

STATEMENT OF TEACHING PHILOSOPHY

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In graduate school, I have been fortunate to meet not only some of the world's most inspiring and inventive educators, but also a couple of truly dreadful instructors, and I believe that both the former and the latter have been instrumental in helping me develop my teaching style. From an innovative network of teacher-scholars at Reacting to the Past Institute, I learned to empower students to go beyond active participation to become course contributors and collaborators. From my teachers with encyclopedic knowledge and a brilliant command of primary and secondary sources, I learned the art of reading slowly and that there is room for whimsy and creativity in the classroom. My students may change their majors and end up switching careers more than once, but the expressiveness of the Vedas and the Upaniṣads, the stories from the epics and the Purāṇas, the eloquence and logic of philosophical texts, and the rich metaphorical language of Sanskrit poetry may stay with them throughout their lifetimes. On the other hand, having been excruciatingly bored at the hands of some of the less engaged and pedagogically-minded faculty, I learned many ways in which not to teach. In this statement, I have space only to touch upon a few aspects of my teaching philosophy. I have chosen the following to highlight: rigorous problematization, multiplicity and interdisciplinarity, close reading, a thoughtful use of technology, innovative methodologies and active learning, and, finally, fostering diversity and inclusion.

In my teaching of Hinduism within the broader historical context, I aim to foster a rigorous process of inquiry using interdisciplinary approaches and drawing on ongoing conversations about methods in the study of religion. For example, in the beginning of a first-year seminar, I assign short articles to provide students with examples of dissenting views on the study of religion. I also ask course participants to reflect on their own (often previously unexamined) motivations to study religion. In another class, I assign readings problematizing the categories of Hinduism, while challenging students to shift their focus from homogeneity to diversity.

My teaching is a project of inquiry into multiplicity of religious expression, examined through the lens of interdisciplinarity. I discuss religious phenomena as expressions of human culture, ritual, myth, symbol, doctrine, heresy and orthodoxy, texts and oral traditions. Furthermore, I utilize interdisciplinary research in the areas of anthropology, sociology, cultural studies, and art history to discuss embodied forms of ritualism and devotion. Bringing in my own observations, stories, and photographs of people and objects, acquired during field work, study, and travel in India, I make topics of inquiry come alive for students who may have never experienced non-Western religions and cultures.

As a textual scholar, one of the most important tools for my own research is close reading. In my teaching, I introduce students to reading sources “against the grain” and model reading in the “fringes,” paying close attention to paratext, supplementary material surrounding the main body of texts, which is often overlooked. Discussing my own research with students, I highlight practical application of specific language and research skills. And just as I do in my own research, I pair my teaching of religious texts and ideas with reflections on contemporary practices and their broader relevance for Asian society.

In my research, I have utilized new opportunities available to this generation of scholars through a thoughtful use of technology. Using scans of manuscripts and a large number of digitized texts makes large-scale textual analysis possible in ways that it had not been before. Likewise, I enjoy using technology in the classroom and utilize a variety of platforms for content-sharing, virtual and blended learning, and course management. Among the tools I use to dynamically engage millennials in the study of religious traditions, are Blackboard, Moodle, Slack, Qualtrics, and Twitter.

While the phrase “active learning” is now so ubiquitous that it has become almost meaningless, I found that when students become agents in their own process of inquiry, they can cultivate extraordinary historical empathy, hermeneutical sensitivity, and cultural self-awareness. And Reacting to the Past is one of several new methodologies that I found to be particularly effective in this regard. Using a blend of historical role-play and textual research, RTTP deeply engages students with sources in the study of religion. For example, in the RTTP game *Defining a Nation: India on the Eve of Independence, 1945*, which I incorporated into my first-year seminar, students study the writing of key political and religious figures in India in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. While representing contending views of historical characters in the game, students “teach” their positions to the rest of the class. In this way, they learn to develop their arguments in stages and to articulate different perspectives clearly, publicly, and forcefully. To strengthen their arguments, students read and reread their main primary sources, the *Bhagavad Gita* and the *Qur’an*. The result is a thoroughly nuanced understanding of sources of Asian religious traditions and a marked improvement in the effectiveness of students’ communication skills, their resilience, and ability to thrive in challenging and dynamic environments. More than just reading texts, *India on the Eve of Independence*, in particular, brings out a richness of opinions on religion and nation building, which remains deeply relevant for contemporary societies. Serving as spokespeople for a variety of views by engaging with ideas in character, students obtain a very practical and embodied experience of pivotal moments in history, while improving their skills in public speaking, writing, critical thinking, problem solving, leadership, and teamwork.

In my teaching, I aim to actively support those belonging to underrepresented and disadvantaged groups and find many international and domestic minority students drawn to my classes. As an LGBTQ Russian woman who has successfully navigated various international and workplace

cultures, I am committed to supporting those who find themselves underrepresented in academic settings. For my undergraduate teaching at Cornell University, I have received several awards, including the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning Practitioner Program, a conference travel grant from the Center for the Integration of Research, Teaching, and Learning (CIRTL), the Peer Collaboration and Mentorship Award, and the Summer Fellowship from the Knight Institute for Writing in the Disciplines. In addition to classroom interactions, I also engage with students and colleagues through volunteer work, service, and mentoring. At Bowdoin College, I am currently collaborating with the McKeen Center for the Common Good and the Center for Religious and Spiritual Life to add a service-learning component to my courses. In the spring of 2018, students taking my courses on Hinduism and Tantric Traditions will have an opportunity to visit a Hindu tantric temple in Rochester, NY to participate in observational study of religion.

In this statement, I highlighted only several aspects of pedagogy, which I emphasize in my teaching. In my courses on Hindu traditions, I prioritize rigorous problematization, which challenges students' assumptions of Hinduism as a timeless monolithic whole. Furthermore, I approach religious studies through attention to a multiplicity of religious phenomena and an interdisciplinary approach. In addition, close reading and a thoughtful use of technology in my own research led me to incorporating these very tools in my teaching. I am committed to using innovative methodologies and, perhaps most importantly, fostering diversity and inclusion in the classroom. In my courses, I aim to provide students with opportunities for service learning and observational study of religion. My overarching goal as a teacher-scholar is to foster in my students a meaningful engagement with history of religion and an appreciation of its contemporary relevance, while training them to become careful readers as well as thoughtful, clear, and self-aware writers, speakers, and thinkers.