Professor Ruth Karras
Lecky Professor of History (1913)

→ “The module I gave this last year on medieval marriage turned out to be my favourite of all the undergraduate teaching I’ve done in my career. It was a model of research-led teaching. Our small group met all year for three hours a week, and we read a variety of medieval texts around marriage, including legal and ecclesiastical texts, letters and autobiography. It was a lot of fun - the students were very engaged, and it’s a topic I’m really interested in and will probably do as my next book.”
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“I’d like to put together a network of postdocs looking at the dynamics of mixed marriage across cultural, linguistic, religious and social class lines in the medieval period in European and non-European societies. We’d work in parallel, bouncing ideas off each other and organising conferences to share findings. I’m interested in learning how research questions differ when you’re dealing with different societies, and also how to connect to contemporary issues. The question of what happened when medieval people formed pair bonds across cultural lines connects to what’s happening now in a multicultural Ireland and Europe.”

She’s impressed with Trinity’s focus on interdisciplinarity and is happy that what were previously two M.Phil programmes – in medieval history and medieval languages and literatures – are now merging into one, with students choosing from three strands: history, literature, and culture and civilisation. This will help create greater linkage between medievalists in the university: “Medieval studies goes across history, history of art, gender, and languages and literature. Under the current structure in Trinity those disciplines are divided between two schools. I think we’d all benefit from greater contact and I’m hoping to help improve communication lines – more frequent meetings and getting together jointly to decide on speakers.”

Her own pedagogy involves a strong focus on images – “not just as illustrations but as discussion points because so much of religion is expressed in art” – and on translation – “teaching on advanced courses involves a close reading of primarily Latin texts. We read the texts in translation but I’ll use the Latin text to draw attention to choices that translators make.”

One of the things that attracted her to Trinity was the chance to teach more specialised students: “In the US a lot of undergraduate teaching is to students who aren’t majoring in the subject. In Trinity, students choose history as their main subject or joint honors.” She’s looking forward this year to two group projects for second year students – “I’ll give both projects on the crusades, which is a really lively field and there’s a connection to the history of sexuality, which I’ll be exploring.”

She’s president of the Medieval Academy of America and in March will be giving the presidential address in the University of California, Berkeley – “I might talk about my current book on King David but I’m tempted to explore this new area, for me, of sexuality in the crusades. We’ll see!”

She and her husband are now well settled into Dublin, which they love. “I’m a city person and I’ve never wanted to live in the country, but in Dublin, in some ways, you get both – it’s very easy to get out of town and there are parks and sea. So far, we’ve been away to Kerry, Kilkenny, Cork, Belfast and the Antrim coast. My husband adores the temperate climate here and we now have a dog, an Australian labradoodle. My daughters and grandchildren are very happy to visit us in Ireland.”

She is also learning Irish: “I’ll never be able to research in it but I want to be able to read signposts and pronounce my students’ names.”
OFFICE OF THE PROVOST
House 1, Trinity College Dublin
Dublin 2, Ireland

T  +353 1 896 4362
E  provost@tcd.ie
W  www.tcd.ie

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