduction of power in society with particular language that may help in my own task of describing how the ideas that Bellah proposed Americans held benignly in common are actually dominant class values and ideologies that demand allegiance from anyone who wants to be considered successful in this system.

Bourdieu describes the social space as a *field of power*, in which forces with different kinds of capital interact and struggle with each other over what particular capital is worth. Bourdieu explained that “to think in terms of field is to *think relationally* [emphasis his].”⁶ Behavior cannot be understood apart from the field in which it is taking place because the field constructs the relationships between people and material culture that are otherwise not obvious. Social class differences cannot take place outside of a field that assigns value differently according to relationship with each other. Bourdieu uses the example of the difference between the “bourgeois” and “the people,” explaining that their difference is only apparent if you understand the social space they occupy,

5. Pierre Bourdieu and Loïc J. D. Wacquant, *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

6. Ibid., 96.

which is the field.⁷ In this example, the struggle is over the value that the cultural capital of the bourgeois enjoys.

Bourdieu uses *capital* simply to describe a sort of currency that can be categorized as cultural, social, and symbolic. Capital is valuable in its exchange rate, that is, the right kind of capital can be traded in for other forms of privilege,⁸ such as access to goods, relational influence, interpersonal status, etc. I am most concerned here with cultural capital, or the behaviors and beliefs that set certain people apart as more powerful because they hold such capital. All of these values and behaviors that are categorized by varying worth conferred by society constitute the habitus in which a person lives. Bourdieu explains habitus as the

generative and unifying principle which retranslates the intrinsic and relational characteristics of a position into a unitary lifestyle, that is, a unitary set of choices of persons, goods, and practices.⁹

He says they are both differentiated and differentiating, as “classifactory schemes, principles of classification, principles of vision and division, different tastes.”¹⁰

Though Bourdieu’s language seems cumbersome at first glance, he is attempting to describe the embedded customs and behaviors of society that differentiate classes from

7. Pierre Bourdieu, *Practical Reason: On the Theory of Action* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998), 33.

8. *Ibid.*, 34.

9. *Ibid.*, 8.

10. *Ibid.*, 8.

one another in a way that seems given and natural, even when he suggests they are in fact, arbitrary and unnatural.

My own project questions the value of higher education and what it means for those who either have it or not. This question of value is bound contextually to United States public life in the twenty-first century because the answer would vary according to place, and even according to a smaller breakdown of fields of power in a Bourdieuan schema. Multiple types of higher education are accessible, available, and valued in different fields; the question of the value of higher education can only be answered in a specific field. There might be one valuation in the U.S. political field, where the public might demand that the President have a college degree, and a different answer on a construction site, where a college degree may only be deemed significant if it is practically helpful.

The field is important to Bourdieu because differences in the power of capital are relative and relational, that is, it is only in relationship that capital can be appraised. He critiques substantialism as a way to describe something in and of itself as valuable, whereas he asserts that something is only more or less valuable than something else. He uses the difference in cuisines as an example. There is nothing substantially distinguished about eating French food, but for Americans, French cuisine is often considered to be high class and suitable for a formal night out, whereas Chinese food is often correlated with takeout, highly available for delivery in cardboard containers.¹¹ This difference is socially constructed by the field of power.

11. Ibid., 3-4.

According to Bourdieu, cultures systematically reproduce social order, difference, and values, and the primary institution for this reproduction is formal education. Schooling is not merely the passing along of scholastic knowledge, but it also includes character formation. In Chapter 2, I analyzed statements about the mission of charter schools like Harlem Children's Zone and KIPP, who emphasized the need for character education in low-income neighborhoods, but those are not the only schools that explicitly attend to character formation. Perhaps more important to Bourdieu than explicit character and moral education, however, would be the implicit curriculum taught around values in formal schooling in the United States.¹² What is most pressing for this project is that the narrative of the American Dream, as upheld by individualistic meritocracy, is part of this cultural formation that takes place in formal schooling in the United States so that students learn what it means to succeed/move ahead in the world and what it means to be left behind.

American Dream and Meritocracy

By putting the ideas of Bellah and Bourdieu together, we see that what Bellah called civil religion might also be coded as a dominant field of power to which others must conform to have cultural capital. Dominant cultures are practices and behaviors valued above others, and the insistence of the dominant culture as normative for all other subgroups and peoples in the culture is itself an act of power over those that do not or cannot fit in. A person who speaks the language of the dominant culture and can move

12. Elliott Eisner, "The Three Curricula," in *The Educational Imagination: On the Design and Evaluation of School Programs*, 3rd ed. (Upper Saddle River, NJ, 2001).

within it to find success possesses critical cultural capital. This capital is not substantively better and different than others, but rather, it is identified as better and different because an adherence to the dominant culture makes a person more likely to succeed.

Furthermore, the dominant culture possesses ideologies or myths that propel and order society. While Karl Marx and Friderich Engels described ideology in such a way that implicated the dominant powers in society with conscious imposition of certain ideas and beliefs on those “under” them,¹³ I use ideology as a way to describe the difficult-to-describe stories, myths, values, and beliefs that are often commonly held in society and difficult to critique. These ideologies usually provide the grounding for other more disputed ideas and beliefs, even while they themselves are difficult to uncover. So while I do agree with Marx and Engels that there is something about power going on with ideology, I am less inclined to assert that those who have “more power” are conscious of the role they play in perpetuating the ideologies that support their status in society.

Antonio Gramsci is useful for this reason, as he includes that which seems like “common sense” to his definition of ideology.¹⁴ Bourdieu’s similar concept by a different name is *doxa*, or that which seems natural and self-evident to a society even when it is not.¹⁵

Taking what is most useful in this discussion, I will continue to describe this concept for the duration of this project using the word ideology, including the natural, self-evident

13. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The German Ideology, Including Theses on Feuerbach*, Paperback edition (Amherst, N.Y: Prometheus Books, 1998).

14. Antonio Gramsci, Quintin Hoare, and Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci* (New York: International Publishers, 1972).

15. Bourdieu, *Practical Reason*.

common sense that both Gramsci and Bourdieu included in their understandings of ideology.¹⁶ I am naming The American Dream narrative and white middle class supremacy as two ideologies supported by the dominant culture that are important in establishing the salvific narrative of education.¹⁷

The American Dream ideology speaks generally about the promised success in the U.S. for those who work hard. While the American Dream language occurs regularly in U.S. culture, it often goes undefined. The term was first used in 1931, when James Truslow Adams described it as the “dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for every man [sic], with opportunity for each according to his ability or achievement.”¹⁸ Surprisingly, Truslow did not write about the American Dream as an individualistic endeavor taken at the expense of others, but rather, wrote of it as a communal goal that could only be reached when society worked together for wide scale uplift.¹⁹ The concept of the American Dream increased in popularity. Politicians, social theorists, and the public deployed the term to refer to any number of things from specific

16. My commitment to keeping with the term “ideology” is rooted in a desire to use words that are common enough in the discourse that this project remains grounded. Otherwise, *doxa* might be worth continuing with since Bourdieu is already so influential in this project.

17. Again, for simplicity’s sake, this project will stick to the use of the term ideology, but rhetorically, we could say that the American Dream is an ideograph in the way that it is a term used to evoke a response that is rooted in however a person or community defines it.

18. James Truslow Adams, *The Epic of America* (New York: Blue Ribbon Books, 1931), 404.

19. Of course, this was a romantic vision that did not likely include all people, as 1931 was still at the height of segregation.

signifiers of success, the potential to change one's life, or the infinite possibilities that were believed by some to be offered by U.S. citizenship.

Presently, the term implies the various meanings, almost referring to each definition simultaneously. In *Facing up to the American Dream*, Jennifer Hochschild names the American Dream as a central ideology in the United States that promises “that all Americans have a reasonable chance to achieve success as they define it— material or otherwise— through their own efforts, and to attain virtue and fulfillment through success.”²⁰ Hochschild reflects an emphasis on the moral character of success by connecting it to hard work so that a person is seen as getting what they earn. In keeping with the way I previously identified ideology, Hochschild's ideology is so ubiquitous in the United States that it seemingly needs no definition, and in the meantime, it supports those who have cultural power by justifying the means by which they obtained it.

Sociologists Stephen McNamee and Robert Miller describe this tenet of the American Dream as the “Meritocracy Myth.” They explain that meritocracy “refers to a social system as a whole in which individuals get ahead and earn rewards in direct proportion to their individual efforts and abilities.”²¹ Here the American Dream has moved from collective effort for wide scale uplift through policy initiatives to an expectation that individuals already possess what they need to achieve the Dream on their

20. Jennifer L. Hochschild, *Facing Up to the American Dream: Race, Class, and the Soul of the Nation: Race, Class, and the Soul of the Nation* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), xvii.

21. Stephen J. McNamee and Robert K. Miller Jr, *The Meritocracy Myth* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2013), 2.

own. They name this as a myth in the United States because of the other factors they describe that affect a person's success, regardless of merit. These include a person's social identity, amount of relevant social/cultural capital, and luck.²² McNamee and Miller refer to the common metaphor of the foot race to describe what it is like for individuals competing to succeed in the United States. In this metaphor, they explain that even though the meritocracy would presume the same starting point for all people, those children with wealthier parents actually start out ahead in the race.²³ They go on to explain that those who inherited wealth, then, start near the finish line because their futures are already financially secure. It is not only financial security that wealthy families pass along to their children, but also political power and an intimate familiarity with the cultural norms that come along with wealth that make it easier to multiply one's wealth. The myth of meritocracy maintains that a person's success is reflects the degree to which they have earned it, and people earn it through hard work. This myth celebrates the self-made man and ignores the reality of the trust fund baby who did not procure that level of financial security only by merit. If the American Dream refers to the wide open possibility that someone can find success, meritocracy defines this further by declaring success is awarded to those that work hard to earn it. Whether they are two distinct ideologies or just the isolation of two strands of one singular braided ideology, the American Dream as driven by meritocracy is the ideology, or are the ideologies, supporting the field of power that allows for the naming of education as salvific.

22. Ibid., 16-19.

23. Ibid., 55.

To refer to meritocracy as a myth can be a misnomer though if the importance of societal myths is not recognized. Here, myth is not fantasy or story, but a powerful justifying narrative that obscures its own interests and origins. In the field of religious studies, myth is used to describe the narratives about humans understanding sacred reality and their relationship to it.²⁴ While I primarily describe ideologies in my project, I see myths as almost synonymous, albeit in narrative form. The religious studies understanding of myth serves as an added emphasis of the sacrality of these narratives; myths are held sacred, making them difficult to critique, deconstruct, or dismantle. Ideologies, narratives, and myths connect people around shared language and visions for society. And yet, they can also serve a darker purpose: justifying the status quo in such definitive terms that it cannot be challenged or disrupted. McNamee and Miller explain that “ideologies provide socially acceptable explanations for the kind and extent of inequality within society.”²⁵ Meritocracy, by explaining that a person gets what they earn through hard work and merit, then assures people that if they have more than another person, it is because they deserve to have more than that other person because they worked harder. This assurance maintains inequality by explaining it as a simple case of dividing the resources according to merit and hard work, seemingly objective markers for who deserves the most and who deserves the least. However, as McNamee and Miller document through vast analysis of data, wealth in the US is primarily a marker of

24. Lawrence S. Cunningham and John Kelsay, *The Sacred Quest: An Invitation to the Study of Religion* (Pearson Prentice Hall, 2005), 59.

25. McNamee & Miller, 3.

inheritance. The problem is that many times people do not actually start on equal playing fields, so the same amount of hard work can still result in vastly unequal outcomes, making hard work an elusive method for reaching the seemingly moving target of success.

The fact that McNamee and Miller name meritocracy as a myth that does not function the way people think it does is irrelevant, as they explain that ideologies are valuable insofar as they are functional, not accurate. “For ideologies of inequality to ‘legitimize’ particular social arrangements,” they write, “it is not necessary that the ideology be objectively true or even falsifiable; what matters is that people accept and act on it.”²⁶ As long as people believe that there are people who earn more than others through their hard work and merit, then the ideology of meritocracy persists.

