

Teaching Religion
Religious Studies 509-301
Spring 2020
University of Pennsylvania

Professor Steven Weitzman

Thursday 1:00PM – 2:50 PM

Course Goals

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, which can be among the most meaningful aspects of an academic career. This course cannot teach you how to teach, a skill you will have to develop through experience and coaching, but it does aim to help you prepare for your role as a teacher by addressing the challenges of teaching and exposing you to some of the arts of doing it well.

More specifically, the aim of this course is to help prepare you to teach about religion in a higher educational setting. Teaching about religion from a non-religious perspective poses specific challenges but also offers students 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, including: What is the value of studying religion in a higher education setting? How does one bridge between a critical approach to religion and the beliefs of one's students? The course will broach these and other questions through readings and discussions meant to help you think through the challenges of teaching about religion to college students, and will give you opportunities to develop your own approach to them.

Contact Information

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Expectations. The class involves a number of combination of active class participation, book-review like assignments, and teaching-related exercises. Assessment is as follows:

- 1) *Active participation* in class discussion and brief exercises, informed by the assigned reading (20% of course grade).
- 2) *Understanding the Contemporary University.* Within the first part of the semester, by Feb 13, identify and read a book that addresses a challenge or problem for the

contemporary American university, and then write a book review of not more than 2000 words outlining its argument and briefly registering pros and cons. You will be asked to share your impressions in a discussion on Feb 13 (20%)

- 3) *The Arts of Teaching Religious Studies*. Within the second half of the class, by March 26, identify a book from the AAR series Teaching Religious Studies on how to teach X subject, and after reading the book distill in 2500 words or less lessons for how to best teach that particular subject to undergrads (again you will be asked to summarize the results in class. The series is found at: <https://www.aarweb.org/publications/teaching-religious-studies-series>. Most volumes should be available through the library. The choice of book should be related to your interest, the syllabus project, and the teaching practicum. (20%)
- 4) *Syllabus Revision*. Rather than composing a syllabus from scratch, you are asked to improve an already existing syllabus in your subject area. In order to find existing syllabi, you may draw on a syllabus from a former teacher or from a scholar in your field or for more options, see the list of Religious Studies syllabi found at: <http://www.wabashcenter.wabash.edu/resources/guide-syllabi.aspx> Once you have selected syllabus, review it in light of what you have been learning in class, identifying areas that you think need improvement and revising accordingly. You are especially encourage to make revisions that address dimensions of teaching we have not discussed at length—for example, class assignments/assessment.

Append the original syllabus and a concise description of the changes and their rationale. An optional resource to consult is O'Brien, Millis and Cohen, "The Course Syllabus: a Learning Centered Approach, and to keep things real, see <https://www.mcsweeneys.net/articles/i-would-rather-do-anything-else-than-write-the-syllabus-for-your-class#.V79RbP7kA-8.twitter> (20%, due by last class).

- 5) "*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, to be performed during class-time (20%).

The course is intended for students planning a career in a secular or pluralistic higher education setting, and it is focused on American higher education, but a portion of the content can be applied to seminaries and other educational contexts.

If you have a disability which may necessitate an academic accommodation or the use of auxiliary aids and services in a class, please contact me and the Office of Accessible Education's Disability Resource Center (DRC) as soon as possible since timely notice is needed to arrange for appropriate accommodations (phone 723-1066; TDD 725-1067).

Reading: Much of the reading is listed in the syllabus below, available online or placed in the "files" section of Canvas. A reading assignment for a typical week will consist of

4-6 article-length readings, and the schedule below provides questions that should guide you as you read them. Beyond that, there are three additional books you will need to read at different points in the semester—available through the library or purchasable online.

