

STINT Teaching Sabbatical Fall 2018
University of Texas at Austin,
Department of Religious Studies

Final Report



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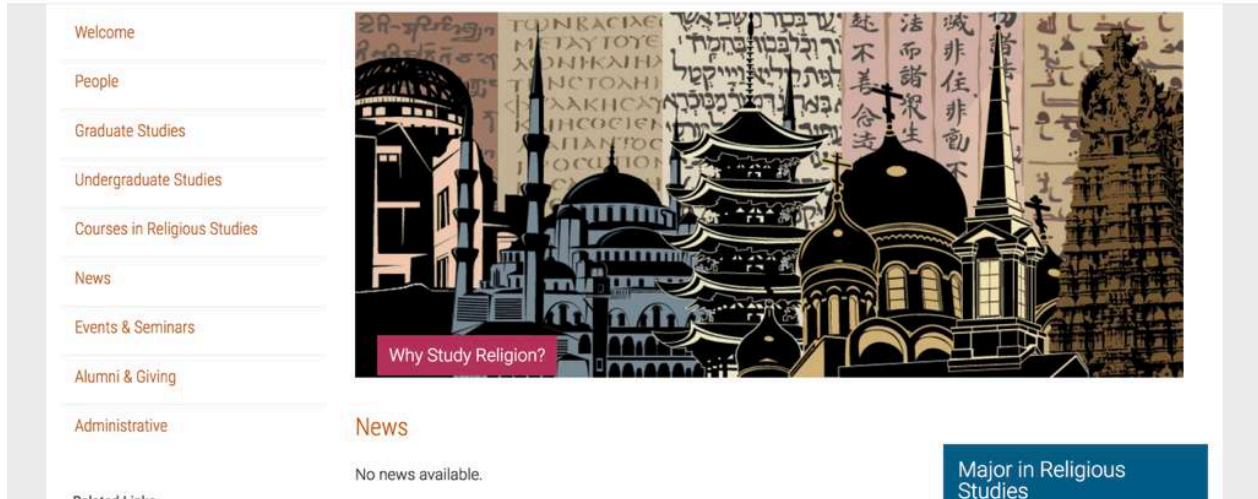
Introduction

In 2018 I was one of the two first STINT-scholars to spend a Teaching Sabbatical at the University of Texas at Austin (UT). Divided into 18 schools and colleges, UT is one of the largest universities in the US with its main campus situated in the center of Austin, TX. UT is a world-renowned higher education, research-intensive institution, serving more than 51,000 students annually with a teaching faculty of around 3,000. There are over 1,300 clubs and organizations which the students can participate in, and no less than 17 libraries and seven museums which they have access to. As a state college, in-state tuition and fees are considerably lower than for out-of-state students: in-state tuition and fees for one year is currently \$10,606, whereas out-of-state tuition and fees is roughly three times as much, \$37,480. In addition to this, room and board costs \$10,804 per year, making a total enrollment of 51,525 per year for out-of-state students. The university is also home to one of the largest college stadiums in the US. Its football teams, known as the Longhorns, are represented by a mascot called Bevo, a Longhorn steer that is said to embody the pride and tradition of Texas football.

The city of Austin itself is not only ranked as one of the safest and most popular cities in the US, it is also unique city in terms of culture, food and cultural events. With Austin being the 'Live Music Capital of the World', you can take advantage of a multitude of festivals and concerts. More than 200 music venues exist in the city, as well as a thriving film scene and year-round sunshine. It is a growing and buzzing city with several global tech companies (Apple, Samsung and IBM among them) having major operations in the area. Austin is also a great city if you are travelling with you family: there are many good schools and lots of in-door as well as our-door activities directed towards children.



The University of Texas at Austin
Department of Religious Studies



From the website of the Department of Religious Studies at UT.

Preparation and Planning

On December 22, 2017, I was informed by STINT that I had been offered a Teaching Sabbatical at the University of Texas at Austin and a two weeks later I got in contact with my academic host Dr. Steve Friesen, Department Chair of the Department of Religious Studies, and my administrative host Aubrey Cunningham at the same department. I was also put in contact with Olivia Kim, Assistant Director, Faculty and Scholar Services, at the International Office. On February 8 STINT arranged a seminar in Stockholm where I was given the opportunity to listen to the experiences of a few previous STINT Teaching Sabbatical Fellows and to ask questions of a more practical nature. This event proved very valuable and it gave me a good idea of what to expect and how to prepare for the sabbatical.

