

# AAR

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The AAR Committee on Teaching and Learning (Tina Pippin, Chair) sponsors *Spotlight on Teaching*. It appears twice each year in *Religious Studies News* and focuses on teaching and learning around a particular theme, concern, or setting.

### Interim Editor

*Tina Pippin*

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# spotlight on TEACHING

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## The Tenth Anniversary of the AAR Excellence in Teaching Award

### INTERIM EDITOR:


TINA PIPPIN, AGNES SCOTT COLLEGE, AND CHAIR,  
AAR TEACHING AND LEARNING COMMITTEE

### From the Editor's Desk

**A**T THE ANNUAL Meeting in Montréal, the AAR will celebrate the tenth anniversary of its teaching award. The idea for the award began in the late 1990s under the leadership of then-AAR executive director Barbara DeConcini, and the Teaching and Learning Committee (Chair Thomas Peterson, Michel Desjardin, Richard Freund, Fred Glennon, Yudit Greenberg, Barbara Patterson, and Kathleen Talvacchia). These leaders wanted to start a larger conversation about teaching by giving national recognition to a teacher in the field of religion or theology. The committee generated the criteria for excellence in teaching in order to shape an award of note. They asked nominees in different fields in religion and theology to articulate their pedagogical concerns, methods, theories, and practices. Nominees make a case for what they consider good teaching; they demonstrate what college, university, and theology school professors do to disseminate knowledge, engage in critical thinking, and formulate questions from the disciplines.

There is no detailed archival history of the beginnings of this award, but the basic idea was to raise up and honor the thing most of us in academic jobs do most of the time: teach.

The winners of the award are Tina Pippin (2000), Eugene Gallagher (2001), William Placher (2002), Janet Walton (2003), Timothy Renick (2004), Zayn Kassam (2005), Patricia O'Connell Killen (2006), Stacey Floyd-Thomas (2007), Fred Glennon (2008), and Kwok Pui Lan (2009). A representative group wrote articles for this *Spotlight on Teaching* issue, updating their teaching statements and sharing their influences and continued passion for teaching religion. The authors show that scholarship is not limited solely to the disciplines and that there are important intersections with what happens in the classroom. The conversations here are interdisciplinary — from different fields in religion and theology and across disciplines of education, community engagement, and others.

The Wabash Center for Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion is cosponsoring a workshop session with eight of the award recipients on Saturday morning at the Annual Meeting. Registration information is in the *Program Book*. Join the continued conversation about teaching and the tenth year celebration! 

### AAR EXCELLENCE IN TEACHING AWARD WINNERS

- 2000 — Tina Pippin
- 2001 — Eugene Gallagher
- 2002 — William Placher
- 2003 — Janet Walton
- 2004 — Timothy Renick
- 2005 — Zayn Kassam
- 2006 — Patricia O'Connell Killen
- 2007 — Stacey Floyd-Thomas
- 2008 — Fred Glennon
- 2009 — Kwok Pui Lan

In the Next Issue of  
*Spotlight on Teaching*:

Undergraduate Research  
in Religious Studies: Pedagogical  
Challenges and Strategies

# The Pedagogical Value of Our Existential “Why?”

Timothy Renick, Georgia State University



Timothy Renick is associate provost at Georgia State University in Atlanta, where he founded and served as chair of the department of religious studies. He recently led the AAR study, “The Religion Major and Liberal Education” (funded by the Teagle Foundation) and currently chairs the AAR’s Job Placement Task Force. He is a regular contributor to *The Christian Century*.

**D**URING MY INITIAL years in academia, I often felt alone in my struggles to establish a toe-hold for religious studies on my campus. I thought that I was toiling in isolation — engaging issues that were the product of a history unique to my institution. What subsequent years have revealed to me is that I was anything but alone within our discipline. In a very real sense, teaching religious studies entails, by its very nature, a difficult and challenging dimension not affiliated with the teaching of, for example, history, biology, or English. Of those fields, no one — faculty, student, or administrator — asks why the field exists. No one imagines a modern university without these endeavors. The discipline of religious studies has never been so blessed. The field faces — and in some senses is defined by — an existential challenge: *Why religious studies?*

