

THE AMERICAN ACADEMY OF RELIGION

The Religious Studies Major and Liberal Education

THESE DAYS, it is hardly news when a publication prints a retraction. When the retraction is for an eight-year-old *obituary*, though, people tend to stand up and to take notice.

As the 1990s came to a close, the *Economist* was so certain of the imminent demise of organized religion that it featured God's obituary in its final issue of the millennium. The editors' perspective was clear, if myopic. Church attendance in much of Western Europe was in free fall. "The cynical, questioning, anti-authoritarian West," often led by college professors, had just completed a century of relentless (and frequently effective) attacks on religious belief. For politicians, intellectuals, and even some clerics, "religion was becoming marginal to public life . . . [and] faith an irrelevance in foreign policy" (1999). The U.S. secretary of state at the time, Madeleine Albright, was of the opinion that any given world problem was "complicated enough without bringing God and religion into it" (Carnes 2006). And when Henry Kissinger published his nine-hundred-page, career-summarizing *Diplomacy* in 1994, the word "religion" did not even appear in the index. Religion was on the way out. Or so the defenders of the Enlightenment canon declared.

How times have changed.

The proportion of the world's population that claims membership in the four largest religions—Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, and Hinduism—actually *increased* over the past century, from 67 percent in 1900 to 73 percent in 2005 (World Christian Database 2007). The number is predicted to reach 80 percent

by 2050. In 2007, Harvard faculty engaged in a very public debate over the importance of the study of religion in the university's core curriculum, with the approved core featuring multiple references to religion (if stopping short of mandating its study). Former Secretary of State Albright (2000) is now a highly vocal advocate of the public role of religion, writing that the failure of Americans to understand other religions "poses one of the great challenges to our public diplomacy." And in November 2007, the *Economist* printed a retraction of its notorious obituary, declaring: "Atheists and agnostics hate the fact, but these days religion is an inescapable part of politics."

Of course, those of us in the field of religious studies know that religion has always been an inescapable part of politics, as well as an inescapable part of economics, foreign policy, social mores, and domestic interactions. The waning years of the twentieth century were certainly no exception. While the reality has not changed in recent years, public perceptions doubtlessly have. World events have led Americans to a new appreciation of the importance of knowledge about religion and to a vivid awareness of the dangers that emerge when we fail to recognize religion as a potent source of motivation and behavior. In a world shaped not merely by 9/11 but by Iraq, Bosnia, Kashmir, and the West Bank—not merely by abortion, but by gay marriage, intelligent design, euthanasia, and stem cells—Americans increasingly accept the idea that we need better to understand the diverse range of religious phenomena. In one recent survey (Wuthenow 2007), over 80 percent of Americans responded

If we truly wish for students to engage the tremendous variety of human understandings of life, death, suffering, love, and meaning, there is perhaps no more direct path than through the study of religion





Hebrew College

affirmatively to the question, “Do you think people should learn more about religions other than their own?”

In a sense, our job as scholars of religion became a lot easier on September 11, 2001. Suddenly, the arguments we had been making for years about the importance of understanding world religious traditions were being made by others: not merely by former secretaries of state and magazine editors, not merely by the general public, but by college deans, provosts, and presidents—at times, even by our “cynical, questioning, anti-authoritarian” colleagues.

A return to liberal education?

Concurrent with (if largely coincidental to) these changes in public perceptions of the importance of religious literacy, there emerged a new (or reemerged an age-old?) debate about the quality and nature of the education provided

by American colleges and universities. In 2006, former Harvard President Derek Bok reported that American colleges and universities “accomplish far less for their students than they should,” citing deficiencies in the teaching of writing, critical thinking, and problem solving as well as a failure to impart “the knowledge needed to be a reasonably informed citizen in a democracy” (2006, 8). Beginning in 2003, the Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) at the University of California, Los Angeles, surveyed over one hundred thousand American college students in a multiyear study of students’ engagement with issues of spirituality and religiousness. In 2006, HERI convened a National Institute for Spirituality in Higher Education, seeking to explore “the role of liberal education in students’ development” and “to find creative ways to encourage the development of curricular and

co-curricular [initiatives] around issues of spirituality” (Bryant and Schwartz 2006, 1).