Through email correspondence with Dr. Steve Friesen it was decided that I should design and teach a course of my own, and after discussing a few alternatives we decided for an upper-level course on Occultism and Modernity, which is one of my main research topics. I sent in a brief

description of the course before visiting UT on April 1-8. Throughout our correspondence, Dr. Steve Friesen was extremely generous with his time and he gave me good advice about housing etc., and he also put me in contact with a few other department members. Since I was going to bring my wife and two daughters (10 and 12 years old) my wife and I spent several weeks researching the schools in Austin. In Austin, like in most other parts of the US, the schools are based on a magnet system, meaning that there are specific neighborhoods connected to each school. The public schools in Austin are listed on the Austin Independent School District website (<https://www.austinisd.org/>), and once we had selected a few schools which we believed would be good for our girls, we checked available apartments in the areas connected to the schools and then booked viewings of several apartments through their leasing offices. So when we arrived in April we had prepared a full schedule for each day!

On the first day of our visit in April, Dr. John Traphagen picked us up in his car and showed us various neighborhoods and it quickly dawned on us that many of the schools/apartments that we were interested in were situated far from the university. The traffic in Austin is quite bad and one can easily be stuck in traffic for over one hour if one would choose to live in one of the suburbs (where the good schools usually are). We decided to look for a school closer to the campus, and on the last day of our visit we found a perfect school and a great apartment within walking distance from the university.

During this week I attended one class in order to get an impression of what to expect and I spent time familiarizing myself with the campus. I had several meetings with my academic and administrative hosts and I was given the opportunity to discuss and plan my semester in detail. My wife and I were invited to a department get-together and on the last evening of our visit Dr. Friesen and his wife took us out for dinner. All in all, we felt very welcome and we looked forward with much anticipation to returning to Austin in a few months.

Once back in Sweden, we started the VISA-process, which was a bit more complicated than anticipated. Also, I started to work on the syllabus for my course and whenever I had questions

about the course Dr. Friesen would reply quickly via email. STINT-meeting in Gothenburg on May 23.

Tasks and Responsibilities

As mentioned, I was given the opportunity to design my own course: RS 373, Occultism and Modernity. The course was offered as an upper-level course, meaning that most of the students are in their third year. This type of courses usually has between 10-20 students, and my class had a total of 14 enrolled students. The course offered students an introduction to the academic study of Western esotericism, a relatively new field of research which covers a wide range of currents and practices such as magic, astrology and alchemy. The course focused on modern forms of esotericism from 18th century Freemasonry to esoteric New Religious Movements such as the modern Witchcraft movement (Wicca) and the New Age Movement. More specifically, the course considered how esoteric practitioners responded to major changes in Western religion and spirituality due to the processes of modernity and secularization. By the end of the course, students had (hopefully) an understanding of the major theoretical approaches to the study of Western esotericism in addition to being familiar with several forms of modern esotericism.

There were classes two times a week, Tuesdays and Thursdays, 3:30-5:00, and I had office hours two hours per week. The teaching alternated between lectures, group discussions and text analysis. The syllabus, readings and other information were given through the Canvas Learning Management System. The grading was divided between midterm and final exams (50%), research paper (30%), and participation and attendance in class (20%).

As the only teacher on the course, I was in full control of the planning, syllabus, teaching and grading, which also meant that I was responsible for everything. Whenever I had questions about grading, etc., I could always ask Dr. Friesen or the department secretary Zhandra Andrade (who was extremely friendly and helpful).



The classroom at the CMA Building, Moody College of Education, where my class was held each week.

Activities During the Semester

I arrived in Austin on August 1, and a few days later I attended a mandatory J-1 Orientation organized by the International Student & Scholar Services at UT. Theoretically I should have been given a UT ID card after having attended the orientation, but due to some glitch in the bureaucracy it took almost a month to get the ID card (which prevented me from getting access to libraries and from getting a key to the office). This was actually the only problem I encountered during my stay; other than this, everything worked out very smoothly. Once I received the UT ID, I was able to get the key to my office, which I shared with Dr. Martha Newman. On August 27 I attended an introductory workshop on the Canvas Learning Management System (Canvas Crash Course), offered by the UT.