- 1) in the first month, find and read a book from the last decade that zeroes in on some issue or problem in higher education today. The book may focus on the role of religion in the university (e.g., Hart, *The University Gets Religion*; Schmalzbauer and Mahoney., *The Resilience of Religion in American Higher Ed*), but it can also focus on some other aspect of higher-education—new trends in student culture, novel approaches to learning, the university's intersections with the history of race, gender or class, the challenges facing contingent faculty, the history and future of academic freedom, or other topics. Please consult with me before finalizing your selection. You will be asked to complete the review of this book by Feb 13.
- 2) A book of your choosing from the AAR Teaching Religious Studies Series that will be the focus of another assignment due March 26 Again, please consult with me about the book you'd like to select.
- 3) At some point during the semester, you should also read L. Becker and P. Deniico, *Teaching in Higher Education* (2013 edition available online through the library), K. Bain's *What the Best College Teachers Do* (also online), or another guide you propose that can address aspects of teaching we won't be able to address in class, such as running a seminar, student evaluation, etc. You will be expected to draw on this work for your syllabus and/or practicum.

You are also asked to listen to one podcast episode or blog post of your choosing from the series *Teaching in Higher Ed with Bonnie Stachowiak*:

<https://teachinginhighered.com/>

Schedule and Discussion Questions

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 developing teacher. Please that that it is more detailed than perhaps a syllabus should be, especially at the undergraduate level. That is because it is meant to be a resource you can consult later on after the end of this course.

Week 1 (January 16): *Why teach? What am I trying to accomplish?*

Over the course of this semester, we will be reflecting on what are we trying to accomplish as teachers, and we will begin by addressing that question head-on:

We can begin by considering what our own teachers were/are trying to accomplish. Many of us learn how to teach by example, by imitating the teachers we have had, for good or for ill. What then have we already learned from our teachers about the why and how of

teaching? Please come prepared to discuss a teacher or learning experience that you would want to emulate in your own performance? Did that teachers have goals beyond imparting a certain subject matter? What seemed to motivate them? What made her/his/their teaching work? What teaching have you experienced that you would not want to emulate?

Then we will think about our own goals. Read bell hooke, *Teaching to Transgress*, 1-22: <https://academictrap.files.wordpress.com/2015/03/bell-hooks-teaching-to-transgress.pdf>
What is her goal as a teacher? Do you embrace it as your own? Do you have other goals?

Week 2 (January 23): *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) C. 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) R. Lovin, "Confidence and Criticism: Religious Studies and the Public Purposes of Liberal Education," Beyond the Classics, 75-88.

d) J. 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 dissenting view: D.G. Hart, "Whither Religion in the University?", The University Gets Religion: Religious Studies in American Higher Education (Baltimore: Johns University Press, 1999), 1-17; 200-251

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 about religion? What are your goals as a teacher of Religious Studies/

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

Week 3 (January 30): *Are students learning what I want them to learn? What are their goals? Do they match up with mine? 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? What lessons are there to draw for our own teaching?

Lofton's account presupposes 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. According to the reading, why do students resist what their teachers are trying to impart to them? What are the implications of this research for our own teaching?

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>

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

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

Week 4 (Feb 6): *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?*

Research suggests that students learn in multiple ways and in fact learning itself is the cultivation of different kinds of cognitive skills. For some background, read Thomas Armstrong, Multiple Intelligences in the Classroom (available as an electronic book via Penn Libraries), the chapter "the Foundations of MI Theory", pp. 1-15). Based on this reading, what kind of "intelligences" do you think can be cultivated within your classroom?

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—using the method in question to teach about 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 P. Frederick, "The Lively Lecture—8 Variations," College Teaching 34 (1986): 43-50, and online at: jstor.org/stable/27558159

2) *Facilitating 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 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>

T. Pohlman and N. Thomas, "Relearning the Art of Asking Questions," *Harvard Business Review*: <https://hbr.org/2015/03/relearning-the-art-of-asking-questions>

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

The educational reformer John Dewey (1859-1952) 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

4) *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 5 (Feb 13): *One of the great challenges of teaching is learning how to reach people with different life experiences. One's own perspective is tunneled by gender, race, economic circumstances, age, language, physical situation, family circumstances, and other contingencies that can make it difficult to understand or communicate with students from other backgrounds or circumstances. I want to create an inclusive learning environment accessible to students from a range of perspectives, but how?*

For background: Elisabeth Lillie, *Sense and Sensitivity: Difference and Diversity in Higher Education Classrooms*, available as an e-book through Penn libraries, 127-154.