One primary way people prove their worth in this seemingly meritocratic system is through the credentialing offered by education. McNamee and Miller name education as the “engine” of meritocracy; that is, education is currently the primary vehicle for people to demonstrate their hard work in order to ensure success. Take the debate over minimum wage, for example. A detractor from raising the minimum wage might suggest that if a person wanted to make more money, then they ought to have gone to college so he could get a better job for a better wage. Minimum wage positions are low-skill for low-pay, and this is how it should be. This common sentiment demonstrates how meritocracy and education are woven together for the service of the American Dream. McNamee and Miller say that it is not that people just hope that their hard work will be

26. McNamee, 4.

rewarded while others suffer for not working as hard as them, but instead that “most Americans believe that meritocracy is not only the way the system *should* work but the way it *does* work.”²⁷

Again, for the same reason meritocracy in general is problematic, connecting education to meritocracy specifically is problematic: we know that hard work is not all that is needed to guarantee success in the United States. Where and to whom you are born and raised matters. Public education is funded through property taxes, meaning higher income areas with higher property values pay more in taxes than lower income areas with lower property values, and so the children that live in these neighborhoods frequently attend schools that have better funding and resources. If and when this is not true, higher income parents have more flexibility to send their children to better private schools if they are not pleased with the quality of their local public school because they know the system well enough to understand that they have agency and economic means to do so.²⁸ In addition to the quality of where a child goes to school, we are reminded by Bourdieu that the cultural capital a family has and passes along determines to what extent someone fits in with the higher classes, or those that symbolize and to some extent, control success. Cultural capital can be exchanged for social capital; a person who fits into social conventions has a better likelihood of forging social connections that can later be traded

27. McNamee, 3.

28. Annette Lareau refers to this high level of middle-class parental engagement and agency over the lives of their children as “concerted cultivation” in *Unequal Childhoods: Class, Race, and Family Life, Second Edition with an Update a Decade Later* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2011).

in for higher employment opportunities. Education scholar Lisa Delpit describes this phenomena as “the culture of power,” explaining that “there are codes or rules for participating in power” and that “the rules of the culture of power are a reflection of the rules of the culture of those who have power.”²⁹ It is for this reason, she argues, that middle-class students do better in school than those who not middle-class. The culture of the schools is based off of the culture of the upper and middle classes because those are the people in power. The students who come to school from these higher classes are already at an advantage by seeing the structures and rules they are accustomed to enacted in the classroom. As an example, she describes how children are taught to interact with authority figures. While many progressive white teachers avoid explicit displays of power, Delpit explains, lower class students are more accustomed to direct demonstrations of power by their own parents or grandparents. They then are less likely to pick up on the social cues of a an implicit command like, “Is that where the scissors go?” than they are to an explicit, “The scissors go in the desk.”³⁰ In even larger matters, this impulse to downplay power with implicit rather than explicit direction is more likely to elicit confusion from lower-class students, who will then be marked as a behavioral issues in the classroom when they fail to read the cues of their teachers, which again, are likely more aligned with the cultures of middle and higher class.³¹ In this way, a child’s

29. Lisa Delpit, *Other People’s Children*, 25.

30. Delpit, 34.

31. See also, Annette Lareau, *Unequal Childhoods: Class, Race, and Family Life, Second Edition with an Update a Decade Later* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2011).

family background and culture has real impact in how well they fit in and succeed in formal schooling.

Furthermore, it is not just the symbolic or cultural power that is exchanged by knowing the right narratives or behaviors that are currency for gaining access to higher class work and life. Sometimes actual financial capital is transferred between generations, making it easier for a rising generation to work toward more success without starting as far back as someone who has nothing. McNamee and Miller also point out that there are times when blind luck matters. It matters when a person is born, into what economy, and where that person is at any given moment, who they might run into, and what opportunities might be offered by those people.

There is an undercurrent to all of these factors that determine success in the world, whether it is merit, cultural capital, generational wealth, or luck: the pervasiveness of inequality based on social location. Specifically, race, class, and gender identity matter in determining how far a person will go in any given field or industry.

Meritocracy was only named as such in the 1950s, and it is hard to ignore the social context of the US in which the term was enthusiastically adopted. During this time, battles over civil rights ensued, including a formal complaint filed with the Illinois Fair Employment Practices Commission against the use of possibly racially biased IQ tests in hiring decisions. Motorola was then ordered to hire the young black man that filed the complaint, after they passed him over for a job he otherwise qualified for on the basis that

his IQ score was not high enough.³² So when more and more civil rights legislation was passed, fear over the forced hiring of minorities increased. It was into this political climate the concept of meritocracy, out of a British sociology dissertation by Michael Young, was introduced and embraced. In this way, an emphasis on a person's merit was contrasted with their demographic details, even though systemic issues impact a person's perceived merit and achievement, such as the IQ tests and later standardized tests that were thought to be potentially biased. It is then an individual's fault when she/he does not go further in their educational or career path because that person has not earned the success. Even though white students and middle class students are more likely to succeed in school, an emphasis on merit protects those students' accomplishments at the expense to needed change for lower-income students of color.³³ That is to say, the ways those students have been systemically disadvantaged by poorer schools and different social/cultural capital is obscured by a belief that those who are succeeding simply deserved it more because of individual effort. The racial implications of success are thusly denied, which is why it is no simple coincidence that the concept of meritocracy took hold in the US during a time in which civil rights and the reasonable expectation of success for people of color were contested.

White Middle Class Supremacy

One problem with ahistorical ideologies is that they do not recognize their own contextual boundedness. For example, the language of the American Dream started in

32. Nicholas Lemann, *The Big Test: The Secret History of the American Meritocracy* (New York: Macmillan, 2000), 157.

33. Refer back to Chapter 1 for statistics about educational achievement.

1931, during a time in which certain groups in the United States were kept from equal opportunity to success either because they immigrated from the “wrong” country or because of race. Even while the American Dream insisted it was for all Americans, there were and still are systemic barriers that limit how easily a person of color or lower means can actually engage. Furthermore, what is offered as the American Dream is rooted in the values and aspirations of those who created the narrative in the first place, and so even as social change has removed some of the barriers of access for marginalized groups, the Dream itself has not changed as much as it has simply subsumed others into it. In other words, people of color and lower class backgrounds now have more access and opportunity to succeed than they once did, but only within the terms already set by those that were never at risk of marginalization.

The implicit centering and advancement of white cultural values is a function of white supremacy. Woody Doane explains that white supremacy is bolstered by a white racial unconsciousness in which “whites are less likely to perceive the degree to which whiteness permeates cultural understandings and institutional practices—and are thereby more likely to resist attempts to redefine the white ‘center’ of American society.”³⁴ The American Dream narrative perpetuates white supremacy because it is a narrative that was created by and for white people, and even after civil rights advancements, the narrative stayed static and folded new groups in. It is not just whiteness that is at the center of this

34. Woody Doane, “Rethinking Whiteness Studies,” in *White Out: The Continuing Significance of Racism*, ed. Ashley W. Doane and Eduardo Bonilla-Silva (Psychology Press, 2003), 8.

narrative, but the narrative also privileges dominant middle class culture. Because race is not a static category with set definitions, it is more precise to name white middle class supremacy as one of the ideologies that ground salvific education. The achievement of salvific education through meritocracy is a gatekeeper of the American Dream with rules that are culturally bound, privileging middle class white culture over any other less dominant culture.

What is at stake here are culturally bound arbitrary³⁵ values that are then used to determine who has earned success and who has not. In *Introduction to Pastoral Care*, Carrie Doehring differentiates between embedded and espoused values, influenced by Stone and Duke's embedded and deliberative theologies.³⁶ In short, embedded values (or theologies) are formed in youth by a constellation of influences related to family and social location. However, there comes a time in which a person can think critically about their embedded worldview and make conscious choices about which values to keep, which values are now increasingly significant to them, and in which priority each of these values reign in a person's life. The notion of espoused values reflects a privileging of critical thinking in education that is often considered to be a value-neutral good.

35. Bourdieu uses the word "arbitrary" to express the idea that higher class values and behaviors are not inherently better than others, but instead, chosen and imbued with capital when the community decides together that the behaviors and values are worth more than others. He does not mean to diminish the real power and worth that are imbued. For example, it is arbitrary that French cuisine is considered to be high class in the United States. Theoretically, Mexican food could have become the cuisine that separated people between higher and lower class. It's still important to know that French cuisine has this kind of power, it still matters, but it is not rooted in the food itself somehow, but it is only valuable because we continue to reaffirm its value.

36. Carrie Doehring, *The Practice of Pastoral Care: A Postmodern Approach* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2015), 18-19.

However, critical evaluation of communal values may actually be reproducing dominant culture by privileging the individual over the community.

Values are informed and interpreted by social identities, which are complex rather than singularly definitive. In Kimberle Crenshaw's critical article, "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color," she explained that sexism was rarely described or analyzed from a particular racial perspective, proposing that the different parts of a person's identity, like race and class, intersected and that the intersection demanded particular analysis.³⁷ Doehring represents an effort out of my own fields of practical and pastoral theology to recognize intersectionality, which is demonstrated in her description of the way a person's values have been shaped by their ethnicity, social class, race, gender, sexuality, and so forth.³⁸ This recognition is done at the scholarly level for integrity's sake and at the caregiving level for the sake of not imposing the caregiver's own worldview on those with whom they work. The social context of values is important because education is frequently responsible for teaching or reinforcing values. The values that are taught and reinforced tend to be the dominant culture values, and if a person has embedded values from a different subcultural group, the person may implicitly feel encouraged to exchange these values for the dominant values. In this way, the critical thinking model may functionally

37. Kimberle Crenshaw, "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color," *Stanford Law Review* 43 (1991): 1241.

38. Doehring, 30-31; Nancy J Ramsay, "Intersectionality: A Model for Addressing the Complexity of Oppression and Privilege," *Pastoral Psychology* 63, no. 4 (August 2014): 453-69, doi:10.1007/s11089-013-0570-4.

serve as an assimilating tactic rather than as liberative education, which is likely the intent.

Support of the American Dream narrative affirms a particular set of values. The present expression of the American Dream prioritizes individuality over communal concern, as the marketplace is competitive rather than cooperative, and most classrooms and schools are preparing students to enter into this system of competition. Students are tested on spelling and math against their peers from a young age. Tracking in K-12 education evaluates students in relation to one another, placing certain students in accelerated classrooms with more opportunities than their peers that may instead be tracked into remedial or trade courses without much input.³⁹

Within the value of individualism is a highly prioritized value of self-fulfillment and actualization through career pursuits and higher education. The college narrative is often one that privileges a student “going away” to school to discover oneself over staying near home and connected to family and community.⁴⁰ This self-discovery is not

39. Jeannie Oakes, *Keeping Track: How Schools Structure Inequality, Second Edition*, 2nd Revised ed. edition (New Haven, Conn.; London: Yale University Press, 2005). Maxine Greene, *Releasing the Imagination: Essays on Education, the Arts, and Social Change*, Jossey-Bass Education Series (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1995). Jacob Werblow, Angela Urick, and Luke Duesbery, “On the Wrong Track: How Tracking Is Associated with Dropping out of High School,” *Equity & Excellence in Education* 46, no. 2 (2013): 270–84.

40. Howard B. London, “Breaking Away: A Study of First-Generation College Students and Their Families.,” *American Journal of Education* 97, no. 1 (1989): 144–70. Patricia M McDonough, *Choosing Colleges: How Social Class and Schools Structure Opportunity* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1997). Judy Marquez Kiyama, “College Aspirations and Limitations: The Role of Educational Ideologies and Funds of Knowledge in Mexican American Families,” *American Educational Research Journal* 47, no. 2 (June 2010): 330–56. Elizabeth Bryan and Leigh Ann Simmons, “Family Involvement: Impacts on Post-Secondary Educational Success for First-Generation Appalachian College Students,” *Journal of College Student Development* 50, no. 4 (August 2009): 391–406.

often considered to be possible when students are still tightly embedded in their family units. While individual self-actualization for young people comes across as a generally held value about the purpose of college, this is a manifestation of a white middle-class value. Students from minority families or families that have not been to college themselves often value arrangements in which a student can live at home to save money or remain integrated in family life.⁴¹ Even if those students do “go away” for college, they are less likely to leave the state.⁴² Additionally, once students are in college, they are often encouraged to follow career paths without regard to the available jobs of their hometowns, so that their own individual fulfillment is put above the needs of the family or community. This is not to say that colleges should not encourage students in this way, or that marginalized students should not seek success away from their hometowns, but rather, it is simply to point out that rarely are non-dominant communitarian values considered legitimate. This is because individualism is such a dominant cultural value in white middle class culture that it often escapes recognition that individual success or fulfillment might not be the highest prioritized value for students from other social locations. The dominant narrative in the US is that of an enthusiastic 18-year-old embarking upon college as a rite of passage, complete with an admonishment of the family that resists their child’s departure.

