

FOCUS ON

The Religion Major and Liberal Education

The Religion Major in Transition

Tim Renick, Georgia State University

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Timothy Renick is Chair and founder of the Department of Religious Studies at Georgia State University. He is the recipient of the 2002 Outstanding University Teacher Award for the State of Georgia and the 2004 AAR Award for Excellence in Teaching. Renick is the Principal Investigator of the Teagle Foundation funded project, "The Religion Major and Liberal Education."

OUR JOB DESCRIPTION changed six years ago. Many of us in the field of religion had struggled for years to convince secular colleagues, skeptical administrators, and a suspicious public of the importance of educating undergraduates about religion, often to little avail. We were all familiar with the arguments against religious studies. Religion was too personal, too private. Scholars were too liberal, too critical. Departments of religion were a luxury, an anachronism, or a threat to church-state separation.

Until 9/11. On a single day, the conversation about religion changed in this country. Arguments we had been making for years no longer fell on deaf ears. In fact, they began to be made by others. The news media began to turn to scholars of religion on a daily basis to clarify the seemingly overwhelming complexities surrounding religious sects and movements. The *Times* of London urged U.S. universities to take steps to aid Americans "to become more reli-

giously literate so that they can [better] judge public policy issues." Former secretary of state Madeleine Albright wrote that a failure to understand other religions "poses one of the great challenges to our public diplomacy." In the face of oftentimes mystifying acts of religious violence globally, American colleges and universities increasingly turned to the academic field of religion for reason and insight.

The impact on the discipline has been profound. *Time* magazine has traced a large and widespread increase in enrollments in religious studies courses at the university level since September 2001. On many campuses, religion courses have emerged as the most popular electives. In not only private colleges but also state universities, courses in the field are increasingly required as a part of core requirements, thus impacting all aspects of undergraduate education. Several new degree programs have sprung up.

The Challenge to the Field

With the rapid growth of the major in religion, with the unique place it occupies in the modern academy, and with significant changes in the national and global context in which Americans view religion, there is a need for the field to reassess the relationship between the goals of the concentration and those of liberal education. The Teagle Foundation grant on "The Religion Majors and Liberal Education" provides a unique opportunity for members of the American Academy of Religion to engage in a sustained dialogue regarding our central role in shaping the religious and cultural literacy of the next generation of Americans.

There is perhaps no academic field more centrally involved in addressing essential learning outcomes involving not only intellectual and practical skills (such as critical inquiry, written and oral communication, and problem solving) but also the areas of personal

and social responsibility (including ethical reasoning and action, intercultural knowledge, and civic knowledge and engagement) than the field of religion. There also are few academic fields that are more diverse, with undergraduate programs of religion variously situated in liberal arts colleges, religiously affiliated colleges, research universities, and theology schools.

In 2000, the American Academy of Religion, with a grant from the Lilly Endowment, examined the present state of the field in its Census of Religion and Theology Programs. With a 79 percent response rate, the census revealed diverse conceptions of the major curriculum and a range of approaches to achieving what are, at times, very different learning outcomes. Some member programs have added requirements that students undertake coursework in world religions, non-Western religions, Islam, religious violence, or ethics. Others have begun to expect that students engage in study-abroad experiences or conduct fieldwork in local religious communities. Still others mandate that students engage in service learning as a component of their studies through internships in nonprofit, religious, and community organizations.

Despite the survey and the wealth of approaches it revealed, there has been little opportunity for a sustained follow-up discussion about the nature of the major, the effectiveness of various approaches in impacting student learning, and alternate steps that might be considered. There also has been little opportunity to disseminate information about the success or lack of success of approaches that have been tried by member institutions, leaving each institution, in effect, to reinvent the wheel. These steps are particularly crucial given the changes wrought on both the nation and the field by the events of 9/11. They also are crucial given the increasingly prominent role that undergraduate courses in religion play in shaping the cultural literacy of a broad range of Americans, from journalists and

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lawyers to government employees, business leaders, and clergypersons.

