

Skin in the theology game

By [Steve Taylor](#)

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Does the study of theology require more skin, more personal involvement, than other types of study?

Case study one: Claire is a second-year university student. She has one optional subject and spots a summer school program called Bible and Popular Culture. She has a cousin who grew up religious and it makes for awkward pauses whenever the family gets together. She enrolls in Bible and Popular Culture, hoping to gain an easy credit and to help her talk with the “religious” side of her family. Unknown to her, one of the classes will be on the subject of trauma. The lecturer connects the Old Testament book of Lamentations with contemporary experiences of trauma. The lecture triggers for Claire a memory of a moment from her teenage years. Suddenly, in the midst of a university class ten years later, she is overwhelmed with painful memories.

Case study two: Bruce has a deep faith. Studying archeology, he notes an intensive called Introduction to Theology. It fits with his timetable. More importantly, having faith, Bruce arrives at class expecting that this class will connect with what is important to his values. Halfway through the class, he finds the faith he learned from his church being disturbed by the content of the lecture. In a small group, feeling slightly ruffled, he expresses his unease, only for a third person in the group to make a smart comment about the naïveté of Christian belief. Suddenly what Bruce has held dear is publicly exposed.

Case study three: Sue is a Ph.D. candidate. She began theology study as a Catholic. But the more she has studied, the more she finds problematic the position of her denomination toward women. Intellectually bright, she enrolls in post-graduate study, wanting to explore her questions in more depth. But her topic—leadership and gender in the early church—is making folk from her home church increasingly uncomfortable. She begins to realize that the results of her research might well result in her being marginalized within her church community. Might she have to leave, either to find a new church, or perhaps even a new denomination?

Each of these case studies are hypothetical, but each are a snapshot from conversations I've had with students in my classes in the last few years.

It seems to me that for each of these students, studying theology has meant the finding of some serious skin in a classroom setting. Lectures have touched on significant personal experiences. Readings have raised questions about beliefs held dear. Study has brought into into question existing relationships and raised the possibility that it might lead to damage of a person's communities and identity outside the class.

All of these requires significant personal energy, the investment of soul and spirit above and beyond the learning outcomes and assessment set. I wonder if other areas of study demand as much skin? Does engineering or the history of the Middle Ages or the literature of Ireland have an impact on identity and experience in such areas?

I suspect that none of them do. As a result, the study of theology is not only a deeply demanding intellectual engagement, but also one that requires significant individual skin in the class.

I wonder what this means for students, for lecturers and for the higher education systems in which theology is taught?

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