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For Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion



## When White Supremacists Come To Town

Rebekka King, *Middle Tennessee State University*

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Like Teresa Delgado I've composed and deleted several versions of this post. My first draft, started several weeks ago, reflected on how we talk about race, violence, and nationalism post-Charlottesville. I wanted to add my voice to the many inspiring people who have found ways to incorporate discussions of xenophobia, violence, and white privilege into their courses. In that post, I attempted to address the types of questions and frameworks that our students naturally employ in the aftermath of tragedies. Specifically, I was interested in the ways our students personalize these experiences by asking each other "What would you do?" We all hope to be the people who do something in the face of hate.

If I hadn't fallen behind in the wake of a hectic fall semester that would be the blog post you would be reading. This week, however, I've been tasked with a different question. Not what *would* you do, but rather, what *will* we do? I write not from the perspective of *post-* but the perspective of *pre-*.

The League of the South (along with several other white supremacist organizations) are planning a rally next weekend in both Shelbyville and Murfreesboro, Tennessee. According to a spokesperson for the organization, the group is not rallying around the preservation of statues this time because the state's Heritage Act already makes it quite difficult to remove confederate monuments. Instead, their stated topic of contention is refugee resettlement (an

issue which happens to be close to home for me; I volunteer as a translator for a local refugee family).

Right now there are several groups mobilizing in opposition to these rallies. Both local organizations and ones from out of town are coordinating resistance activities and counter-protests. Across social media and at various public forums, citizens of Murfreesboro are divided as to what the appropriate response should be. Some people are firmly resolved, others are uncertain, and many are afraid.

Coincidentally, in my introductory Religion and Society class, my students are in the middle of a unit examining religious codes and systems of ethics. Last week, we looked at Craig Martin's *A Critical Introduction to the Study of Religion* that explores how ethical decisions are filtered through Bourdieu's notion of *habitus*. That seemed like as good a place as any to think about the different possible actions that one might take against a white supremacist rally.

So here's what I did, *pre-* an event like Murfreesboro/Shelbyville 2017.

I began by reflecting on the fact that we've had more conversations than usual about current and political events this semester. From Puerto Rico to Las Vegas; from nuclear threats from North Korea to a church shooting in the town next door; and from the epidemic of sexual violence against women epitomized by Harvey Weinstein to the movement inspired by Colin Kaepernick to expose systemic racism. Over the past two months there has been no shortage of current events for our students to assess or debate from the position of "What would you do?"

I went on to say that I wanted to have a different type of conversation. Rather than describing or offering their own opinions, I would be asking them to do a higher level of analysis. Description, I told them, is an important part of what we do in religious studies, but that's not all we do. I called on the students who are also enrolled in my Jesus class to explain how in that class we've undertaken a discursive analysis wherein we're not interested in what the texts say (and certainly not in whether they are right or wrong), but instead are interested in what they do (and what the doing does).

I printed off conversation threads from four different public Facebook events/pages that are making plans in opposition to the white supremacists' rally. The different options presented by these pages are:

- Do nothing (ignore them, don't invite conflict)
- Hold a family-friendly rally in a different location (a protest of sorts without direct confrontation)
- Have a counter-protest and call on citizens to stand against white nationalism, Nazis, and the KKK (a protest with direct confrontation but the avoidance of physical violence)
- Take part in an Antifa-style protest (direct confrontation with anticipated violence)[1]

As we worked our way through the four sites, I asked the class to read the language closely for evidence of how each group describes themselves, the white supremacist group, and other

planned protests. We discussed how they legitimated their perspectives and where they placed their authority (in the case of the first three, each claimed to have the best interests of Murfreesboro at heart and worked to establish their local identity via connections to different community groups and networks). From there we sketched out a basic conception of how all four read the moral position “white supremacy is wrong” through different lenses provided by their *habitus* and with very different consequences.

The activity seemed to work well. I wanted to have a conversation that did something different than simply reiterating the students’ own viewpoints. While those types of conversations can be helpful because they provide an opportunity for students to practice speaking about contentious issues, this particular discussion is more urgent. Often I find classroom discussions devolve into each student waiting their turn to state their case and figure out who is “on their side.” My hope was that by working together to analyze the discourses and social locations of the different groups rather than evaluating each other, the boundaries that sometimes emerge in these conversations would dissolve. I also hoped that they might come to better understand their own perspectives and how they are shaped by social factors. Finally, and most prominently, I hoped they would be able to more fully understand these events as embedded in cultural systems, rather than independent, chaotic occurrences.

By way of a conclusion, I offered myself as a case study and asked them (based on their assessment of my own identity, values, and *habitus*) to offer evidence for and against my participation in each of the four counter activities. I told them that I was uncertain about which of the options I wanted to participate in and that I would take their advice to heart when deciding what to do. They made passionate cases for and against each position with a level of perceptiveness and concern that exceeded my expectations.

Previously, when I’ve thought about how I teach current events in the classroom it has focused on reflection as reaction. I’ve invited students to consider the facts of what “actually happened” and to delve into the nuance of context. In those cases, I have taken on the role of a guide, helping them articulate and expand their understanding. Here we don’t completely understand because we don’t yet know what will happen. There’s an ambiguity in addressing something that is uncertain and has yet to occur, especially amid the elevated risks that accompany a situation like this. In this case, I made them play the role of the guide, instructing me on how to understand and articulate my own perspective.

As I write in a moment that feels like a calm before the storm, this ambiguity and liminality feels important - which is why I wanted to write this post before the event itself occurred. As faculty we’re good at having answers. Assessment and evaluation are second nature. But both with my students and on the Wabash Teaching Religion and Politics blog, I see value in capturing the uncertainty, inviting my students and you into the process of considering the question what *will*, as opposed to what *would*, you do.

[1]For obvious reasons, I was unable to find anything on public social media forums making specific plans related to Antifa or similar groups so we read an article describing their

perspective and activities.

<https://wabashcenter.wabash.edu/2017/10/white-supremacists-come-town/>