

# The Heart of a Teacher: Arthur Holder

For more than three decades, the winner of the GTU's 2019 Excellence in Teaching Award, Arthur Holder, has guided students with quiet wisdom and pastoral sensitivity.

By Doug Davidson

**W**hen Arthur Holder was announced as winner of the 2019 Excellence in Teaching Award at the GTU's Commencement Exercises in May, no one in the GTU community was surprised he would be selected for this honor. The only surprise was that the highly respected professor of Christian Spirituality and former academic dean had not already won the annual award. "Our awards committee had to double check the records," remembers GTU Dean Uriah Kim, "because none of us could believe Arthur had not yet received the award!"

The award committee's surprise reflects how highly regarded Arthur Holder is among GTU students, alumni, faculty, and staff. Throughout 33 years in graduate education in Berkeley, Holder has always been in roles that that combined teaching and administration—including more than two decades as an academic dean, first at Church Divinity School of the Pacific for seven years, and then as the dean and vice president for academic affairs at the GTU from 2002 through 2016. But teaching has always been his first love: "I enjoy the administrative work, but I've always thought of administration as the job I was hired to do. Teaching is what I really love."


Holder says it is the "committed, engaged, interesting people who come to study at the GTU" that make teaching here so satisfying. "I love that we've got students from all over the world. Typically, at least half of the students in courses I teach will be from outside the United States. And I love the religious diversity. In my field of Christian Spirituality, it's long been primarily ecumenical Christian diversity. But since I left the Dean's office, I've been teaching our Interdisciplinary Studies Seminar for first-year doctoral students, as well as the History and Culture departmental seminar, which includes people from all concentrations in that department,

so it's been about interreligious diversity as well."

Advising doctoral students is one of Dr. Holder's greatest joys as an educator. Whether a student's work explicitly focuses on contemporary issues or involves a deep dive into the ancient history and culture that produced a text or shaped a tradition, Holder is always interested in the "so what?" question that motivates a student to pursue a particular project. "Even when people say, 'I'm just interested in history for history's sake,' I don't believe it. There's always something that causes a student to study *this* history, *that* period, *that* person, *that* text rather than some other." He continues, "I try to encourage students to find that point where the subject that they're working on connects with a deep passion that they really care about, and then out of that combustion chamber comes, the creative explosion—creative but contained explosion—that really powers the work."

**H**older enjoys accompanying students on the journey as their projects and interests evolve, transform, and sometimes even change direction completely. Although students often enter the doctoral program with a clear dissertation project in mind, the final result is sometimes far afield from the original vision. "Students are exposed to so much in their coursework. Every book they read, every course they take, is a potential stepping stone to the dissertation. Helping them sort through the possibilities, and eventually decide which one is the keeper, that's part of what I love."

One might call Holder's approach to teaching pastoral; it certainly builds on skills that he honed in his nine years of parish ministry—listening, paying attention, being available, offering support and counsel. "To be a teacher is not to be a



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machine or an ‘answer robot’ or encyclopedia just spewing out all of this knowledge. It’s to be in a relationship with people; that’s what it’s about. You’ve got to call out something in the student and you’ve got to let it be called out in you.”

In thinking about religious education, Arthur Holder draws on the work of Parker Palmer in *The Courage to Teach*, who discusses the three-tiered connection between the student, the teacher, and the subject being studied, what Palmer calls “the great thing.” Palmer suggests that between the poles of a teacher-centered approach (where the professor has all the authority) and a student-centered approach (where the focus is primarily on the student’s needs) is what he calls a subject-centered teaching. As Holder summarizes, “The way to keep the balance is for both the students and the teachers to focus on the subject, this great thing that we put in our midst and then admire together, puzzle over together, and try to figure out. I think that has been the approach I’ve tried to take, partly because I find that’s what works.”

As academic dean, Arthur Holder played a central role in the development of the current doctoral curriculum, which is structured to facilitate and emphasize interreligious and interdisciplinary study. Each of the four doctoral departments at the GTU has been structured to include representation from different religious traditions and scholarly disciplines, allowing for effective bridge-building, cross-fertilization, and dialogue. Yet the program also

offers exceptional opportunity for specialization through more than thirty unique concentrations. Holder believes the new structure facilitates the interaction of students across different disciplines and faith traditions, in ways that truly highlight the unique nature of the community at the GTU, while also providing structure that allows different scholars to pursue their own paths.

The review process that preceded the curriculum redesign highlighted the GTU’s distinctive character in another way that continues to shape Holder’s approach. “We made a comparative study of maybe a dozen different PhD programs, and the GTU was the only school that said we were training people to do anything other than teach at the higher education level. Every other program emphasized, ‘The purpose of this program is to prepare professors.’ But all our materials talk about preparing people for leadership in religious organizations, social service agencies, nonprofits, foundations, publishing, educational institutions, and other things.” He continues, “There’s a reason why we have graduates doing those things; it’s because we’re encouraging and welcoming them. And it certainly makes a difference in the way I teach.”

Congratulations to Dr. Arthur Holder, recipient of the GTU’s 2019 Excellence in Teaching Award. ♦

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