41. Jennifer Engle, “Postsecondary Access and Success for First-Generation College Students.,” *American Academic* 3 (2007).

42. Ibid.

Dominant values may be arbitrary in the sense that theoretically, a society could have formed differently than it has and that there is nothing inherent about a value that sets it above others, but at the same time, dominant values are imbued with worth for very particular historical reasons. I am most interested in the theological history of such dominant values because of my identity as a practical theologian who analyzes the role Christianity has played in the formation of United States culture, policy, and narratives. While individualism is not inherent in Christianity, Christian belief in the young life of the United States has reinforced individualism and self-driven work/success as seemingly God-ordained values.⁴³ Max Weber addressed this in his text *The Protestant Work Ethic* by explaining that Calvinism bolstered ideas of proving one's worth through hard work in the eighteenth century.⁴⁴ Even while the founders of the U.S. were concerned that the U.S. not be shaped as aristocratically as England, Calvinist theology held that laziness was sinful and hard work was what God required. As with many theological shifts in the history of the United States, the political and spiritual realms of society mutually reinforced each other. Increasingly throughout the past two hundred years, the United States has seen a cultural focus on the individual apart from society. This emphasis can be seen in Christian theology as well, in Evangelical churches that are increasing in their

43. That is to say, there is just as much (if not more) in Christian scriptures to support cooperative living over competitive individualism, and so, it is the interpretation and privileging of particular Christian scriptures over others that names this as a Christian value, not the concept itself.

44. Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (London: Gallen & Unwin, ltd, 1930).

share of Christian members when they focus on personal relationship with God and individual salvation.

While values are socially determined, society privileges some ideologies or narratives more highly than others by rewarding certain expressions over others. For example, students are rewarded with opportunities when they are willing to relocate anywhere at the expense of alternative values of geographic rootedness, family connection, and community involvement.⁴⁵ Here again Bourdieu is useful for understanding the relative worth of values and behaviors. He writes that schools necessarily reproduce these dominant cultural values in order to reproduce privilege and power. A person cannot succeed unless she is willing to take these values and behaviors, or habitus, into herself, even while she can never make these behaviors natural in the same way that someone who was raised in a higher class acts. In other words, perhaps a person can espouse values that are counter to their embedded values, but there is always some space and tension with the embedded and the communities in which they are rooted. Doehring refers to this reality when she explains that in crisis, a person calls forth what is embedded first, and only upon second and third order thinking brings up that which they consciously espouse in the present day.⁴⁶

45. Rhoades, Gary, Judy Marquez Kiyama, Rudy McCormick, and Marisol Quiroz. "Local Cosmopolitans and Cosmopolitan Locals: New Models of Professionals in the Academy." *The Review of Higher Education* 31, no. 2 (2008): 209–35. More general critiques of a loss of place or rootedness can be found in Wendell Berry's *The Unsettling of America: Culture & Agriculture* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1977) and in Willie J. Jennings's *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010).

46. Doehring, 18-19.

At any given moment, a person is negotiating between embedded and espoused values and behaviors. And yet, the very idea of embedded and espoused values is itself imbued with the dominant cultural privileging of the individual as espoused values are connected to second order thinking that a person can only do when they prioritize thinking for themselves apart from what they were socialized to think in their families and communities. There is a liberal value of “free” individual thinking that is considered more rich and deep than the communal knowledge of a social group. If a person continues to believe, affirm, or act in the ways privileged by the marginalized or lower class groups she comes from, she is somehow less than her counterparts that think for themselves. However, this “free” thinking is itself determined by dominant culture, so that to be a “free” thinker means to take on the thoughts (values and behaviors) of the dominant class, or the educated higher class. A student from a marginalized group who does make it to college is then expected to take on the values of higher education as his own “espoused values,” even if they are at odds with his “embedded values,” and he must do this if he wants to succeed in this realm.

When dominant society insists that higher education and all that comes with it is a vehicle of meritocracy that leads to the American Dream, they are calling for all marginalized people that come from a variety of embedded belief systems to consciously discard those embedded values and behaviors as part of their previous lives. To succeed, they must take on the mantle of espoused liberal values of individualism, which includes a commitment to success and self-fulfillment above all else. It is worrisome that people would be expected to leave their families and communities behind in order to succeed in

the United States, so education must mediate the risks of cultural assimilation with culturally-responsive pedagogy.

Education Critique

This chapter has focused on sociological critiques and dangers of presuming education has salvific power in our society, and many of these critiques are already influencing discourse and approaches within the field of education itself. That is to say, the academic discipline of education has identified the potential pitfalls of the uplift narrative of education for marginalized people. In fact, I included Bourdieu in this chapter because his work in cultural theory is drawn upon from scholars in both religious studies and education, and so, his work is a helpful interlocutor for the conversation I am hosting between the two fields. Part of the lasting impact Bourdieu's work has had in the education world is grounding for a debate over underrepresented students' supposed deficits when they enter the classroom. When social theory is used to explain why some students succeed and some do not, it can end up legitimizing the differences if the arbitrary nature of the dominant cultural capital is not critiqued. In this way, some teachers began to see students as coming from their own culture of poverty rather than being disadvantaged by their active exclusion from dominant culture. Education scholar Norma González explains,

The idea that poor students shared a 'culture of poverty' that was considered to be antithetical to school achievement led to the development of 'cultural deficit' models in schooling. Poor and minority students were viewed with a lens of deficiencies, substandard in their socialization practices, language practices, and orientation toward scholastic achievement.⁴⁷

47. Norma González, "Beyond Culture: The Hybridity of Funds of Knowledge," in *Funds of Knowledge: Theorizing Practice in Households, Communities, and Classrooms*, ed.

We saw the assumption of social deficiencies in Chapters 2 and 3: from the early 20th century need for kindergarten being based in the assumption that parents were not parenting right to the continuing focus on character education in charter schools targeted toward poor and minority communities.

One critique of the deficit model is in its misuse of Bourdieuan theory, rather than in its use, and as such, the critique itself has been a reclamation of the meaning and purpose of capital language. Bourdieu is helpful not because he decides what values are most important for success, but because he describes how society determines which values to prioritize over others, and in doing so, categorizes people. In other words, the theory is descriptive rather than prescriptive. In this vein, education researchers Norma González, Luis C. Moll, and Cathy Amanti introduced the concept of “funds of knowledge,” which González says is “based on a simple premise: People are competent, they have knowledge, and their life experiences have given them that knowledge.”⁴⁸ Initially researched in the context of public schools that serve US-Mexican populations in the southwestern US, education researchers Carlos Velez-Ibanez and James Greenberg define funds of knowledge as the “strategic and cultural resources... that households

Norma González, Luis C Moll, and Cathy Amanti (Mahwah, N.J.: L. Erlbaum Associates, 2005), 34.

⁴⁸ Norma González, Luis C Moll, and Cathy Amanti, *Funds of Knowledge: Theorizing Practice in Households, Communities, and Classrooms* (Mahwah, N.J.: L. Erlbaum Associates, 2005), ix-x.

contain” which can be “useful assets in the classroom.”⁴⁹ Rather than focusing on what poorer students lack when they come into the classroom, the funds of knowledge approach emphasizes what students do bring into the classroom that can then be used to help students learn using examples with which students are already familiar. While an emphasis on cultural capital has supported the deficit model, bringing funds of knowledge into conversation about social and cultural capital both privileges diverse epistemologies while being attentive of the power differentials inscribed by societal expectations of worth and exchange rate of the skills and knowledges students possess.⁵⁰ In this research, teachers have visited the homes of their students and spoken with their families about their habits and lives together, mining real life for connections with the classroom curriculum. This is important because social and racial biases are often inscribed in classroom texts and curriculum through examples used that presume all children’s everyday lives look the same.⁵¹ Funds of knowledge research provides teachers insight into the daily lives of their students so that clearer curricular examples can be made that enrich comprehension in the classroom. Rios-Aguilar and Kiyama propose a framework of (mis)recognition, transmission, conversion, and activation/ mobilization to

49. Carlos Vélez-Ibañez and James Greenberg, “Formation and Transformation of Funds of Knowledge,” in *Funds of Knowledge: Theorizing Practice in Households, Communities, and Classrooms*, ed. Norma González, Luis C Moll, and Cathy Amanti (Mahwah, N.J.: L. Erlbaum Associates, 2005), 47.

50. Cecilia Rios-Aguilar et al., “Funds of Knowledge for the Poor and Forms of Capital for the Rich? A Capital Approach to Examining Funds of Knowledge,” *Theory and Research in Education* 9, no. 2 (July 1, 2011): 163–84, doi:10.1177/1477878511409776, 175.

51. Christopher Jencks, “Racial Bias in Teaching,” in *The Black-White Test Score Gap*, ed. Christopher Jencks and Meredith Phillips (Brookings Institution Press, 2011).

determine how funds of knowledge and social and cultural capital might increase educational opportunities for under-represented students.⁵² In short, it is not enough to highlight different forms of knowledge that minority or lower class students bring to the classroom without acknowledging how these might be exchanged for privileges and advantages in a system that is shaped by power difference while also working to change the system itself.

An ongoing question I have about the funds of knowledge approach in light of this project is the functional nature of the methodology in its seeking to elevate under-represented students in a system that already decided their alternative knowledges have a lower exchange rate than the higher class cultural capital that can be exchanged at a higher rate. So even while scholars are honorably highlighting the contextual values and skills of other social groups, there is still an expressed purpose of increasing higher education access for under-represented students without questioning the narrative that their success in education, which in the process converts their community knowledges into cultural and social capital, is the only way they can expect to achieve social mobility and compete with those in a higher class. This is not an indictment of the funds of knowledge literature because educators who are committed to social justice need resources to fight inequality in education. Rather, the critique within this more philosophical project that seeks to question the motives behind what we do in the educational system in addition to figuring out how to help students succeed within the current agreed-upon goals. It may be that if the pressure placed on the educational system

52. Rios-Aguilar et al.

to credential and categorize students as the sole determinant of their future status in society was decreased, schools really could embrace diverse epistemologies without putting their students' futures in jeopardy. While Chapter 5 proposes a vision for what it would mean for Christians to counter or reframe the salvific promise of education, I heartily affirm current movements and attempts in education to honor the diverse wealth of knowledge students bring to the classroom.

Accordingly, there have been great efforts in the field of education to provide education to all while paying attention to the particular needs of different student groups. Since increasing diversity in education itself can improve learning outcomes in the classroom, foster experiences with those who come from different backgrounds, and prepare students to engage in an increasingly heterogeneous society,⁵³ many higher education initiatives have emphasized educational access for traditionally underrepresented groups. However, diversity in the classroom cannot be the end goal, as students from these underrepresented groups are at a disadvantage simply because classrooms often reflect the values and goals of dominant culture. Again, the difference in cultural capital remains an issue. Furthermore, marginalized students should not be used for the educational benefit of their white middle class classmates if their own success is not the goal.⁵⁴

53. Patricia Gurin et al., "Diversity and Higher Education: Theory and Impact on Educational Outcomes," in *Race and Higher Education: Rethinking Pedagogy in Diverse College Classrooms*, ed. Franklin A. Tuitt and Annie Howell (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Educational Review, 2003).

54. This is an aspect of Immanuel Kant's categorical imperative—the insistence that a person cannot ethically be treated as a means to an end, but as an end his/herself. Christine M.

While I am critiquing the utilization of education and formal schooling as a way to uplift individuals, a tool of social mobility, there are other philosophies of education at play beyond this. John Dewey influenced a school of thought that tasked schooling with the protection and flourishing of democracy. He explains, “the problem of education in its relation to direction of social change is all one with the problem of finding out what democracy means in its total range of concrete applications; economic, domestic, international, religious, cultural, economic.”⁵⁵ Though he acknowledges the indoctrinating elements of education, he also believed schooling provided an opportunity to sustain and improve upon democracy. While the democratic purposes of educational philosophy have influenced progressive education and social change movements, they also risk the danger of connecting civic engagement to formal schooling. We have already established that this connection often disadvantages underrepresented populations, barring them in theory from participating in democracy.

