Critical Education about Marriage: Combining Critical Pedagogy and *Phronesis* for Religious Education

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Abstract

This article discusses the nature of criticality for religious education curriculum and pedagogy, with a particular focus on marriage in Hebrew Bible (Old Testament, abbreviated OT) texts. First, 'criticality' is defined in historical and literary terms, asking questions of what the Bible writers meant and intended. Secondly, the use of Bible texts is explored through the prism of 'critical theory', in which social critique particularly emphasises notions of justice, equity and democratic 'voice'. The presence of secular Jewish thought within the Frankfurt School of social-critical thought suggests some influence from the ancient Jewish prophetic call for everyday justice. Thirdly, I explore synergies between critical theory and the Aristotelian concept of *phronesis*, 'practical wisdom' on effective living, as developed by Bent Flyvbjerg and colleagues. Through these lenses, I examine how these ideas might affect the way marriage is discussed and taught in religious education in Africa and elsewhere. Finally I discuss the broader potential for this mix of Critical Theory and *phronesis* for education as a whole.

Keywords: Religious Education, marriage, Critical Theory, critical pedagogy, phronesis, Old Testament, empowerment, democratic voice.

1. Critical Education about Religion

Learning about religion through a curriculum content agreed by some education Board and declared as 'fact' obscures the problematic nature of

religion and of knowledge, and fails to engage learners actively with issues. Various attempts have been made to define a methodology for religious education, combining description with issues (Barnes 2011 is a balanced recent example). This paper brings together the socially empowering Critical Theory of the Frankfurt School, and Bent Flyvbjerg's (2001) social application of *phronesis*. I apply this to education about marriage because marriage choice, intermarriage and divorce are issues relating to religious groups in Africa. Elsewhere, including the UK, there are similar issues in some Muslim communities. Although written for an African journal, issues of sexuality and marriage are relevant in different ways across the world and within various religions. I then consider how critical pedagogy for religious education might be developed. In Aristotle's view, the quest for knowledge is a balance between conceptual knowledge (*epistemé*), technical skill (*techné*) and everyday practical knowledge (*phronesis*), a triplet of human virtues – to get to know things, to become skilled, and to have common sense. Concerning marriage and sexual relationships, attitudes are generally neither *common* (that is, widely agreed) nor *sensible* (that is, based on rational thought). The rationality of choices in matters of sex, religion and politics are profoundly problematic, and all collide in the debate about marriage choice, lifetime marital fidelity, and divorce. Religious beliefs impact strongly on marriage partner choice, contraception and divorce; and traditionalist political voices, whether it is in Christian Africa, in the US Republican Party, or in an Islamic context, adversely affect the lives of many[1]. The religious education curriculum needs therefore to be grounded on and to develop ethical criticality.

Critical Biblical Studies

Religious Education has evolved from Christian instruction to become an academic, intellectually-rigorous subject, a study of religions and the personal and social issues they impact on. Criticality, broadly defined, is central to a modern academic curriculum: criticality in Biblical Studies until the 1970s was primarily historico-linguistic, and these areas continue to be

[1] See Bigger (2009) for a discussion of the African context.

relevant[2] leading to a greater emphasis today on the *writers* as creative theologians of the post-exilic period (Grabbe 2004; Jonker 2010). That literary and redaction criticism (i.e. the art and techniques of the original writers and editors) is important I argued in detail in *Creating the Old Testament* (Bigger 1989), following Robert Alter's (1981) determination to discover what the final historical authors might have meant[3]. This is not, in my view, an excuse for theological conservatism: the Bible writers wrote to persuade and on occasions are neither wise nor edifying, particularly their views on 'other' nations. The writers held positions of religious and political power which they wished to preserve, and they wanted their texts to persuade and even enslave others (in the sense that the texts would mould the lives of followers). A critique of such power is the task of Critical Theory. Their texts have affected marriage ideology and sexual choices throughout the centuries to the present day.

