

ROBERT D. HEATON

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Specialties in New Testament, Christian Origins & Early Christianity
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Statement of Teaching Philosophy

I choose to teach religious and biblical studies, and primarily early Christianity, in the university setting to ameliorate gaps in knowledge about the complexity and diversity of Christianities early and modern, both those gaps benign in nature and those brought about by ecclesiastical expedience or hostility. Whether students major in Christian ministry, take seminary classes, or come to religious studies as non-majors, all are impacted personally by received biblical interpretation, and I therefore endeavor to offer them resources to expand their comprehension of the Bible. My pedagogy features the following tenets, which I explain briefly below: our *yearning to discern the will of the Lord* can and should coexist with our *responsibility to memorialize the past* accurately. Therefore, *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,¹ 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 consistently implement effective teaching methods, evaluative processes, and best practices.

YEARNING TO DISCERN THE WILL OF THE LORD

Although students make college-related decisions for a variety of reasons and under a host of pressures, they often choose a Christian university or seminary out of an earnest desire to know the Lord—the will of God the Father, the heart and mind of Jesus, and the movement of the Spirit. Affirming these faithful and conscious choices to learn, grow, and excel in a compassionate environment, I sense the gravity of this calling to teach the Bible to students, and do so because I, like them, seek truth, love, peace, and justice in a wider society that often rewards alternative pursuits.

RESPONSIBILITY TO MEMORIALIZE THE PAST

Having heard the prominent historical Jesus scholar Annette Merz advance a human rights perspective for biblical studies and Christian origins in 2015,² I recognized immediately that she gave voice to a historiographical interest I had previously explored in my master’s thesis at Anderson University. This view contends, for example, that individuals from the past should be pursued with care such that their origins, motivations, and beliefs can be ascertained charitably and contextually, driven not by modern needs to flog aberrant beliefs or to self-distinguish from notions of heresy, but to accurately preserve a record of the human agency present within the church and especially within its foundational, apostolic roots. Whether inclined to agree or disagree with someone from the past, I embrace this “golden rule” in my teaching and research.

¹ 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).

² Antoon de Baets, “A Declaration of the Responsibilities of Present Generations toward Past Generations,” *History and Theory* 43.4 (Dec. 2004): 130–164.

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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.”³

While I am a religious studies educator, even though I 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 students’ faith commitments with respect, and do not trample 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 and argumentation.

Weighing dual commitments to church and academy—to “faith and intellectual freedom”—has not been easy, either historically or in the present,⁴ and I do not pretend to have identified the equilibrium or engineered an algorithm to navigate them. Yet, I have sought and will continue to seek a brand of scholarship that can at once be *informed by* and *transformative of* faith.

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 achieve via 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, positionalities, and genders, 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 objectives.

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” informs the didactic endeavor. I am aware of the pressures students 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.

³ Merrimon Cuninggim, *Uneasy Partners: The College and the Church* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 98.

⁴ Merle D. Strege, *The Desk as Altar: The Centennial History of Anderson University* (Anderson, IN: Anderson University Press, 2016), 352ff., 427–28.

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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 predetermined ends. While I teach from a place of service, 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, the public good, and/or God's ministry. 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."⁵

A COMMITMENT TO EXCELLENCE

I may not always get a lesson right—quite often, looking retrospectively at lecture materials confirms this—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.

⁵ 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.