Attending to the tension in linking formal education and participation in democracy can have the potential for liberation. As an example, Paulo Freire in his book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* introduced the use of literacy education to teach social consciousness and civic engagement.⁵⁶ This education did not happen in formal schooling

Korsgaard, *Kant: Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. Mary Gregor and Jens Timmermann, 2 edition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

55. John Dewey, “Education and Social Change,” in *The Later Works of John Dewey, 1925-1953: 1938, Logic - The Theory of Inquiry*, ed. Jo Ann Boydston and Ernest Nagel (SIU Press, 2008), 416.

56. Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Seabury Press, 1968).

settings with traditional readers, but rather, he met with communities and taught out of their own lives, reading words that mattered to them and their lives more than primary school readers meant for children. Recent attempts to engage students on their own terms through socially aware pedagogy are indebted to the influence of Freire in the field of educational philosophy. More than the democratic engagement that Dewey promoted, which still privileged those students who were able to attend experimental progressive schools, critical pedagogy as a growing tradition seeks as its objective consciousness raising for all students, including those who have been historically oppressed, for the sake of liberation.⁵⁷ This liberation is not simply succeeding where under-represented students have been previously barred, but instead, calls for critique of the status quo and a decolonization of knowledge. bell hooks writes that critical pedagogy aims to “redress biases that have informed ways of teaching and knowing in our society ever since the first public school opened.”⁵⁸ This is what I hope for the development of the funds of knowledge concept—that it will elevate epistemologies in society that have been previously deemed worthless. This process admittedly takes work beyond the classroom because of the same power/capital complications explained previously.

My argument is not that we should give up on increasing access to education for all social groups and ensuring that education is responsive to their backgrounds and

57. While Freire later questioned the English translation of his Portuguese term *conscientização*, there is no doubt that the critical pedagogy tradition has been influenced by the long-standing translation as “consciousness-raising.”

58. bell hooks, *Teaching Critical Thinking: Practical Wisdom* (New York: Routledge, 2010), 23.

needs. Instead my argument is that our driving need to increase the access and cultural responsiveness is already rooted in an arbitrary celebration of education as the primary tool for improving the status of individuals, even while we know the ways we do education repeatedly disadvantages lower class students. I name education as an arbitrarily chosen tool for categorizing people and what they will earn in life because formal schooling itself does not inherently make people better employees or wage earners every time for every job. The ideologies of meritocracy and white middle class supremacy advocate that the higher the education level of an individual, the higher their value to society or a company. Of course there are jobs that require formal training, but for many jobs, the formal training needed might ideally differ from the formal public schooling we have now; yet we remain confined by the system we already have in place. The concept of degree inflation is a problem because there are jobs that start seeking more highly educated employees even if the job description itself does not call for it. So when we fight for equality without questioning these grounding assumptions, we are still playing by dominant culture rules, and the dominant culture will continue to find ways to protect itself in the face of the struggle for equality.

Conclusion

In the podcast *Revisionist History*, journalist Malcolm Gladwell interrogates the promise education offers to poor students and students of color.⁵⁹ While he rightfully and

59. Malcolm Gladwell, *Carlos Doesn't Remember* by *Revisionist History*, Episode 4, *Revisionist History*, accessed October 6, 2016, <https://player.megaphone.fm/PP3692963319>.

helpfully critiqued the supposed ease of the narrative that poor kids have an equal chance to excel through school and make what they want of their lives, or what McNamee and Miller calls the meritocracy myth, in the end, he still seemed in favor of making the narrative work without questioning the value of the narrative. For him, the problem is that meritocracy is not actually working, not that meritocracy as proven through educational achievement itself is a problem. While I share the concern that meritocracy through formal schooling is not working the way many people assume it does, I am also concerned that the narrative instead disadvantages entire groups of young people that may later become poor adults with few other options after exhausting the limited-time-only-offer of education. The core of this difference lies in my role as a Christian theologian, which is where we will turn to in Chapter 5. In that chapter, I examine the Christian roots of the ideologies explained in Chapter 4 and propose an alternative vision for social salvation that promotes human fulfillment for all through a multiplicity of social initiatives and opportunities, rather than simply through the limited course of formal schooling.

CHAPTER FIVE: THE IDOLATRY OF THE MARKET AND WHITE MIDDLE CLASS CULTURE AND THE IDEOLOGY OF SALVIFIC EDUCATION

The story of salvific education in the United States promises that everyone gets what they earn through hard work alone. Education is promoted as the best avenue for social mobility because it is through education that a person can demonstrate that they “deserve” more because of their success. While this promise has not proven equally valid for all people, it is still an attractive myth, which is why I describe it as an ideology with religious-like allegiance.

Liberation theology is helpful in challenging these ideologies, as it provides the theological basis for a concern that these narratives perpetuate the cultural oppression of lower class groups. Echoing the social gospel attention to the social reality in addition to the spiritual, liberation theology expresses the conviction that poverty is a theological concern. Liberation theology came out of the work of Catholic theologians like Gustavo Gutierrez in the 1960s and 1970s,¹ but it has had wide-reaching impact on Catholic and Protestant theology alike, both in its treatment of poverty in society and other ways in which communities experience oppression: gender, race, sexuality, creation, and so

1. Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2001).

forth.² Insofar as this is a project that is concerned about those who are oppressed by narratives and institutions that disadvantage some while advantaging others, this project shares the orienting concerns of liberation theologies.

More specifically, this project is rooted in liberation theology's critique of capitalism and declaration of poverty as a theological concern that demands a theological response. Jung Mo Sung, for example, is a twenty-first century liberation theologian out of Brazil whose critique of market provides a useful lens for this chapter. So while this project does not claim to fit squarely within the discipline of liberation theology, it could not exist without the prior work of liberation theology on issues of economics within a holistic vision of human salvation.

In this chapter, I briefly describe theological doctrines that are promoting the societal ideologies of meritocracy and the American Dream even when they do not function equally well for all people. I call into question the idolatry of the market and other human institutions and the faith that people, including progressive Christians, are putting in these institutions to determine the ultimate worth of human individuals and communities. I argue that Christians cannot continue idolizing the market as judge of worth and human institutions as agents of salvation, as we are called to place our ultimate faith in God. I end this chapter by proposing a revised vision of social salvation as it relates to education in the US, outlining some basic shifts Christian advocates of

2. Barend A De Vries, *Champions of the Poor: The Economic Consequences of Judeo-Christian Values* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 1998), 192.

education should make against societal ideologies that perpetuate the status quo by protecting the powerful at the expense of the vulnerable.

Poverty as Sin, Success as Salvation

The troubling nature of considering poverty to be a demonstration of individual sin is connected to what is referred to as the “moralization of poverty” or “culture of poverty.” Pamela Couture explains that the concept of the culture of poverty often refers to a set of “pathological character traits” in individuals that are then passed down through generations, resulting in the perpetuation of poverty.³ There has been a history of linking race and poverty in this narrative, as Couture writes that the narrative “creates the impression that most of the black population will inevitably be poor.”⁴ However, there is a disdain for anyone experiencing poverty when that person is seen to have had the opportunity to succeed and did not. This disapproval is rooted in the conviction that access to success is equal, and being poor is a demonstration that the individual did not work hard enough to achieve the American Dream. Disdain is further fostered when a person or group points out the inequality of access of support in their efforts to achieve, because then the critical person or group is casting doubt on the agreed upon narrative. While resonances of the “culture of poverty” persist today through the insistence of character education at charter schools like HCZ and KIPP, poverty is also conceived of as an individual failure for not achieving well enough to not be poor.

3. Pamela D. Couture, *Blessed Are the Poor?: Women’s Poverty, Family Policy, and Practical Theology* (Nashville: Abingdon Press in cooperation with the Churches’ Center for Theology and Public Policy, Washington, D.C, 1991), 33-34.

4. Ibid.

The connection between poverty and sin has been made before by Max Weber in *The Protestant Work Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*.⁵ In this seminal sociology text, he explains that the particular brand of US capitalism is supported by the Calvinist and Puritan theology that was prominent in the formative years of the country.⁶ Because Calvinist theology broadly maintained that hard work and success on earth was a demonstration of divine election, this value of hard work was preached from the pulpit. Eventually the values of capitalism fused with Christian theology to continue privileging those that that represented material success in a way that echoed the relationship between success and divine election.

If material success was the demonstration of divine election, then it follows that material poverty would be interpreted as a demonstration that one had not been divinely elected, or put simply, a sign of divine damnation. In the model that holds poverty as a demonstration of sin, successful people become the models of salvation. The problem with this understanding is that a rich person only demonstrates that the person has achieved in capitalism, not in morality.⁷ Even more than just a simple win-lose situation, Puritan thought in colonial America maintained that inequality itself was God-ordained because of the opportunity it afforded the rich to be able to help the poor by practicing

5. Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (London: Gallen & Unwin, ltd, 1930).

6. *Ibid.*, 27, 177-183.

7. Jung Mo Sung, "Save Us From Cynicism: Religion and Social Class," in *Religion, Theology, and Class: Fresh Engagements after Long Silence*, ed. Joerg Rieger (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 45.

“love, mercy, gentleness, and temperance” and for the poor to practice the virtues of “faith, patience, obedience.”⁸ In this way, equality was not a goal; rather inequality was the God-ordained order of the world.

This belief in success and poverty as demonstrations of a person’s religious and moral character proves to be a major obstacle for overcoming wealth inequality. In this ideological system, people implicitly trust the market as the righteous judge of what a person deserves and does not deserve based on what it takes to earn favor in the system.⁹ This presents us with a theological problem: the idolatry of the market, or the idolatry of the American Dream ideology. Idolatry refers to the worship of idols, and in doing so, granting them godlike status. To idolize the market is to trust the market or the way things are to be the determinant of a person’s worth and future is to give the market a role that Christians are called to leave to God. This kind of implicit faith in the market ordains the system so that any interference is bad. That is to say, if the market is an impartial judge that rewards hard work as a moral good, to interfere with assistance for the poor is to interfere in the poor’s own achievement of salvation.¹⁰

As an example of this position, let’s explore Samuel Gregg’s explanation of why we should be careful about intervening in the problem of inequality through charity.

8. Sheila D. Collins, “Religion and Class in the Construction and Reconstruction of the Myth of American Exceptionalism,” in *Religion, Theology, and Class: Fresh Engagements after Long Silence*, ed. Joerg Rieger (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 103.

9. Sung, “Save Us From Cynicism.”

10. *Ibid.*, 48

While it is possible to give people everything they need and/or desire, this does not help them to *self-realize* the basic moral goods or virtues that reflect our consistent free choice for the good. Endowed with intellect and free will, each person is responsible for his or her self-fulfillment. Naturally, each person may be helped—or hindered—in fulfilling this objective by those around him or her; but whatever the external influences, each person is ultimately responsible for his or her own acquisition of spiritual, moral, and material goods. This need to allow people to self-realize moral and spiritual goods places certain restrictions on our ability to act justly toward others.¹¹

While many would agree with this justification that to overly interfere with a person's ability to self-actualize is a type of injustice itself, the argument rests on faith in the market system as a fair judge with rules that allow equal opportunity for self-promotion. Furthermore, the assertion that this would then limit “our ability to act justly toward others” reinforces the idolatry of the market by prioritizing the rules of the market over the calls of Christian discipleship.¹² The argument that people must be allowed to self-realize also reinforces the individualistic meritocracy of the fourth chapter of this project. The pull-yourself-up-by-your-bootstraps narrative presumes that all persons have equal access and opportunity to succeed in the system as it is, which again, is a result of idolizing the market and American Dream ideology.

The idolatry of the market is quite easy to fall prey to in Western civilization, which is the point of suggesting that these ideologies are deeply rooted and integrated into the very way people conceive of their place in the world. In *Branded*, practical

11. Samuel Gregg, *Economic Thinking for the Theologically Minded* (University Press of America, 2001), 5.

12. Obviously the calls of Christian discipleship are complicated, too, as someone could use the parable of the talents to justify this argument. However, I am suggesting that he is not prioritizing a theological argument at all, but rather, putting the capitalistic market system at the forefront of his description of Christian social ethics.

theologian Katherine Turpin suggests that consumer culture may be “the closest contemporary parallel to the fertility religions of the ancient Near East” when describing how the charge of idolatry is recognizable even though contemporary people are not worshipping golden calves as the Hebrew people in Exodus story.¹³ She argues that consumerism has been a powerful force in relationship and meaning making in the United States—marking social status and “the good life.”¹⁴ In this vein, educational achievement has become a commodity that grants access to the power to consume, demonstrating one’s status and procurement of “the good life.”

