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For Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion



The Perfect Storm

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Blog Series: Teaching and Traumatic Events

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Over the past few months, the entries in this blog series have attempted to provide guidance and insight related to the pedagogical challenges of teaching traumatic materials. The series was initiated to provide a sense of reassurance about facing these challenges. By discussing the range of challenges, the variety of approaches, the multiple potential topics, and the significant questions, it may, of course, have had the opposite effect. Readers of the series may be even less confident that they can engage such topics in their classrooms.

In my final entry, then, let me try and make the case for why—pedagogically—traumatic materials belong in our classrooms. First and foremost, and this is consistent with everything I've said in my contributions, as teachers of religion, we don't *decide* to introduce traumatic materials into our classrooms; they are already the warp and woof of our subject matter and of our students' lives. We can make decisions to avoid such materials and topics or to try and ignore their affective charge, but we can't avoid them if we are treating our subject well.

Since we have to engage traumatic materials, we should be mindful of what they can do in our classrooms, to our teaching, and for our students. Traumatic materials are, for all kinds of complicated, and unpredictable, reasons, interesting. They have a charge that engages and enlivens students. They demand a response. Traumatic materials are complex. They require a wide range of approaches—both disciplinary and interpretive. To treat traumatic materials well, students will have to think like historians, like textualists, like rhetoricians, like

sociologists, like psychologists, like ethicists, like political theorists. They will have to think about questions of nation, identity, power, race, sex, class, and cultural difference. Traumatic materials cannot be mastered. They cannot be mastered by teacher or student. This means they necessarily create a collaborative learning environment in which everyone has a chance to shine and everyone has a chance to listen. They require patience, and attention, and stillness, and reflection. But because they are so complex, when we begin to understand them, there is a genuine feeling of accomplishment that not only vivifies the learning environment but also gives students (and teachers) a sense of capacity and competence.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, traumatic materials are difficult. Not just difficult to comprehend and interpret, but emotionally, affectively, psychically difficult. They demand something of us. They demand something more from some of us than others. But this means that teaching traumatic materials generates a situation that calls for a certain ethical attentiveness. Students and teachers are required to listen to each other more carefully, to respond to each other more thoughtfully, to sit with each other more patiently. We must learn how to recover from slips, and mistakes, and hurts. In his Netflix special, “Thank God for Jokes,” comedian Mike Birbiglia notes that jokes are sites of offense, insult, and even danger because jokes are always about someone. (He references as an extreme case of this problem—the *Charlie Hebdo* shootings—a traumatic event that brings together jokes, violence, and religion.) Similarly, traumas always impact someone. But Birbiglia goes on to observe that because jokes are always about someone, they create an invitation to attend to each other with great care and sensitivity, to make sure that we are not rushing to judgment, or taking each other’s words out of context, or quickly ascribing ill motives. The attention that Birbiglia claims jokes can foster in us sounds a great deal like the habits of scholarly attention that we want our students to develop.

Let me be clear: we should not use traumatic events and materials instrumentally to build skills in our students. The *last* thing we need is to establish some new pedagogical trend that posits trauma as the new tool for engaged student learning! At the same time, we should not be afraid of the challenges posed by traumatic materials because, as I’ve said in my contributions to this series, the challenges are not so different than the challenges posed by teaching generally. And, as I am suggesting here when there are sound reasons for considering and investigating traumatic events, the rewards of engaging them with our students are quite rich and profound.

<https://wabash.center/2018/05/the-perfect-storm/>