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The Pedagogical Refinement of Covid-19

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In the history of Christian thought, suffering has frequently been conceptualized as a process of “refinement.” Suffering “refined” believers and religious communities by (painfully) stripping away the unnecessary, as well as by revealing and perfecting the core dimensions of religious practice.

I am writing this on the first day of the Spring Break—normally a time to slow down and reinvigorate oneself in the midst of a busy semester. However, this year it also comes in the midst of the global Covid-19 outbreak. In the state of Oregon, where I teach, the governor issued the stay-at-home order this morning. All universities in my state had temporarily shut down last week, and my institution is moving from face-to-face to fully online delivery. This is also the case with many universities across the country. Instead of refreshment, Spring Break has brought an accelerated work pace, deep concern for our families and communities, and a host of uncertainties about what lies ahead.

As a teacher, alongside my colleagues, I am working to determine the best ways of adjusting our traditional face-to-face classes to alternative modes of delivery. As a theologian who studies the history of Christian theologies of suffering and healing, I cannot help but think of the Covid-19 crisis as a reality painfully refining our pedagogies, stripping away the obsolete

and revealing and perfecting the essential dimensions.

I am not suggesting that this global health disaster is somehow a positive force in the history of higher education (or humanity in general). I mourn the lost lives and the health, economic, and social tolls of this pandemic, the full extent of which we are yet to experience. At the same time, I am convinced that, as self-reflective educators, we are called to think creatively, including about negative factors, and, without denying the harm, still imagine possibilities of a positive impact they might bring upon our practice of teaching. By, painfully, taking away our more conventional models of instruction, the current crisis might refine essential, but at times, neglected core dimensions of a vibrant pedagogy; one that includes innovation and creativity, meaningful connection with our students, and awareness and responsiveness to wider cultural questions.

As Covid-19 forced classes to move online, it presented faculty with a novel challenge of adjusting all face-to-face courses for remote delivery. As I ponder the best practices of successfully conducting my undergraduate honors seminars over Zoom, these sustained deliberations yield new pedagogical insights and highlight some deficiencies of the ways I have taught this class in a traditional format. The Covid-19 challenge pushes us to exercise renewed pedagogical creativity with our courses, which we are being forced to re-examine, reform, and even re-invent afresh.

The recent days have brought a heightened awareness of many students' daily sacrifices in pursuit of a college degree. I learned of some of my students' lack of high-speed Internet access in their homes, of others' inability to afford plane tickets, and yet others' struggles with academic demands due to anxiety, intensified due to the outbreak. Covid-19 and the resulting academic adjustments have fostered a new, more meaningful, level of knowing my students, understanding their unique needs, and therefore being better able to teach, mentor, and support them.

In an academic era anxious about the relevance of the humanities, the daily disruptions of Covid-19 may present students with intellectual opportunities to develop their own responses to the crisis in relation to the humanities' rich traditions of making meaning of and resisting suffering. As instructors, we might intentionally make space in our courses to integrate questions exploring such connections between the past and the present (expressed in world religions, literature, philosophy and art). After all, this profound and unsettling crisis might yield unexpected refinements of our students' pursuits of knowledge and justice, akin to its refining of our own teaching craft.

(This blog has previously appeared on the University of Chicago's Craft of Teaching the Academic Study of Religion blog.)

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