This project has, in one sense, a very simple goal: to promote a sustained public dialogue within the field concerning how the concentration in religion can serve the evolving goals of liberal education and the needs of American society. The project seeks to encourage broad and diverse participation within the AAR in considering the following questions:

1. How might we invigorate learning in the field in light of recent global events?
What is the role of the concentration in promoting intercultural knowledge and competence among students?
2. In a context of growing religious violence and radicalism, how can we encourage students to engage ethical issues in a way that is both academically rigorous and morally constructive?
3. How can we best create learning environments which encourage students to intelligently and critically engage the moral, religious, and spiritual issues central to humanity while in the major and throughout their lives?
4. How can the concentration enhance its role in promoting practical skills central to liberal education such as written and oral communication, critical thinking, and problem solving? How might the promotion of these outcomes within the major be integrated with achieving the personal and social outcomes outlined above?
5. In light of the growing number of institutions that require undergraduates to take courses in religion, what should be the shape of foundation or core courses in the field?

Multiple Opportunities for Participation

The project formally will extend almost two full years, from the initial convening of the working group in early 2007 to the AAR Annual Meeting in November

2008, when there will be a special open forum to discuss the completed White Paper. Ideally, the impact of the initiative will extend years beyond this initial period. All told, in addition to regular meetings of a distinguished and diverse “working group,” there will be a total of five significant public undertakings that the Teagle Foundation grant will make possible. All of these undertakings afford opportunities for participation by AAR members, and some are already underway.

First, a series of ten \$500 seed grants were awarded to individual institutions to promote the discussion of the religious studies majors on a diverse group of campuses. The call for these proposals went out in this publication and in the AAR e-bulletin this spring. Over 30 proposals were submitted, and members of the AAR’s Academic Relations Committee ranked the top 10. For those of us who read through the proposals, it is clear both that there are a large number of challenges facing our field — from difficulties getting programs started to growing pains as existing programs evolve into something new — and also a great deal of creativity, ideas, and enthusiasm in response to these challenges. The reports of the 10 institutions receiving seed grants will be integrated into the final White Paper.

Second, a daylong Leadership Workshop on “The Religion Major and Liberal Education” will be held on Friday, November 16, in San Diego, the day before the official start of the 2007 Annual Meeting. The workshop will provide a forum for a sustained discussion of the goals of and the challenges to the major, as well as interactive sessions exploring what is working and what is not on individual campuses. The keynote speaker will be Stephen Prothero of Boston University, author of *Religious Literacy*. All signs point to this being the most popular AAR workshop ever, with over 40 people already registered, but seats are still available. We hope you can attend.

Third, a special paper session on “The Religion Major and Liberal Education” will be held at the 2007 Annual Meeting [Saturday, November 17, 1:00-3:30 PM].

Five interesting perspectives on the major will be heard, with scholars representing church-related colleges, public universities, community colleges, and liberal arts institutions. Please attend the session and join in the dialogue.


Fourth, in spring 2008 and led by working group members, a White Paper will be written discussing the state of the religion major and outlining findings and best practices that have surfaced from the seed grants, workshop, and paper session. This White Paper will be distributed to all AAR members before the 2008 Annual Meeting.

Finally, at the 2008 Meeting, a special session will be held to discuss the White Paper and map out issues for AAR members to consider in the years ahead.

Why This Project?

Perhaps too often, our participation in the AAR serves to remind us of our differences — differences in institutional and religious affiliation, methodological approach, and disciplinary expertise. It’s clear, though, that there are certain issues that unite us. We all care about the religious literacy of our students. We all believe that what our discipline does is genuinely important. We all are committed to being better at what we do.

Through the support of the Teagle Foundation, the current project provides us resources to explore these common goals in a sustained fashion. It provides us with a context to learn from each other, both with regard to what is working and what is not. The project will only be a success, though, with your participation. I hope you will contact me (trenick@gsu.edu) or other members of the working group with ideas and suggestions, and I hope you will participate in the workshop, the paper session, and the various other forums we have planned.

Recent world events present our field with a unique opportunity to reconsider and potentially to redefine our roles and responsibilities. How we respond to this opportunity will not only shape the future of our profession but also the religious literacy of the next generation of Americans. 

