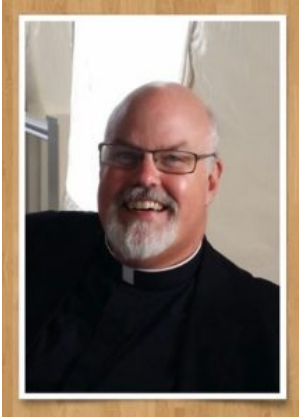




# WABASH CENTER

For Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion



## Is the Study of Theology Worth It?

Patrick Flanagan, *St. John's University (New York)*

Blog Series: Praxis: The Responsive & Expanding Classroom

June 08, 2020

Tags: teaching theology | student learning | teaching during crisis

Is the study of theology worth it? That's a question you and I might pose to our students at the beginning of every semester. At times, we may have to answer this query for ourselves. At the beginning of each semester, I presume this is a question that students have, particularly because at my university students are required to take three theology courses. The first day of theology classes, then, I offer a value proposition. (Now, mind you, I generally teach moral theology classes primarily to business and pharmacy students.) I tell my students that this course may not position them for their ideal job in a corporation or biomedicine, but that a theology course can help students think, write, and speak with a depth and breadth they before had not known. The subsequent question every term is, "but how will that help me advance in my career?" These developed skills, I tell them, will aid them in living out the challenging and, perhaps, painful realities of life. That has never been truer than in these days of Covid-19.

One of the first topics I teach is "narrative." I invite my students to consider what the foundational stories for different religions are. Conversations extend from the metanarratives that undergird traditional monotheistic religions to Rastafarianism, Wicca, and Mormonism. These class days tend to be lively ones as we move into discussions of the Branch Davidians and the Westboro Baptist Church.

Good narratives mature over time as profound experiences impact and challenge them. My parents' generation had Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" speech on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial, the Second Vatican Council, the assassination of John F. Kennedy, and the rise of Fidel Castro's Cuba. Honestly, it made me jealous. I wanted stories to add to my collection, but could not imagine having any of such historical impact as they had. How young and naïve I was! GenXers and I have experienced stories that have forced us too to reevaluate the foundational narratives in which we were grounded.

The students in front of me, now on my computer screen, were curious about my generation's stories. Mind you, when I first started teaching, as I suspect all of us are/were, we are/were our students' older sibling. Now, I could be their parents and for that reason, they are curious. When asked, I speak of how marginalized groups and their allies consistently have fought for equality, particularly LGBTQIA+ citizens, communities of color, and immigrants; seemingly endless wars in Viet Nam, the Gulf, Afghanistan, and Iraq; governments, including the United States, having a wide range political scandals; 9/11; and, of course, the information technology revolution. For some reason or another, they are fascinated, and I suspect hungry like I was when I was younger to have their own stories. While some have alluded to the global digital transformation in their lives, there has never been a clear consensus as to what might unite GenZers in a common narrative. Now, there is. They get it.

Students recognize that they must understand the profound effect this global health crisis has had on them, and on their narrative. For those who have been grounded in an understanding of who and what God is for them, they will have additional work that may take them places about they least expected to go. What will be required is what the study of theology provides: some deep thinking, critical writing, and clarity in speaking.

<https://wabashcenter.wabash.edu/2020/06/is-the-study-of-theology-worth-it/>