Likewise, Liberation theologian Jung Mo Sung implicates people in the idolatry of the market by describing the enticement of placing one’s faith in the market as twofold.

First, he who practices evil in the name of some perverse god (an idol) or, guided by a religious kind of devotion, has a peaceful conscience (see Psalm 73:12). This is so because the evil that one practices against ‘the little ones’ is not seen as evil, but as saving work. That being the case evil knows no limits. Second, to the extent that the capitalist system produces an ‘economic religion,’ it manages to fascinate people both with its promises and its demands for sacrifice. A people fascinated by the capitalist ‘religious aroma’ struggle to enter the market’s ‘sanctuary,’ but not to build a more fraternal, just and human society.¹⁵

What Sung offers us here is a connection between faith in the market and the role of salvation when it comes to conversations about poverty and inequality. When a person is trusting the market like this, as a god or idol, it is not with malicious intent. In fact, it is

13. Katherine Turpin, *Branded: Adolescents Converting from Consumer Faith* (Cleveland, Ohio: Pilgrim Press, 2006), 29.

14. *Ibid.*, 31-32.

15. Jung Mo Sung, *Desire, Market and Religion* (London: SCM Press, 2007), 12.

easy for Christians to presume that idolatry requires a conscious decision to worship something other than God, above God, because of its dominant place in the Ten Commandments. In the same way that killing seems obvious and is projected as something only an evil person would do, idolatry is easily relegated as an obvious sin that righteous people do not struggle with. However, Sung asserts that the people committing the idolatry of the market would not recognize that as their sin because they think they are doing good because their intent is to help others. This is what makes the salvific education so enticing: the genuine, well-meaning belief of good people that they are participating in the saving work of God. The problem is the issue of *which* God—the God of Abraham, Sarah, and Isaac, or the God of the Market.

The problem with trusting the market to gauge a person's worth is that the market's criteria for worth is different than the biblical and historic witness of Christian theology. In capitalism, people are worth as much as their output, that is, their contribution to the overall market determines their value.¹⁶ Low wage workers theoretically make their low wages because their work is not skilled and so their positions are easily replaceable. When a job does not require specialization, or in many cases, higher educational training, employers do not need to pay as much for the work. This is where education and capitalism get tied up together to determine human worth.

While Christian theologies have been used to justify this idolatry of the market and categorization of what people are worth, there is also Christian witness to contrast

16. In Kantian terms, this is a problem because people are not to be treated as a means, but rather, an ends in and of themselves. That is to say, people cannot be valued merely based on their output as cogs in a capitalistic machine.

this narrative and provide an alternative—people are inherently worthy of a certain standard of human rights and living just because they are human, created and loved by God. The idea that human beings are somehow particularly important to God is first rooted in scripture and then picked up by theologians and philosophers. In the earliest scriptural account of how humanity came to being, we see a conviction that people were made in God’s image and were given dominion over the earth.

Then God said, ‘Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.’
So God created humankind in his image,
in the image of God he created them;
male and female he created them.
God blessed them, and God said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth...’ God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good.¹⁷

Later, it was reported again that “When God created humankind, he made them in the likeness of God. Male and female he created them, and he blessed them and named them ‘Humankind’ when they were created.”¹⁸ Christian ethicist David P. Gushee is one scholar that has rooted an unconditional valuing of human life in the biblical account that names humankind as created in the image of God. In *The Sacredness of Human Life*, Gushee argues that the creation of humankind in God’s image imbues humanity with the

17. Genesis 1:26-28, 31; Just as many other scripture passages, this one has had both positive and negative implications in how it has been interpreted. I include it here as evidence of a traditional conviction that human beings have sacred worth, even while I caution against the danger of interpreting “dominion” to be justification for colonialism over other peoples, lands, and creatures of the earth.

18. Genesis 5:1-2.

rights of God, which include the rights not to be murdered, assaulted, oppressed, and so forth.¹⁹

Even beyond the *imago dei* argument is the command by Jesus to love one another, and in doing so, demonstrate a love for God in body, heart, soul, and mind.²⁰ The social gospel and subsequent liberation theologies are based on the social teachings of Jesus, which include an attention to how people are treated, or even, categorized between worthy and unworthy. Any theological system that takes seriously Jesus's commands in regards to how to treat the other must be willing to elevate these teachings over the ideologies of American Dream, meritocracy, and cultural supremacy.

Idolizing Education, a Human Institution

The idolatry of the market is not the only demonstration of idolatry that is supporting salvific education; additionally, people idolize the role of education in social uplift. In other words, people place their faith in a human institution to do the work of evaluating human worth once they join the market in search of employment. Idolatry is a particularly theological problem; in this moment, I am speaking specifically to Christians. The theological question in the face of idolatry of the market and the salvific ideology of education is related to eschatology and soteriology. Though these are two major doctrines in Christian theology that could merit extensive treatment, I will only briefly touch on

19. David P. Gushee, *The Sacredness of Human Life: Why an Ancient Biblical Vision Is Key to the World's Future* (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2013), 53.

20. Luke 10:27-28.

each of them as they shed light on the problem at hand—the idolatry of education within the idolatry of the market.

Eschatology is important because a person or society's vision for what is even possible in the future is part of what drives this social uplift role of education. Again, the Social Gospel movement ushered in a critical reimagining of the demands of Christian faith, positing that instead of only offering eternal salvation, a ticket to heaven instead of hell, Christianity actually offered the opportunity to work toward the kingdom of God on earth. The question lies in what is accomplishable—can perfection be achieved on earth, or is it always just outside of reach, so that we simply keep working towards the prize? Chapter Three explained that postmillennialist theology was more common in the late 19th-early 20th century than it is now, and so the early theologians of the Social Gospel movement were more likely to be influenced by postmillennialism, or the idea that Jesus left humanity what they needed to establish the reign of God on earth before Jesus returns. It is this hope, even implicitly, that drove work for perfection and the integration between Christian thought and public policy. Nineteenth century Christians made a concerted effort to establish the perfect Christian nation in the United States.

Postmillennialism might not be driving the faith in human institutions in the same way it was one hundred years ago, but the eschatological question remain: what is the end of our world and how are we called to participate in the world's completion? Without oversimplifying complex theological positions, what is broadly referred to as mainline or liberal Christianity often parts ways with more conservative or fundamentalist Christianity in this point, particularly on the agency and purpose of humans in however

the final completion of the world is imagined. Believing that perfection will only be realized after death, and only by the grace of God, may demand a difference in expectation for what humans can achieve on earth than a skepticism of an after-life and a conviction that life on earth must be made as nearly perfect as possible. This is a tension that often divides loyalty to social Christianity and spiritual Christianity, or at least, the level of emphasis each of these purposes incurs. A critique of overly spiritual Christianity lodged by social Christianity, particularly liberation theologians, is that the emphasis on an other-worldly salvation prevents Christians from focusing on working for a more just current world, and instead, reinforces oppressive systems by delaying justice for another world. Similarly, a critique of overly social Christianity could be found in what I am describing as the idolatry of human institutions, or the belief that the institutions we have created on earth can save people, neglecting the larger perspective of human finitude before God that is also apparent in Christian tradition. Like many other theological conflicts, this is likely a tension that can be sketched out in a spectrum or the range of a pendulum, emphasis swinging back and forth between two poles.

Questions of eschatology undoubtedly raise questions of soteriology, for the question of the end (both completion and actualization) of the earth and those in it demands the question of human versus divine agency. How large of a role do humans play in whatever might be seen as the telos of this world, and how dependent are humans on supernatural intervention, or salvation?

To draw once again on the Social Gospel movement described in Chapter 3, Walter Rauschenbusch found his answer for this question from a biblical image and

promise—the kingdom of God.²¹ Jesus’s teachings about the kingdom of God within those who believe provided grounding for the working toward the kingdom of God on earth, and this movement inspired many following movements for social Christianity that demanded attention given to justice on earth rather than the delay of salvation or redemption to after death. And yet, there is still a not-yet-ness of the kingdom alive and well in Christian theology. In his essay, “What is *This Life* For?,” theologian Vincent Bacote articulates an evangelical soteriology for this life that is helpful in chastising both the tendency to postpone salvation for the after-life and the tendency to overestimate the perfection that humans can create on earth. Bacote argues that salvation must be public, political, pneumatological, and place-centered. As I locate this project in the public political sphere many times already, what his articulation of soteriology adds most particularly is his call for pneumatological, or spirit-filled, salvation. It is easy in more liberal social Christianity to de-emphasize the mystical or spiritual nature of salvation, instead offering an earthly notion of redemption that is recognizable to even secular humanists. Bacote names the Holy Spirit as that which is orienting Christians to work against injustice rather than perpetuating the belief that salvation simply refers to an eternal future. He instead suggests that Spirit-filled people will find themselves wrapped up in the work for justice against oppression, explaining,

Even a partial realization of the kingdom in society, though imperfect, is preferable to leaving the oppressed to wait for the consummation of the age. If we agree that the Spirit directs our gaze to this life and that Jesus brings justice in even a partial sense today, then we ought to consider the pursuit of societal

21. While “kingdom” language has been rightfully critiqued for its masculine form, I chose to keep the term as it is for simplicity and continuity with the image used by many theologians in the history of social Christianity.

transformation as essential to our sanctification as personal holiness. We should be concerned if our salvation does not lead to actions that reveal our love for our brothers and sisters who remain oppressed. A Spirit-led revolution still beckons.²²

What is perhaps most valuable about this perspective is not only his implication of Spirit in the work of justice seeking on earth, but his suggestion that the realization of the kingdom in society will be partial and imperfect, and yet, still worth the pursuit. This is the corrective that is needed against the idolatry of the market, education, or any human institution: even while we seek the realization of the kingdom of God on earth, our attempts are always partial and imperfect, and so, we must take care not to expect a human institution to do that which only God can do—bring perfect justice and the end of human oppression and exploitation on earth. And even while we confess our own limitations, we do not let them hold us back from seeking that realization of the kingdom on earth, for even in part or imperfect, we must struggle for the liberation of all those who are oppressed and exploited.

Reframing Salvation

So if soteriology must balance between the call to participate in Spirit-filled pursuit of social justice on earth and the expectation of perfection of that mission, how would this affect the idea of salvific education, or education's role in an earthly social mobility that is modeled after the salvation paradigm? First, Christians must stand apart from the status quo, and this means refusing to participate in the idolatry of human institutions that attempt to categorize people, particularly in exploitative ways that elevate

22. Vincent Bacote, "What Is This Life For? Expanding Our View of Salvation," in *What Does It Mean to Be Saved?: Broadening Evangelical Horizons of Salvation*, ed. John Gordon Stackhouse (Baker Academic, 2002), 112.

some at the expense of others. When formal schooling and educational credentialing is used to offer some material success and social mobility while denying it for others, Christians must respond with skepticism. They can promote an alternative narrative that plainly asserts that God has already deemed humanity worthy of salvation and reconciliation that no human institution can deny them, rooted in a theological commitment to salvation not being limited to a post-death reality. When a social structure has the power to condemn to poverty because of a failure to succeed in the meritocratic educational system that dictates what they deserve, Christians must articulate the continued promise that salvation, and its connection to earthly justice, is never limited by one's individual merit or success. One such counter-narrative to the Western cultural insistence that people get what they earn would be found in the story of the prodigal son in Luke 15. While the eldest son continued to work hard in the fields for his father, the younger son took his inheritance and left home, and we are told that "there he squandered his property in dissolute living."²³ When he comes home, however, humbly ready to work as a servant for his father, his father instead embraces him and hosts a celebratory feast in his honor, flipping the elder son's expectation of meritocracy on its head. When society becomes angry at the suggestion that individual merit is not the sole determinant of the worth of a human being, Christians must host the celebratory feast—rejoicing for the moments that transcend the individualist ideologies of our culture in favor of a glimpse of the realization of the kingdom on earth.