Once we detach Biblical Studies from church hermeneutics, the texts take on different meanings. Ancient texts such as Homer, Sophocles, and Euripides in ancient Greece, Gilgamesh in Sumeria, and the Indian epics Ramayana and Mahabharata all come alive for modern audiences through their human relevance and interest. The 'reception history' of such texts is currently a lively research topic reflecting a broad hermeneutic, and biblical texts are no exception. In my view, the study of the ancient texts as literature is enriching only if it is critical in every sense of that term, preventing the text from becoming a museum piece gathering dust, or religious propaganda. Embedded social assumptions are contested and scrutinized in a critical curriculum, using concerns for equity, justice, empowerment, and dialogue[4] in addition to concerns about historicity and authenticity. Social critique draws on the social sciences, such as anthropology, sociology and cultural studies, research into what people in general *believe* and *do*. 'Critical

[2] A reassessment of the historicity of OT material has been made by van Seters (1975); Hayes and Miller (1977); Lemche (1988); Davies (1992); Whitelam (1996); Thompson (1999); and Dever (2001).

[3] Alter's work was developed further in Alter and Kermode (eds.), 1987, covering the whole of the OT.

[4] Dialogic Pedagogy is associated with the work of Mikhail Bakhtin, see White and Peters, 2011.

studies' critique the social status quo and power structures, emphasising justice and exposing the ploys of the powerful. Issues of race, religious diversity, class, gender and sexuality all have deep roots in biblical literature, but not all are supportive of a just society. A broader secular hermeneutic to enrich understanding today will condemn some features (e.g. racist assumptions) and draw positively on others (e.g. social justice). Such a discussion needs to be at the heart of religious education both in curriculum design and in pedagogy.

Critical Studies and Critical Pedagogy

'Critical' is an vague word in education, demanded of adolescents as well as graduates and postgraduates. An opposite is 'descriptive', a surface account without questioning or debate – although critical discussion needs accurate description, as in anthropology. Nevertheless this broad use of the term 'critical' is helpful since pupils from infants onwards do need to learn how to think clearly. Socio-critical questioning or 'Critical Theory' provided an ethical countermeasure to Nazism from 1929, in Frankfurt, Germany, relocating to America (Colombia University) after the Nazis' rose to power (returning to Frankfurt in 1953). The agenda described below was articulated first by Horkheimer (1982) and Adorno[5] (1973), and later by Marcuse (1968/2009) and Habermas (1973; 1990). Their theoretical insight was to recognize that modernism had not produced a just society, and that critique of this should encourage the emancipation of the oppressed – 'to liberate human beings from the circumstances that enslave them' (Horkheimer 1982: 244). Critical Theory recognizes that critique of society has to look beyond the worker/owner dichotomy of Marxism and to judge all social action through its potential either to transform or to oppress (How 2003)[6]. Concerns for equity and emancipation require us to seek out and listen to silenced

[5] See also Horkheimer and Adorno (1972).

[6] Applying this to Biblical material, Whitelam (1996) and Yiftachel (2005) both discuss the silencing of Palestinians in modern Israel in what the latter calls 'ethnocracy'. Sand (2009) speaks of the 'invention of the Jewish people'; Hobsbawm and Ranger (1992) discuss the issue of cultural invention more generally.

voices; equally, it invites us to be sceptical about the claims of the powerful, and their attempts to construct 'knowledge' in ways which benefit themselves and their social group at the expense of those weaker.

This is described in Peter McLaren (1989; Darder *et al.* 2009: 61-83) as *dialectic*, a relationship between a point of view and its antithesis. That relationship can lead to synthesis, except that power differentials prevent a solution which is fair to both sides, since the voice of the powerful holds too much weight. Therefore the holding of power itself needs to be examined. Contrasting with descriptive sociology, this social critique is not neutral but evaluates aspects of society moving from *what is*, to *what should be* (Giroux 1983: 28; 1988). The championing of critical subjectivity was a deliberate rejection of the failure of the objectivity of positivism to produce a society that was in any way fair and just, so it had become the duty of thinking people to apply ethical standards. Critical Theory criticised the 'fetishism of facts' for their own sake and without ethical insights, and the claim of value neutrality as hidden strategies for hegemony and domination (Giroux 1983/2009: 33). The various research fields which emerged from Critical Theory, such as feminism and antiracism, deliberately make no attempt to be neutral, but affirm the assumption that society is a mixture of varying degrees of powerfulness and powerlessness, declaring that this balance needs to be studied from the standpoints of equity and justice, and rectified. Paulo Freire (2004), for example, fostered political consciousness through active and relevant adult education: he and his followers strongly advocated the participation of the powerless in political processes, and the accountability of the powerful for their choices. This provides a 'pedagogy of possibility' (Rossatto 2005).

