



July 2015

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Recommended Citation

Boyle, Gerry (2015) "The Magic of the Classroom: Islamic scholar and Charles Bassett Teaching Award winner John Turner teaches, and is enlightened by, his students," *Colby Magazine*: Vol. 104 : Iss. 1 , Article 30.

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The Magic of the Classroom

Islamic scholar and Charles Bassett Teaching Award winner John Turner teaches, and is enlightened by, his students

By Gerry Boyle '78

Associate Professor of History John Turner is seldom at a loss for words, certainly not when he's discussing the history of Islam or the Middle East, or commenting for the media on the Taliban or ISIS.

But when Jumana Hashim and Joseph Whitfield, co-presidents of the Class of 2015, knocked on his office door to inform him he'd received the Charles Bassett Teaching Award, Turner was stunned.

"When they told me, I was rendered speechless, which I know many people will find funny," he said. "I had nothing that I could possibly say. I was overwhelmed. Actually, I had to reach out and hold on to the chair."

Since 1993 the award, named for Professor of English Charles "Charlie" Bassett, has been given by seniors to honor a member of the faculty. The recipient, who is selected by secret ballot, delivers the Last Lecture after spring semester exams—an assignment for which Turner promises to have recovered his voice.

"It's an exceptional honor," he said.

Watch a video of John Turner's Last Lecture.



Video



Associate Professor of History John Turner teaching a class outside the Lovejoy Building. Turner asks that students question interpretations of history, including his own.

Faculty focus daily on teaching, bringing ideas to the table, and piquing students' intellectual curiosity.

"You can see the immediate and you can see the connection and the ideas being sparked and the way people are changing and shifting their thinking," Turner said, pausing from grading research papers. "It's very rare that you get these moments of reflection on the impact."

The immediate, he said, is being in the classroom with students and seeing "that magical moment when people are starting to think differently and they see the world in a different way. That magical moment is really one of the things that drives me. I look forward to it every day."

"They see things and they draw connections that I've forgotten to look for," he said. "It's surprising, it's invigorating, it's enlightening. It shapes my thinking as well."

Those moments, Turner said, aren't only experienced by the students. His students, he said, bring fresh perspectives to the subject and new insights from their other classes that he, even as a scholar and expert in his field, may miss.

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President David A. Greene congratulates Associate Professor of History John Turner as Turner receives the Charles Bassett Teaching Award for 2015.

After the semester ends Turner's thinking will turn to his own scholarship. On sabbatical next year, he is studying a group of heretics in eighth- and ninth-century Baghdad who were accused of being Manichaeans, adhering to a religion based on dualism rather than the teachings of Mohammed. Turner is comparing that heresy with the accusations leveled in 12th-century France against the Cathars, a Christian sect accused of professing many of the same beliefs as Manichaeans. Was there a standard checklist of misbehaviors that crossed religions? Did they actually believe these things or was this the most effective way of defaming them? The questions, he said, "open up a space for thinking about the nature of political discourse, religious discourse, and the shaping of who gets to be in a community and who's pushed outside."

The inquiry could inform discussions about contemporary religion, the modern phenomena of the Taliban and ISIS, and race in the United States, he said.

This research project, like his others, is tied to subjects that come up in the classroom as he approaches history as something that must be challenged and demands “constant reengagement.”

“It’s not just history as history,” Turner said. “It’s history as argument over memory.”

The tools required for that sort of study are eminently transferable, he said.

“It’s really about finding the right questions and asking the hard questions and dissecting the information to respond to these questions,” Turner said. “Those are the skills that allow for students who are out in the world to confront ambiguity, confront propaganda, and to respond to it, to disagree with it effectively.”

More about Associate Professor of History John Turner and his work as an Islamic scholar, and his observations about ISIS and contemporary events in the Middle East:



[Video: Faculty Showcase](#)



[Q&A: Associate Professor John Turner, Colby Magazine](#)



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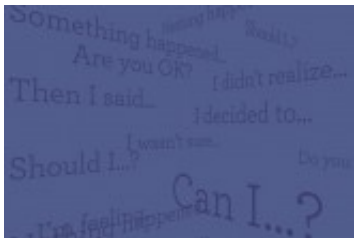
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