Apart from my class on Occultism and Modernity I participated as much as possible in the department activities, such as attending graduate seminars, faculty meetings, public lectures, social events, and one PhD thesis defense. It should be pointed out that I was invited to all department meetings and that I was treated as a regular fellow faculty member. The graduate seminars were well-attended (between 20-30 persons) and they characterized by lively

discussions focused primarily on theoretical issues. It was particularly interesting to attend the PhD defense which was, compared to Sweden, a very small and private affair. Apart from the PhD candidate himself and the examining committee (which consisted of three faculty members and one external reader attending via Skype), there were only five other persons attending the event. As for the examination, there was little attention given to the actual text of thesis with hardly no questions about the content. Instead, the discussions centered on other possible ways that the thesis might have been carried out, and on various alternatives for expanding the research into a post.doc project. The more administrative faculty meetings gave me a good impression of how the department is organized and how the bureaucracy on the department level is structured. My overall impression is that there is less bureaucracy on the department level, and that faculty members have less administrative responsibilities compared to the situation at my home department. Two things that stand out from attending the department meetings is on the one hand the process for being promoted from Assistant to Full Professor, and the importance placed on external funding. The first issue, the promotion process to Full Professor is similar to the practice in Sweden with external readers evaluating the quality of the applicant's work. However, it differs in the sense that at UT the department members themselves vote whether or not one should be promoted (based on the reports of the external examiners). In Sweden, that would be unthinkable, and the decision is made on a faculty level, rather than department level. The second issue, external funding, was not limited to discussions about research grants (as they tend to be in Sweden), but included ongoing contacts with private individuals and non-scholarly organizations. To me, this was an important lesson on how personal contacts outside of the academia can be seen as an asset how much importance that was placed on such contacts.

On October 8, there was a STINT Teaching Sabbatical Fellows half-term workshop in Austin at UT, co-organized with the International Office. This meeting proved to be particularly rewarding as it forced me to take a step back and reflect upon my experiences thus far at UT, and how best to use the remaining time. Since it was in the middle of semester and that I was fully occupied with my teaching responsibilities, I found it hard to pint-point what I had learned so far, but as I

listened to the other STINT fellows, I came to realize that I had actually learned a lot already. The workshop, furthermore, included a short lecture by Anne Braseby from the UT Teaching & Learning Design Team Lead on their Faculty Innovation Center, as well as a tour with Amber Welch, Head of Technology and Enhanced Learning, of the UT Libraries and learning spaces.

On October 25, I was invited to give a public lecture at the department, which turned out to be very well-attended. The topic, “The Reception of Tantra in British 1950s Occultism: The Case of Kenneth Grant (1924-2011)” was based on my current research. The lecture was attended not only by faculty and students from the Department of Religious Studies, but also by people coming from other UT departments and even people from outside the university. The discussion that followed after my lecture gave me the impression that there was a genuine interest in the topic and I received many insightful questions, comments and reflections.



Texas Longhorns stadium.

Comparing and Reflecting on the Teaching Experience

Although there are many similarities between higher education in the US and Sweden, there are also significant differences. One such obvious difference is the alarmingly sharp decrease of students in the Humanities across the Swedish universities. As a consequence, many Swedish departments in the Humanities are facing serious economic challenges due to the simple fact that they don't have enough students. This will have a direct negative impact upon the courses provided by the departments (courses with too few students will have to be closed down or, as the case with my home department, they have to be turned from Campus courses to online courses). Given the US higher education system (in which students have much broader education and the Humanities are an integrated part of the overall education for the students), the Humanities are not as vulnerable as they are in Sweden. However, in this section I will not dwell on such larger, structural issues, but instead focus on my personal teaching experience, which I have chosen to discuss under five headings: (1) Time-Frame; (2) Progression; (3) Pedagogy; (4) The Students; and finally (5) Grading.

Time-frame

The main difference between my course at UT and the courses I teach at GU is the time-frame: in Sweden my teaching load is in many ways fragmented in which I usually teach specific moments or parts of larger courses, which means that I only get to see the students for a few lectures or a limited period only (usually a few weeks only), whereas at UT the course ran over the whole semester. I thus had a total of 28 classes, from August 30 to December 6, which gave me the opportunity not only to get to know the students better than I have the possibility to do in Sweden, but more importantly that I was able to guide the students in the more theoretically challenging aspects of the subject in a much more thorough manner than I usually have the opportunity to do in Sweden. Given the relatively small number of students in my class and the long time-frame I was able to follow their individual development to a much greater extent than what I am used to in Sweden. It was a bit challenging and daunting to prepare the syllabus with required readings for 28 classes before even having met the students. Did I require too much of them, or too little? Were the texts I had chosen too advanced? As the semester progressed it

was clear that the amount and level of the texts worked really well, and the course evaluations indicated that the work load was considered to be “about right” for most students.

