



■ Emil Homerin, 2005

“In the humanities, I believe we’ve implicitly taken a ‘Socratic oath,’” says Emil Homerin, a professor of religion. “In times of crisis or loss, we can help people ask cogent questions to address the situation.”

Recent history has kept Homerin, a specialist in Islam, Arabic literature, and mysticism, particularly busy. A committed teacher, he takes the work of his classroom beyond the campus, talking with the media and addressing local groups to promote greater understanding of Islamic cultures and societies.

Homerin—who says he knew from the second semester of his freshman year in college that he wanted to be a professor—is the University’s first professor of Islam.

At the time of the Iranian Revolution in 1979, “there weren’t people on most faculties who were experts” on Islam, he recalls. By the time he completed his doctorate in 1987, at the University of Chicago, universities were hiring specialists.

“I’ve had to cap my classes since I came,” he says. “Student interest was here.”

Homerin teaches an introductory course on the history of Islam and another, called Islam and the Third World, that examines effects on the religion from historical, political, social, and economic factors in the developing world.

Another course—Speaking Stones—was inspired by Homerin’s efforts to draw undergraduate students into the process of academic research. Students meet at Rochester’s historic Mt. Hope Cemetery, the sprawling, Victorian resting place of Frederick Douglass, Susan B. Anthony, some of Rochester’s wealthiest citizens, and some of its most vulnerable—one corner holds the graves of children who died at the city’s orphan asylum.

Homerin’s primary area of research is medieval Arabic poetry. The difficulty of learning Arabic is an almost insurmountable obstacle for drawing students into research there, but he realized that his work on medieval Muslim saints does offer a way in.

“Essentially, I’m looking at gravestones and reading obituaries,” he says. So he devised a course in which students learn about Western funeral rites and practices and about funerary art. They turn to the rich resources of Mt. Hope Cemetery to carry out original research on a gravesite there of their own choosing—work that has repeatedly found a home in local historical publications, Homerin notes with pride.

He weaves poetry into all of his courses—something many students aren’t used to reading, he says, but an art form of enduring popularity in the Middle East.

“Poetry can bring an emotional dimension to learning that’s often lacking—to see into the world of others, and perhaps, through that, into our own.

“When you can help students understand others, you’ve done something.”