Some of the challenges come from without. As clearly evidenced by a recent multiyear, Teagle Foundation-funded AAR study of the religious studies major that I led, many of us face pockets of faculty at our home institutions who, believing religion to be an antiquated holdover of premodern ways of thought, fiercely oppose devoting university resources to studying an allegedly dying and false phenomenon (see articles by the Teagle Working Group and the AAR). Others of us face colleagues who see the addition of religious studies courses as opening the door to proselytizing in the classroom. (The Texas state system is just now reintroducing religious studies programs following faculty backlash after decades of reliance on “Bible chairs” — clergypersons paid for by Christian denominations — who were, until the practice was declared unconstitutional in the 1980s, employed to teach courses on religion.) Still others see the discipline as a luxury. Amid the current economic crisis, a number of schools are looking to trim or to discontinue religious studies programs, with well-established departments at institutions such as the University of Florida and Arizona State University in peril. While the public rationales for these budgetary decisions are never as blunt as the attacks of some of our less tactful colleagues, a familiar question

nonetheless is implicit in each administrative proposal to trim a program: *Why religious studies?*

Other challenges come from within the discipline. D. G. Hart, a professor of church history, has argued that religious studies tries to portray itself as an academic field of critical inquiry but that its existence and methods are inextricably tied to the field’s origins in Protestant campus ministries during the first part of the twentieth century. “As much as religious studies strives to sever ties to communities of faith, it cannot do so without self-immolation,” he writes (Hart, 10). Duke’s Stanley Hauerwas argues that “the creation of religious studies departments can be understood as the ongoing development of universities to provide legitimating knowledge for state power” (63–64). For Hauerwas, the discipline falsely attempts to unite inherently unrelated phenomena under the artificial construct of “religion” and, in the name of maintaining neutrality, abdicates responsibility for teaching students what is genuinely true about God’s ways.

While in what follows I will not explicitly attempt to refute the criticisms of either secular critics of religious studies or of scholars of religion such as Hart and Hauerwas, I would like to suggest some alternate answers to the question of *Why religious studies?* Moreover I will argue that, rather than feel embarrassed or disoriented by the field’s inability to conclusively answer the central question of its existence, those of us who teach in religious studies might better embrace the existential question as an integral aspect of our classroom pedagogy.

## *Students care about the study of religion.*

One of several interesting findings in Barbara Walvoord’s 2008 study of undergraduates in introductory religion courses was that college students genuinely care about spiritual issues and want to pursue matters of personal religious development. A 2005 study of 112,000 students by the Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) at UCLA came to a similar conclusion: “Today’s college students have very high levels of spiritual interest and involvement, many are actively engaged in a spiritual quest and in exploring meaning and purpose in life. They are also very engaged and involved in religion, reporting considerable commitment to their religious beliefs and practices” ([www.gseis.ucla.edu/heri/spirituality.html](http://www.gseis.ucla.edu/heri/spirituality.html); see also Walvoord, 11).

While both Walvoord and the HERI study found that college-age students are often frustrated by a lack of opportunities to explore spiritual matters in college classrooms (56 percent of students said that their professors had never presented the opportunity to discuss the meaning of life, according to HERI), the very deficiency can be seen as a pedagogical opportunity for those of us who teach in the field of religious studies (see Astin, et al.).

In light of such findings and faced with the challenge of creating an introductory world religions course for the core curriculum at Georgia State University, my department elected to structure the course around a set of fundamental questions asked by most college-age students: Where do we come from? Why do we live and die? Why is there suffering? Is

violence justifiable? For each question, we selected primary sources from various world religions that offer provocative insights representative of the traditions in question. The goal was not to script the students’ answers to these basic questions of meaning (although we were certainly cognizant of the ways that the material chosen inherently shapes the discussion), but rather to provide a structured setting — assisted not only by an instructor, but by readings, writing assignments, and classmates — in which students might pursue their own thinking on the issues. The resulting course most assuredly does not address Hauerwas’s concerns about our discipline, but it does engage genuinely important issues not explored by any other offerings in the general curriculum. Indeed, efforts to fit explicit explorations of diverse religious perspectives on life’s central questions into other core courses in the college curriculum — history, sociology, even the increasingly secular field of philosophy — can seem strained and ad hoc. In religious studies, it comes naturally.