Meanwhile, the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) was conducting a multiyear study of liberal education that concluded, “the world in which today’s students will make choices and compose lives is one of disruption rather than certainty, and of interdependence rather than insularity” (2007, 15). It called for a widespread shift in the “focus of schooling from accumulating course credits to building real-world capabilities” (5). In its influential 2007 report, *College Learning for the New Global Century*, AAC&U mapped out four essential learning outcomes for all American college students:

- **Knowledge of Human Cultures and the Physical and Natural World**, “focused by engagement with big questions, both contemporary and enduring”
- **Intellectual and Practical Skills**, including “critical and creative thinking,” “inquiry and analysis,” and “written and oral communication”
- **Personal and Social Responsibility**, including “civic knowledge and engagement—local and global,” “intercultural knowledge and competence,” and “ethical reasoning and action”
- **Integrative Learning**, including the synthesis and “application of knowledge, skills, and responsibilities to new settings and complex problems” (12)

For many of us in the field of religious studies, these “new directions” for American college students seemed anything but novel. The four essential outcomes embraced by AAC&U outline themes that religious studies has been focusing on for decades: intercultural learning, engagement of big questions, critical thinking and writing, moral reasoning, and the application of all of these skills to new global contexts and lived behaviors. It is safe to say that few disciplines in the academy more centrally and more naturally address the AAC&U outcomes than does the field of religious studies.

At a time when leaders in higher education are increasingly asking students to engage the large issues of life’s meaning and to think critically and responsibly about their role in the world, religious studies offers unique opportunities. Other disciplines such as philosophy, literature, and the creative arts doubtlessly engage questions of ultimate meaning. Yet these

endeavors are largely the province of the talented few: the philosopher, the novelist, the poet, the painter, the dancer. The rest of us are the audience. While, to be sure, we can learn to appreciate the creations of these artists and scholars, we remain observers. Religion, by contrast, is largely created by its adherents. Millions of worshipers and hundreds of thousands of local religious communities—through their prayers, rituals, devotions, and acts of charity; their conversations about scriptures; and their hierarchies and institutions—shape and are shaped by the religious meanings of their traditions. If we truly wish for students to engage the tremendous variety of human understandings of life, death, suffering, love, and meaning, there is perhaps no more direct path than through the study of religion.

Clearly, the field of religious studies now finds itself at a pivotal moment. An unprecedented confluence of world events, public perceptions, and educational insights has created exciting possibilities for the growth and reimagining of the field—possibilities that were unthinkable even a decade ago. The current moment presents important opportunities for the academic study of religion—and poses a series of challenges. How we, as scholars of religion, respond to these challenges may well have much to say about the future of the discipline—not to mention the future of American public literacy about a broad range of religious phenomena.

The religious studies major in transition

The religious studies major is in a state of flux. By most indicators, the field is growing, perhaps significantly. The number of religious studies majors increased by 22 percent in the past decade (to an estimated forty-seven thousand students), with like percentage increases in the number of total courses offered, course enrollments, and faculty positions in the field.¹ The number of religious studies majors at public institutions has grown even more rapidly, by 40 percent during the same period, signifying a sea change in the field. What was once a major situated largely within liberal arts colleges and denominationally linked institutions is now establishing a widespread presence at state universities. In the past five years alone, new degree programs or departments of religion have been proposed or established at the University of Texas; Ohio State University;

Georgia State University; the University of Minnesota; the University of North Carolina, Charlotte; the University of North Carolina, Asheville; and Towson State University—among other public institutions. In part shaped by this trend, the number of religion degree programs that are housed in free-standing religion departments also appears to be on the rise, with the total now topping 50 percent.

