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Perhaps no other topic has dominated 21st century political discourse as much as the topic of terrorism. The attacks of 9/11 and 7/7 initiated a wave of public obsession about the topic, a fervor that still has not abated roughly a decade after the initial attacks. And yet, serious discussion of terrorism in philosophy of education has been lacking, with only a few book and articles dealing with the topic. Perhaps this is not such a bad thing. Not only have the intervening years allowed for reflection on the terrorist acts themselves, but it has also allowed us to see and evaluate our responses to terrorism, including two official wars, torture, and innumerable drone strikes. Thus, Dianne

Gereluk’s new treatment of the topic at this time is welcome: we have had time to witness terrorism, react to terrorism, and reflect on both the attacks and our responses.

Gereluk begins her book by helpfully surveying educational policy documents and curriculum materials as they relate to terrorism. She notes that much of the material published in the US and UK since the terrorist attacks has little to do with understanding terrorism, and has more to do with soothing student anxiety, attempting to increase public safety, enlisting students in identifying dangerous people and situations, and promoting patriotism. Children’s books, she finds, focus on stories of individual bravery, emphasizing an optimistic (and probably naïve) sentimentiality. Even school textbooks do little more than mention the terrorist attacks. And when we have talked seriously about terrorism in the larger society, Gereluk bemoans how it often has been corrupted by extremist rhetoric, by the creation of false dualisms, and by the construction of simplistic hero and villain narratives. She finds the lack of intelligent discussion of terrorism to be disconcerting, particularly in education. She’s right to be concerned: As much as anything else, terrorism is an issue that has driven global policy over the last decade. If students don’t understand the issue of terrorism, they don’t understand the contemporary world.

Another helpful aspect of this book is how it describes and categorizes the possible reasons for teaching about terrorism. These reasons include promoting safety and stability (i.e., patriotism and unity in the face of challenge) and understanding factors that influence extremist activities. The point of the latter goal is to help students to recognize and identify those who may be persuaded to join extremist groups. Other justifications for teaching about terrorism include helping students to become more informed about current political affairs and to promote values such as tolerance, respect, and forgiveness. Gereluk does not seem to endorse any one justification over the others, although she does warn us that an emphasis on “unity” and “patriotism” can work to shut down critical discourse. In the chapter, Gereluk wants us to be clear about our goals and to think deeply about how they might sometimes conflict.
Gereluk’s larger point is that schools have an obligation to discuss terrorism. They must do this, however, in a certain way. Educational consideration of terrorism must put terrorism into its historical and political context, must examine current inequitable circumstances that might contribute to terrorism, and must be presented within a moral framework. Educators must be willing to condemn both the factors that have led to terrorism, particularly the foreign policy of the US and UK, and also the acts of violence themselves.

The most philosophically rich section of book is Chapter 4, which deals with teaching controversial subjects. Terrorism certainly qualifies as a controversial subject. For one thing, broaching the topic will necessarily involve questions of how different cultures should be presented to students – whose representations, we ask, should prevail in such discussions and why? Should the grievances of terrorists be taken seriously? Does Jihad imply actual armed struggle or does it refer to a Muslim’s inner quest for self-improvement? Discussions of terrorism can also be controversial in that they will often connect with concerns about national pride and patriotism. Implying that American foreign policy contributed to the perpetuation of terrorism, for example, has been taken as an anti-American statement in some quarters. People strongly disagree about such issues, and teachers have been fired because they have entered the fray. Gereluk’s question, then, is whether a teacher should take sides in these debates. If a teacher believes that American foreign policy contributed to the terrorist attacks, should they feel free to state his or her opinion in class?

Gereluk employs Michael Hand’s distinction between directive and non-directive teaching. Directive teaching is employed when teachers try to persuade students that one belief is better than other. Non-directive teaching occurs when the discussion is open ended and there is no attempt to persuade students to adopt a particular stance. Against some liberal educators, Hand would argue that students should unapologetically be led in a specific moral direction. Educators should not give the impression that some things, like racism, are open for debate. Teachers should disclose their moral views and teach their views as the correct one. Others have argued that teacher disclosure makes students passive: it puts students under pressure to
take certain positions, not because they see the reasons for those positions, but because their authority (i.e., the teacher) has spoken. When it comes to terrorism, which view about teaching should prevail? Should teachers disclose their views about terrorism and try to persuade students that those views are correct?

