

Tim Renick Awarded University System of Georgia Board of Regents' Teaching Excellence Award

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Tim Renick is a summa cum laude, Phi Beta Kappa graduate of Dartmouth College (1982), where he double majored in Religion and Government. He received his M.A. (1984) and Ph.D. (1986) from Princeton University, Department of Religion, with a concentration in ethics. In the fall of 1986, Georgia State University hired him as Assistant Professor of Philosophy, with the specific assignment of building a religious studies program. Students greeted the religious studies curriculum with great enthusiasm, and by 1991 there were twenty courses on the books, a B.A. degree approved by the Georgia Board of Regents, and graduates going off to study religion at Chicago, Virginia, and Yale. Today, the program (for which Renick serves as Director) has four tenure-track and one non-tenure-track faculty, over 40 courses, and over 50 current majors. He has been the recipient of the Outstanding Teacher Award of the College of Arts and Sciences, the Outstanding Teacher Award of the Blue Key National Honor Society, and was named Distinguished Honors Professor (all at Georgia State University). He is very active in university government, serving on the University Senate, as Chair of the university's Graduate Council, as a member of the College Executive Committee, and as Associate Chair within the Department of Philosophy. He is also the author of twenty articles. His book, Aquinas for Armchair Theologians, was published by Westminster John Knox Press in January 2002.

RSN: Dr. Renick, we understand that the University System of Georgia Board of Regents recently awarded you with its Teaching Excellence Award. Would you tell us about the award? Is there more than one recipient in any given year?

Renick: I am very honored to have been the recipient of the Board of Regents' Teaching Excellence Award. The award is the highest recognition given to teachers within the state system. It is given annually to the outstanding teacher among almost 30,000 professors and instructors. Candidates are nominated by their home institution, and a statewide panel of chairs, faculty members, and administrators determines winners. There are separate awards given annually to the outstanding teacher in research institutions (e.g., UGA, Georgia Tech, GSU, Georgia Southern) and non-research institutions (e.g., Georgia Perimeter College, DeKalb College).

RSN: What do you think distinguished you to be the recipient of this award?

Renick: I'd like to think that this award is, in part, an acknowledgement of the success of our young Program in Religious Studies at Georgia State. In only a few years, we've gone from having no organized program in religious studies to offering over 40 graduate and undergraduate courses, a B.A. degree with 50 current majors, and an M.A. track. Last year alone, our credit hours increased by over 80% from the previous year. And our majors have gone on to study religion at some of the top graduate programs in the country – Brown, Harvard, Yale, Vanderbilt,

Virginia, Chicago, and Emory. We've even had students study at Oxford and Cambridge. When a program is under ten years old and can cite successes like this, I guess it is bound to get the attention of others.

Of course, the personal demands in starting this program have been a little overwhelming. In the early years, when I was fresh out of grad school, I was often the only faculty member teaching religion. As student interest grew, I had to supplement the curriculum with heavy doses of directed reading and independent study courses. In fact, over the years, I've offered something like 200 reading courses and directed over 50 Honors and Masters theses. I'm proud to say that many of the students who took these courses went on to top graduate schools like Brown, Harvard, Yale, and Chicago. So, I think the award recognizes some of these personal efforts, as well.

I also believe that I am an effective teacher. In the year leading up to the award, I taught six classes with over 180 students in total. On the numerical students evaluations for the year, one student rated my overall teaching effectiveness a "4" (on a 5-point scale); every other student gave me a "5."

RSN: We understand that you have been instrumental in the creation of a religious studies program within the Department of Philosophy at Georgia State University. Tell us about some of its strengths.

Renick: From the beginning, we made the decision to emphasize comparative religion as the heart of our program. While some might think that, since we're a program at a state school in the South, classes in Christianity would be our bread and butter. That's not the case. Our second tenure-track appointment was in Chinese religions, our third in Judaism and Hinduism, and our most recent appointment was in Islam. Our best enrolled classes are not *Bible and Christian Thought*, but comparative courses like *World Religions*, *Religion and Ethics*, and *Women and Religion*. Non-western courses like *Buddhism*, and *Zen and Shinto* fill up.

The fact of the matter is, especially in the aftermath of the Olympics, Atlanta has become an increasingly international city. Georgia State is among the most diverse state schools in the entire South. While I was too naïve to realize it at the time, the direction we selected for our program was a fortuitous one. Our enrollments have at least doubled every couple of years for the past decade. In part, this is because our courses are seen as timely and relevant by the students. We helped teach a special September 11 course this past spring, and are adding the courses *Religion, War, and Peace*, and *Islamic Fundamentalism* for the coming year.

Of course, it always helps to be lucky. A year ago, our brand new tenure-track Islamicist, John Iskander, arrived on campus about three weeks before September 11. He was making appearances on CNN, just down the street from campus, before mid-terms. The timing made us awfully popular with our Dean.

That raises another issue. Not only have we tried to make our program relevant to the students, we've tried to make it relevant to the university community. We've been very active in contributing to other university projects — the university's new Middle East Center, a proposal

for Asian Studies, the African-American Studies Department, the September 11 speakers series, study abroad initiatives. We've worked hard to show the administration and our colleagues in other departments that religious studies is not ancient and esoteric. It's crucial to the day-to-day projects of the university

RSN: What subjects do you teach?

Renick: In the beginning, the easier question would be "What courses *didn't* I teach?" For three of my first five years, I was the only Religious Studies faculty member at Georgia State, and I tried my best to teach the range of courses a good program should offer to its students. Many were "stretches" for me. I still teach ten to twelve different courses on a rotating basis. *Religion and Ethics*, *Philosophy of Religion*, *Introduction to Religion*, *Church and State*, *Contemporary Religious Thought*, *History of Christian Thought*, and the new course *Religion, War, and Peace* are among them. As an indication that Georgia State attracts unconventional students, my most popular course may be *Augustine and Aquinas*, which fills up with 40-plus students every time it's offered.