Religion and its study is beset by unequal power relationships, prompting a critique in terms of gender, class, age, race, sexuality and disability. For example, patriarchal attitudes in the Bible are countered by feminist writers after pioneering work by Phyllis Trible (1978; 1984). Where religious policies such as on birth control exacerbate poverty, critique may question both its appropriateness and motives. Sexuality and disability are affected by religious attitudes (for example by hostility to same sex relationships, and by regarding disability as divine punishment). Critical Theory therefore offers a different way of looking at religious texts and the doctrinaire institutions that use them, texts produced by a literate power

elite, and used over the centuries by other elites. The Old Testament (OT) texts did not have to follow liberal, politically-correct agendas: for example, an enemy's life had no value; a father had absolute authority even when wrong. Within Religious Education, a social-justice critique opens up to pupils a way of looking not only at scriptures but also at their own society, and helps them to critique the nature of religious authority with which they are presented. This puts them in a position to understand whether or not a particular religious position is reasonable or not, and is emancipating or not. This is not to import a western agenda onto biblical texts: there are strands of biblical prophetic literature, and laws, which support the weak over the strong, defending the poor, the widow and the alien. Many critical theorists had Jewish roots; thus we are in effect applying updated prophetic insights to our criticism of OT narrative and story.

Phronesis

A recent recasting of critical studies uses Aristotle's term *phronesis* ('practical wisdom') concerning how to act in particular circumstances, sitting alongside technical skills/know how (*techné*) and conceptual knowledge (*epistemé*). Practical wisdom, following Aristotle, can never be divorced from knowledge of what works, and discussions about truth and falsehood. *Phronesis* involves exchanging ideas and expertise through group or community problem-solving: a phronetic approach develops this ancient concept to restrict powerful voices. Flyvbjerg and his colleagues (2012) identify practical wisdom as a product of discussion and debate, with 'expert' voices not privileged, ambiguities recognized, and due caution taken to recognize the sleight of hand used by powerful agendas. Practical wisdom is thus viewed as open and democratic. Flyvbjerg (2001) challenged the positivism of social science research, so that research *about* something becomes viewed as weaker than research which is sensitive to *the application of* knowledge (Flyvbjerg, Landman & Schram 2012:1-12) *which improves* some identified problem. In a sense, 'being phronetic' is a state of mind which fosters strategies for improvement, whilst separating this from the other agendas of administrators and politicians. Power is always present in social situations and has to be carefully scrutinised and sidelined. Thus, Simmonds, in this 2012 volume (pp. 246-263), expounds on 'making the

teaching of social justice matter'. On the question of who decides, in a sense the whole community decides (that is, practical wisdom has to be generally accepted); but in another sense it is dynamic, that is the choices may change with circumstances and dialogue. The last word has never been spoken; the details of practical wisdom will always be controversial.

As an issue for Religious Education, dogma is the weapon of the powerful to control the attitudes and behaviour of others. Freedom of thought and expression become victims of dogma, and have led to religious intolerances and persecutions. *Phronesis* invites *all* people involved to discuss without barriers or recriminations. The emphasis on justice demands that decisions made are fully consulted over and are fair to all involved. On the topic of marriage, the tension between family pressures and personal consent are at issue. Historical critique is important where historical documents (such as the Bible) are used as authorities to persuade: it is vital that this appeal to authority is relevant and the proof-texts actually meant what is claimed for them.

Phronetic study asks four questions to establish practical wisdom, according to Flyvbjerg *et al.* (2012:38-40):

(1) Where are we going?
(2) Who gains and who loses, and by which mechanisms of power?
(3) Is this development desirable?
(4) What, if anything, should we do about it?

Using this to explore our topic of marriage.

(1) On religious attitudes to marriage, there is a tension between traditionalists emphasising family approval and secular couples who focus on love and relationship. Arranged marriages, same sex marriages, birth control and divorce are current flashpoints which religious dogmas seek to control.

(2) Religious pressure to conform may be policed by social pressures and threats of ostracism, so the holders of hegemonic power will lose if this is challenged. Equally the individual will lose if it is not confronted. The struggle for gain is between personal emancipation

including the right to develop a relationship with someone loved, and the family's right (often with religious sanctions) to control sexual availability and childbearing.

(3) The two sides will disagree over the desirability of changing traditional practices. The mechanism required in this method is to allow the silenced majority (girls and women especially) to express their opinion on an equal playing field, their views given due weight. This will result in a more balanced view.

