

# JEFFREY L. STOUT



Few members of the Princeton faculty have been honored with the President's Award for Distinguished Teaching; fewer still, with Princeton University's Graduate Mentoring Award as well. Jeffrey L. Stout, professor of religion, has received them both, in 2010 and 2009, respectively. Since joining Princeton's faculty in 1975, teaching has been Jeffrey's central focus. All of his teaching, he says, is about how to live well. The main academic remedy he proposes for ignorance and injustice is a kind of friendship in which we hold one another to increasingly demanding standards of excellence.

Jeffrey was born in Trenton, New Jersey, in 1950. He was involved in the civil rights and anti-war movements in his teens and 20s. As an undergraduate at Brown University, he studied ethics, the history of Christian thought, and Hegelian philosophy. His senior thesis was on Christian and Marxist conceptions of hope. He chaired a student strike in 1970, ran the Rhode Island Draft Information Center, and founded *Issues*, a journal of opinion noted for publishing Fr. Daniel Berrigan's "Sermon from the Underground."

Jeffrey came to Princeton as a graduate student in 1972. In graduate school, he focused primarily on religious ethics, Hegel's critique of Kant, and the contemporary revival of American pragmatism. His dissertation asserted a structural parallel between two philosophical problems given canonical statement by David Hume: one pertaining to theoretical induction in science, the other to an alleged gap between factual and normative judgments. Stout argued that recent pragmatist attempts to "dissolve" the former problem could be applied by analogy to the latter.

Jeffrey's first book, *The Flight from Authority* (1981), argued that the nature of knowledge, the rationality of religious belief, and the relationship of religion to morality are issues that have changed significantly from one historical context to another, but not in the rather simple ways in which many intellectuals impressed by the influence of Descartes, Hume, and Kant have assumed.

Jeffrey's second and third books—*Ethics After Babel* (1988) and *Democracy and Tradition* (2004), both of which received the Award

for Excellence from the American Academy of Religion—criticize the claim that modern democratic discourse is too pluralistic to sustain rational discussion. Richard Rorty described *Ethics After Babel* as “The most imaginative, thorough, and enlightening discussion of moral relativism” he had read. Commenting on *Democracy and Tradition*, J. B. Schneewind remarked, “Stout has done more than any other writer to bring to our attention the problems facing democracy due to our inability to talk things over with religious believers.”

Jeffrey’s most recent book is *Blessed Are the Organized: Grassroots Democracy in America* (2010), an ethnographic study of Christian and Jewish involvement in a network of citizens’ groups stretching from New Orleans to northern California. That network’s lead organizer, Ernesto Cortés Jr., received an honorary degree from Princeton in 2009 and co-taught a Princeton seminar with Jeffrey in 2015.

He has also published influential articles on the nature of obligation, theories of interpretation, resistance to same-sex marriage, liberal and post-liberal Christian theology, theories of truth, natural law, the ethics of war, prophecy and social criticism, the films of Lars von Trier, relativism, Hegel, Lincoln, and Emerson.

In addition to his exceptional career as a teacher and scholar, Stout has performed remarkable service for the University as chair of the Department of Religion (1992–99, 2002–03), assistant coach of men’s soccer for two years, and as co-sponsor of the faculty Resolution on Divestment in support of the struggle against apartheid in South Africa. He has long been affiliated with the departments of politics and philosophy. He played a role in the founding of the University Center for Human Values and the Center for the Study of Religion. He served on the executive committees of the Program in Political Philosophy and the Program in Visual Arts and he chaired Princeton’s Committee for Film Studies from 2011–15. He was also a member of the editorial board of Princeton University Press from 2000–04.

He served as president of the American Academy of Religion in 2007. His presidential address, “The Folly Secularism,” argued on democratic grounds against attempts to minimize the influence of religion on political life. Theocracy is bad religion and bad politics, but also thinking that religion “as such” is the problem ignores massive historical evidence to the contrary. Jeffrey distinguishes between secularism, understood as an ideological stance or political movement, and secularization, understood as social process. He argues

that the secularization of political discussion has less to do with the triumph of secularist ideology than with what citizens can now reasonably take for granted when debating one another. In 2007, he also delivered the Stone Lectures at Princeton Theological Seminary. His topic was horrendous evil and sacred value in cinematic art. He intends to revisit these themes in a lecture series for the American Academy of Religion in 2019.

His chief mentor in film studies at Princeton was P. Adams Sitney, with whom Jeffrey co-directed the “Cinema and Religious Expression” project in 2000–01. His lecture course, “Religion in Modern Thought and Film,” featured the works of Hitchcock, Bresson, Tarkovsky, Dash, Ozu, Kurosawa, Brakhage, Dorsky, and Friedrich. On several occasions, under the auspices of the Program in Hellenic Studies, he and Sitney took Princeton students to Greece for the Temenos screenings organized by Robert Beavers.

Jeffrey was inducted into the American Academy of Arts and Sciences in 2008. He has delivered numerous honorific lectures and lecture series, including the Bartlett Lecture on World Peace at Yale in 2008. He gave the Gifford Lectures at the University of Edinburgh in May 2017. The six-lecture series focused on religion and political power. Jeffrey dedicated the series to his friendship with Cornel West.

It is hard to imagine the Department of Religion without Jeffrey. His dedication to and influence on the department cannot be overstated. He has advised and counseled decades of undergraduates, graduate students, and faculty in his areas of expertise as well as in all fields within the department. Despite his skill as a lecturer and a seminar leader, many students tell us that his most important teaching was performed outside class during office hours or in the department lounge, where he was willing to continue the discussion begun in class, to take up a new topic, or simply to listen. Most basically, Jeffrey was always ready to help each and every person be the best version of themselves that they could be. He leaves the department not only with a large hole that cannot be filled but also with a legacy of excellence and care that all of us will aspire to perpetuate.