

# **Teaching Religious Studies**

**Religious Studies 509-301**

**Fall, 2016**

**University of Pennsylvania**

**Professor Steven Weitzman**

**Tuesday 2:00PM – 5:00 PM**

## **Course Goals**

The aim of this course is to help graduate students in Religious Studies and related fields prepare for their careers as educators. It has two more specific goals:

The first is to help you prepare for a career as a teacher who makes a positive difference in the lives of students. A graduate program at a research university like the University of Pennsylvania prepares its participants to be scholars first and teachers second. What the culture of such institutions can obscure is the rewards, responsibilities and challenges of teaching. Teaching can be among the most meaningful aspects of an academic career, a chance to develop one's intellectual life while also helping others.

This course cannot teach you how to teach, a skill you will have to develop through experience, but seeks to encourage you to begin preparing for your role as a teacher. Our aim is both practical and theoretical. The course is designed to help you plan in advance for your work as a teacher. It also seeks to help you develop your teaching in dialogue with issues and debates in the Humanities and Education.

The second goal is to help prepare you to teach about religion in a secular academic setting. Teaching about religion from a non-religious perspective poses specific challenges but also offers special opportunities to help students learn about other cultures and to think through questions that may be important to their self-understanding. The course broaches questions specific to the teaching of Religious Studies—what is the value of studying religion in a higher education setting? How does one bridge between a secular critical approach to religion and the beliefs of one's students? What is different about teaching a sacred text as opposed to another kind of text?, etc. Thinking about these questions is also a way to explore the field of Religious Studies as it has developed within the modern secular university.

## **Contact Information**

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## The Nitty-Gritty

### Reading:

All of the reading material will be available online or distributed in another way, with the exception of one book, which you should acquire through an online vendor or from the library—a book of your choosing from the AAR Teaching Religious Studies Series that will be the focus of a book review. Please consult with me before selecting a book.

Please note that reading assignments are fairly robust. When doing the reading, it may help to keep focused on the questions posed in the schedule below.

### Expectations:

- 1) *Active participation* in class discussion and collaborative exercises, to be informed by the assigned reading (20% of course grade)
- 2) *A Review* that compares the teaching approaches of three authors represented in a book that you select from the AAR series Teaching Religious Studies (20%). You will be summarizing your conclusions in class. For this assignment, you will need to acquire one of the books in the series listed at: <http://www.oup.com/us/catalog/general/series/AARTeachingReligiousStudiesSeries/?view=usa>. The choice of the book should ideally be related to either the syllabus revision project or the teaching practicum.
- 3) *Syllabus Revision* (May 2). Rather than composing a syllabus from scratch, you will be asked to improve an already existing syllabus in your subject area, with many examples to be found on the Wabash Teaching website. In order to search by syllabi by topic at this site, see <http://www.wabashcenter.wabash.edu/resources/guide-syllabi.aspx>. Please select a syllabus from a course that you can imagine teaching some day; try to identify the strengths and weaknesses based on what you have been learning, and then revise it accordingly. Append the original syllabus and a concise description of the changes you've made and their rationale (an optional resource to consult is O'Brien, Millis and Cohen, "The Course Syllabus: a Learning Centered Approach", and for some reflections on writing syllabi, see <https://www.mcsweeneys.net/articles/i-would-rather-do-anything-else-than-write-the-syllabus-for-your-class#.V79RbP7kA-8.twitter>) (20%).
- 4) *"Learning by Teaching" Exercise*. Generate some kind of learning experience for your fellow students that draws on what you have learned in the class—a lecture, discussion, or some other kind of learning experience that advances the goals you have set for yourself as a teacher, along with a related writing exercise (30%)—May 30

## Schedule

The following schedule is meant as a road map for you as you think about the act of teaching, organized around questions that you might ask as a new or developing teacher.

### **Week 1 (August 30): *The Art of Teaching Religious Studies.***

Over the course of this semester, we will be trying to understand two elusive topics: teaching and religion, and we will begin by several questions.