23. Luke 15:32.

Additionally, the parable of the prodigal son sheds light on the disdain many people have on those they feel have not earned society's respect through their achievement of success, whether in education or in career. When the ideology of US culture reigns, people often reflect the anger of the older brother in the face of people who are poorer than them, assuming that the lower class squandered their money or chances to make money, and because of this, do not deserve to be embraced by society. This then reinforces the status quo without the acknowledgement that opportunities were already skewed to those who had power and resources and that education and access to material success is not equal for all social groups. The parable of the prodigal son indicts Christians who have been enraptured by the ideologies of culture, reminding them that even if those who are poorer than them *did* squander their resources, even this does not preclude them from participating in the kingdom of God as it is being realized on earth. And as was said before, this realization of the kingdom demands the dismantling of injustice, oppression, and exploitation of those on earth and cannot be used to further justify the subjugation of poor people that higher class Christians may think earned what they deserved.

Another part of the theological problem with using education to categorize people is that even Christians have been caught up in self-aggrandizement over one's success and credentials. When they do this, they elevate the need for higher education so high that someone who does not attend or succeed in college is seen as less than someone who does, conjuring assumptions on a person's ability to think critically about faith, politics, and life. In other words, Christians have not been exempt from quantifying a certain level

of personhood as directly correlative of education attained. I have been in seminary classes and progressive Christian churches that dismissed conservative theological belief as a signifier of lower education, suggesting that theological education transforms people into critical thinkers, even while neglecting to think critically on their own assumptions about the intersections of education, social class, and religion. Christians, rather, need to stand against the status quo that idolizes the market by insisting on human worth and value apart from earthly success and credentials, respecting and lifting people up as valuable in their own right rather than because of what they have done from the perspective of society.

Second, Christians must commit to participating in kingdom of God work as partial and in process, rather than perfect and complete. While a preoccupation with human impotence and sinfulness in comparison to God can postpone any hope of the kingdom of God (justice and liberation) for some after-death alternate dimension, an over-confidence in human power in bringing about perfect justice and liberation on earth can tempt us to put our faith in corruptible institutions. A belief in possible perfection or human creation of total equality and egalitarianism may be interpreted as another type of idolatry—the idolatry of humanity with no need of divine intervention and the idolatry of believing that humans can achieve the type of perfection that would require complete selflessness without error. This idolatry of human potential reinforces the idolatry of the market as humanly created and maintained, ordaining the market with the power to be the instrument of human perfection.

There is a counter witness even within liberal Christian theology that maintains that the world is in constant pursuit of justice, empowered by the salvific power of God that joins us in the struggle. Sung described the not-yet-ness of social salvation:

If we believe that God was with Jesus and for that reason raised him from the dead, confirming him as the Christ, we should also arrive at other conclusions that result from this faith. If not even the Jesus who was the Messiah succeeded in fully impacting the Kingdom of God in history, it is because the Kingdom of God does not fit fully in history. In human history we can only build and live out anticipatory presences of the Kingdom of God: social, economic, political, cultural, and religious relations that are signs of the presence of the Kingdom of God among us, in spite of their ambiguities and provisional character.²⁴

Martin Luther King Jr. tried to describe this reality by proclaiming that “the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.”²⁵ Fellow civil rights activist Vincent Harding emphasized the not-yet-ness when he declared that “we are citizens of a world that does not yet exist.”²⁶ None of these liberation theologians were suggesting that the role of God in the creation of a more just world could or should be usurped by humans that had figured out a perfect market system that could bring about salvation; on the contrary, they were skeptical of the idolatry of the market, knowing that it privileged those who already had power while sacrificing those who could not fit into the system to gain power. Any conception of human sin, whether sin is defined as deliberate individual

24. Sung, 26.

25. While this quote is frequently attributed to Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., who repeated it frequently in his speeches, he borrowed it from 19th century Unitarian minister Theodore Parker. Theodore Parker, *Ten Sermons of Religion* (Crosby, Nichols, and Company, 1853).

26. This sentiment has been oft-repeated by many of the pastors and teachers in my life that were under the mentorship of Dr. Vincent Harding. One instance of his own explanation can be found Children’s Defense Fund, *Vincent Harding: Creating America*, accessed October 7, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T6W42KLpNgQ>.

acts of selfishness or systemic patterns of disenfranchisement, must admit that perfect salvation and justice will not be seen in this lifetime. Even if the moral arc of the universe bends toward justice, humans are still fallible and capable of hurting one another. For this reason, a theology that recognizes that the justice achievable on earth will always be partial actually fosters a healthy skepticism of the powers that be and the status quo, encouraging diligence that does not settle for complacency when things seem to be “good enough.”

Lastly, I am suggesting that our soteriology must include collective participation with God’s own mission to reconcile the world to God’s self. In 2 Corinthians 5, Paul laments about the earthly reality the church finds themselves in contrasted to the perfection of God. Yet he goes on to insist that through God, people are made new, as God “reconciled us to himself through Christ” and “entrust[ed] the message of reconciliation to us.” Christians are called to continue the work of reconciling the imperfect world and its injustices to God’s self, which would include the dismantling of economic privilege for the restoration of the community. This reconstruction resists the idea that salvation is individualistic and passive in favor of an image of salvation as communal and active. There is an inherent individualism is the obsession with the categorization of people and what they are worth. This individualism insists on each person being judged on an isolated basis to determine if the individual is “good enough” by outside standards. The individualism of meritocracy coincided with an increase in individualism in Christian theology, particularly in evangelical theology as described by

Christian Smith.²⁷ Yet, individualism is not an isolated problem in conservative churches, but rather, a societal trend that affects liberal churches as well, where individual critical thought is emphasized as the highest value. It is no wonder, then, that societal salvation parallels the individualism of present iterations of Christian salvation, whether that salvation requires a personal relationship with Jesus or a postmodern conviction that one's own individual experience is the ultimate filter through which religious truth must pass. In "Being Saved as a New Creation," theologian Cherith Fee Nordling strikes a balance between the idea of individual salvation and community relationship by explaining that God saves individuals for robust relationship in community.²⁸ She interprets the parables of the lost sheep, coin, and son as conveying the lengths to which God would go to save just one, but she points out that in each case, the lost was immediately restored to relationship with the others, not set apart permanently. The sheep was returned to the flock, the coin to the purse, the son to the family. In this way, we must attend to people as individuals while being ultimately concerned about one's restoration to the community. Many times the categorization of people and what they are worth is used to exclude people from community, ostracizing those who are deemed least worthy—the poor, the addicted, and the uneducated.

27. Christian Smith, *American Evangelicalism: Embattled and Thriving*, 1 edition (Chicago, Ill: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

28. Cherith Fee Nordling, "Being Saved as a New Creation: Co-Humanity in the True Imago Dei," in *What Does It Mean to Be Saved?: Broadening Evangelical Horizons of Salvation*, ed. John Gordon Stackhouse (Baker Academic, 2002), 117.

A moment must be taken to acknowledge the particular audience of the salvific education narrative—it is not an accident that the institution that we have imbued with the power to grant social mobility is one that is first and foremost offered to children. While education as a good is broad and for all ages, when people refer to formal schooling, they are most frequently speaking of the education that takes place as early as age 2 up through college (traditional college age being 18-22). There is a complex constellation of social and theological beliefs about children, adults, innocence, and responsibility²⁹ that lends credence to the suggestion that children are the most “savable” in this sense, and the result is an offer of salvation that comes with an expiration date for many people, even though there are exceptions to the rule. Chapter 3 discussed the 19th century idea that education should be invested in because children are still malleable and innocent, while adults are set in their ways. The belief in meritocracy and the value of individualism set the stage for salvific education, but when this combines with the idea that education is significant because of its role for children, we have a narrative that says the best time to move up the social ladder through education is when someone is young. This results in adults having fewer options for social mobility if they did not succeed in education as a child. They are left with the options of staying where they are or finding a second chance in education, which is often limited by their past achievements and current resources.

29. Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore, *Let the Children Come: Reimagining Childhood from a Christian Perspective*, 1 edition (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2003).

Is Salvific Education Worth Saving?

I have defined salvific education as the promise given to low-income families that formal schooling, and higher education in particular, is the single best way to climb the social ladder and fulfill dreams of middle class success. As this is rooted in US cultural ideologies that I am suggesting Christians should counter, I am not necessarily seeking to redeem the promise, though I certainly believe equal access to opportunity and education should be procured as quickly as possible. The disparities in our educational system that are often aligned along race and class lines are abhorrent. That being said, what can Christians who care about education do if they do not want to further perpetuate the idea that education is the single path to social salvation for the dangers outlined before? For those of us who do believe in the transformative power of education, how can its salvific power be redeemed in light of the reframed soteriology of this chapter?

The first call of the reframed soteriology was that Christians must resist the status quo when it oppresses vulnerable people. In the context of how education is currently functioning in the US, this would mean that Christians must stand against the widespread inclination to use education and credentialing as the measure of whether or not people deserve to flourish in our society. Instead, Christians have to support a basic standard of living on theological grounds of *imago dei* and resist the systematic exploitation of vulnerable groups. This is rooted in the idea that only God can cast such ultimate judgments on humanity, and as humans ourselves, we are in no place to do so. Rather, there are multiple calls in scripture and Christian tradition both to take care of the poor

and the widowed, to help our neighbors, and to judge only ourselves and not others.³⁰ This slightly realigned mindset would still allow Christians to brainstorm and support best education practices, but not as the only way a poor person can seek justice, but instead, as a tool for the continued liberation of the whole of humanity.

Second, in response to our realization of the kingdom being only partial, Christians must resist the narrative that education is the single human institution that will save poor people and instead warn people that no human institution will be perfect enough to solve the entirety of social problems in society. On top of the theological problems already described with idolizing a human institution and granting it godlike powers to redeem humanity, we are also limited by the larger structures in our society that do not respond to Christian beliefs about human worth. Put plainly, capitalism by definition ranks and sorts people, granting different compensation according to supposed worth in the system. As long as we are constrained in this system that thrives by paying some people more because they are paying other people so much less, perfect equality as defined by sameness cannot be reached. The best Christians can do within such a system is to make progress toward the insistence that people are made a living wage and that their work or limits in work are not exploited to make higher class unthinkable profits.³¹ This means that education cannot be relied upon as the sole determiner of wage and mobility, particularly when a critique levied at the institution of education is that its

30. See Deuteronomy 15, Isaiah 58, Matthew 5, Matthew 7, Matthew 19, Matthew 25, and so forth.

31. O'Brien, David J., and Thomas A Shannon. *Catholic Social Thought: The Documentary Heritage*. Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1992.

purpose is to reproduce wealth and privilege, as access is easier for those who already have wealth and privilege.

Instead, Christians must recognize that society needs to invest in more than education to even realize the partial kingdom. Just as Gary Dorrien called for a multi-faceted approach to social salvation and Christian ethics, the Catholic social teaching tradition recognizes how complex a response to poverty and oppression in society must be. *Catholic Social Thought* is a 600+ page collection of teachings about the relationship between the Church, people of faith, and social issues of the time.³² Issues addressed include social class, poverty, violence, peace, marriage, love, food, education, economics, disability, homelessness, human rights, and the list goes on. The index of topics addressed represent the wide-ranging effort required of people of faith for the sake of social salvation. Many social policies would need to be explored and enacted to truly create equal opportunities for people to flourish, including robust vocational training, asset building strategies for low income families, fair and affordable housing policies, mental health parity and fair insurance practices, health community resources, substance abuse treatment rather than criminalization, resolving mass incarceration, and so forth. Focusing on education at the expense of larger initiatives ignores the interconnectedness of these issues as many of these actually impact a person's likelihood of success in formal schooling and in contributing valued work in community.

Lastly, as our participation in the realization of the kingdom is our collective salvation, we must care about and critique the ideologies/idolatries of the culture and how

32. Ibid.

they are impacting people and hindering the realization of the kingdom of God. This means we must name the myths and offer counter-narratives, and in this way, invite people into kingdom work- whether they call it that or something else. Rather than perpetuating the individualism of salvific education that forces students to compete with one another for fewer and fewer openings in the higher class, a new vision for salvific education would be the support of pedagogical approaches that foster collaborative learning and community consciousness raising, as was mentioned in Chapter 4. It might also mean that churches need to be involved in the communities in which they are embedded, supporting local schools and policy initiatives that seek increased access to justice on multiple fronts, rather than trusting that the most vulnerable in their communities have whatever they need already to make better lives and more opportunities for themselves.