C. Marshall and J. Reinharz, "Gender Issues in the Classroom,"

<https://search-proquest-com.proxy.library.upenn.edu/docview/196868730?pq-origsite=summon>

What does the following reading suggest as a way to address this challenge? Are you satisfied with it? How else might you cultivate a diverse and accessible classroom? In light of the reading or your own experience, how would you redesign the syllabus of this class to make it more broadly accessible?

W. Koonsberger, "Approaching Diversity: Some Classroom Strategies for Learning Communities," <http://www.aacu.org/publications-research/periodicals/approaching-diversity-some-classroom-strategies-learning>

If we have time, we will also consider the special challenges of teaching "millennial" students. See W. Bauman, et al. "Teaching the Millennial Generation in the Religious and Theological Classroom," *Teaching Theology and Religion* 17 (2014)

Today is also when we discuss the higher education books that you have reviewed.

Week 6 (Feb 20): *Some of my students are religious, others anti-religious. What room is there for religious belief within my classroom? Do I see myself as endorsing religion? Am I a critique of religion? What is the role of religion in my own teaching?*

In the background of this question is an issue that has long bedeviled the academic study of religion—the vexed relationship between the academic study of Religious Studies and the study of religion from within the framework of religious tradition or belief. Religious Studies worked hard to distinguish itself from seminary education that taught about religion from within a religious perspective, but in recent years, some have been seeking to reintroduce religious belief and theology into the liberal arts curriculum, including within public universities (see Taves and Sheehan).

What do you make of these arguments? Will students be able to bring their religious beliefs into your classroom? What about your own religious beliefs if you have them? And how will you manage the situation when students have conflicting beliefs? We will organize our discussion as a debate, asking you to take a position you may not personally agree with to help flesh out the arguments. For background reading, see

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]. To be distributed.
A. Taves, "Negotiating the Boundaries in Theological and Religious Studies", found at <https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/4aad/c11566cbe8708dfb3a94315a060df408d921.pdf>
Jonathan Sheehan, "Why We Should Teach Theology in a Public University," *Religious Dispatches* (May 2016): <http://religiondispatches.org/why-we-should-teach-theology-in-the-public-university/>
T. Sutton, "Orthodoxy Revisited: the Postsecular Classroom," *Journal of Beliefs and Values* 39 (2018), to be distributed.
S. Southerland and L. Scharman, "Acknowledging the Religious Beliefs Students Bring into the Science Classroom," *Theory into Practice* 52 (2013).

Optional if there is time and interest Without intending to pry into your personal beliefs, we might also reflect on how professors manage their own religious identity as part of their teaching. See the forum entitled “Insiders, Outsiders and Disclosure in the Undergraduate Classroom.” *Teaching Theology and Religion* 19 (2016), found online via Penn Libraries.

Week 7 (Feb 27).

The first half of today will be devoted to a presentation and discussion with Professor Peter Decherney, director of Penn’s Online Learning Initiative, about the online revolution underway in higher education. In the second half of class, we will explore the following:

Professors often do not know what to do when a student faces a mental health issue. What would you do, at Penn, if one of your students was beset by a mental health emergency. What resources are at your disposal?

Beyond these practical questions, there is also an academic question for scholars of religion. While we teach Religious Studies, people elsewhere in the university are seeking to cultivate students’ spirituality in the belief that it promotes their well-being. Note, for example, the role of spirituality in Penn’s website devoted to student well-being: <https://www.wellnessatpenn.com/wellness-area/spiritual/>. Is there anything that we can bring as scholars of religion to the question of how to enlist spirituality for students’ well-being?