The first to pertain to teaching: What are we trying to accomplish as teachers, and what makes for good teaching?

Many of us learn how to teach by example, by imitating the teachers or learning experiences we have had, both positive and negative. What have we already learned from our teachers about how to teach? Please come prepared to discuss a teacher or learning experience that you would want to emulate in your own performance? What made his or her teaching work? What teaching have you experienced that you would not want to emulate. Why?

The second set of questions concerns the content of what we are trying to teach: religion. What is religion? What kind of knowledge is needed to understand religion? Please come to class ready to define what you mean by religion and to explain what you think a student needs to learn in order to understand it.

### **Week 2 (September 6): *What should I be trying to achieve as a teacher of Religious Studies in a university setting? What do I want my students to learn?***

What are our goals for teaching Religious Studies in particular? What will a student know or be able to do as a result of learning with you? We will address these questions in light of readings that articulate a range of possible goals for academic Religious Studies. How does each of the following studies (all in the packet) define the purpose or benefit of learning about religion from an academic perspective?

a) Astin, Astin and Lindholm, Cultivating the Spirit: How College can Enhance Student's Inner Lives (Jossey-Bass, 2010), 1-11, 115-157.

b) Charles Long, "The University, the Liberal Arts, and the Teaching and Study of Religion," Beyond the Classics: Essays in Religious Studies and Liberal Education (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1990), 19-40.

c) Robin Lovin, "Confidence and Criticism: Religious Studies and the Public Purposes of Liberal Education," Beyond the Classics, 75-88.

d) Jill deTemple, "Home is My Area Code: Thinking about, Learning and Teaching Globalization in Introductory World Religions Classes," Teaching Theology and Religion 15 (2012): 61-71: <http://proxy.library.upenn.edu:2154/doi/10.1111/j.1467->

9647.2011.00764.x/full

And for a view which dissents from all of the above:

D.G. Hart, “Whither Religion in the University?”, The University Gets Religion: Religious Studies in American Higher Education (Baltimore: John’s University Press, 1999), 1-17; 200-251 (the whole book is worth reading for an understanding of the field)

Which of these conceptions of Religious Studies do you embrace as your own mission as a teacher—if any? What are the implications of each view for how one might go about teaching Religious Studies? What would you say your own goals are as a teacher?

Optional: For the goals of still other practitioners of Religious Studies pedagogy, see <http://www.rsnonline.org/images/pdfs/2009OctSpotlightonTeaching.pdf>

**Week 3 (September 13):** *Assuming I have settled on goals, how do I know whether I am achieving them? Are my students learning what I want them to learn? What are their goals and motivations? Do they match up with mine, and if not, why not, and what should I do about it?*

As Lofton’s review essay about J.Z Smith shows, sometimes we do not have effect on our students that we imagining ourselves having. Where, according to Lofton’s account, is the gap between the idealized teaching Smith writes about and the actual experience of being his student? Do we need to worry about such a gap in our own teaching?

Lofton’s account presuppose a student who wants to learn what we have to teach. Although college-level education is supposedly voluntary, even the brightest college students do not in fact want to learn what we have to teach, and the students’ own religious beliefs are not the only issue—they can also be resistant to reading literature, to learning about the past, to understanding other cultures and genders. Education scholars have uncovered a number of factors that impede students’ desire or ability to learn just as they have discovered some of the factors that can amplify student motivation and ability. What are the implications of this research, if any, for teaching a field like Religious Studies? Factoring in this research, how might we foster or allow for the kind of engagement that we are seeking in students?

S. Seidel and K. Tanner, “What is Students Revolt?—Considering Student Resistance,” *CBE Life Science Education* 12 (2013): 586-595 (available online)

J.Z. Smith, “‘Narratives into Problems’: The College Introductory Course and the Study of Religion.” *JAAR* 56: 727-739, at

<http://www.bu.edu/cas/files/2011/12/Smith-College-Intro-Course.pdf>

Katie Lofton, Review of J.Z. Smith, On Teaching Religion

<http://jaar.oxfordjournals.org/content/82/2/531.full>

To be an effective teacher, one must understand one’s students, and they are incredibly diverse, coming from different backgrounds and perspectives. According to Seidel and Tanner, why do students resist what their teachers are

trying to impart to them? Does their analysis illumine in any way the disconnect between J.Z. Smith and his student Katie Lofton? What could a professor have done to avoid alienating a student like her? Does her response mean that Smith has failed as a teacher?