By the way, the course we added already is among the most highly demanded offerings in the university’s core curriculum, which leads me to a second point....

## *Students who care about what they study tend to be better learners.*

A study recently released by the National Board of Economic Research looks at the choices undergraduates make in selecting their courses and majors, and at the impacts that these choices have on their later professional lives (DeGiorgi, et al.). What the researchers found will not surprise any of us who work with students on a day-to-day basis: students often make poor choices. The study focused on two major influences on students’ selection of classes and majors. One was the influence of peers — students who take an elective, for instance, primarily because their friends are taking the class or because a parent tells them to do so. The second was ability — students who take a class because they have an interest in and aptitude for the subject matter.

Not surprisingly, the researchers found that students very often take classes because of the influence of others. We’ve all dealt with the pre-med student who is convinced he’s going to be a doctor like his dad even though he has never gotten higher than a “C-” in any science class, or the student who insists on following her friends into business classes but — small problem — she hates business. Such choices are clearly not a recipe for student success, and the researchers found “clear evidence that peer-driven students perform worse than the ability-driven students in terms both of average and final grades” (DeGiorgi, et al.).

The researchers then followed the graduates into the work force for several years, finding that the students who selected jobs based on peer pressure earned 13 percent less than those who let interest and ability drive their career decisions. More importantly, the first group was also much more likely to feel mismatched and unhappy in its positions and to encounter difficulties in the workplace (e.g., poor job performance, layoffs).

Combine Walvoord’s and HERI’s insights with these findings and one arrives at another

important, if often underappreciated, rationale for the presence of religious studies on college campuses: religious studies contributes to the happiness and success of students. Students excel when they care about a subject, and many students care deeply about issues central to the field of religious studies.

## *Academic disciplines should constantly question the reason for their existence.*

In the early stages of the Teagle project to study the religious studies major, I participated in an interesting exercise at a meeting of Teagle grant recipients from seven other disciplines. The Teagle Foundation Director, Robert Connor, asked each of us to prepare a report on the history of the efforts of a discipline other than our own to develop and to implement curricular innovation, common learning outcomes, assessment tools, and so forth. We surveyed not only the professional organizations’ websites but also conference proceedings, journal articles, and pedagogical resources.

Those around the table that day arrived at largely the same conclusion: most disciplines do not have a rich history of critical thought about these matters. Even disciplines guided by formal accrediting processes and boards often have little to say about the larger issues of what the field is trying to impart to students and what students should learn — beyond certain bodies of specific information — by pursuing the major. We may not often hear the question posed on college campuses, *Why chemistry?*, but this is not necessarily due to the fact that chemists have a unified, well-developed, and coherent answer to the question of their existence. Indeed, the most common complaint voiced by those who pursue issues of pedagogy within these other, established disciplines was that so many of their colleagues cared and thought so little about the topic.

In my experience, this has never been a problem for religious studies. Ours is a discipline that is constantly critical of what we do and why, and the result is that we tend to think a lot about pedagogy. In times of increased emphasis on assessment, this is a definite asset; as we all know, to assess how well you are accomplishing a goal, you must first think about what you are trying to attain. But it also is an important part of what we can model and impart to our students in the classroom. Most of our colleagues across the academy say that they want their students to learn to be self-critical, but many of them (and, admittedly, more than a few of us) proceed to spend the semester assuming the essential, even unquestioned, significance of their own enterprise. In few disciplines is self-criticism on display as publicly and as frequently as in religious studies, and perhaps we should start to acknowledge this as one of the significant strengths of our field.

My home department’s BA and MA degree programs became markedly stronger when we started to require that students take a seminar course exploring competing theoretical understandings of the field. The students may experience some disorientation in encountering

**PIPPIN**, from page ii

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**RENICK**, from page v

Robert Orsi and Stephen Prothero debate the role that the investigator's value judgments should play in what he or she studies, or in reading Diana Eck, Jonathan Z. Smith, and Mark Taylor in succession, but the discussions are inevitably lively and the disorientation is productive. Students begin to see how their own perspectives and choices — and those of their teachers — shape the nature of what they study and how they perceive it. And when one thinks about it, isn't this itself a rather potent response to the question *Why religious studies?*