Rob Whitley, “Five Ways Professors Can Help Students with Mental Illness,” *Psychology Today* <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/talking-about-men/201809/five-ways-professors-can-help-students-mental-illness>

M. Di Placito-de Rango, “Situating the Post-Secondary Instructor in a Supportive Role for the Mental Health and Well-being of Students,” *International Journal of Mental Health and Addiction* 16 (2018)

See Penn page on spirituality and well being by Ben Dean:

<https://www.authentic happiness.sas.upenn.edu/newsletters/authentic happiness coaching/spirituality>

L.Migdal and D. McDonald, “Clarifying the Relation between Spirituality and Well-being” *Journal of Nervous and Mental Health Disease* 201 (2013),

A Becker, “Ethical Considerations of Teaching Spirituality in the Academy,” *Nursing Ethics* 16 (2009): 607-706

Steve Weitzman, “Strategic Spirituality” (draft)

Week 8 (March 5). *What is my role and responsibility as a mentor in an academic context? I’ve had a range of experiences. Is there a right way to mentor? How do I build a strong mentoring experience with students?*

B. Montgomery, “Mapping a Mentoring Roadmap,” *Sage Open* 7 (2017)

<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/2158244017710288>

K. Kram, "Phases of the Mentor Relationship," *Academy of Management Journal* 26 (1983)

<https://www.zdrufenje-manager.si/assets/Baza-znanja/Razvoj-zenskega-managementa/Phases-of-the-Mentor-Relationship.pdf>

C. Chandler, "Mentoring and Women in Academia: Reevaluating the Traditional Model," *NWSA Journal* 8 (1996): 79-100.

<https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/dcd2/8aaf89a5c62de6ba8dc81ff68560c810c628.pdf>

In light of the reading and your own experience, please draft a 1-3 page "road-map" or plan that outlines your responsibilities to any potential mentee or protégé, and what expectations they have to meet in turn.

This is also the day when we will discuss the higher education books you've reviewed.

March 12—Spring Break

Week 9. (March 19). *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

On the basis of everything you’ve read for this week and know about Religious Studies, design a 1-2 page undergraduate curriculum for a Religious Studies major, bring to class and we will negotiate a plan to vote on as a faculty.

Week 10 (March 26). *More and more learning about religion is being mediated through technology in one way or the other. Should I be drawing on technology to teach about Religious Studies, and if so, what is the best way to do so? Is there any reason not to?*

For applications to Religious Studies (all available online through the library), see T. Troftgruben, “Decentered online Bible instruction: How Active Learning Enhanced the Study of Scripture,” *Teaching Theology and Religion* 21 (2018).

G. Brooke Lester, “What if? Building Interactive Fiction for Teaching and Learning Religious Studies,” *Teaching Theology and Religion* 21 (2018).

A. Derogatis and I. Weiner, “Turning Students into Scholars” Using Digital Methods to Teach the Critical Study of Religion,” *Religion* 48 (2018)

What are the advantage of teaching in this way? Do you spot disadvantages? Do you already use, or plan to use, technology in your teaching, and if so, how?

On some of the trade-offs of using technology, see: C. Anson, “Distant Voices: Teaching and Writing in a Culture of Technology,” found at:

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

Jim Casey, “Digital Shakespeare is Neither Good nor Bad, But Teaching Makes it So,” *Humanities* 8 (2019): <file:///Users/wsteve/Downloads/humanities-08-00112.pdf>

If you have time: part of the challenge of using technology is simply keeping up. Are the sort of “tips” listed in Devereaux article below realistic for you? If not, what is?

See A. Devereaux et, al, “Ten Timeless Tips for Keeping on Top of Teaching Technology,” *Teaching of Psychology* 41 (2014): available through the library.

This is also the day when you will share your writing about the AAR teaching book

Week 11-12 (April 2, 9): “Learning by Teaching.” (teaching practica)

Week 13 (April 16): Conclusion: Getting Started!

We will devote the day to final reflections and to think about how to balance teaching with other aspects of your professional and personal life.

Since the final week of the semester falls during the holiday of Passover, this session

concludes the class.