Progression

I was particularly interested in the question of progression. Only two out of the fourteen students majored in religion, the others did majors in such diverse subjects as journalism, film studies and computer science. Given the fact that this was an upper-level course, I was faced with the problem of maintaining a high scholarly level while at the same time acknowledging the fact that most of the students had not taken any Religious Studies classes before. This problem is actually something that I had been facing, and still continue to face, at my home department in Sweden where we are currently transitioning from traditional progressive courses (e.g., grundkurs, fortsättningskurs, fördjupningskurs) to more specialized courses offered at different levels in the course system. It was particularly through the required reading that I was able to maintain a more advanced level that went beyond a mere introductory level course, and my students were thus required to read and discuss a large number of specialized articles and essays from scholarly journals and anthologies, in addition to the two text-books I had chosen for the course. The course was thus markedly research-oriented and the students not only had to read and discuss advanced research articles, but they also had to put the research into practice by having to write a short research paper (around 10 pages) linked to the theories discussed in class. The grade of the research paper amounted to 30% of the final grade, and it was thus a significant part of the course. Judging by the course evaluations, this strategy seems to have worked out very well.

Pedagogy

Pedagogically I wouldn't say that there is such a huge difference between the teaching methods used by teachers at UT and GU, at least not when it comes to the Humanities, and more specifically, Religious Studies. Lectures, seminars, discussions, research papers and exams look more or less the same, and it appears to be up to each teacher to decide what to emphasize in his or her class. That said, the students at UT seem to be better prepared for critical discussions,

both individually and in small groups, and my impression is that they were prepared for the discussions by having read the required texts and that they had reflected on the texts prior to the class. By contrast, my Swedish students in general don't seem to place as much importance on being prepared for class or for taking active part in critical discussions. One reason for why the students at UT seem to be more active, might be the fact that the grades appear to matter more to them than they do to Swedish students. In my course, participation and attendance in class amounted to 20% of the final grade, and some of the students asked from time to time how they were doing in class, something which I've never had a Swedish student ask me.

Another major difference between courses at the UT and GU is the fact that UT-courses are often much more specialized and directly connected to the teachers' research. Teachers at UT (the majority are high-profile and productive researchers) are given much more freedom to design their courses, whereas the bureaucracy and education structure at GU make it more difficult for individual teachers to create "personalized" courses in which their research is integrated. At my home department in Sweden, we are gradually moving towards specialized courses but there are still bureaucratic and administrative problems connected to this, not least the fact that it takes over year to launch such new courses.

The Students

My overall impression of the students is that they are hard-working, engaged and interested in the subject at hand. Despite the fact that they have a heavier reading load than Swedish students (most UT students take 3-4 courses during the term) they were usually very well prepared for class, having read what they were supposed to do. Also, they appear to be better trained in being able to critically engage with and discuss scholarly texts. One of the assignments of the course was to submit a research paper, and while the students seemed better equipped than many Swedish students to formulate and carry out a research question, it was a bit surprising that many, but not all, were struggling with the writing process. Finally, compared to Swedish students, they seem to keep more distance to the teacher and to have more respect for the role of the teacher. It is, perhaps, a bit unfair to compare the students at

UT with my students at GU. The grades required for entering Religious Studies at GU are low, whereas only the top-four percent of the high school students in Texas are admitted to UT. This factor, in addition to the high annual fees and emphasis on the grades, probably goes a long way of explaining why the students overall seem more professional and hard-working than the students at GU.

Grading

One of the things I found most challenging was the grading system. At the University of Gothenburg (as well as in most other universities in Sweden) we are using three-level grading system: fail, pass, and pass with distinction, whereas at UT I was faced with a 12-level system, from A to F (including plus and minus as seen below). The final grades were, furthermore, divided between midterm and final exams (50%), research paper (30%), and participation and attendance in class (20%). The students should be able to follow their grading development over the semester, which another challenging dimension.

Grading rubric for plus/minus grading:

Grade	Percentage
A:	93-100%
A- :	90-92%
B+:	87-89%
B:	83-86%
B-:	80-82%
C+:	77-79%
C:	73-76%
C-:	70-72%
D+:	67-69%
D:	63-66%
D-:	60-63%
F:	below 60%

Given the emphasis placed on the grades by the students, I was positively surprised there was no pressure whatsoever from the department or otherwise to keep the grades in the higher

spectrum, i.e., there was no institutionalized grade inflation in order to maintain UT's academic reputation.



Downtown Austin with the Capitol Building in the center.