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**GALLAGHER**, from page iii

hermeneutic of suspicion, or what he calls "methodological doubting," has frequently yielded real insight, for fuller understanding it needs to be balanced by an equally rigorous process of "methodological believing" (see Elbow 1986, 254–304, and 2000, 76–80). He proposes that "thinking is not trustworthy unless it also includes methodological belief: the equally systematic, disciplined, and conscious attempt to believe everything no matter how unlikely or repellent it might seem, to find virtues and strengths we might otherwise miss" (1986, 257). Elbow suggests that methodological belief can be employed "to find a valid sense in words . . . to transmit an experience, [to] enlarge a vision." He refers to both methodological doubt and methodological belief as constituting "games," emphasizing that both are provisional approaches that can be tried out on the material at hand or temporary stances that can be adopted to see what they might yield. In short, they can be played with. Both games invite their participants to entertain seriously, but for a limited time and without making a personal commitment, a range of possibilities for making meaning about a particular body of evidence (Elbow 1986, 278, 261; see my development of Elbow's ideas in relation to a course I teach on new religious movements in Gallagher, 2007). Elbow's seriously playful approach to making sense and meaning of any kind of evidence could be particularly productive in the religious studies classroom. Rather than directly challenging students either to state and justify their own convictions

and practices or to wrestle directly with the convictions of others that may initially challenge and affront, Elbow's approach, as I would appropriate it, entices students to entertain a variety of "what if" questions that can provide multiple points of entry into the religious worlds of others. That process of entertaining seriously how others make meaning of the world through their religious acts and convictions, much more than the factual knowledge it yields, is the beginning of religious literacy.

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**FLOYD-THOMAS**, from page vi

for myself and my students alike, I strive to foster a "pedagogy of possibility" that presents learning and teaching as synergistic enterprises that are neither isolated nor disposable, but rather, are all-encompassing elements of life that extend well beyond and long after our shared classroom experience. In so doing, my expressed hope is that I and my students invest in the rigorous work of learning and knowledge production so we all will leave our campuses and venture out into the "real world" as dynamic, thoughtful people ready, willing, and able to face the challenges of life with a sound and needed skill set that is matched by our passion for engagement beyond the glass walls, stained glass ceilings, and ivory towers of the academy. I do this semester in and semester out, not merely because it is the job that I have been employed to do but because, at my roots, I know and believe that inherent within each of us (professors and students) is not only the ability to practice what we preach but also that the very classrooms that we occupy may become the biggest room for such improvements.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> See Stacey Floyd-Thomas, Katherine Allen, and Laura Gillman, "Interdisciplinarity as Self and Subject: Metaphor and Transformation," in *Issues in Integrative Studies* 20 (2002): 1–26; Stacey Floyd-Thomas and Laura Gillman, "Subverting Forced Identities, Violent Acts and the Narrativity of Race: A Diasporic Analysis of Black Women's Radical Subjectivity in Three Novel Acts," in *Journal of Black Studies* 32.5 (2002): 528–56; Stacey Floyd-Thomas and Laura Gillman, "Facing the Medusa: Confronting the Ongoing Impossibility of Women's Studies," in *Journal of International Women's Studies* 2.2 (May 2001): 35–52; Katherine Allen, Stacey-Floyd-Thomas, and Laura Gillman, "Teaching to Transform: From Volatility to Solidarity in an Interdisciplinary Family Studies Classroom," in *Family Relations: Interdisciplinary Journal of Applied Family Studies* 50.4 (2001): 317–25; "From Embodied Theodicy to Embodied Theos: Black Women's Body and Pedagogy," in *Being Black/Teaching Black*, ed. Nancy Lynne Westfield (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2008), 125–136; and Juan Floyd-Thomas and Stacey-Floyd-Thomas, "Emancipatory Historiography as Pedagogical Praxis: The Blessing and the Curse of Theological Education for the Black Self and Subject," in *Being Black/Teaching Black*, ed. Nancy Lynne Westfield (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2008), 95–106.

<sup>2</sup> The word "pedagogical" or later "pedagogy" is not used in this fashion to suggest that teaching revolves around "training or educating children." Rather, I employ the word in reference to my intellectual design and identity politics involved in the art and science of teaching. 