

## **Katherine A. Dugan** **Teaching Statement**

Lived religion animates my Religious Studies classrooms. This approach means that I teach students to think critically about religion in academic discourse and in the everyday. My pedagogy draws on interdisciplinary tools to present religion as a complex part of human life.

One of my goals as a teacher is to complicate assumptions about religion. To that end, my Contemporary American Catholicism seminar included a unit on contemporary devotionism. The assigned reading was an ethnography of a Latino woman's Marian devotion. I passed around saints' medallions and demonstrated how practitioners can pray the rosary with a smartphone app. The discussion opened with one student's declaration of Marian prayers as anti-modern. Pushing him to see the familiar in the strange, I asked if he ever imagined conversations with a relative who had passed away. He nodded, surprised to draw a parallel between his relationship with his deceased grandmother and Catholic devotions. Encouraging this kind of intellectual permeability is contagious. The rest of the class joined in the lively reevaluation of what constitutes reasonable religious action.

Ethnographic research shapes my lived religion approach to teaching. In a lecture course, History of Catholicism in the U.S. (1500-2015), I assigned mini-ethnographies of local Catholic sites—shrines, churches, cemeteries, and schools. Students presented their findings to each other, posted reflections on our course blog, and compared their observations of Catholic Chicagoland. They debated why a parish in suburban Schaumburg built in the 1990s had clear windows and no crucifix while the Our Lady of Pompeii shrine in Chicago's Little Italy donned stained-glass windows and many statues. This ethnographic data deepened their analysis of topics like church architecture after Vatican II and ethnic parishes in the city.

In introductory courses, I use materials from popular culture to capture student imaginations about religious traditions. When I teach Introduction to Religion, for example, the class analyzes on-line prayer petitions (#prayforme) as a case study in religion and social media. Two perpetually bored seniors in my class began to contribute when I projected Twitter feeds on the wall. In Introduction to Buddhism, small groups applied principles of Zen to their lives. A young man who struggled to understand Zen concepts was able to lead his group's creation of *Zen and the Art of Swimming*. Using popular idioms effectively introduces religious traditions and teaches students to think critically about the role of religion in phenomena they encounter each day.

Courses about religion attract a diverse population. I engage that diversity by asking students to bring their own experiences into the classroom. For example, a Baptist challenged Catholic ideas of sacraments in my Contemporary American Catholicism seminar. A young woman of Indian background used her experience of *pooja* in Ohio to complicate how the introductory Hinduism textbook described that ritual. These exchanges encourage students to learn from each other and grapple with intricacies of religious life.

My approach to teaching, like my approach to ethnographic research, unsettles expectations about how religion looks. My teaching methods model academic rigor, cultivate intellectual curiosity, and develop students' capacities for sustained engagement with religion's complexities.