Important Lessons

There are many important lessons to be made from the semester spent at UT. First of all, the benefits of being able to follow a group of students over a whole semester. Not only did it give me the opportunity to get to know the students far better than what I am used to in Sweden, but it had a direct (positive) impact on the teaching/learning experience. Given the long time-frame and the relatively large number of classes (28 over the semester), I was able to guide the students and follow them more closely on an individual basis than what I am used to. Second, the freedom to design a whole course and of being able to integrate my research into the teaching was a new and rewarding experience. Although I have always tried to bridge the gap between teaching and research, it has been difficult to do so at GU in a thorough and systematic way, although this is about to change at GU. Connected to this, is the third important lesson, namely the problem of progression. How do you create a higher-level course for students who

have very little or no previous experience of Religious Studies? How do you avoid creating a mere introductory course? As mentioned above, one efficient way of doing it – as I learned at UT – is to integrate the course with cutting-edge research on the topic at hand. Scholarly articles and essays are often written for a more advanced audience (i.e., fellow researchers), and making such literature required reading will force the students to deal with advanced theories and concepts. This poses a challenge for me as a teacher, but given the long time-frame and the large number of classes it becomes a feasible task. Furthermore, the research paper required the students to practically use the theories encountered in the syllabus and discussed in class. Finally, there was an important lesson which is more difficult to explain or to put into words. Compared to the higher education milieu in Sweden (at least the one that I am familiar with), there seemed to be less stress and a more positive general attitude towards the role, function and responsibilities of being a higher education teacher and researcher, coupled with an intellectual curiosity and open-mindedness which was very refreshing to experience. I don't think this can be explained by the mere fact that as a visitor one tends to see things in rose-colored glasses. In terms of stress, not being faced with the fragmented teaching situation I am used to in Sweden, jumping from course to course, doing a few lectures here and there, but instead given the opportunity to focus on one group of students over an extended period of time, creates a stress-reductive working situation. True, I only had to teach one course, whereas teachers at the UT can teach up to four courses per semester. Nevertheless, being able to design your own course and integrate it with your research, in combination with being able to follow one group of students over a whole semester is conducive for a stress-free working situation.



View from the Campus at UT.

Action Plan

On January 30, I lectured on my experiences from the STINT Teaching Sabbatical at the Departments of Literature, History of Ideas, and Religion at the University of Gothenburg. As the Department of Literature, History of Ideas, and Religion has been fairly successful in receiving STINT Teaching Sabbatical funding (we have now sent out a total of four STINT fellows) the teachers, graduate students and administrative staff members are quite familiar with the program and the benefits of sending faculty members abroad and to teach at a foreign university or college. To what extent the department will make use of the experience and knowledge gathered by the four STINT fellows, remains to be seen. However, it is my aim to use this knowledge in the department work of creating new, specialized courses. The perhaps most important lesson in this context that I want to emphasize is the progression as discussed above, and the integration of research into teaching to a much greater extent. I think we have a lot to

learn from the US system in which individual teachers are to a large extent free to design their own courses, often based on their current research.

A second point in my action plan, is to maintain and develop the collaboration between GU and UT, both in terms of teaching and research. As a concrete example of this collaboration, I am currently looking into the financial possibilities of inviting Dr. John Traphagen from UT to spend a semester in 2020 at GU.

A third, and more ambitious point, is to work towards an exchange program for students between UT and GU. The Department of Literature, History of Ideas, and Religion has a long tradition of international cooperation and exchange programs, not least with Stellenbosch University, South Africa, and it would be beneficial for both students and faculty if some sort of exchange program could be developed with UT.

Conclusions and acknowledgments

In sum, spending a semester at UT was a fantastic opportunity both professionally and personally. Teaching at a foreign university not only forced me to reflect upon my role as a teacher in higher education, but it also made me look at the Swedish education system with new eyes. I am sure this experience will make me a better teacher and hopefully some of the lessons learned will be of use to my home department and its current work of re-designing the course structure. On a more personal note, Austin is a truly wonderful city and it worked perfectly to bring a family.

I would like to thank STINT for this opportunity, and especially Hans Pohl for all his support and advice; my home department LIR at GU, for allowing me take a leave of absence in order to teach a semester at UT. Most importantly, I would like to extend a heartfelt thanks to the faculty and administrative staff at the Department of Religious Studies at the University of Texas at Austin for welcoming me to their department. In particular, I would like to mention Dr. Steve Friesen, Dr. John Traphagen, Dr. Martha Newman, and Zhandra Andrade. Thanks are also due to

Erika Payan Zanetti of the International Office at UT. Finally, my greatest thanks go to my talented and enthusiastic students on RS 373 – thank you for making the class such a great experience!

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