

Teaching Statement
Timothy Renick, Georgia State University

At heart, my philosophy in the classroom is simple: 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 an understatement. 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 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 of Zoo Atlanta 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; a third and a fourth (eventually) would follow. Before five years had passed, I was writing the proposal to add a B.A. degree in Religious Studies.

Today, Georgia State has over thirty undergraduate and Masters-level courses in Religious Studies, with almost sixty students pursuing their bachelor's degrees and nine M.A. students concentrating in the field. Each semester since the introduction of Perspectives 2001 courses into the core curriculum three years ago, the Religious Studies offering has been the most popular Perspectives course at Georgia State. Almost half of the 3000- and 4000-level Religious Studies courses scheduled for Spring 2002 filled during Phase One registration; the Perspectives offering was filled with eighty-five students after three days.

Being at the center 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, underfunded) 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 twelve Honors theses (more than any other faculty member at Georgia State over that time frame, I'm told) and over thirty Masters theses.

The students flourished in these one-on-one settings; their accomplishments mounted. One of my students became the first-ever Georgia State recipient of a National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) Young Scholars's 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 at both Cambridge and Oxford Universities in England and graduate degrees in religion at Harvard, Yale, Princeton, Brown, University of Virginia, Vanderbilt, Emory, University of California at Berkeley, the University of Chicago, Georgetown, and others. (I wonder if there is any other program in the state--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 150 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 an article in the most prestigious journal in the field, the *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*. The essay was based on a topic that he first pursued in my "Augustine and Aquinas" class here at Georgia State.

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. This spring, I will be one of the faculty organizers of and participants in a special inter-disciplinary seminar that will explore the causes and consequences of the September 11 attacks; the course will bring together faculty members from History, Political Science, Sociology, and Religious Studies and doubtlessly will be taken by 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. This certainly applies to race, nationality, and religion. It also applied to innate abilities. I thus take great pride in the fact that many students, with no intention of going on to graduate school or further studying religion, 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 question 17 of the Student Evaluation Questionnaire. In over half of the sixteen courses I taught during this period, the students rated the course a perfect 5.0 overall. In fact, last year, out of all of the students I taught who filled out evaluations, one assigned a 4.0 on question 17; *all* of the other students for the year assigned a 5.0.

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 engaged and challenged intellectually, 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 team-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, I delivered three academic lectures to the group on the religious dimensions of September 11 and the war in Afghanistan; for literally hours, lawyers, architects, fund-raisers, managers, and CEOs discussed and debated the Taliban, *jihad*, notions of "just war," the differences between "combatants" and "non-combatants," and a series of other issues. They already have invited me back to attend their next retreat.

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.

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Professional Experience

Georgia State University, Director of the Religious Studies Program, and Associate Chair of the Department of Philosophy. Associate Professor 1993-present; Assistant Professor, 1986-1993.
Princeton University, Teaching Assistant, Department of Religion, "Christian Ethics and Society," 1983-84.
Dartmouth College, Lecturer, Department of English, "English Composition," Fall 1980 and Fall 1981.

Education

Ph.D. Princeton University, Department of Religion, Princeton, New Jersey (1986). Area: Religion and Ethics.
M.A. Princeton University, Department of Religion (1984).
B.A. Dartmouth College, Hanover, New Hampshire (1982), Phi Beta Kappa, summa cum laude with High Honors in both Religion and Government (double major).

Areas

Religion and Ethics; War, Peace and Violence (including the Just-War Tradition); Contemporary Religious Thought; Church and State; Religious Pluralism and Ethical Discourse; Aquinas.

Fellowships & Awards

Georgia State University Distinguished Honors Professor, 1995.
Blue Key National Honor Society Outstanding Teacher Award, 1995.
Outstanding Teacher Award, College of Arts and Sciences, Georgia State University, 1990-1991.
Named to the *Dictionary of International Biography* (Cambridge University Press); *Who's Who in American Education*; and *Who's Who in America (Southeast)*; and *The Directory of American Scholars*.
Association of Princeton Graduate Alumni Teaching Award (Department of Religion), 1985.

Recipient of highest teacher rating, Princeton University Student Course Guide, 1984.
Princeton University Fellowship, 1982-1986.
Phi Beta Kappa, 1982.
Rufus Choate Scholar (top 5%), Summa Cum Laude (top 2%), graduated ranked 6th in a class of 1,100, Dartmouth College, 1982.

Selected Publications

A. Book

Aquinas: An Introduction, Armchair Theologians Series, John Knox/Westminster Press (2002).