Conclusion

While my project is concerned about the myth of meritocracy and the perpetuation of inequality through formal schooling, as a theologian, I am most deeply disturbed that salvific language and Christian history has been used to systematically categorize people, determining their material worth through the market. When Christians continue to support the ideology of the market in general and the ideology of education in particular, insisting on schooling's potential to save poor people, they are both idolizing the market and marginalizing the Christian witness that presupposes human worth before and above merit. The problem is that when Christians and others idolize the market, they are placing their faith in the idea that as long as we can get people equitably into the

system, or in this case, formal schooling, the system will judge them fairly. We have successfully evangelized the salvation that education offers, and so, our obligation is met. Devastatingly, though, this emphasis on getting individuals into the education system that will then save them on the basis of their own merit ignores the interdependent nature of salvation for all creatures and instead, overvalues American individualism, productivity, capitalistic output, and white middle class cultural values.

What I propose is for Christians to offer a countercultural witness in society that both rejects the idolatry of the market and status quo of economic inequality while also reclaiming the salvific language to describe the communal struggle for more justice and equality rather than success reserved for only certain social groups. Christians should not be cozy with the dominant and oppressive structures of US society, but instead, they should be on the forefront of calling out the narratives that are being used to exploit and oppress people, particularly those narratives articulated with Christian language. This would require believing that all persons are inherently valuable as human beings and then acting accordingly, advocating for those who are most vulnerable to being marginalized and exploited through creating a variety of social structures that mitigate rather than perpetuate oppression.

CHAPTER SIX: CONCLUSION

The dominant culture in the United States has repeatedly insisted that education is the ticket out of poverty. The resistance and transformation of poverty are useful objectives, but the history of education in the US includes socializing and assimilating those who are seen to be lacking, either biologically or socially, so that they can fit in with the dominant culture. Even still, marginalized persons are prevented from reaching the same heights of success as those who were already in the dominant culture. This narrative of education for uplift is both rooted in and bolstered by the concurrent narratives of Christianity in the United States. Christian missionaries reinforced the importance of education for literacy in the early 18th century. Christian teachers lent credence to the importance of education for socialization in the late 18th century. And throughout the history of the United States, Christian theology frequently linked the concepts of productivity and worth.

As a Christian theologian myself, I refuse to reduce Christianity to keeper of the status quo and the tool of the dominant culture to protect and retain power. There are counter-narratives within the Christian tradition that speak to its role for disrupting the status quo and advocating for the powerless, and it is in this tradition that I ground my work. Christian theology must be for the dismantling of oppressive systems that exploit persons and communities. Because systems are overarching and difficult to influence, let

alone dismantle, this work requires a communal ethos rather than an individualistic approach, and so, disrupting the status quo as a theological project demands social collaboration and community organizing rather than individual education.

As an educator, I am disappointed when education is reduced to a means for social uplift. This narrative often ignores the inequalities already inscribed in the system being trusted to either advance or hold people back in the quest for mobility. Instead, I want to see both a reclamation of Christian theology that respects the inherent worth and value of humans through an approach to education that grants it the space and time to be liberative for individuals and communities. This goes beyond formal classroom settings that implicitly privilege dominant culture.¹

In this final chapter, I will preview an alternative vision for education that chastens its role in society by naming it as one of several simultaneous approaches to social justice and equality, rather than the currently described sole salvific role that it holds now. This alternative vision also seeks to free education from its role of credentialing savior to instead offer a more robust type of liberation, one that has been witnessed to throughout the history of civil rights advocacy. After all, education is one of the most powerful institutions in our society, and it warrants ongoing debate and struggle as to how large of an influence it should play, what kind of influence it should have, and in what alternative arenas education should be offered.

1. Here, I consider individualism to be part of the dominant culture being reproduced by formal schooling.

Chastening the Role of Education

One of my earlier proposals included relieving the burden on education to right the wrongs of society by investing in other social policy initiatives that seek to ensure the right to live in affordable housing, build assets, access healthcare, train for careers, and so forth. I rooted this in Gary Dorrien's call to Christian ethicists to renew the attention on policy initiatives like cooperative ownership and profit sharing that Social Gospellers supported. The problem with expecting education to be the sole source of social salvation for all people is that it makes an idol out of a human institution, granting it so much power and status that we fail to see the problem with allowing an imperfect human institution to determine human worth and value. While this is the theological issue, society's reliance on education to determine each individual's future potential has pragmatic problems that should concern non-theologians as well.

One issue is the difference in student aptitudes for the types of academic skills that formal schooling privileges. While there is ongoing research about multiple intelligences, there is no doubt that formal schooling in the US at present seeks to promote STEM coursework (science, technology, engineering, mathematics).² This has come as a loss for both the arts and humanities, who are facing a loss of funding and

2. This need to emphasize STEM education came up time and time again in the discourse analysis of political speeches. Howard Gardner, *Frames of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligences* (New York: Basic Books, 1983).

support in both K-12 and college education.³ Already, students who have higher aptitudes for math and science are likely to progress easier in the curriculum than those that struggle in these areas. A growing awareness of aptitudes and limits should also bring to mind the specific needs of students all across the ability spectrum. Disability theologian Deborah Creamer's human limits model suggests that limits are an intrinsic characteristic of being human, and so we must start with "the human variations of ability as the norm," and theorize from there.⁴ If all people possess limits that vary from one another, it is unjust to expect that each individual must prove their worthiness for making a sustainable living through one specific measuring tool that is arbitrary, shifting, and privileging specific aptitudes over others. The privilege question only magnifies when we consider that higher class students with lower aptitudes in school have increased resources for tutoring and teaching help, while those in lower class homes are much more limited. The thought that a person who cannot pass calculus should not be able to support a family should be appalling to most, and yet, this is just a hyperbolic example of the consequences of trusting formal schooling to grant access to basic necessities to sustain life.

The limits placed on education being the sole determinant of a person's fate demands us to invest in other areas of development. Technical career training ought not

3. One such defense of the humanities in the face of increasing STEM demand can be found in Martha Craven Nussbaum, *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities* (Princeton, N.J.; Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2010).

4. Deborah Beth Creamer, *Disability and Christian Theology: Embodied Limits and Constructive Possibilities*, American Academy of Religion Academy Series (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

be a second-rate option for lower class persons that lack the cultural capital to succeed in formal schooling, but rather, a viable option for any person that has higher aptitude and interest for technical careers. This points to another problem with the idolization of higher education. We have placed so much currency in educational credentialing that choosing another direction is seen as a lesser choice rather than a different choice. There is no part of a car that I can fix without asking for outside help, and yet, my status in society seems higher than that of a car mechanic because I will soon have a PhD. This is the cultural orientation of education that needs to change.

Furthermore, student loan debt from pursuing college degrees is at an all-time high. The salvific narrative of education in the US is telling young people that they must go to college in order to get good jobs, but in order to go to college, they must take out significant student loans. This is another place in the system in which higher-class students may have privilege. Higher-class students both have increased access to resources to pay for college and increased access to universities in which their investments make sense. While the government is attempting to come down on predatory student loan practices from for-profit universities that prey on under-represented students, many people have already suffered the consequences of being taken advantage of when they try to attain the American Dream through education as they were told they must. In other words, it is worth asking if the promise of salvific education is even working for the people it is targeted to, or if instead it is simply a narrative that is meant to reproduce the status quo and convince all classes that those who succeed simply earned their place on top.

Much more debate about what we teach in school and the return rate of investment for student loans is warranted. My point here is simply that these are the questions we must contend with if we continue to grant education the sole power to categorize people between worthy and unworthy, setting the arbitrary rules for success in the system that privileges the financially secure who already possess cultural capital and social power.

Expanding the Role of Education

At the same time I seek to chasten the role of education in society, I also want to free education to expand to its fullest potential, celebrating its role as social change instigator and community empowerment tool. The debate over who is privileged in formal schooling is not new, so the alternatives to formal schooling that come from the community are longstanding as well. An early example of this was mentioned in Chapter 3: the Catholic Church started parochial schools as an alternative to the Protestant education offered in public common schools. I am not as interested in alternatives within formal schooling as I am interested in alternative places of education outside of formal schooling, as learning and formation takes place in many different settings for different purposes. What I want to focus on here are the alternative forms of education that were about community and individual empowerment for social change and justice. In this section, I briefly outline some of the possibilities of alternative spaces for education, in contrast to formal schooling, through examples of how community-based education has in fact been an integral component of justice work. I close with a call for local churches

to be sites of community-based education as part of the continued reconciliation of the world and a call for local schools to continue participation in liberative education.

Education in Civil Rights Movements

In *Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement*, biographer Barbara Ransby describes how Ella Baker, one of the most influential woman in the civil rights movement, enthusiastically engaged in the intellectual vibrancy of Harlem in the 1930s.⁵ The 135th St. Library and the Harlem Branch YWCA both hosted forums for political discussion and debate, and Baker helped establish the Negro History Club, a study group that discussed political issues relevant to the black inhabitants of Harlem. The library also hosted the Harlem Adult Education Experiment, which continued to “sponsor forums, lectures, and debates on a wide range of topics,”⁶ marking a concerted non-schooling effort to educate adults in the neighborhood on content that mattered most to them. The topics arose from the needs of the community in a way that is resonant with the way Paulo Freire described education that emerged from generative themes in the community. These conversations not only occurred in the structured environments of the library and the YWCA, but in apartments and homes, as well. This approach to education is democratic and has nothing to do with credentialing, instead reflecting community organizing and political movements more than formal schooling. The content of the education included books, conversation, debate, and public action.

5. Barbara Ransby, *Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement: A Radical Democratic Vision*, Gender & American Culture (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003).

6. *Ibid.*, 27.

During the same time period in Tennessee, Myles Horton formed the Highlander Folk School, an adult education center that made the societal issues and problems of the working-class participants the content of education.⁷ Horton sought to reach rural, poor people in the south through political education that happened in groups and communities, rather than in individualistic endeavors. The school was connected to the civil rights movement in tangible ways. Septima P. Clark spent time at Highlander before developing citizenship schools, which taught African Americans how to read so that they could vote despite the onerous requirements meant to restrict black voting in the south. When asked what effect her time at Highlander had on her Montgomery bus action, Rosa Parks answered, “Everything.”⁸ The education model at Highlander was one that was dialogical and democratic, meaning it presumed that learners and teachers were on equal footing. Each person had experiences that gave them knowledge and investment in the communal project of learning and working for justice.

These exemplars of popular education continue to influence grassroots educators and organizers today. Two leading racial justice organizations, Black Lives Matter (BLM) and Showing Up For Racial Justice (SURJ), offer advocacy trainings and book clubs that continue the project of political education outside of formal schooling targeted for adults. These organizations arose out of necessity as a response to the overwhelming

7. Barbara J. Thayer-Bacon, “An Exploration of Myles Horton’s Democratic Praxis: Highlander Folk School,” *The Journal of Educational Foundations* 18, no. 2 (Spring 2004): 5–23.cin

8. John Hurst, “Civil Rights Movement Origins at Highlander Educational Sessions,” *Race, Poverty & the Environment* 14, no. 2 (2007): 15–15.

occurrences of police brutality and terrorization of communities of color, rooting this education in the needs and pain of communities. While the methods for education used during the civil rights movement are still used today, they are often enhanced by technology. SURJ and other similar organizations host webinars, connecting people from all across the country in shared spaces online. BLM and SURJ both promote their education efforts through social media, gathering interest and people using the type of populism that the Internet encourages. The common thread in the civil rights movement and the racial justice movements of today is in the demonstration of the importance of popular education that happens outside of formal schooling. This reflects an understanding among community organizers of the importance of social and political education and the likelihood that this type of education is not happening within formal schooling.

The problem with these democratic community education models is that their counter-cultural mission has often prevented them from garnering public or state support. More than a lack of support, these models have been treated with suspicion because of their non-conformist ideals that counter individual competition for success. The Highlander Folk School was shut down for a time, and the FBI kept a file tracking the school and its participants because of allegations of communist and anarchist activities.⁹ On a public level, democratic schools and educational movements have also faced

9. "Highlander Folk School Part 1 of 19," *FBI Records: The Vault*, accessed November 1, 2016, <https://vault.fbi.gov/Highlander%20Folk%20School/Highlander%20Folk%20School%20Part%201%20of%2019>.

vandalism and violence. While they are useful for political organization and philosophically in line with the type of education this project calls for, it is not without cost or risk because their very existence challenges the dominant reproduction of class and values of those in power.