What constitutes the religious studies major is also undergoing rapid change. The American Academy of Religion conducted comprehensive surveys of undergraduate course offerings in religion in both 2000 and 2005. The results are striking, if not surprising. The number of sections taught of courses in Islam and Hinduism each almost doubled during the five-year period; by most indications, courses in Christian theology, Old Testament, and New Testament were all flat or down. Sections of Introduction to World Religions grew in number; sections of Introduction to the Bible declined.² There is a very real shift occurring in the field of religious studies—not a shift away from the study of Western religions *per se* (indeed, courses in the Introduction to Western Religions were up significantly during the five-year period), but one away from the study of Christianity in isolation.

At religiously linked schools such as Colorado Christian University (Council of Christian Colleges and Universities) and Santa Clara University (Jesuit), efforts are underway to reconceive and to globalize the study of religion on campus. Colorado Christian provides a particularly interesting example of the transformation of the field. An evangelical university that “purposefully seeks to foster spiritual as well as intellectual growth,” Colorado Christian has just added its first comparative course in world religions and seeks to establish a religious studies major. On a campus where “Christianity isn’t a religion, it’s a life,” such undertakings can be controversial. As Frank Ames (2007) reports, “although many parochial institutions maintain high academic standards for students and appoint capable scholars and teachers to their faculties—and often succeed in providing excellent education—it is fair to say that religious commitment at times diminishes empathy

There is a very real shift occurring in the field of religious studies—not a shift away from the study of Western religions *per se*, but one away from the study of Christianity in isolation

toward the Other and awareness of the Self, which are essential in religious studies.” While Ames and his colleagues at Colorado Christian are currently negotiating the at times subtle lines between personal religious commitment and the scholarly study of religious traditions, they are convinced of the importance of the acad-

emic study of other religions amid a Christian devotional context.

At Santa Clara, the department is consciously involved in efforts to “explore the shape and function of theological studies in relation to other approaches to religion,” including political science, history, classics, women’s and gender studies, and environmental studies (Crowley 2007, 24).

Colorado Christian and Santa Clara are part of a larger movement in which departments and curricula in religious studies at public, private, and church-related institutions are gradually, persistently, and unevenly shifting from a “seminary model” for the study of religion (in which courses in Bible, Christian history, and Christian doctrine are seen as primary and courses on other religions and aspects of religion are deemed secondary or even unnecessary) to a comparative model (in which the focus is on promoting student understanding of the beliefs, practices, and histories of multiple religious traditions in a comparative context).

Faculty and administrator misperceptions of the field

In the state system of Texas, another sort of transformation is underway. Between 1905 and 1985, almost all instruction in religion within the units of the Texas College and University System was performed by “Bible Chairs:” ministers nominated and paid for by various Christian denominations and often teaching from an explicitly devotional perspective. The practice was declared unconstitutional in the mid-1980s, but a perception that religious studies is indistinguishable from religious practice remained in the minds of many administrators and faculty members across the state. The permission granted in May 2007 to the University of Texas, Austin, to establish the first-ever Department of Religion within the state system represents a significant change in state policy.



Kent State University

But old perceptions die slowly; on one university campus in Texas, while 98 percent of the faculty agree that religion influences world events in significant ways, 10 percent of the faculty members are still of the opinion that religious studies courses are, by their very nature, unconstitutional (Raphael 2007). Such sentiments fly in the face of nearly unanimous legal consensus. Nonetheless, the concerns of some faculty members, in Texas and elsewhere, who fear that religious studies necessarily entails an encroachment of religious practice into the classroom can still present real obstacles to the development of the discipline in state settings.

In some senses, what is happening in the Texas state system parallels the movements at Colorado Christian and Santa Clara—a transitioning of the religion major from a seminary to a comparative model. In Texas and other

state-school contexts, though, the common fear faced is not that religious studies is not Christian enough, but rather that it might be too much so.