(4) We should apply principles of social justice, making sure that marriage choices are made with full consent without unfair pressures. In terms of polygyny, direct and indirect pressures on women can be eliminated, so decisions on polygyny are taken only by those most affected, the women who would become co-wives.

Thus *phronesis*, everyday wisdom, develops a process for societal improvement and empowerment which involves dialogue, democracy, justice, the resistance of officious power, and reconciliation.

2. Marriage in Religious Education

Critical teaching about 'religion' invites the kind of investigation that recognizes and reduces bias. Whether religion and marriage should be interlinked is a crucial question: what is a social custom to some is a sacrament to others. Law and custom, for example, made divorce difficult until relatively recently as this separates what God (it was presumed) had joined together. The same sensitivities affect whether previously divorced couples can marry in church. Whether marriage should be regulated by religion requires critical investigation; and how couples might be *justly* paired and supported in the secular community is an important question for social critique. Creating a family through casual copulation has drawbacks in child support and nurture, devaluing the role of father and the nuclear family. At a time when morality and values were presumed to have a religious basis, it made sense to place child nurture in the domain of the sacred, constrained by values claiming to have authority as 'God's will'.

However, religious belief and teaching have a human origin, establishing power and authority to an elite priesthood. The people in power are likely to be male; their concern to control sexuality will be hegemonic and one sided. For women, a sexual exclusivity contract may be the price that has to be paid for persuading a man to provide continuously for mother and child. Whether women would receive sexual exclusivity from their husband is however a different issue.

Marriage customs have been influenced by tradition and by religious teaching. From the standpoint of social justice, neither influence has set a high regard for love or even consent. Bible stories sometimes talk of a man loving a girl (Isaac, Jacob) but less of a girl loving her husband. Wives are said to complain (Sarah, Rebecca, Michal) and be spiteful to co-wives (Sarah and Hagar, Leah and Rachel, Peninnah to Hannah)[7]. Detailed studies of marriage in the OT and elsewhere in the Near East are sparse[8] Marriages were decided within families by families, often when a girl was young, and often with economic implications. Tribal tradition favoured polygyny where warfare depleted male numbers. Warfare also resulted in the capture of women, who became reluctant workers and childbearers. The OT stories reflect this, with concubines, harems, and even marriage by capture (Judges 21.14-24). Those treating the Bible as scripture might view such stories as vindications of unjust practices, unless the nature and purpose of the story is understood and its context within the complete canon of Biblical texts is clarified. Biblical stories, in short, cannot provide a sound basis of present-day policy and practice, but are themselves a critique of ancient practice. Stories were not necessarily told *with approval*. Critical pedagogy within religious education has a crucial part to play to uncover these layers.

[7] Gen 24.67; 29.18; 16.6; 30.1; I Sam 1.6; II Sam 6.16.

[8] Ancient Hebrew marriage and family customs were the subject of my PhD (Bigger, 1975). Early studies are by Burrows (1938), Epstein (1927, 1942), Neufeld (1944), Mace (1953), De Vaux (1961), Plautz, (1962). Ugaritic families were described by van Selms (1954) and Rainey (1965). The Nuzi texts were described, transliterated and translated by Breneman (1971). More recently there have been studies by Perdue et al. (1997), McNutt (1999), and from a conservative Christian perspective Davidson (2008). There have been many other simplistic popular books.

Old Testament Stories about Ancestry

Today the vivid narratives of novels and television soaps are ever popular; similarly, the scintillating but sometimes seedy OT stories depict controversial attitudes to sexuality and status. Their purpose is at the same time theological, political and social, to generate obedience, control and compliance. The stories are not straightforward but were written by people unknown to us in order to persuade and influence their readers (or audience if the stories were recited). We need therefore to read the Biblical narratives as stories with theological and political agendas.