If there is time, we will also be devoting part of our discussion to understanding the pedagogical implications of student diversity in a broader sense. Recommended readings on that topic include:

“Gender Issues in the Classroom,”

<http://www.columbia.edu/cu/tat/pdfs/gender.pdf>

Hurtado and Ruiz, “The Climate for Underrepresented Groups:

<http://heri.ucla.edu/briefs/urmbrief.php>

Williams Koonsberger, “Approaching Diversity: Some Classroom Strategies for Learning Communities,” [http://www.aacu.org/publications-](http://www.aacu.org/publications-research/periodicals/approaching-diversity-some-classroom-strategies-learning)

[research/periodicals/approaching-diversity-some-classroom-strategies-learning](http://www.aacu.org/publications-research/periodicals/approaching-diversity-some-classroom-strategies-learning)

**Week 4-5 (September 20, 27): *Assuming I have settled on goals and have students willing to learn, how do I teach them effectively? Should I just deliver a lecture? What are my other options?***

We will use this session to look more closely at some of the basic tools available to a college teacher: the lecture, discussion-leading, experiential learning, and technologically enhanced teaching. What are the advantages and disadvantages of each of these teaching tools? How might one use them most effectively in a Religious Studies course? Select one of the following tools, and come prepared to teach us briefly about how to employ it.

### 1) *Lecturing*

There is a lot of criticism of the lecture as a monotonous experience that induces passivity in students. Is there a case to be made for the lecture as a teaching device? For some relevant reading, see Gulette, 25-37; P. Frederick, “The Lively Lecture—8 Variations,” *College Teaching* 34 (1986): 43-50, and online at: [jstor.org/stable/27558159](http://www.jstor.org/stable/27558159)

### 2) *Discussion*

Discussion during classes or in sections actively involves students in theory, but how does one get students to actually speak up or to listen to one another? And if they do speak up, how does one forge from their often unpredictable responses a meaningful learning experience?

J. Hollander, “Learning to Discuss: Strategies for Improving the Quality of Class Discussion,” *Teaching Sociology* 30 (2002): 317-327

<http://www.jstor.org/discover/10.2307/3211480?uid=2129&uid=2134&uid=2&uid=70&uid=4&sid=21104327369643>

### 3) *Experiential Learning/Service Learning/Teaching and Civic Engagement*

The educational reformer John Dewey (1859-1952) strongly advocated for the use of real life experience as a way to learn, and his views have had a profound impact on education today, but how does one incorporate “experience” into the subject like the

teaching of Religious Studies. What is the rationale for this kind of learning? What are the potential benefits and pitfalls? For some background, see A Kolb and D. Kolb, "Learning Styles and Learning Spaces: Enhancing Experiential Learning in Higher Education."

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/40214287>

Some would now argue for community service or even social activism as a form of learning. What does this entail and how would it work for Religious Studies. See S. Bhattacharyya, "Engaged Pedagogy and Civic Engagement," *Religious Studies News* (2010):

[http://rsnonline.org/indexf72a.html?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=251&Itemid=332](http://rsnonline.org/indexf72a.html?option=com_content&view=article&id=251&Itemid=332)

4) *Technologically Enhanced Teaching*. There now exists a whole industry promoting the use of technology in the classroom. See, for example <http://educomp.com/> and the online resource this company offers at; <http://educomp.com/Products/EducompOnline.aspx> Beyond power-point presentations and the enhanced showing of videos, how might technology empower you as a teacher? Is there any apparent downside to the use of technology in teaching? On some of the trade-offs, see: C. Anson, "Distant Voices: Teaching and Writing in a Culture of Technology," found at:

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/379069?seq=1>

*Creative Assignments/self-motivated learning*: Much of the learning in a course is supposed to take place outside the classroom, through course readings, assignments and individual study. How do I engage students at the level? Are there ways to encourage reading and reflection that do not entail passive reading or rote memorization? For an example, see Bauman, "The 'Make Your Own Religion' Project,"

<http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/teth.12324/full>

**Week 6 (October 4): *I approach Religious Studies from the perspective of a secular academic, but some of my students are religious, others anti-religious. What room is there for religious belief within the classroom? Do I want my teaching to be or to seem anti-religious? If not, is there some other option beside being for or against religion?***

One issue many teachers of Religious Studies struggle with is the vexed relationship between the academic study of Religious Studies and being religious. Some scholars believe that Religious Studies is a secular undertaking and that the teacher should sustain an objective or critical perspective, but others seek to teach to or from within a religious orientation. Some bracket out their own religious convictions or experiences; others believe it is important to incorporate those beliefs or experiences into their teaching. Some work hard to avoid their field being confused for theological studies; others believe there should be room even with a secular Religious Studies department for the teaching of religion from within a particular religious perspective. What are the issues at stake in this debate? In the debate as it is described by Taves, how would you position yourself? Can an outsider to religion truly understand it or teach it? Can an insider be objective?

Relatedly, what should we do with the fact that many of our students are religiously

motivated? Should one try address the religious identity issues and/or need for personal meaning that can lead a student to want to take a religious studies course (or deter them from taking such courses)? We will try to organize our discussion of these issues as a debate, drawing on the following readings as a resource

First some background:

W. Royce Clark, "The Legal Status of Religious Studies Programs in Public Higher Education," *Beyond the Classics*, 109-139 [especially instructive for those of you who will be teaching in state schools but of relevance to any Religious Studies department seeking to distinguish itself from a seminary or divinity school].

Ann Taves, "Negotiating the Boundaries in Theological and Religious Studies", found at <http://www.religion.ucsb.edu/Faculty/taves/GTU-FinalLecture.pdf>

Robert Wilkin, "Who Will Speak for the Religious Traditions?", *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 57 (1989): 699-717.

Donald Wiebe, "Does Understanding Religion Require Religious Understanding?" *Insider/Outsider Problem*, 260-73.

Then consider how three professors active today manage the relationship between their role as teachers and their own religious beliefs in a forum entitled "Insiders, Outsiders and Disclosure in the Undergraduate Classroom." *Teaching Theology and Religion* 19 (2016), can be found on via Penn Libraries

**Fall term break (October 11).**

**Week 7 (October 18). *How do I teach my students how to read a religious text? What am I trying to teach about that text? What makes teaching a religious text different from teaching a literary text or a historical document?***

Beyond the general challenges of teaching about religion, many of us will face the more specific challenges of teaching religious texts—an undertaking that combines the challenge of teaching religion with teaching students how to interpret texts. What makes teaching a religious text different from teaching other kinds of text?

For some background on the challenges of teaching students how to read any kind of text, see National Endowment for the Humanities, "Reading at Risk: A Survey of Literary Reading in America" – Research Division Report, No. 46, 2004.  
<http://www.nea.gov/pub/readingatrisk.pdf>.

As teachers of Religious Studies, we face additional challenges as we try to teach students about religious texts. What is it that we want students to learn from these texts—an ability to quote from them, a better understanding of history, or something else?

Please read the articles by Cornell and Lemon, Reed, and Kirkpatrick that appear in the following issue of the journal *Teaching Theology and Religion* (vol 19, 2016):  
<http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/teth.v19.2/issuetoc>

Based on these readings, how is the Bible typically taught in university classrooms? Do any of the essays suggest viable alternatives? What is it that a student of Religious Studies should understand about the Bible (or the Quran or other sacred texts?)