Evolving interdisciplinary efforts and subfields

Amid already established programs of religious studies, the challenges are often of a different nature. At the University of Minnesota and Louisiana State University, efforts are underway to increase the interdisciplinary outreach of relatively small programs as a means of growing both curricular resources and institutional allies. In these settings, the size and scope of the religious studies major is growing, but largely through increased collaboration between core faculty and colleagues in cognate departments. The university appointment of a scholar in

Hinduism, for instance, might be jointly shared between religious studies and Asian studies. Gail Hinich Sutherland of Louisiana State observes (2008), “this is going to mean that we probably have to leave the narrow textualists for seminaries and well endowed private universities. No one wants to trade scholarly profundities for glib generalities but we must take note of the world we are preparing our students to inhabit.”

This is not to say that textual study is unimportant to students of religious studies. Still, in certain interdisciplinary and area-studies settings, emerging perceptions of the public importance of religious studies are already shaping the nature and direction of the field, pointing the way to courses and faculty appointments in some subfields and not in others. Indeed, such directions may be partially responsible for the rapid nationwide increase in the number of courses in areas such as Hinduism and Islam but decline in the number of courses in Bible and theology.

Defining and assessing the major

The faculties of established programs of religious studies are grappling with the challenge of assessment. Amid a national wave of assessment initiatives, programs are scrambling to find ways to fit the notoriously broad and ever-evolving field of religious studies into rubrics both literal and metaphorical. Of the thirty programs submitting “seed grant” proposals to the American Academy of Religion’s Teagle initiative on the religious studies major, fully one-half already

offer some kind of capstone course or experience to their majors. Many other programs are contemplating adding such a capstone.

But what should be the nature of such courses, how specifically do they contribute to assessment, and are there alternate models for assessment that might be more effective? Eckerd College, for example, blends comprehensive examinations in three fields with a substantial paper that together form the basis for an extended conversation between the student and the departmental faculty. Rhodes College has experimented with a model of faculty-student research collaboration.

Clearly, part of the challenge in developing assessment strategies for the discipline is the fact that there is continuing debate about the appropriate *content* of the religious studies major (though the depth of these debates may be exaggerated at times). Unlike a number of undergraduate disciplines that have accrediting bodies enforcing uniform content for the major or that spring from long-established disciplinary histories, religious studies is relatively new and evolving. Its strong interdisciplinary content complicates assessment further, as the major often straddles multiple departments. A final problem is the relative lack of reliable data collected by departments and the discipline about the career paths of students graduating with undergraduate degrees in religious studies.

Given that the content of the religious studies major is in flux and information about what students do with the major after graduation is incomplete at best, the tasks of defining the major and then assessing it represent continuing challenges across the discipline.

Growth in community colleges

At any given moment, 46 percent of American college students are attending community and two-year colleges. Courses in world religions, introduction to religion, philosophy of religion, Bible, and even Islam are increasingly common in these settings (over 40 percent of community colleges now offer coursework in the field). In light of the rapid increase in the number of religious studies majors at state universities, it is safe to assume that community colleges provide the training ground for many majors in the field (Young 2007).

For the subset of community college students who do not continue on to four-year institutions, their community college education might

Teagle Working Group Members

The American Academy of Religion (AAR) Working Group included the following members: Timothy Renick (principal investigator), Georgia State University; Lynn Schofield Clark, Denver University; Kyle Cole, AAR; Elizabeth Conde-Frazier, Claremont School of Theology; Eugene V. Gallagher, Connecticut College; Mitch Leopard, Cable News Network; Eugene Y. Lowe Jr., Northwestern University; Darby Ray, Millsaps College; Amna Shirazi, Shirazi Law Group; and Chava Weissler, Lehigh University.

