James Alfred Martin Jr., a specialist in the philosophy of religion, has been appointed visiting professor for the spring term at Wake Forest University.

Martin will serve under a program that allows professors to teach interdisciplinary courses without being tied to any single department. His schedule will include an honors course on Dante, Descartes and Gandhi and a seminar on religion.

Martin, an alumnus of Wake Forest, has degrees from Duke and Columbia universities. He retired this year from Columbia, where he was chairman of the department of religion. He has also taught for 19 years at Amherst College.
Retired professor Martin dies
University Professor taught interdisciplinary and MALS courses

James A. “Al” Martin ('37), who had a distinguished academic career before “retiring” to Wake Forest where he taught interdisciplinary undergraduate and graduate courses for 20 years, died Jan. 24, 2007, in Decatur, Ga. He was 89.

A memorial service will be held Feb. 4 in Decatur, where he had moved after the death of his wife, Nell, in 2005, to be close to his brother. He is survived by a brother and several nieces and nephews.

Martin had already taught for nearly 40 years when he retired from the religion department at Columbia University, returned to his native North Carolina, and joined the faculty at his alma mater in 1983 as a University Professor—the first person hired to fill an interdisciplinary appointment. He had also taught at Amherst College and held a prestigious professorship at Union Theological Seminary, and had written numerous books on religion and philosophy.

Martin retired in 2003 from Wake Forest, where his academic career had started in the 1940s. He had remained close to the University throughout his career, said Provost Emeritus Edwin G. Wilson ('43). He received an honorary degree in 1965 and the Distinguished Alumni Award in 1971.

He was in his mid 60s and was chairman of the Board of Visitors of the College and Graduate School of Arts and Sciences—a voluntary position—when he was invited to join the faculty as the first University Professor. “He was a man with a superb background in religion and philosophy,” Wilson said. “He was known to be a splendid teacher, and he had authored a number of publications.”

Martin, who was an ordained Deacon in the Episcopal church, taught “Meaning and Value in Western Thought” in the religion department, but he was better known for the wide-ranging interdisciplinary honors and humanities courses he taught over the years including “Dante, Descartes and Gandhi,” “Forms and Expressions of Love,” “The Promise and Perils of the Nuclear Age” and “Images of Aging in the Humanities.”

He also taught in the Masters of Arts in Liberal Studies program. He was a “star” in the MALS program, whose classes were always full, said Cecilia Solano, director of the program and interim dean of the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences. He taught one course—alternating between “Cultural Pluralism and Values” and “Literary Classics of World Religions”—almost every year between 1987 and 2002.

He supervised seven theses between 1994 and 1998 on subjects as varied as Gandhi, gypsies and Georgia O’Keeffe, demonstrating his wide range of knowledge, Solano said. In 1995, he won a national award for the best teacher in a graduate liberal studies program.


Martin was a native of Lumberton, N.C. After graduating from Wake Forest, he received his master’s degree from Duke University in 1938 and then returned to Wake
Forest where he taught philosophy and psychology for two years. He earned his Ph.D. from Columbia University in 1944 and served as a chaplain in the Navy for two years.

He taught at Amherst College from 1946 until 1960 and at Union Theological Seminary from 1960 until 1967, where he was the Danforth Professor of Religion. He joined the faculty at Columbia University in 1967 and chaired the religion department for 10 years, before retiring in 1982 and moving to Winston-Salem.

-- Kerry M. King ('85)
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