Ariel G. Schwartz
Teaching Statement

As a scholar and a teacher of religion, I endeavor to make the strange familiar and the familiar strange. I approach religion as one of the many social, economic, political, and ideological structures that constitute us as human beings, and I aim to show my students that the "religious" in its many forms – people, ideas, places, practices, objects, language – is everywhere, constantly present, sometimes glaringly but more often inconspicuously. I begin each course that I teach by prompting students to reflect on their own definitions, perceptions, and examples of religion. As a class, we construct word clouds that visually represent our sense of religion. By asking students to consider their personal theories of religion, I stimulate students to share with each other their preconceptions, and I cultivate a classroom environment of openness to the subtleties of what "religion" may entail. My teaching philosophy is grounded in helping students to spotlight the strange and the familiar, so that I may shed light on what they don't understand and guide them in re-evaluating what they think they already know.

Because my studies of religion have been and continue to be encounters with the unexpected, I strive to extend that experience to my students. I encourage my students to remap their ways of knowing religion. In my upper-level undergraduate seminar on Religion and Violence, I assign my students to visit a local museum. I ask them to find an artifact, a display, or an exhibit that evidences the intersection of religion and violence and then to write a short paper relating that curio to our class material. The exercise requires undergraduates to apply classroom theories outside of the university setting. It also asks them to reassess what they recognize as religion and to reflect upon why they recognize it as such.

I instruct my students to approach religious studies through the diverse methodologies and disciplinary perspectives with which I conduct and analyze my own scholarly research. I ask students to decipher primary texts, work through critical theory, assess material artifacts, and engage in ethnographic practices. In helping my students to understand religion as inseparable from politics, economics, and culture, I require my students to anchor any and all course material in historical and geographic contexts. In my course on Religion and Politics, I assign students to analyze the relationship between religion and politics through exploring a single case study. For example, we watch a film about the salvific role of religion in Brazilian prisons and read selections of Winifred Sullivan's work on faith-based prison reform. By discussing concrete case studies, my students analyze religion and politics holistically. They address issues of socio-economics, race, and history, nuancing their conceptions of how religion and politics intermix.

While I emphasize theory and scholarship in my religious studies courses, at their core, my classes are about people. I foster a classroom culture of respectful listening and thoughtful self-reflection, encouraging my students to consider, and be considerate of, the diversity of others' experiences. In particular, I endeavor to give voice to historically under-represented groups through our readings and our interpersonal engagements. In my classes, we address ways of interfacing with people whose opinions differ from their own, and we contemplate how we might work through and benefit from difficult exchanges. Encountering "the other" – in theoretical readings, in subject matter, or sitting across the table – entails grappling with difference. As an educator in the humanities, I lead students in remaking moments of uncertainty and unease into opportunities for mutual understanding and personal growth.

Likewise, my dedication to the humanities broadly has led to my prioritization of higher-order learning. In part, my work is to help students retain details about the pillars of Islam or

elucidate theories about the nature of the "sacred." However, on par with teaching factual and theoretical material, I support my students in growing their abilities to read critically, to think analytically, and to write with more care. Using formative assessments and substantive feedback, I work to ensure that my students practice and improve upon these skills throughout the quarter. Students in my Religion and Violence course wrote weekly response papers in which they summarized the weekly theorist's argument and then reflected upon it to highlight its utility, its drawbacks, and emergent questions. I stressed quality thinking over conscientious writing, so that students would focus on putting their ideas on paper. The assessment ensured that all students completed the readings and took time to think about them. It gave students a platform for forwarding points of confusion and accustomed them to writing regularly. When speaking with students during my office hours, a few told me that while they felt that the weekly papers were time-consuming, they appreciated the assignment as a venue for organizing and expressing their thoughts and that through this assignment, they "actually learned."

I find helping students learn incredibly fulfilling and rewarding, but I see teaching as fundamentally reciprocal. Through my work with students, I learn about new subject material, differing perspectives, and alternate insights. I also look to my students for feedback on my teaching, and I take their comments seriously. Although I required my Religion and Violence students to submit a final paper draft and conduct a peer review before revising and resubmitting, many struggled to express themselves lucidly and fluidly. Students informed me that they would have liked to spend more time learning about writing, and my training at the Searle Center for Advancing Learning & Teaching taught me that scaffolded assessments guide student progress. Subsequently, I learned that in order to help students improve their writing, I need to emphasize conscientious, quality writing, even in weekly response papers.

In addition to my courses in Religion and Violence and Religion and Politics, I propose new structures for Introduction to the Study of Religion and Introduction to Religion: Theory and Method. Each of these courses approaches religion thematically, rather than by religious tradition. While the former addresses religion through "religious" categories (for example, practices, morals, places, and prayer), the latter asks students to examine and apply classical, modern, and innovative technologies for studying religion. My classes on American religions, religion and law, and religious freedom in an age of globalization focus on how religious philosophies, practices, and communities shape, and are shaped by, our everyday lives.

Studying religion can and should prompt us to reconceptualize our worlds. I encourage my students to ask new questions and to find new connections in and through religion, religions, the religious. Why is the American flag a sacred object? How does ISIS relate to the Crusaders? What do "foodie culture" and "selfies" have to do with *anatman* (the Buddhist concept of no-self)? By supporting my students in advancing their reading and writing skills, I work with them to evaluate and improve upon their critical thinking skills and to hone their verbal and written modes of self-expression. In teaching religion, I prompt my students to question what we think we know, to reconfigure what we think is fixed. I animate them to probe the strange and the familiar, to reconsider the things they take for granted, and to engage more sensitively and reflectively with the worlds in which they live.