The Genesis family saga runs from Adam to Ephraim, the chosen son of Joseph: this comments on legitimacy and suggests that the writer is a supporter of the northern kingdom so hated by the Judaean writers of the books of Samuel and Kings. The story sets up a fictional family tree of twelve tribes whose father/ ancestor, Jacob was conveniently nicknamed 'Israel'; the earlier ancestors Shem and Abraham were common to all other semitic tribes. Tribes such as Judah are critiqued through the poor behaviour of their patriarch, both for his mishandling of the 'levirate' type marriage of Tamar his daughter in law (Gen. 38) and in the part he played in selling Ephraim's father Joseph into Egypt. In promoting the interests of Joseph (and of his mother Rachel) the other elder sons of Leah are criticised in different ways – Simeon and Levi for slaughtering the inhabitants of Shechem because of a proposal for intermarriage (Gen. 34); and Reuben for having sex with Bilhah his father's concubine (Gen 35.22 and 49.4). The blessings of Jacob (Gen 49) seal the down-rating of the sons of Leah. Thus, whatever else they imply, the stories of Dinah and Tamar are mainly constructed as mechanisms to expose the male characters to criticism. Their circumstances, Dinah raped or seduced as a prelude to marriage, and Tamar denied 'levitate' marriage on the death of her husband may be recognizable social situations, but we need to be cautious about generalisation since they are fictional tales within a fictional setting. The status of Jacob's wives is also subject to this stricture: Leah was described as being foisted on Jacob by trickery, replacing Rachel whom he loved. The genealogy of Genesis 46 records Rachel as the only wife, reducing Leah and the servant women as women 'who bore Jacob children', even though this distinction is not made in the story itself. The final version of Genesis (perhaps influenced by post-exilic genealogists) uses monogamy as its schema, with exceptions (e.g.

Abraham and Jacob) explained away. Non-Hebrew tribes (e.g. Lamech, Esau) are explicitly polygynist, and the problems of this are emphasised (e.g. Rachel and Leah, Gen. 29.31-30.22). This monogamous schema creates genealogical simplicity but does not imply much about actual marriage customs.

This brings up another consideration, the extent to which a coherent narrative has been added to by later editors. We do not have space here to explore this fully, so general comment will suffice. The Ephraim edition of Genesis, of which we have spoken, gives the overall shape to the story that we recognize. Joseph is a hero in exile, producing continuity from exile through his sons. We know little of deportations after the defeat of the northern kingdom, where a pro-Ephraim agenda might be found. That Jeroboam the first king of 'Ephraim' (the northern kingdom) fled to Egypt has been seen as the source of the Joseph story (Carmichael 1979). There may have been earlier and later versions, as source criticism asserts. There can be no certainty that the Pentateuch as a whole had a single author (but see Whybray 1987, that the Pentateuch was a fictional 'prequel' to the Hebrew monarchy, using various fragments). The opening Genesis creation story seems influenced by the Babylonian creation story; that a covenant of circumcision was an exilic construct is possible; that a pro-Ephraimite agenda was relevant in the exile needs some explaining but we know that the Samaritans continued this tradition. The underlying questions and issues are historical/literary, not doctrinal.

One other aspect of Genesis' approach to sexuality worth highlighting in this section concerns legitimacy. Abram/Abraham's family lies at the core of the semitic Near Eastern family tree: the meanings of his names, 'great father' and 'father of many' note his function as Ancestor. Since his main wife Sarai/Sarah was childless, Abraham's firstborn child by a servant woman, Hagar, was Ishmael who became the ancestor of Arab tribes. Sarah had however already been passed off as Abraham's sister and given in marriage first to Pharaoh of Egypt, and secondly to Abimelech of Philistine Gerar (Gen 12 and 20), showing little regard for biological legitimacy had she become pregnant. Because she laughed at the thought of becoming pregnant in old age, her son Isaac's name is constructed from the verb 'to laugh' (though not the form 'she laughed'). The Abraham legend contains a section on his nephew Lot whose life in Sodom ended with the

destruction of that city. His daughters bore by their own father children who became ancestors of the Moabites and Ammonites. There is an acute question for us about why the patriarchal story is dominated by chaotic sexuality – certainly to entertain, but also to demonstrate that God's choice of a people was not to be constrained by human sexual behaviour. God controlled both children and barrenness. Inheriting sons are chosen, with biological firstborn sons not automatically recognized.