B. Essays

- "Second Noah: Howard Finster, the Bible, and Southern Folk Art," in Jeffrey S. Siker, ed., *The Bible and Popular Culture*, Routledge (2002).
- "A Response to Berlin and McBride," in Jennifer Baise, ed., *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism*, Gale Publishing (2001).
- "A Cabbit in Sheep's Clothing: Exploring the Sources of Our Moral Disquiet About Cloning," *The Annual of The Society of Christian Ethics*, Volume 18, 1998, 259-274.
- "Charity Lost: The Secularization of the Principle of Double Effect in the Just-War Tradition," *The Thomist*, Vol. 58, no. 3, July 1994, 441-462.
- "Toward Recapturing the Virtue of Charity in the Just-War Tradition: Deterrence, Proportionality and the Use of Minimum Means," *Journal of Religious Studies*, Vol. 18, no. 2, Fall 1992, 94-113.
- "From Apartheid to Liberation: Calvinism and the Shaping of Ethical Belief in South Africa," *Sociological Focus*, Vol. 24, no. 2, 1991, 129-143.
- "Making the Unthinkable Thinkable: Technology and the Justice of War," *Ethics* (A Quarterly of the Josephson Institute), Vol. 3, no. 4, 1991, 31-35.
- "Freedom, Individuality and the Common Good: A Reply to Berlin and McBride," *Social Theory and Practice*, Vol. 16, no. 3, 1990, 323-335.
- "Stanley Carlson-Thies and James W. Skillen: Welfare in America--Christian Perspectives on a Policy Crisis," *Religious Studies Review*, 25, 1, January 1999, 66-67.

Courses Taught (at Georgia State and Princeton)

Introduction to Religion; World Religions; Religion and Ethics; Religious Pluralism and Ethical Discourse; Church and State Contemporary Religious Thought; Christian Ethics and Society; Ethics of Euthanasia (Honors Seminar); Ethics of Animal Rights (Honors Seminar); Philosophy of Religion; Augustine and Aquinas; History of Christian Thought Through the Reformation; History of Christian Thought Since the Reformation; Introduction to Philosophy; Social and Political Philosophy; Ancient and Medieval Philosophy

University and Community Service

Chair, Graduate Council, Georgia State University, 1998-present; member 1994-present.

Member, Executive Committee, College of Arts and Sciences, 1997-present.

Chair, Dean's Triennial Evaluation Committee, 1998.

Chair, Chair Evaluation Committee, Department of Philosophy, 1999.

Chair, Honors Program Review Committee, 1999-present.

Faculty Senator, Georgia State University, 1994-present.

Appointee, Promotion and Tenure Review Board (responsible for re-writing the College P & T Manual), 1997-1999.

Chair, Humanities Group, Research Initiation Grant Program, 1996; member 1995-1999.

Appointee, SACS Reaccreditation Committee, Georgia State University, 1996-1998.

Faculty representative, INCEPT (Freshmen Orientation), 1999-present.

Committee on Religion, Board of Regents, University System of Georgia, 1994.

Author, proposal for a Bachelor of Arts degree in Religious Studies, approved by the College of Arts and Sciences, Georgia State University, 1990; instituted 1992.

Chair, Search Committees in Religion, College of Arts and Sciences, Georgia State University, 1987-1988, 1990-1991, 1995-1996, 1998-99; Member, Search Committees in Philosophy, 1986-1987, 1991-1992, 1992-1993, 1994-1995, 1996-1997, 1998-1999.

Adviser to Hospice Atlanta and the Visiting Nurse Association of Metropolitan Atlanta, 1989-90.

Academic Program and Continuing Education Committee, Georgia State University, 1994-present.

Member, Georgia State University Animal Care and Use Review Committee, 1990-present.

Honors Council, Georgia State University, 1992-present.

Student Life and Development Committee, 1996-1998.

Chair, Curriculum Committee, College of Arts and Sciences, Georgia State University, 1991-1992, 1992-1993; Vice-Chair 1989-1990; Committee Member, 1987-1990.

Faculty Adviser, Georgia State University Young Democrats, 2000-present, Religious Studies Student Forum, 2001-present; Georgia State Buddhist Students, 1986-1996; Amnesty International, 1987-1994; Students of Objectivism, 1987-1991; Mortar Board Honor Society, 1988-1989, 1991-1994; Bahai Student Group, 1991-1995.

Member, Chair Evaluation Committee, Department of Philosophy, 1988-89, 1991-1992, 1998-1999 (Chair).

Organizer, an eight-week course in the comparative study of world religions for Atlanta senior citizens, conducted by North Atlanta Senior Services, summer 1989 .

Appointee, Dean's Advisory Committee on Religion, College of Arts and Sciences, Georgia State University, 1989-1990.

Languages

Research capabilities in French, Spanish and German.

Professional Memberships

American Academy of Religion
Society of Biblical Literature
Society of Christian Ethics
Religious Studies Group of the University Center in Georgia

References

Professor Jeffrey L. Stout, Department of Religion, Princeton University
Professor Ronald M. Green, Department of Religion, Dartmouth College.
Professor Stephen Prothero, Department of Religion, Boston University.
Professor Paul Ramsey (deceased), letter on file with the Department of Religion, Princeton University.
Professor David Blumenfeld, Associate Dean for the Humanities, Georgia State University.