

# Teaching Statement

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At heart, my philosophy in the classroom is simple, maybe even trite: challenge students, and they will respond. For me this is not some empty slogan. In the 1980s, my career depended on it.

In 1986, I was hired fresh out of graduate school by Georgia State University and asked to help to build a program in Religious Studies. Admittedly, "help" may be the wrong word here. When I arrived in Atlanta, I was the only faculty member in a "program" which did not yet exist. I began working on the development of a Religious Studies curriculum--adding courses where few or none had been before, targeting students who did not yet know they were destined to study the subject matter.

The catch, of course, was that I not merely had to propose the new courses; I had to *teach* them. And so I put my pedagogical philosophy to the test. In courses with titles like "World Religions," "Introduction to Religion," "Religion and Ethics," "Church and State," "Contemporary Religious Thought," "Augustine and Aquinas," "African-American Religions," and "Theory of Religion," among others, I taught in the only way I thought appropriate: by challenging students to confront the material and to engage each other. I developed my own anthology of readings for each course (a practice I continue to this day), and I placed primary texts directly in the hands of the students. I steadfastly refused to "dumb down" the material (in many cases, assigning the same pieces that I had read as a student at Dartmouth and Princeton) or to shy away from controversial issues. I am proud of the fact, for instance, that my students were debating the beliefs and policies of the Taliban years before the events of September 11. I brought in guest speakers--Terry Maple, Director of the Atlanta Zoo, for a course on animal rights; Phelmon Al-Amin, leader of the largest mosque in Atlanta, for a discussion of Islam; a Grady cancer surgeon for a course on euthanasia. I asked students to think.

The more that I challenged my students, the greater their enthusiasm and, it seemed, the larger the enrollments. Before I knew it, I was chairing a search for a second faculty appointment to the nascent program. Before five years had passed, I was writing the proposal to add a B.A. degree in Religious Studies.

Today, Georgia State has almost forty undergraduate and Masters-level courses in Religious Studies, with over eighty majors and nine M.A. students concentrating in the field. Our lower-level courses usually fill two months before classes begin; our upper-level offerings often enroll forty students or more. We have just established our first endowed chair of Religious

Studies and seek to make an appointment at the senior level for the fall of 2004. And just this month, the Dean and the Provost, in part based on these accomplishments, gave their official approval for the hiring of two more tenure-track lines (bringing us to a total of seven) and the establishment of a separate Department of Religious Studies at Georgia State in the next four years. Richard Hecht of UCSB and William Paden of Vermont were brought in to assess the program in February 2003 and wrote: "The quality of its graduates, the volume of its majors, and the dedication of its faculty are simple extraordinary. We believe it is on its way to becoming a national example of how an urban, state research university can serve its constituencies."

Being the founder and director of a new, burgeoning degree program taught me valuable lessons about the importance of teaching beyond the traditional classroom. In part to help flesh out an underdeveloped (and, at times, under-funded) curriculum, in part to respond to the enthusiasm of individual students, I offered a host of independent-study and thesis-research courses. All told, I have taught over two-hundred independent study courses since I arrived at Georgia State; I've directed fourteen Honors theses (more than any other faculty member at Georgia State over that time frame, I'm told) and over forty Masters theses.

The students flourished in these one-on-one settings, and their accomplishments mounted. One of my students became the first-ever Georgia State recipient of a National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) Young Scholars Grant for her work on the pre-Holocaust Jewish theology of Franz Rosenzweig. Another is now in his third term in the Georgia House of Representatives. A third recently finished two years in the Peace Corps in the Solomon Islands, South Pacific, becoming the first white man ever appointed "chieftain" of the small village in which he was stationed. My students have gone on to pursue advanced studies in theology at both Cambridge and Oxford Universities in England and graduate degrees in religion at Harvard, Yale, Princeton, Brown, Virginia, Columbia, Vanderbilt, Emory, the University of California at Berkeley, the University of California at Santa Barbara, the University of Chicago, Georgetown, and others. (I wonder if there is any other religion program in the country--let alone one so young--that has placed students in Oxford, Cambridge, Harvard, Princeton and Yale in the last ten years alone.) The Brown student was one of only four candidates admitted to the Ph.D. program in Religion from over one-hundred applicants. The Berkeley student received a full tuition fellowship, a \$10,000 a year stipend, and a teaching assistantship--all guaranteed for four years. One of my students, having just received his Ph.D. from the University of Chicago, this spring published his first article, in the *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* no less. The essay was based on a topic that he first pursued in my "Augustine and Aquinas" class here at Georgia State. This spring, another former advisee donated \$50,000 to the university to establish a graduate fellowship in my honor.