### **Week 8 (October 25): Presentations of Review Essays**

Select two essays from the Teaching Religious Studies volume (other than from Bell's volume) that you have selected and that reflect significantly different approaches to the teaching of the subject matter in question. What teaching challenge is each essay trying to address? Are they successful in overcoming it? After describing each approach, explain which one you favor and why.

### **Week 9. (Nov 1). Teaching "Lived Religion"**

***Religious culture expresses itself in many ways? How does one teach about those aspects of religion found in the world beyond texts?***

Many scholars have pointed out that religion cannot be confined to the reading of sacred texts and that textual interpretation should not be the implicit model for how one approaches other kinds of phenomena like ritual or the use of material objects. We will explore how to incorporate dimensions like religious practice, sacred objects and the body

For the limitations of focusing on scripture as a way of understanding religion, see Gregory Schopen, "Archaeology and Protestant Assumptions in the study of Indian Buddhism," *History of Religions* 31 (1991): 1-23 (can be accessed online via Penn Libraries).

What is misleading about studying its sacred texts as a way of understanding Buddhism? But what then are other ways of studying religion? For some alternatives, see

Lawrence Sullivan, "Body Works: Knowledge of the Body in the Study of Religion," *History of Religions* 30 (1990): 86-99, found at [http://proxy.library.upenn.edu:2266/stable/1062793?pq-origsite=summon&seq=1#page\\_scan\\_tab\\_contents](http://proxy.library.upenn.edu:2266/stable/1062793?pq-origsite=summon&seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents)

Viviane-Lee Nyitray, "Teaching about Material Culture in Religious Studies," and the following essays at:

[https://zm03.pobox.stanford.edu/service/home/~/?auth=co&loc=en\\_US&id=482624&part=2&view=html](https://zm03.pobox.stanford.edu/service/home/~/?auth=co&loc=en_US&id=482624&part=2&view=html)

How might one incorporate these alternatives into one's teaching about religion?

**Week. 10 (November 8—we will try to reschedule this meeting to avoid having class during election day): Teaching as Collaboration. *How do my efforts as a teacher relate to that of colleagues in the same department? How do I relate my efforts into a***



### *larger educational experience?*

Your teaching will be part of a larger experience for students, working in tandem with other courses. How will your teaching fit into this larger learning experience?

One way to approach this question is to focus on the major, a concept introduced in 1910 by Harvard Universities that most American universities now use to encourage a certain level of specialization in a given field. What should a student learn by majoring in Religious Studies? Depth of knowledge? Breadth of knowledge? A certain skill-set? Unless you happen to be the only scholar in your department, you will have to address these questions in partnership with colleagues, and the effort to establish the requirements of a major can bring out differences in how the field and teaching itself are conceived.

Fortunately, we needn't reinvent the wheel. According to an AAR study, many scholars agree about the characteristics of a successful Religious Studies major. What are those characteristics? Do you agree with them? For background reading, see

“The Religion Major and Liberal Education—A White Paper”, from the American Academy of Religion”, and the responses that follow, found at <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1467-9647.2010.00673.x/pdf>

A successful Religious Studies department is more than just a curriculum or structure, however, and we will be trying to understand some of the other elements by looking at departments that have failed and trying to understand why. The reading for this week, all in the packet, includes case studies of departments that closed or that had near-death experiences. Can you discern the reasons for failure? Were they merely practical—financial, administrative-or are there underlying intellectual issues at work? What was or might have been necessary to come back from the brink? What, finally, do you consider the elements of a successful Religious Studies department?

Gary Lease, The Rise and Fall of Religious Studies at Santa Cruz: a Case Study in Pathology, or the Rest of the Story,” Method and Theory in the Study of Religion 7 (1995): 305-324

E. Ann Matter, “The Academic Culture of Disbelief: Religious Studies at the University of Pennsylvania, Method and Theory in the Study of Religion 7 (1995): 383-392

**Week 11-12 (November 15): “Learning by Teaching”**

**Thanksgiving Break (Nov 28)**

**Week 13 (December 5) Teaching and the Future (syllabi projects due today)**

