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Freire on free space

"No education is not political — no matter whether the educators are conscious of it or not," said Paulo Freire when he was in Auckland recently.

Professor Freire, consultant on education for the World Council of Churches, conducted two seminars in Auckland and Wellington during his short visit to New Zealand.

He describes himself as a "very domestic being" who would love to be home with his wife and children, but the purpose of his visit was to share some of his ideas on education, which some New Zealanders are familiar with from his books "Pedagogy of the Oppressed", and "Cultural Action for Freedom."

He wrote "Pedagogy of the Oppressed" he said, thinking it would be read only by Latin American students and teachers who would be able to understand the sophisticated language used. He expected to print an edition of only 5000 copies. But an American theologian friend told him it was worth translating and in 1970 the first edition appeared in the United States. It has now been translated into 10 languages including Greek and Swahili.

Why does he think his books have become so popular and widely read?

"Mainly because they are saying obvious things, which a lot of people have inside them, but which they have not been able to express. They discover themselves when they read the books and think — 'that is precisely what I thought.'"

In Holland three editions were printed in four months, and both of his books have sold 1600 a month since they appeared.

FREE SPACE

"In a country like New Zealand," Paulo Freire said, "there is more free space in the education system, than there is in Latin America. The question is how to work within this free space."

In the University of Geneva where he has taken classes as the professor, he didn't organise a programme. Instead he spent several days with his group of students just discussing the word "seminar", which by its normal use every day



had lost all meaning. It was possible to do this because of the free space of the University.

"The humanizing of education has to start from the people, not from you or your perception of reality. You have to know how people see themselves and what their concrete reality is."

"Generally we tend to act as missionaries or economists to the people," he said. "We have a tendency to evade the people and not to respect their culture or their soul. This first real obstacle, and the main one, is the origin of class. As bourgeoisie, the university system has produced in us an elitist concept of knowledge — far from the reality of the people."

"We too have to learn by experience and receive

people. We think we can save the people, but either we save ourselves together or no-one is saved. No-one can save anyone else.

"One of the most important things to be discussed (not taught) is the understanding of the differences between cultural patterns and beliefs."

A constant concern of Paulo Freire is the process of turning things which are being discussed into objects of knowledge. In this way those present try and experience an act of knowing.

"For example instead of showing some slides and saying, this shows a river... you challenge the people looking at the slides to discuss them. They can discuss the technical, economical, political and social aspects of everything they see. Our task as educators it to challenge the people, and go beyond them."

Every education of situation envelops an education of knowledge. When trying to work out what "knowing" is, we have to realize that we can't be neutral.

One of the apparent defects in his books is the lack of method, he said. This is because the question for him is not important. What is important is the political clarity. In starting to act with the people, you discover the instruments and as long as they cohere with your political vision, they will be the right ones.

On the question of what educative role the churches can play, Professor Freire said it depends on the level of communication church people have with society.

"If the churches are conservative, then their education will be too."

"The only true church is the prophetic church — that is the church that is with the oppressed, but not paternalistic. It exists not only to speak on behalf of those who are silent, but also to struggle with them and give them a voice. It must look for radical solutions, and not just reforms."

He finds it contradictory for anyone to be an exploiter and a Christian, and he rejects all theological thought that makes a dichotomy between liberation and salvation. "People in the younger generation," he said, "are leaving the church because they can't accept the evangelical approach. They either have to be patient or alienated. I insist to my children that it is not the true essence of the Christian religion."

knowledge. Teaching cannot be dichotomized from learning. No teachers have nothing to learn, and no students have nothing to teach.

"We have a bad tendency to make value judgements on the value of a culture, and to think of ourselves as having an organising and developing role in society. But it is only possible to have a real role in communities by first of all learning with the people in the community. Secondly to continue to learn; thirdly to continue to learn. Mysteriously and suddenly you find that you too can teach. This comes when you are totally immersed in the community; but this rarely happens."

"We go to the communities with gloves and masks; in the last analysis we go hating and not loving the