

Greetings,

I'm a high school world religions teacher and theology (religious studies) department chair seeking to participate in the National Endowment for the Humanities Institute. My teaching role within my school community holds a grave responsibility to teach high school juniors about each religion's historical experiences, the Catholic Church's role in perpetuating antisemitism, interreligious dialogue, and religious intolerance. Additionally, my role as department chair empowers me to influence our theological curriculum at all levels. Because of these responsibilities, I'm seeking experiences which would not only develop my own capacity to teach about the Holocaust and other sensitive historical conflicts and genocides, but also contribute to my colleagues' exploration of these topics.

Our high school environment enrolls approximately 330 young women. As a Catholic school, most of our students identify as Catholic, Christian, or nonreligious. Partly because of Omaha's history of housing segregation, many of our students were raised in a fairly insulated, homogenous "bubble." They went to schools with others who looked like them and who generally hold the same worldview as them. I take pride in popping this "bubble." Thus, my content and pedagogy seek expose them to regions of both Omaha and our world that they have not had contact with before. Most of my students have only ever been exposed to Christian theology and history in their grade schools, but our school philosophy believes that it is imperative that students develop "an understanding of and deep respect for the spiritual traditions of the world." In my World Religions course, students explore different systems of belief, listen to sacred myths, analyze rituals, and contemplate universal truths from around the world. Studying history and listening to our neighbors' experiences is an essential component of the course.

Obviously, the Shoah is an essential component of Jewish history. Because of my undergraduate studies I feel like I have a solid understanding of the Holocaust's events and their sequence. I took an extraordinarily detailed Philosophy of the Holocaust course which explored timelines, events, and Nazi ideology. I used some of those materials to build the lessons I use now. That said, I feel like my current lessons about this history could be drastically improved. With heavier topics like this, I tend to want to "stay in control" of my classroom by opting to lecture. We all know, however, lecturing is not the most effective pedagogical approach. So, what excites me most about this program is learning about inquiry-based teaching strategies. In the real world, my students need to take responsibility not only for their own learning but also take agency for acting towards equity, justice, and inclusion. My classroom needs to become a space where they can practice the skills necessary to take control, rather than being the passive recipients of a lecture. To create this shift in all of my lessons, but especially my lessons about the Holocaust, I need professional development like this opportunity.

This responsible inquiry-based learning would not be limited to the Holocaust and Jewish history, but will extend to other topics of violence and genocide which are a part of other religions' histories. This institute would empower my students to explore the genocide of indigenous traditions and cultures both in America and around the world, religious conflict in south Asia between Hindus and Muslims, China's persecution of Uighur Muslims, the Yazidi genocide under ISIS, and other topics. Then, after graduating, being able to ask questions about

these topics and investigate them for themselves will empower my students to navigate the modern world in all of its complexities. Simply put, my students need more than the passive history lecture that I can currently offer them. I need more resources in order to serve my students best.

Furthermore, I believe this institute would provide me and my students with critical resources necessary for responding to contemporary antisemitism. Unfortunately, Holocaust denial and misinformation appear to be a growing trend across the United States. Accurate and responsible education about the Holocaust is extremely important in combatting this trend. Again, I would like to put my students in charge of this learning, instead of me just explaining the issue to them. Of course, these skills and practices would translate over into comparable topics in my course such as Islamophobia.

My role as a theology teacher at a Catholic school also provides me and my students with a unique opportunity to explore the damaging legacy of the Church's antisemitism and other theological factors which contributed to the Holocaust. As a practicing Catholic, I believe that it is important to learn our own history so that the contemporary Church can work towards reconciliation, solidarity, or fraternity. In my course, my students already study some theological perspectives which contributed to antisemitism and the Holocaust. We also read the groundbreaking 1965 document *Nostra Aetate* which articulates the Catholic Church's intended relationship to Judaism and other religions. However, there are certainly more Catholic perspectives that my students should explore. Perhaps the session entitled "Perpetrators, Bystanders, and Victims" could provide me with some framework for how both the Church as an institution and individual members within the Church contributed to antisemitism and the Holocaust. This is certainly a topic which I hope to independently research and then discuss with institute leaders.

If I am awarded the opportunity to attend this institute, it would certainly benefit not only me, but also colleagues within my own theology department. For example, our sophomore theology teacher explores Christian and Jewish theological perspectives in Elie Wiesel's *Night*. I would be eager to share my experiences with her and the rest of my colleagues so that they can ensure that they are teaching topics responsibly and with sensitivity. Our school's philosophy demands our adult community to teach about "human rights, active citizenship, and civic responsibility on the local, national, and global level." Topics of justice are foundational to who we are as a school. My colleagues within my department, and perhaps the entire school community, could certainly be introduced to inquiry-based learning as a responsible tool for discussing justice topics.

I believe that I would bring a number of valuable perspectives to this institute. I imagine (although I could be wrong) that most other participants would come from a history or social science background. My theological training certainly overlaps with these disciplines, but has especially prepared me to discern, study, and communicate the evolution ideas and belief. Systemic violence and genocide certainly arise from multifaceted proceedings. There are psychological factors, political factors, geographic factors, economic factors, and social factors that each contributed to these horrific events. I hope that other participants in the program would bring their own expertise and enlighten me about these components. In return, I hope to share my

own expertise to help others piece together the theological, religious, and ideological factors which morphed into genocide over time.

I certainly have many questions I hope to explore through participation in this institute. What are genocides' early warning signs, and are we in the midst of any today? How did the Holocaust influence theological perspectives in world religions, especially Christianity and Judaism? How have policies of the Catholic Church contributed to antisemitism and the Holocaust? How does misinformation and ignorance about the Holocaust facilitate contemporary antisemitism? Mostly though, I wonder what responsible, inquiry-based pedagogical practices look like when teaching about genocide? I realize that studying the Holocaust and other topics of violence can be emotionally difficult for students who have personal connections to these events. I am extremely interested in learning effective and responsible teaching strategies for these emotional and personal discussions.

I sincerely hope to be accepted into the Making Holocaust and Genocide Education Relevant Through Inquiry and Classroom Application Institute. I think the historical knowledge, research methods, and pedagogical applications would greatly benefit my own professional development and, thus, my world religions students. I can assure that I would be fully committed to both our institute experiences in Pennsylvania and our virtual meetings throughout the fall.

Thanks for your consideration,
Drew Holtmann