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The topic for this issue of *Spotlight on Teaching* was inspired by a panel discussion arranged by Cynthia Humes last year at Claremont McKenna College titled “Teaching Difficult Topics.” Cynthia invited panelists to describe “specific challenges and encounters that they faced in their courses, and to illustrate from their own experience what teaching strategies they used in response to a charged and contentious classroom setting.”

Although religion in world events is repeatedly front-page news, public understanding of its complexity is more constrained than ever. The stakes of remaining ignorant and misinformed get higher as political interests and religious groups compete for their own agendas. The world enters the classroom both in the faces of students, and in the situated positions which professors themselves assume and signify. Taking cover in the safety of enlightenment boundaries between perceiver and perceived, subject and object is no longer an honest option.

So how do we teach in classes where the subject peers at itself in the mirror of the texts, lectures, and images studied? Students in our classrooms are not (and never were) blank pages on which we can write as we might do our articles and books. Our interactions are not one-way monologues nor should they be. But co-constructivist pedagogy and power/knowledge critiques of academe have also raised challenges. Classrooms often turn into sites of contestation by design or default that put to test the very premises of hard-won scholarly coherences recast as regimes of oppression. Exercise of free speech clashes with political correctness; academic freedom collides with identity politics; cultural criticism contends with historical revisionism; critical analysis and (con)textual study come up against subjectivism and

the primacy of experiential and embodied knowledge.

This issue of *Spotlight* takes up the question of teaching “difficult” subjects. It turns out, as we learn from the collection of essays, that the term difficult is understood, encountered, and dealt with in many different ways. Difficult may refer to topics that are tricky, thorny, sensitive, controversial, offensive, and simply just demanding; critical methods that subvert received knowledge and unsettle the status quo; assertions and/or disavowals of the professor’s or student’s specific religious, political, or sexual identity; radical suspicion of any and all knowledge construction and production in academe. Keeping the definition of difficult wide open, professors from various perspectives offer their views and share their strategies in response to these often insoluble difficulties.

In his piece titled “Common-Sense Religion,” Daniel C. Dennett noted that most people in the world say their lives would be meaningless without religion, and then tartly asks, whoever would want to interfere with whatever it is that gives people’s lives meaning? But for one thing: what do we do with creeds that oblige devout followers to behave intolerantly or violently? (*Chronicle of Higher Education*, January 20, 2006, B6). What is lost in translation, of course, is the distance that spans the gap between creed and act, a distance made up of very specific factors such as who, what, when, why, and where.

Nonetheless, the question is apt and sensible. A persistent dilemma in fields such as the study of religion and culture, one made ever more urgent by the realities of pluralism up close, is what we see as our role in our classrooms. Should we only be translators and transmitters of different religious cultures, or are we also obliged to engage in historical analysis and cultural critique? Is our primary role to show “the internal logic of religious systems” and not to “defend or debunk anyone’s truth claims”? (Rycenga, iv) Or has phenomenological epoché devolved into a PC routine of “finding ways to say everyone is right if only properly understood” (Cummings, v)?

Should we bring the communities we study into the classroom to “shift from an expert model of knowledge production to a collaborative model” (Arnold, x)? Or can such porous and blurred boundaries inadvertently subject students to intimidation and preempt their ability to think independently, especially when the communities in question don’t particularly “like the idea of the course at all” (Hawley, iii)?

Then, too, not only are scholarly representations of specific religions a valid object of critical

analysis, as in Edward Said's critique of Euro-American Orientalist "constructions of an anti-Islamic discourse" (Kassam, vi); but so, too, are representations of religious groups themselves who claim to speak authentically and authoritatively for all Muslims and, for example, declare "the Sunni legal tradition as the norm" (Schubel, vii).

Lest we think of "difficult" purely in intellectual terms, the sight of a student or professor's tears visibly remind us of the emotions that well up in the classroom when "desires for knowledge move us...in unexpected ways" (Henking, viii). And that giving voice to those who have been marginalized is full of ironies when speech is used to silence those who have silenced others. "Not all silence/ing is bad; not all voice/ing is good" (Maldonado, ix), and both can hurt and anger.

The insanity of war and genocide takes us to the very extremities of the human capacity for inhumanity. What do we do when the subject itself evokes "strong feelings of anxiety, shame, guilt, fear, anger, horror, hopelessness" (Graham, xi)? The history of ethnic cleansing and religious genocide appears not to have been much of a lesson, much as Cassandra's prescient warnings about the future fall on plugged ears. How does one square the moral imperative to know the past with the knowledge that "material about trauma can induce... 'vicarious trauma'" (Dobkowski and Salter, xii)?

Teaching difficult subjects, as we see, often goes beyond our imaginings, and our classrooms are crucibles of learning not just for students but for teachers, too. As Cynthia Humes concludes from her own unforeseen difficulties, "what we do as scholars actually matters" (Humes, ii).