Freedom Schools and Free University

The celebration of community-based political education is not meant to suggest that formal schooling cannot engage in democratic education, but only to point out the gap that exists when they do not. Freedom Schools were another form of education in the civil rights movements, and iterations of them persist today. Leaders of the movement founded freedom schools in the summer to supplement the education elementary and high school students received in formal schooling, offering both remedial formal school subjects and nontraditional content that was more politically focused. Freedom schools also included music, art, and drama out of a commitment to offering curriculum that was student and community centered. Churches and universities are still offering summer freedom schools in low-income communities, often for children of color.

In Georgia, Freedom University also arose out of the needs of the community in the context of undocumented immigrants being turned away from mainstream university education.¹⁰ In 2010, the University of Georgia Board of Regents voted, “to prohibit public universities from enrolling students without papers in any school that has rejected

10. Lorgia García Peña, “New Freedom Fights: The Creation of Freedom University Georgia,” *Latino Studies* 10, no. 1–2 (Spring 2012): 246–50, doi:<http://dx.doi.org/du.idm.oclc.org/10.1057/lst.2012.2>.

other qualified applicants for the past 2 years because of lack of space."¹¹ As a response, a handful of University of Georgia professors started Freedom University, volunteering their time to teach courses for students that did not have the necessary credentials to attend other public universities in the state. They raised money and support through donations and community partnerships in order to purchase books and obtain space to meet. They were hopeful that this was not the long-term solution to the problem, but they were able to organize around community education and discovered through this an intense engagement with the content from students whose motivation was learning, rather than credentialing. Freedom University could not offer students college diplomas, but this did not silence interest and participation. Freedom University symbolizes a conviction that something important can happen when people gather together to learn, particularly when mobilized by societal injustices and not just individualized social mobility.

A Call to the Churches

If education has great potential to be transformative when it is rooted in the needs and calls of communities, responding to the social problems that arise, then there is no institution better poised to offer good education than the local church. Churches are already situated within communities, and many of these churches have been in their current locations for generations. Churches also have faith-based values that often demand they give attention to the most vulnerable populations. Too often though,

11. University System of Georgia, "Regents Adopt New Policies on Undocumented Students," October 13, 2010, http://www.usg.edu/news/release/regents_adopt_new_policies_on_undocumented_students.

churches end up waiting for the poor to visit them on the church's own terms on Sunday morning, rather than the church meeting people out in the community.

There are natural ways for churches to either tap into community education initiatives that are already in motion or serve as a meeting place in which community concerns could be voiced and addressed together. SURJ has created a resource guide for faith communities that offers step-by-step suggestions for how a small group at a white church might proceed in learning together how racism is impacting society and how white people of faith might engage in dismantling white supremacy.¹² In other instances, churches have donated meeting space to organizations that are already implementing community education as part of their advocacy strategies. Freedom schools in the 60s were frequently hosted in church buildings, and even now, that practice continues.¹³

The importance is for any church community to engage in the communities within which they are embedded and listen for the needs and issues voiced by the community. Churches should not assume they know best how to help a community within which they may simply be situated, rather than engaged. This call for community-based education and organization requires relationship building, humility, and a commitment for justice. Broadway United Methodist Church courageously attempted this type of relationship building when they ended all of their efforts in mission and charity to instead build

12. Showing Up for Racial Justice (SURJ), "Faith Building Racial Justice Spiritual Communities Pilot Learning Project Resource Guide," Created in 2016 by the SURJ-Faith working group, coordinated by Rev. Anne Dunlap. Limited circulation.

13. For example, Riverside Church in New York City and Friendship Baptist Church in Evanston, IL both hosted freedom schools in 2016.

relationship with those in the community.¹⁴ What they found was that when they shifted to relationship building rather than service providing, they were able to connect people in the community that could work together to offer and share what was needed: community gardens, music practice, a community space for video gamers to gather, and yes, even educational opportunities. It is conceivable that as community issues arise, the relationships and network now created at Broadway would provide a context in which these issues could be discussed and challenged, making it a potential place of social advocacy and justice.

Through all of these examples, both within and outside of the church, it is increasingly clear that community-based practice is how education remains an agent of social change. This community model flies in the face of individualized credentialing that formal schooling offers that is meant to categorize what one person is worth relative to another. This radical reorientation to the community rather than the individual does not ignore the struggle for justice, but it does seek justice for the whole rather than conceiving of justice as reached through individual uplift.

A Call to the Schools

While democratic community-based education holds the potential to disrupt ideologies and systems that marginalize specific social groups, they do not do so as a complete alternative to formal schooling. Change and liberation are happening in the education system as well. This project is indebted to the critical pedagogy movement that has emphasized the need for greater access to education for more people, so that those

14. King, Robert. "Death and Resurrection of an Urban Church." *Faith & Leadership*, March 24, 2015. <https://www.faithandleadership.com/death-and-resurrection-urban-church>.

from underrepresented social groups may still succeed in formal schooling, particularly since it does currently function as an entry point to higher paid careers and social power.

Just as formal schooling has functioned as a powerful tool for social salvation that is race and class based, it has the potential to continue a socializing influence that rather than ranking students, prepares students to engage in justice advocacy. This is not a new idea, but rather was highlighted earlier in the discussion of different purposes of education and the importance of education that does not seek simply to assimilate students into a narrow definition of white, middle-class personhood.

However, as this project explains, the over-reliance on the credentialing that is only possible through formal schooling is itself part of the problem. Even while increased access to education for marginalized social groups is laudable, this must not be done alone as the sole means for overcoming poverty. Schools can resist this mission thrust upon them by continuing support of programs and ideas that are not for the sole sake of providing increased social value through formal credentialing. At the postsecondary level, this resistance may manifest itself through the provision of affordable access to university resources to the community, including courses, library access, lectures and events actively promoted in the community, and service learning opportunities that invite students to engage in the communities in which their universities reside. This increased access and community engagement could serve as a public statement that universities are not simply gated grantors of status to a privileged few.

Schools, particularly K-12 schools, also resist this sole salvific function whenever they honor the different cultural values and experiences of their students rather than

teaching students to assimilate to dominant cultural values that are often reflective of white middle class supremacy. The funds of knowledge theory described in an earlier chapter demonstrated the potential of affirming alternative knowledges, but ran the risk of instrumentalizing alternative knowledges to forge a bridge to assimilation to dominant culture. Allowing alternative modes of knowledge and meaning, like communitarian values rather than unquestioned individualism, to influence the classroom and teach multiple valuable lessons would honor the diversity students bring.

Contributions, Limitations, and Implications for Future Research

This project contributes in different ways to my home field of practical theology and my cognate disciplines, sociology of religion and educational philosophy. I identify myself as a practical theologian because I believe theology still has a voice in US social issues, as many of them are rooted in ideologies that originated in Christianity. In fact, if these ideologies that often reproduce privilege and continue practices of oppression are strengthened by Christian theological interpretations and narratives, then Christian theologians must take an active voice in the public sphere to provide alternative theological narratives that liberate rather than oppress. I locate this responsibility in the discipline of practical theology, as its methodology already starts with a question out of concrete lived experience, rather than starting with abstract doctrinal questions and eventually seeking to connect to social issues.

My project continues the call for practical theology to engage in larger ideologies and narratives in society that are influencing Christians and non-Christians alike, as Don Browning did in his work on the family and Pamela Couture did in her work on

poverty.¹⁵ Practical theologians have a role to play as interpreters of religious-like meaning making, historians of Christianity's influence in society, and prophets calling for change. In this way, the problem of the inflated role of education in the US is simply a case study to explain a larger concern over the ease with which Christians assimilate into the status quo of the United States dominant culture, rehearsing narratives that perpetuate the very injustices we are called to stand against. Other projects that might deserve similar treatment include renewed attention on the family in light of changing marriage policy, the role of religious freedom in an increasingly pluralistic society, and the value of private ownership as a demonstration of economic success.

We learn from the specific case study of salvific education the consequences of the insidious relationship between dominant American ideologies and Christianity. Through the meritocratic-seeming arguments about access to education, people are blamed for their own failure in a system in which the failure of some is a necessity. The categorization of people in this way grants power and privilege to those that fit into and succeed in the dominant culture, while depriving everyone else of the right to live and

15. Don S Browning, Gloria G Rodriguez, and American Assembly, *Reweaving the Social Tapestry: Toward a Public Philosophy and Policy for Families* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2002). Don S Browning and David A Clairmont, *American Religions and the Family: How Faith Traditions Cope with Modernization and Democracy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), <http://public.eblib.com/choice/publicfullrecord.aspx?p=908396>. Don S Browning, *From Culture Wars to Common Ground: Religion and the American Family Debate* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997). Don S Browning, *Equality and the Family: A Fundamental, Practical Theology of Children, Mothers, and Fathers in Modern Societies* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Pub., 2007) Pamela D. Couture, *Blessed Are the Poor?: Women's Poverty, Family Policy, and Practical Theology* (Nashville: Abingdon Press in cooperation with the Churches' Center for Theology and Public Policy, Washington, D.C, 1991).

thrive in their own ways. Theologians and people of faith, though, have another tradition to draw upon—the Christian tradition in which the meek inherit the kingdom and the community of faith extends grace and care to the outcast. This alternative narrative must hold Christians accountable whenever they easily accept dominant societal ideologies that privilege the rich and blame the poor. This Christian vision has the potential to dismantle oppression and reconstruct more just systems.

However, even while this project calls for a critique of the way Christian theology has bolstered ideologies that sometimes oppress, one limitation is in its descriptive nature that is not yet able to fully articulate precise interventions that will disrupt the system in its oppression. Though the critique that this project proffers is a necessarily initial step, there are real policy implications that need to be considered, such as the funding of public schooling through property tax, the reliance on standardized testing to determine content focus for schooling, and so forth. Particular policy proposals would require constructive projects that articulate the theological grounding for responding social programs, including policies that increase economic stability for low-income families without relying solely on success in the formal schooling system. Such constructive theological endeavors would be best approached as interdisciplinary projects, as these are complex issues that demand nuanced responses. This is a related limitation of my own project; as sole author of this dissertation, I was responsible for the interdisciplinary work that runs the risk of broad interpretation opposed to in-depth analysis. If these large systemic analyses were approached collaboratively rather than individually, as Don Browning often did in his family research, the policy suggestions might be both more creative and

demonstrate more integrity to the disciplines represented. Any single perspective risks oversimplifying a problem or a solution. The type of expansive ideology and narrative analysis and disruption I am envisioning as part of the work of practical theology requires collaborative work amongst people with different expertise and experience. It is not accidental that this call alone rejects the presumed value of individualized scholarship that often reigns in the academy in favor of a more effective and influential collaboration. Women have frequently been penalized for such collaborative work, which reminds us that these values are bound by social location and often come into question when power and status are threatened.¹⁶

While this project required a singular focus on salvific education in the United States, a consequence of that narrow focus is that it may not be transferrable to other contexts. This dissertation did not attempt a comparative analysis of different nations' approaches to education, nor did it offer alternative philosophies from other parts of the world. The conclusions about the chastening of education are limited to the context of the United States, a developed nation that already supports public education for children and adolescents, a policy that I am not trying to dismantle. However, the United States does

16. Heather Sarsons, "Gender Differences in Recognition for Group Work," December 3, 2015, http://scholar.harvard.edu/files/sarsons/files/gender_groupwork.pdf?m=1449178759. Jevin D. West et al., "The Role of Gender in Scholarly Authorship," *PLOS ONE* 8, no. 7 (July 22, 2013): e66212, doi:10.1371/journal.pone.0066212. Jeff Guo, "Why Men Get All the Credit When They Work with Women," *Washington Post*, accessed November 1, 2016, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonk/wp/2015/11/13/why-men-get-all-the-credit-when-they-work-with-women/>.

export the ideologies of the American Dream, meritocracy, and white middle class cultural supremacy to other countries through the emphasis on spreading democracy around the world and using education as a vehicle to do so. There is great potential for more research and writing to be done about the implications of my work here for international policy in addition to domestic policy.

Education has been transformative for society, but it also has a history of colonization and cultural assimilation that has been bolstered by Christian theology. As Christian theologians, we must critique where our theology has been used to defend those in power while oppressing those with less power. As educators, we must be committed to the liberative potential of education even while being leery of the potential of its cooptation through agendas of socialization into dominant culture. Education has saving power only if it is truly liberative, not if it forces a particular way of being or simply tries to lift up a few to an already determined group of power in an inherently unjust structure.

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