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For Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion



Pulling the Trigger

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Blog Series: Teaching and Traumatic Events

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The questions that inform my teaching and scholarship focus on representations of violence. This means I spend a good deal of time studying such representations. I learned several years ago that my capacity to answer relatively straight-forward questions like “But is that film really gory?” or “Will I find that book really disturbing?” has dwindled into non-existence. Turns out that when a significant portion of your media consumption is comprised of images of war, torture, sexualized degradation, and racialized brutality, your attunement to the average consumer’s tastes atrophies. From the outset, then, I acknowledge that I might not be the most reliable guide to help sort out how to teach traumatic materials.

By the same token, I have taught, written about, and meditated on an array of traumatic materials—and my students, in the main, after initial phases of feeling overwhelmed and disoriented by the questions and contents that organize my courses, have reported finding something valuable in them. So, to open this blog series, I want to suggest that teaching traumatic materials may not be so different from teaching per se.

First, I think we are sometimes overinvested in thinking about traumatic materials as a special case. When considering the events, texts, and ideas that comprise the religious studies curriculum, it’s tough to think about what remains after subtracting potentially traumatizing content. War, violence in various forms, imperialism and colonialism, degradation and humiliation, ethnocentrism and racism, sexism and heterosexism—examples of each abound

in the language, imaginaries, and practices that we take as our object of study. Do we need *additional* pedagogical tools beyond the transparency, openness, and attentiveness that we should be using all the time to make sure that we are noticing, and making space for, our students' varying levels of discomfort, resistance, confusion, and hostility? Given that traumatic materials constitute so much of what we teach when we teach religion, I would suggest that—insofar as we are teaching well—we already know how to teach such materials.

Second, I think we overestimate our ability to predict which materials will traumatize. In a former life, when I was an adjunct teaching Constitutional Law, I made a remark about the brilliance of the U.S. Constitution's solution to the practical problems presented by the Articles of Confederation. A young African-American woman, who had been quiet for the first few weeks of class, spoke up and eloquently explained that she found nothing to admire in a document that still countenanced the ownership of human beings. I carry her intervention with me every time I enter the classroom. My experience of the world shapes what I experience as injurious, as ugly, as painful, as disturbing. In the same vein, I remember distinctly how terrified and paralyzed I felt sitting amongst the enthusiastic cheers that greeted the final scene of Brett Ratner's blockbuster film, *X-Men: The Last Stand*, as "good" mutants fought to destroy the "bad" mutants who refused to be "cured" of their otherness. Given that history and mainstream culture are made by and for those who hold power, even the most seemingly anodyne examples can be traumatizing for those who were never meant to survive.

Related to the question of predicting which materials might traumatize, I also wonder about our ability to read students' reactions. When does silence evince reflection and when paralysis? When is speaking up fueled by enthusiasm and when by rage? Although my course evaluations tell me that my ability to read the energy of the room is far from perfect, I remain convinced that when we strive to remain present with our students in the unfolding of the event that is the class session, then the surprises that inevitably come will be much less likely to catch us off guard in destructive ways.

Finally, I think we sometimes overvalue teaching traumatic materials—either by assuming that certain topics are beyond our pedagogical capacity—because they are too upsetting, too sensitive, too difficult—or by valorizing those who have the "courage" and the "finesse" to teach such challenging content. I teach what I teach—like most teachers—because I find something important, something tantalizing, something worthwhile in the material. I teach what I teach—like most teachers—because it opens a particular perspective on the world for my students. And, like most teachers, I have good days and bad, days my students get it and days they don't, days I'm fully engaged and days I'm distracted, days they resist what I'm trying to do and days they trust me enough to willingly come with me.

The more we normalize the traumatic in our pedagogical imaginations, the more we'll be able to help our students encounter the ubiquity of trauma that constitutes their world and their lives.

<https://wabash.center/2018/01/pulling-the-trigger/>