RSN: Who have been your role models as a teacher?

Renick: As a junior at Dartmouth, I was pre-law and a Government major. Then I took some courses from Ronald Green and Robert Oden in the Department of Religion. I still remember that Dartmouth recently had initiated an annual campus-wide teaching award. In the first two years, Ron and Bob were the recipients. (You wonder how that went over in the Biology Department!) I soon learned why they were selected. Both are exemplars of what a teacher-scholar can be, and illustrate the impact that a teacher can have on students. They changed my career course. I decided to add a major in religion, and with Ron Green's encouragement, applied for graduate school in religious ethics. At Princeton, Jeff Stout and the late Paul Ramsey and Victor Preller were enormously influential.

RSN: What makes for excellent teaching — especially in the field of religious studies?

Renick: The answer to this question may be different for one who teaches at a private school, though I suspect not. I think the most important thing we can strive to be as teachers of religion is facilitators. Students are always curious about my personal beliefs, but my classes are successful, I think, because I make it clear that my views are not the point of the class.

I use "readers" for all of my courses — compilations of primary sources that I have put together. With the authors defending their own views for themselves, my role can be that of facilitator: someone who steps in to help students understand the various positions, their strengths and weaknesses. While I'm enough of a student of post-modernism to know (and to tell students) that I cannot be truly "objective" in some ultimate sense, appearances do matter in the classroom. By focusing my efforts on explaining Mary Daly or Stanley Hauerwas rather than siding with or opposing them, I think I'm able to speak to a much wider range of students.

In our program, we've had some students go on to Baptist seminary and others go on to Ph.D. work at Chicago and Berkeley. How can a single class, say, *Augustine and Aquinas*, be useful to

both? My answer has been consistent over the years: keep the focus on the material and trust the students to determine for themselves who's right and wrong.

RSN: What is a teaching technique or learning experience that you have found especially effective?

Renick: One of the largest challenges in teaching religious studies at a large state school like Georgia State is the incredible range of student abilities. Some students would hold their own at Princeton, others struggle with basic reading and writing tasks. How do you address both groups simultaneously? Some people think that you need to "dumb down" the reading, using textbooks written to the level of the "average" college student (whatever that means). But I've never had much luck with such texts. They bore the better students. They bore me. And ironically, the "middle of the road" students for whom they are supposedly written rarely find them very exciting, either. In fact, I don't use a textbook in any class I teach. I put together readers: selections of primary sources. This way the students are actually reading the views of the authors, not *about* the views.

This has several benefits. It challenges the better students; by the end of the semester, their critical skills often have improved markedly. Second, it holds my attention. I get to teach material I find challenging, and am more excited about going into the classroom as a result. I try to keep the less talented students from getting left behind by keeping the readings short, and by making sure we actually talk about the readings in class.

This approach does put some additional pressure on me as a teacher. In class, I have to present the material in such a way that it is outlined for the students who did not get the major points of the readings and yet not redundant for the students who did. I have to stick to essay exams and come up with questions that allow the talented students to show the depth of their knowledge and less talented students to show their grasp of the basics. Finally, I have to write extensive comments on students' work to speak to their particular abilities and needs. Come to think of it, I'm working way too hard...

I think the costs are worth it, though. The approach has allowed our better students to excel to a level where top graduate schools are interested in them. And, when things are really working well, their example rubs off: the struggling students start to improve as well.

RSN: In what ways is the vocation of teaching especially rewarding for you?

Renick: Teachers are always thrilled when their students succeed in traditional ways. I'm no different. I was excited when one of our students got into Harvard. It seemed to validate the work we had been doing. Just last year, one of our grads now at Chicago published an article in the *JAAR*.

But I'm always telling my students that the point of Religious Studies is not primarily vocational. The pursuit should be its own reward. A couple of months ago, I entered a local Atlanta bar (on a purely research visit, needless to say) and ran in to a former student who worked there. He sent over a round of drinks and came by to say that my courses "had changed [his] life." The cynic in

me was thinking, "Yeah, without that valuable B.A. in Religious Studies, you'd be bussing rather than waiting tables." But ultimately, I felt really good about the encounter. We're very lucky to be teaching material that is genuinely important, even life changing, to our students. Unlike our colleagues teaching business, we have the luxury of being able to measure our successes in more nuanced ways than the income level of our students. Still, I did feel compelled to leave a generous tip.

RSN: What it has been like being a religion scholar within a philosophy department?

Renick: There have been some challenges over the years. Philosophy does not have as much in common methodologically with modern religious studies as it did with the theology that once typified Religion departments. But the fact of the matter is that healthy enrollments are crucial to the survival and growth of academic programs at places like Georgia State. And "growing" our program amid a large, established philosophy department – with required, core courses – has been hugely beneficial to us. We've picked up many majors who first sampled a lower-level philosophy course or took a cross-listed offering like *Philosophy of Religion* or *Buddhism*. Given that few universities are in the financial position to establish a "Department of Religious Studies" all at once, the model we've used at Georgia State to develop our program strikes me as a sensible one.

RSN: What do you think has accounted for the success you have enjoyed as a teacher? What word of advice would you give to other teachers?

Renick: It's an exciting time to be teaching religious studies. What we do is relevant. I genuinely believe this. The task, then, is to somehow convey this fact to others —to our students, to colleagues in other departments, to deans and administrators. If I've been successful as a teacher, I think it starts with the belief that what I'm doing is not just important to me. It's valuable in a larger sense.