Working Group Recommendations

As part of the Teagle Foundation initiative on the relationship between the disciplines and undergraduate liberal education, the American Academy of Religion Working Group issued a series of specific recommendations for improving the religious studies major. The recommendations can be found in the full report of the working group, which is available online at www.teaglefoundation.org/learning/publications.aspx.

provide their only formal opportunity to take courses in religious studies. In many cases, contact, let alone coordination, between the faculties of four-year institutions and those of the “feeder” community colleges in their areas is all but nonexistent.

The task ahead

In 1999, precisely the time when the *Economist* was releasing its obituary of God, historian D. G. Hart was publishing an obituary of another sort. In *The University Gets Religion: Religious Studies in American Higher Education*, Hart presented a bleak picture of the future of academic study of religion, declaring it a “field in search of a rationale.” He concluded that “as religious studies strives to sever ties to communities of faith, it cannot do so without self-immolation” (1999, 10).

Like the *Economist’s* declaration of God’s demise, Hart’s prediction may have been premature. The last decade has seen rapid growth in the academic study of religion and, by many indicators, this growth has been spurred on by an emerging consensus, both public and academic, about what the scholarly study of religion entails and why it is important to students and society. With almost fifty thousand students majoring in religious studies in American colleges and universities at any given time (and with that number increasing rapidly), scholars of religion will play a significant role in shaping what the next generation of Americans knows, thinks, and does with regard to religion. Clearly, our efforts to improve the major in religious studies and to strengthen its links to the goals of liberal education are anything but purely academic. □

REFERENCES

- Albright, M. 2000. From the secretary. *State* (September). Quoted in Peck 2001.
- Albright, M. 2006. The mighty and the almighty: Reflections on America, God, and world affairs. New York: HarperCollins.
- Ames, F. 2007. Establishing the religious studies major: Stories from the Colorado Christian University trenches. Leadership Workshop. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion, San Diego, CA.
- Association of American Colleges and Universities. 2007. *College learning for the new global century: A report from the National Leadership Council for Liberal Education and America’s Promise*. Washington, DC: Association of American Colleges and Universities.
- Bok, D. 2006. *Our underachieving colleges: A candid look at how much students learn and why they should be learning more*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Bryant, A. N., and L. M. Schwartz. 2006. *National institute on spirituality in higher education: Integrating spirituality into the campus curriculum and co-curriculum*. Los Angeles: Higher Education Research Institute.
- Carnes, T. 2006. Q&A: Madeleine Albright. *Christianity Today*, June, www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2006/juneweb-only/126-43.0.html.
- Crowley, P. G. 2007. Religious studies in a Jesuit context. *Religious Studies News* 22 (4): 24.
- Economist*. 1999. God. December 23.
- Hart, D. G. 1999. *The university gets religion: Religious studies in American higher education*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Kissinger, H. 1994. *Diplomacy*. New York: Simon and Schuster.
- Peck, E. 2001. Doing it all wrong in the Middle East: Iraq. *Mediterranean Quarterly* 12 (4): 13–26.
- Raphael, R. 2007. Religious studies in Texas: A mission without a major. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion, San Diego, CA.
- Sutherland, G. H. 2008. Report on the AAR/Teagle seed grant. Unpublished report, American Academy of Religion.
- World Christian Database. 2007. www.worldchristiandatabase.org/wcd/; (accessed November 1).
- Wuthnow, R. 2007. Religious diversity in a “Christian nation”: American identity and American democracy. In *Democracy and the new religious pluralism*, ed. T. Banchoff, 151–70. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Young, S. 2007. Out of sight, out of mind: Religious studies and the community college. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion, San Diego, CA.

NOTES

- 1 All statistics in this paragraph are derived from the American Academy of Religion, Census of Religion and Theology Programs, 1996, 2000, and 2005. (See www.aarweb.org/Programs/Department_Services/Survey_Data/Undergraduate.)
- 2 American Academy of Religion, Census of Religion and Theology Programs, 2000 and 2005. Because the number of institutions responding to the survey differed during the two survey periods, the statistics cited in this paragraph are based upon the number of sections offered of the particular course as a percentage of the total number of sections offered during each survey period.