Isaac's main function was the beget Esau and Jacob, Esau the ancestor of the Edomites (Gen 36) and Jacob ancestor of the Israelites (Gen 46). Jacob (Gen. 27-37) tricked his older twin of his birthright, and was himself tricked in marriage by his father-in-law Laban, who married him to the wrong girl – but he in turn tricked Laban to build up a fine herd of sheep in preparation for leaving. Later he was tricked by his own sons who declared Joseph dead, but almost at the point of death switched the birthright from Manasseh to Ephraim, sons of Joseph. As Israelite ancestor, Jacob was no role model. Hebrew history thus had very shaky foundations. There is little doubt in all but conservative quarters that the characters in the stories never existed as real people. We can term the stories 'legend', so long as this does not imply exaggerated stories of real people. They are fictions. God sent Abram to Palestine as an alien, an element designed to declare that Palestine was given by God. Abram negotiated with God over the saving of Sodom and Gomorrah, and was granted an heir by divine dispensation. Ishmael, expelled to the wilderness, was saved by God. A solemn covenant between God and Abraham is declared (Gen 17) using circumcision as the symbol. Isaac's life is spared by God, and Jacob wrestles with God at Penuel (Gen 32.24-28). God is shown as puppet-master, the organising figure behind history. This is the central message. And, according to Genesis, this God chose Ephraim as the legitimate heir.

The issue for pedagogy is that teaching about Old Testament stories are stories that require interpretation. The critical agenda requires teachers to use the curriculum for discussion of social and moral issues, regarding the attitudes within the text as open and not to be accepted as uncontroversial. Pupils faced with the stories of Abraham, Sarah and Hagar (for example) should interrogate these rationally and by no means regard them as role models.

Monogamy and Polygyny

The creation story (Gen. 1-3) brings man and woman together as 'one flesh', first to be fruitful, and second with a relationship created by sin. This is bitter-sweet, explaining why marriage is emotionally problematic, much as the story explains the pain of childbearing and the toil of farming.

Polygyny still occurs today, and Religious Education needs to explore the issues. Polygyny occurs in the Old Testament as an exception that creates problems. In primeval genealogies, the exceptional bigyny of Lamech is considered worthy of comment (Gen 4.19) but there are no other hints. With Abraham, childbearing by Hagar is a response to the childlessness of his 'wife' Sarah; his marriage to Keturah comes only after Sarah's death (Gen. 25.1). Hagar and Keturah may have been the 'concubines' mentioned in Gen 25.6, the ancestresses of many Near Eastern tribes – or it may be a catch-all for any others who claim Abrahamic ancestry). I argue elsewhere that the non-semitic term 'concubine' (pilagesh) is a late attempt to show that these other descendants of Abraham did not inherit (Bigger 2011). Jacob's polygyny, a trick by his father-in-law, caused major family tensions between wives and their offspring. The people 'Israel' emerged from very murky ancestral roots, at least in this fictional prequel. Mary Douglas (2004) the anthropologist may be right in claiming that one motive for writing Genesis may have been to discourage ancestor worship[9].

Samuel's mother Hannah was barren (I Sam. 1), her fecund 'rival' co-wife Peninnah bullying her. Samuel's birth to an otherwise barren woman, as with Isaac's birth to Sarah (Gen 21.1-2), is shown as a divine gift of a significant historical figure. The late writer Ben Sirach (Ecclesiasticus) commented on family tensions: polygynous jealousies are bitterness indeed (Ecclus. 26.6; 37.11). Polygyny was allowed in Judaism into the middle ages and beyond, but that is not to say that it was common. The Elephantine Jewish colony in Egypt controlled polygyny by contract (Porten 1968), if the woman's family had sufficient influence. We have insufficient evidence of marriage contracts in Israel in the OT period to put together a fuller picture of ordinary marriages and families so can only try to interpret the hints in the texts. Some kings are depicted with harems of wives and concubines –

[9] Mary Douglas also made substantial contributions to OT study in the light of Anthropology (Douglas 1974, 1993 and 1999).

especially David, Solomon and Rehoboam[10], the three generations leading up to the division of the monarchy into Israel/Ephraim (North) and Judah (South). Later kings are identified through their mothers' names, which may be a hint that kings at least had several wives so that the mother of the crown prince had a high status. However, since Samuel and Kings were written during the exile (the books end with the exile) the stories may mirror the harems of their host empire (first Babylon, then Persia).

If we read these ambiguities in the light of the prophets' desire for justice and loving-kindness involving support for the weak in society, these stories do not within their context support unjust marriage practices today. This prophetic message parallels the secular desire for social justice within critical theory, thus offering a modern strategy for critiquing the biblical text. The OT is a document of the powerful, written by a literate elite in order to establish their legitimacy against the claims of others. The comparative statuses of wives and concubines is a facet of this claim, maintaining the fiction of unequal family relationships as a metaphor for tribal competition. The status of women depicted as unfavoured wives is *literary*, and is not evidence of what happened in society. Even that most peculiar of stories, the rape and murder of the Levite's concubine (Judges 19) is a propaganda story against the tribe of Benjamin, King Saul's tribe, told in all probability centuries after the supposed events.

