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For Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion

Can We Do More than Gawk?

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Blog Series: Stories from the Front
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Tags: teaching for transformation | critically reflective teaching | student learning goals

Last Wednesday most of us opened our cyber-devices to a feed full of news about three young Muslim students in North Carolina who were murdered at home by a gun-toting white

Image courtesy of David Castillo Dominici at FreeDigitalPhotos.net

neighbor, apparently acting in defense of some deadly cocktail of anti-theist "rationality" and parking-related irrationality. The shooter's wife claims that Islamophobia had nothing to do with the crime, while the victims' family asserts that the perpetrator became aggressive only after seeing women in headscarves at the apartment.

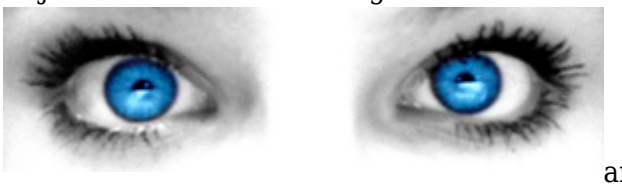
My immediate reaction was twofold – first, to be genuinely saddened and horrified at the waste of three promising young humans, and second, to feel strangely affirmed by my outrage. It

suggested that my job teaching religion actually matters. This latter feeling was energizing, even somewhat titillating, along the lines of a really good "I told you so." I immediately fired off a bunch of self-righteous hashtags of #MuslimLivesMatter (and perhaps an angry tweet at Bill Maher), with a pleasant dopamine rush at every click.

But after the initial excitement, I began to feel a creeping sense of shame. Was I actually using this tragedy to feel better about myself? Am I, as a teacher of religion in the 21st century, capitalizing on gawking at religious atrocities?

For example, in the Teagle/AAR white paper on "The Religion Major and Liberal Education" published in 2008, the horrors of 9/11 were cited as creating a unique opportunity for religious studies programs to grow:

"In a sense, our jobs as scholars of religion became a lot easier on September 11, 2001.



Suddenly, the arguments we had been making for years about the importance of understanding world religious traditions were being made by others: not merely by former Secretaries of State and magazine editors, not merely by the general public, but by college deans, provosts, and presidents — at times, even by our 'cynical, questioning, anti-authoritarian' colleagues."

I realize that many of us became interested in religious studies long before 2001, and we stuck with it despite years of people asking us what we were going to "do" with it. Having suffered under the tyranny of the useful for so long, it is perhaps a natural reaction to find satisfaction in something that causes our science or business or government colleagues to think that maybe, just maybe, what we do is not simply an "intellectual luxury."

So I'm left with a dilemma: I could deliberately bring religion-related tragedies into class as a way of stimulating thought and, yes, excitement among students, but this can feel a bit like gawking at a deadly car crash, especially for those of us with the kind of privilege that generally insulates us from such horrors. Or I could hope that maybe students will take the initiative to bring questions to class, out of a desire to learn. Or perhaps I should just leave it alone and count on students making connections between "the material" and "real life" on their own time.

Thus far I have sought to use such events to, at the very least, complicate students' understandings of religion – their Eurocentric, colonialist, or essentialist assumptions. But such efforts usually feel haphazard and disjointed. What, if anything, did you say to your students about the Chapel Hill shootings? How do we study and teach religion without merely gawking at its worst offenders? Perhaps it's time for a #howtoteachthechapelhillshootings resource.

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