Clearly, teaching is a lot more than the time spend formally standing in front of a classroom.

It is the curricular development and one-on-one instructional efforts discussed above.

It is responding thoughtfully and constructively to students' work. The principles here are simple (if demanding). My policy is that every test and every essay should be returned to the student by the next class meeting, and that each essay submitted deserves at least a page of hand

written comments in response. Moreover, there is no honest effort by a student that is undeserving of at least some positive comments. If a professor is to challenge, he or she also must encourage.

Teaching is finding ways to present the material so as to engage the very best students. I have been fortunate enough to be an active participant in the Honors Program since my first year at Georgia State. For the past fourteen years, I have served on the Honors Council, the faculty advisory body of the program. In addition to directing a host of Honors theses, I have taught fifteen Honors courses. Of these, four have been special, inter-disciplinary colloquia on topics like "Animal Rights," "Euthanasia," and "Environmental Ethics"--each initiated and organized by talented students who perceived a need for a course on the topic and who had the determination to bring it about. In the Spring of 2002, I was one of the faculty organizers of and participants in a special inter-disciplinary seminar that explored the causes and consequences of the September 11 attacks; the course brought together faculty members from History, Political Science, Sociology, and Religious Studies and attracted some of the very best students at Georgia State.

But teaching is also finding ways to reach the less talented students. One of the wonderful things about Georgia State is the amazing diversity of its students. (*Newsweek* just named Georgia State one of the three most diverse universities in the United States.) This certainly applies to race, nationality, and religion. It also applies to innate abilities. I take great pride in the fact that many students, with no intention of going on to graduate school, come back again and again to take my courses. They show up to enthusiastically discuss course materials during office hours, they sit in the front row for public talks and lectures, and they stay in contact after graduation. I also take great pride in the fact that the overall student assessment of my courses has been so positive through the years. In the last three years, I have averaged 4.98 (out of 5.0) on the question regarding the "overall quality of instruction" on the Student Evaluation Questionnaire. In over half of the sixteen courses I taught during this period, the students rated the course a 5.0 overall. In fact, in 2001, out of all of the students who filled out evaluations for my courses, one assigned a 4.0 on the question; *all* of the other students for the year assigned a 5.0. In 2002, I was awarded the Teaching Excellence Award by the Georgia Board of Regents, the highest acknowledgment for teaching for the over 20,000 faculty members teaching in the University System of Georgia. It was the first time the award went to a scholar from the field of Religious Studies.

Finally, teaching is addressing the needs of the larger community. I take very seriously the responsibilities that come with being a faculty member who teaches religion and ethics at a state university. It is not merely college students who want to be challenged intellectually and who desire to understand religion, it is the community as a whole. Two examples will suffice. A few years back, I was contacted by a group of senior citizens from the North Atlanta Senior Services Center who said that they felt ignorant about world events because they did not know enough about various religions. In response, I organized and co-taught an eight-week course in world religions at the center--and never have I had a more enthusiastic and thoughtful group of students. More recently, I was asked to attend a weekend retreat for the three-hundred-member Buckhead Business Association. The retreat had been planned before the events of September 11, but the group contacted Georgia State to see if faculty members could attend and help these

business leaders understand the terrorist attacks from a serious and scholarly perspective. Over a three-day period in November 2001, I delivered three academic lectures to the group on the religious dimensions of September 11 and the war in Afghanistan. For hours, lawyers, architects, fund-raisers, managers, and CEOs discussed and debated *jihad*, notions of "just war," the differences between "combatants" and "non-combatants," and even "double effect." I was invited back for the next retreat in 2002 (despite, not because of, the "double effect" discussion, I'm sure), and we proceeded to take on a new slate of ethical topics.

Challenge students, and they will respond. It sounds simple, but doing so actually involves a host of efforts and undertakings that, I must admit, I never imagined when I came to Georgia State University in 1986. I've increasingly come to appreciate that the act of "teaching" extends far beyond the hours I formally spend in the classroom. The act of standing before a group of college students is at once invigorating, challenging, gratifying, frightening, and important; there is, quite frankly, nothing I enjoy doing more. But it is the teaching that goes on *outside* of the classroom that may have the greatest potential to touch, and even to change, lives.