For Religious Education, it is important to emphasise that no form of marriage is divinely ordained. Polygyny, the Bible warns, is a source of bitterness: respect and justice should in general be shown towards the powerless (Amos 5.24). The biblical writings, even law codes, had agendas, and all are concerned first and foremost to condemn idolatry, revealing through its narratives and laws that actually idolatry was exactly what everyone did in real life. There is a substantial subtext to support women in case of marital problems, and biblical stories expose oppression, told without approval and sometimes with mockery. We have to remember that marriage was a family and not a romantic attachment. Fiction may laud Isaac's love for Rebekah and Jacob's for Rachel, but Leah's experience was less positive, and Tamar was motivated by wanting a child and not a husband (Judah comes out of this story particularly badly). The husband who makes a false

[10] II Sam 3.2-5; I Kgs 3.1f, 9.24; II Chron 11.21.

accusation against a new bride must remain married to her – doubtless without great affection on either side (Deut 22.19). Some polygynous marriages at least were prohibited, if the two women were too closely related (Lev 18 and 20, Bigger 1979). An implication for today is that showing respect for one's wife or wives is more significant than wondering whether particular marriage customs are divinely sanctioned.

Intermarriage and Divorce

The OT presents a confusing picture of intermarriage. Ezra's extraordinary demand that men divorce (or maybe dissolve their marriages) to their 'foreign' (i.e. non-Hebrew) wives to prevent apostasy takes up a disproportionate amount of space. On the positive side, Ruth the Moabite became the ancestress of King David, and Joseph's sons, including Ephraim the heir in Genesis, had an Egyptian mother. Rebekah objected to her son Esau's Hittite wives demanding that his twin Jacob (clearly not yet married) found a bride within the extended family, as Isaac had done. This (fictional) marriage curiously linked Israelite origins to Haran near Damascus, not to Palestine (the patriarchs were described as sojourners in Palestine)[11].

A mother teaches her children language and story, and so is deeply influential to their development; therefore intermarriage was presumed to cause idolatry and backsliding. Deuteronomy (7.3) recommends avoidance of some intermarriages. Approaching this from the standpoint of critical *phronesis*, practical wisdom with its emphasis on power, the various ancient criticisms of idolatry suggest that intermarriage with local non-Hebrews was common and was only deemed a problem by a group of religious officials with exclusivist tendencies who were horrified about what they saw and wished to control it. In Elephantine texts, inter-religious marriages were common, even referring to both sets of Gods. Then, as later, a hard-line on intermarriage had been very hard to keep, and involved some repressive strategies such as threats and stigma. The same has been true in some modern religious communities. Repression is opposed to justice. This invites discussion in religious education on the advantages and disadvantages of religious, cultural and 'racial' mixing. Memories of Nazism and the spectre

[11] Ezra 9-10; Gen 46.20; Gen 27.46.

of segregation makes this difficult to defend today, though pressures controlling marriage choice still exist. Our conclusion underpinned by social justice has to be therefore that inter-religious marriages are a normal aspiration. Chetty (2007) used rhetorical criticism on Ezra-Nehemiah and New Testament texts to comment on issues of divorce today, which in his view should not use Ezra-Nehemiah as a guide. Johnson (2011) contrasts the circumstances of social trauma in Ezra-Nehemiah with the institutionalised racism which discourages intermarriage in the United States. Southwood (2012[12]) seeks clarification from anthropological study of the trauma of return migrants.

Divorce is sparsely covered in the OT, and virtually disallowed in the NT. Examples of marriage contracts/documents are known from the ancient Near East, especially an early cuneiform collection found in the city of Nuzu (Breneman 1971) in the region referred to in Genesis as Haran. Conditions for the marriage could include specifications about divorce. The wife's belongings brought into the marriage were often listed to be retained by the wife when she departed. These have become somewhat confused with the idea of dowry imported from anthropological descriptions. Much later, around the 4th century BCE, specifically Jewish documents which include marriage and divorce were found in Elephantine near Aswan, Egypt, a military colony in the Persian period. Here, mixing with the local community was normal and some documents were sworn in the names of both Jewish and Egyptian deities. Again, the wife's belongings were listed in case of divorce. That no marriage documents from the OT period have been found in Palestine/Israel might be because writing materials used were not durable. Documents hidden and later discovered in Dead Sea caves survived because they were considered precious; a family archive was then, as now, more ephemeral, as modern family historians can attest. Deut 24.1-4 offers the only law, and this is curious since its main purpose is to prevent a man remarrying his divorced wife.

