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For Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion



Teaching What is “Real”

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“You are now entering the real world.”

This is undoubtedly one of the most popular remarks that college/university graduates hear around the time of their commencement ceremony. The comment implies, of course, that life on campus is a kind of artificial existence, since, just to give one example, there are generally no children in sight. It also suggests a certain distance between what happens in the classroom and what goes on outside. At best, the former is understood in the statement as a kind of abstract thought, while the latter has to do with concrete practice; whether the abstract is applicable to a concrete situation remains therefore to be seen. At worst, classroom lessons are assumed as basically “irrelevant.”

There are certainly a lot of things—important things—happening in our society and world today. Gun violence, for instance, is happening all around us, from the mass shooting in a gay bar in Orlando to the murder of a professor by his doctoral student on the campus of UCLA. One can easily add to this the process and implications of the upcoming presidential election, the “debates” over climate change, or the impact of the slowdown in China on the global economy. Do we spend time in our classrooms to talk about these happenings that affect lives and impact how entire societies function? Do we tell or show students how their education relates to these phenomena beyond the four walls of the classroom?

In order to show the relevance of what students learn inside her classroom to the “real world,” a colleague of mine in the economics department has developed a particular practice. She always tunes her car radio to NPR during her drive to campus, and then she uses what she heard that day to begin her classroom lesson. According to her, years of practice have now enabled her to connect with ease on any given day whatever she hears on the radio and what she is supposed to teach. This is important to her because she wants her students to see and understand the value—that is, the practicality—of their classroom learning.



I wonder if and how this pedagogical philosophy and practice may be transferable to our teaching of religion and theology. It is great to demonstrate the relevance of what we teach. Having said that, I must also say that I wonder at times if this emphasis on “relevance” is not at least partly related to the corporatization of education. That is to say, teaching and learning now, including that of religion and theology, must demonstrate its value, just as everything in the business world must bring with it concrete, verifiable, and assessment result. If the bottom line of “result” in the business world means profit, is it thinkable that value in education also becomes narrowly defined in terms of practicality or, worse, utilitarianism, such as “gainful employment”? (Just today, I saw a featured page on a news website on “colleges where your return on investment is terrible.”) In a sense, paying attention to profit or practical utility is not a problem; it does, however, become a problem when such attention causes us to become tunnel-visioned and short-sighted. We have seen what the focus on and rush to profit-making is doing to the environment; similarly, may the emphasis on “relevance” and “real world” actually compromises the long-term benefits of education? Could it further develop a (under?) class of under-educated adults? Would it prevent future production of liberatory knowledge?

Let me give an example given the recent mass murder in a gay bar in Orlando; no matter what the motives of the shooter may involve, the tragedy does remind me of the vulnerability of GLBT lives. In a conversation about academic “relevance,” my own teacher, Mary Ann Tolbert, talked about how academic research on and classroom exploration of ancient tombstones in Greece are likely considered to be both “impractical” and “irrelevant” in today’s educational climate. It is, however, in and through such a study that we learned of female homoeroticism in ancient Greece: when a couple were buried together, these ancient tombstones often have the

engraving of two hands being clasped together; on many tombstones, though, the two hands are clearly female. In other words, what seems like an esoteric, elitist, “ivory-tower,” and out-of-touch pursuit of the past actually leads to a production of knowledge that is meaningful and relevant to GLBT lives today. If that lesson had been abandoned for its lack of evident and immediate payoff, we would have missed and lost something significant.

In fact, thinking carefully about what one means by “real” and “relevant” in the long haul is especially important in this moment of history. As changes are happening faster and become more and more unpredictable, we do not really know what the future will look like and what sort of knowledge and skills will be needed. We definitely should try our best to tell and show students why it is important to learn what we have to teach; at the same time, we ourselves must learn not to foreclose our teaching and learning by a narrow and short-term understanding of “relevance.” We must keep reminding ourselves and our students how often and how many relevant and crucial pursuits have been caricatured or dismissed at first as “frivolous,” “useless,” or “unreal.”

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