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### *Statement of Teaching Philosophy*

I choose to teach religious studies, and primarily early Christianity, in the university setting in order to ameliorate gaps in knowledge about the complexity and diversity of Christianities up to the fourth century, both those gaps benign in nature and those brought about by ecclesiastical expedience or hostility. My pedagogy features the following tenets, which I explain briefly below: ***nothing less than critical inquiry*** suffices in the religious studies classroom, where I practice a sensitivity and ***an orientation towards all learners***, for the university benefits from its ***strength in diversity***. Cognizant of the human rights imperative to education,<sup>1</sup> I idealize ***the didactic double accusative*** whereby I teach both subject matter and individuals, while maintaining ***a dialectic of teleology*** that rejects any form of coercion toward predefined ends beyond the enlightenment and empowerment of the individual. Finally, I avow ***a commitment to excellence*** both in theory and practice to prevent stagnation and to constantly implement effective teaching methods and best practices.

#### **NOTHING LESS THAN CRITICAL INQUIRY**

*“When and if a college proclaims some sort of religious orientation, including when it describes itself as ‘Christian,’ it does not thereby earn for itself some spurious right to be less than a college.”<sup>2</sup>*

While I am a religious studies educator, even though I might teach at a religiously affiliated institution of higher learning, this permits no license to adhere to anything except established collegial ideals of the university or to teach less-than-truths. Of course, I treat faith commitments with respect, and do not set out to wantonly bulldoze them in the classroom. However, the academic study of religion, and biblical studies, constitute genuine disciplines in a university liberal arts ecosystem beholden not to creeds or canons of faith but rather to critical inquiry and accepted scholastic standards of evidence.

#### **AN ORIENTATION TOWARDS ALL LEARNERS**

Though our abilities and competencies may vary, all who enter the university classroom are capable of learning and must be appropriately engaged for the task. I am cognizant that different learning styles prevail among a diverse student body, and I therefore aim to reach some via technology and visualization, some via traditional lecture methods, some via collaborative endeavors, and some via the arts, all tailored appropriately to the subject matter of the lesson at hand. All who join the classroom deserve the opportunity to learn in their learning language, whether majors, minors, undeclareds, or auditors.

#### **STRENGTH IN DIVERSITY**

Any community, from the university at-large to the classrooms that serve as its lifeblood, will best thrive from a diversity of ethnicity, experience, and perspective. In the undergraduate liberal arts setting, I foster these diversities by encouraging the participation of all community members, by assigning readings from scholars hailing from a variety of backgrounds and positionalities, and by demonstrating how the diversity of modern Christian thought was reflected in the early centuries of the church by believers with different emphases, distinct practices, and diverging goals.

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<sup>1</sup> As enshrined, for example, in Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) and Article 13 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (1976).

<sup>2</sup> Merrimon Cuninggim, *Uneasy Partners: The College and the Church* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 98.

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### **THE DIDACTIC DOUBLE ACCUSATIVE**

I remain keenly aware that I do not simply teach my favored historical subjects, but also students who are in the midst of one of the most crucial and formative periods of their lives. Content matters, but so too does the learner, and this double accusative imparts the lifeblood to the didactic endeavor. I am aware of the pressures they face, their differing competencies and bodies of cultural experience, and crucially for the study of Christianity, the faith commitments and/or prejudices they may bring to the classroom. Therefore, I pursue this work with a mix of grace and rigor, interpersonal charisma and evidence-based teaching, and an orientation toward holistic support of the individual equally guiding my professional practice alongside robust scholarship.

### **A DIALECTIC OF TELEOLOGY**

On the one hand, I hold that education serves the public good as one element of the long arc of human history that, as Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. said, bends toward justice. On the other, I affirm the liberty of the student to choose how to make use of her education, a primary human right, and thus reject any preconceived teleology that might shackle the individual. Students deserve to be supported in a religious studies classroom free of overt or covert compulsions to achieve. The ideal education should not so constrain the student to directly benefit any church, nation, denomination, or any other group than the liberated individual, who will, with appropriate guidance, hopefully choose to dedicate her life toward justice and the public good. By walking the line of this teleological dialectic, I seek to enact the words of Paolo Freire: “What the educator does in teaching is to make it possible for the students to become themselves.”<sup>3</sup>

### **A COMMITMENT TO EXCELLENCE**

I may not always get a lesson right, and my first efforts to reach a student or a class may produce imperfect results. I am, however, dedicated to improvement and lifelong learning about my pedagogy, both as a practical matter of lesson planning, lecture delivery, workshops, etc., and at the level of pedagogical theory.

These philosophical commitments are valid whether I am introducing liberal arts/general education students to the academic study of religion for the first time or whether I have the opportunity to lead advanced students in the pursuit of their major or graduate degree. Ultimately, I desire to serve both constituencies simultaneously, allowing beginning students to experience the richness of our field and gain knowledge that will help them interact with their world, while also investing in the professional interests of Master’s and Doctoral students seeking to make a greater impact on our society.

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<sup>3</sup> Paolo Freire, in Myles Horton and Paolo Freire, *We Make the Road by Walking: Conversations on Education and Social Change* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990), 181.