Apart from the Ezra diatribe about idolatry, there is little in the OT which gives solid guidance about marriage. We need to look elsewhere for

[12] See Bigger, forthcoming, 'Review Article: Anthropology and the Biblical Exile' which includes a review of Kelle, Ames and Wright (2011) on the complexity of modern studies of the biblical exile.

such guidance, to the prophetic concepts of justice, mercy, uprightnessness and lovingkindness. In modern terms, this invites the use of critical pedagogy, basing a social and personal curriculum on justice and respect and promoting positive interpersonal relationships.

3. Conclusion

Examples of marriage in the OT do not give us a clear picture either of marriage as conducted then, or ideals that might be helpful in the modern world. The material had social, political and religious agendas which cloud all descriptions. Since the Bible is used as a source of authority, Religious Education has a role in helping pupils to read the Bible critically so that they can resist irrational demands. Critical pedagogy engages pupils both with understanding ancient texts in their context (exegesis) and interpreting them for today (hermeneutics). I argue that everyday wisdom about sexuality needs to start with a social critique based on justice and respect, which can be defined religiously or secularly. This *critical phronesis* asks questions about power agendas and hegemony, and seeks a balanced view about how just solutions can be found, with no voices repressed. This invites us to consider what counts as everyday wisdom (that is, assumptions about what is appropriate and effective) within a vision of an empowering community. Incorporating these insights into schooling produces a 'critical pedagogy' that puts personal empowerment and fulfilment first. Rossatto (2005: 120-127) calls this *centring pedagogy on student need.*

Religious Education has so far favoured a descriptive methodology, describing world religions and scriptures in ways unlikely to offend. Critique is therefore impeded. The detail has been written by people with agendas, and the descriptions are generalisations which tend not to show either the wide variation of belief and practice or those aspects detrimental to human happiness. Religions are presented through rose tinted spectacles as legitimate forms of knowledge, belief and practice. Critical pedagogy turns this around: the emphasis is now on issues of ethics, power and oppression. The curriculum might cover attitudes (across religions) to poverty, oppression, discrimination, respect, environmental responsibility or vandalism and autocracy versus democratic communities. These will enrich the social, moral and political learning of pupils. All religions have aspects

that require critique and even condemnation. Forced marriage choice is on this list, as is female genital mutilation. Sexuality and marriage are key sites of oppression for girls and women, enforced by older women as well as by men. Critical *phronesis* assumes that such a critique is part of the change process, enabling education to improve the world by consultation and joint decision-making. This model of Religious Education puts religion under a microscope. It is not anti-religious, since it seeks out the best (ethical, responsible, democratic) forms of religion in order to give pupils higher expectations of institutions and personnel. Nevertheless it needs to explicitly expose and reject aspects which are repressive and oppressive.

Critical 'phronetic' Religious Education on marriage and sexuality focuses on social and personal issues, using the principles of justice, responsibility, loyalty, support, care and undivided love. These could be described as human values (statements of what holds real value), virtues (positive attitudes and behaviour) and ideals (visions of how society should be) as I demonstrate elsewhere in relation to the whole curriculum (Bigger & Brown 1999). Religious Education needs, using Paulo Freire's phrase to 'read the world', that is examine why the world is as it is, and seek to challenge and change it where necessary. Through doing that pupils can 'read the word', that is understand literary conventions and their implications, including the use of scriptures (Freire 2004). This would transform classroom practice and the understanding of religion. Religious Education has to study religion and religious attitudes critically if it is to maintain its place as an academic subject. That means far more discussion of ethical, social, psychological and political issues. That will challenge some religions and denominations which try to control people's lives and choices, and this is no bad thing. Any faith honouring the principles of justice, equity and respect will have little to fear. At stake is the issue of what we do as a world community about the treatment of girls and women: justice, equity and respect are good starting points in a world where sexual violence and sexual exploitation are endemic, and the even law often provides little justice. This 'critical' approach to sexuality, relationships and marriage is broader than the religious education curriculum: discussions of social justice and democratic voice need to permeate the whole curriculum if it is to prepare pupils to contribute to a fairer and more fulfilling society.

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