For help with this question, Gereluk turns to political philosopher John Rawls. Rawls argued that the liberal state cannot advocate for moral principles based solely on a “comprehensive” moral doctrines (a doctrine tied to a specific religious or metaphysical worldview). There are, after all, many comprehensive doctrines that seem “reasonable” in pluralistic societies, each with conflicting and competing claims. Taking sides would not treat individuals as free and equal citizens; it would privilege some individuals over others, violating the reciprocity and mutuality that should exist among citizens in the liberal state. What the liberal state can do, however, is advocate for moral principles that are essential to social cooperation. People need to be able to get along with others who do not share their beliefs. The liberal state can teach in a directive way those principles necessary for social cooperation, such as toleration and respect.

When, then, can a teacher take a position in discussing terrorism? First, when individuals are not being treated as free and equal citizens this can be rightly condemned by the teacher. Second, when an individual or group violates the terms of social cooperation, or when a group threatens the stability of society, this also can be condemned. Gereluk applies this principle to argue against culturally hostile statements (against Muslims for example) and against the promotion of patriotism (because of its potential to marginalize and ostracize those on the social periphery). If the teacher discloses her reasons based on these public reasons, Gereluk argues, she will not be in violation of the core liberal principles.

Overall, I believe that this book sets us up nicely to start a long-overdue discussion. It hits many of central issues in an engaging way, free of paranoia or bluster. Each chapter includes interludes where discussion questions are posed. Clearly, the purpose of the book is not to answer every question about terrorism and education, but to start a more
meaningful educational engagement with the issue. In this task, the book succeeds admirably.

There are a few questions I will raise in the spirit of keeping this important conversation going. First, Gereluk presents an interesting set of criteria specifying the moral principles that have the power of public reason behind them. Much more could be said about this. People can agree about the basic moral principles, for example, but disagree about how to apply them. Take the case of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, a driving issue behind Middle Eastern terrorism. It seems that people could take seriously the public values of treating one another as free and equal, of toleration, and so forth, but still come to very different conclusions about how this all applies in this case. Should a teacher really be free to teach as truth one side of this debate, simply because it can be framed to align with public values? This seems to miss something about the nature of the controversy and why schools would need to be sensitive to it. The “burdens of judgment” are not only operative in our values, but also in the application of our values, which means that deep-seated controversy will continue even when limited to the publicly defensible values. What implications does this have, I wonder, for Gereluk’s criteria?

Second, there are some aspects of terrorism that should be emphasized, but do not come out strongly in Gereluk’s book. She rightly argues that students should learn about oppression and inequality and about how these factors might be a driving force behind some instances of terrorism. In conjunction with this, however, there might also be a discussion of the proper role for violence in correcting such inequities. Is violence ever justified in rectifying oppression? What limits are there? What alternatives to violence might exist? Such a question would link the discussion of terrorism to larger movements for social justice.

Third, some of the sections could have benefited from greater depth. Consider the case of teacher disclosure. For example, often the issue as a teacher is not whether to disclose one’s personal views or not, but how and when to disclose. Also, in the book’s final arguments against the promotion of patriotism in classroom, there could have been a discussion of various forms of patriotism, such as
the “liberal patriotism” advanced by writers such as Eammon Callan. Might there not be forms of patriotism that are supportive of open discourse, of diversity, or treating others as free and equal citizenship? This is not to say that Gereluk is wrong in her conclusions rejecting patriotism, simply that more depth in that discussion would have been welcome.

Dianne Gereluk, I believe, has done us a service in initiating a more intelligent discussion of how and why terrorism should be a topic in 21st century schools. I hope that the discussion can continue. The darkness that has consumed the world, with extremist violence and our often unhinged and violent responses to it, deserves our educational attention.

About the Reviewer

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