The Religion Major and Liberal Education Working Group Members

Timothy Renick (Principal Investigator), Chair and founder of the Department of Religious Studies at Georgia State University and a member of the Teaching and Learning Committee of the AAR

Lynn Schofield Clark, Assistant Professor of Mass Communication and Director of the Estlow International Center for Journalism and New Media, Denver University, and author of *From Angels to Aliens: Teenagers, the Media, and the Supernatural* (2005) and co-author of *Media, Home, and Family* (2004), editor of *Religion, Media, and the Marketplace* (2007) and co-editor of *Practicing Religion in the Age of the Media* (2002)

Kyle Cole, Director of College Programs, American Academy of Religion

Elizabeth Conde-Frazier, ordained American Baptist minister, Associate Professor of Religious Education, Claremont School of Theology, and author of *Hispanic Bible Institutes* and co-author of *A Many Colored Kingdom: Multicultural Dynamics for Spiritual Formation*

Gene Gallagher, Rosemary Park Professor of Religious Studies at Connecticut College, and Chair of the Teaching and Learning Committee of the AAR

Mitch Leopard, CNN correspondent on international issues, MA in Religious Studies

Gene Lowe, ordained Episcopal priest, Assistant to the President of Northwestern University and Senior Lecturer in Religion

Darby Ray, Associate Professor of Religious Studies at Millsaps College and Director of the Faith and Work Initiative, author of *Deceiving the Devil: Atonement, Abuse, and Ransom* (1998) and *Christic Imagination: An Ethic of Incarnation and Ingenuity* (forthcoming), and editor of *Theology That Matters: Ecology, Economy, and God* (2006)

Amna Shirazi, senior partner in the Shirazi Group, a law firm specializing in immigration law, and an undergraduate major in Religious Studies

Chava Weissler, Philip and Muriel Berman Professor of Jewish Civilization in the Department of Religion Studies, Lehigh University, author of *Voices of the Matriarchs: Listening to the Prayers of Early Modern Jewish Women* (1999), and a teacher at Lafayette College, DeSales University, and Moravian College

Wildcard Session Features Papers on Liberal Education

As part of the project “The Religion Major and Liberal Education,” a wildcard session has been scheduled for the 2007 Annual Meeting in San Diego. The session has a variety of papers addressing the evolving place of the religion major in the modern academy — from discussing influences of the institutional context upon the religion major to addressing how the religion major better prepares students to meet the needs of liberal education, the professions, and society.

Timothy Renick, Georgia State University and principal investigator for the project, will preside. Five papers will be presented:

- “The Religious Other and the Goals of the Liberal Arts” by Katherine Janiec Jones, Wofford College
- “For Sapiential Literacy: The Role of Religion at Public Colleges” by Anthony Mansueto, Collin County Community College
- “The Place and Purpose of Religion at a Church-Related College” by David C. Ratke, Lenoir-Rhyne College
- “A Reconnaissance of Religious Studies in Three Settings: Developing Discursive Values” by David Reinhart, DePaul University
- “Out of Sight, Out of Mind: Religious Studies and the Community College” by Steve Young, McHenry County College

“The Religion Major and Liberal Education” is a two-year project to reassess the relationship between the goals and objectives of undergraduate concentrations in religion and those of liberal education. As such, the AAR wants to involve as many as possible in the conversation. You are encouraged to attend this session and the leadership workshop to discuss this important initiative.

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Conveners: **John Witte, Jr.**, Director, Center for the Study of Law and Religion
Frank Alexander, Founding Director, Center for the Study of Law and Religion

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The Religion Major and Liberal Education: A Conversation

The AAR's Working Group for The Religion Major and Liberal Education project believed a conversation among three scholars with deep ties to religious studies would help to illuminate the intricacies involved in the project. To demonstrate the complexities and commonalities of scholars in different academic positions, we are fortunate to publish this interview with Colgate University's Rebecca Chopp, Northwestern University's Eugene Lowe Jr., and Pomona College's Zayn Kassam.

RSN: In order to function as a contributing member to society, are there some central ideas and concepts that every undergraduate — regardless of major — should know about religion? If so, have these ideas and topics changed over the past generation?

Rebecca Chopp: More than ever, undergraduates need to master the basic assumptions and become handy with some of the skills involved in religious studies and in theological studies. Over the past generation religion has emerged as a significant force for societal, cultural and personal meaning. One of the many implications of 9/11 is that few Westerners can afford the luxury of thinking that religion will disappear or be reduced to the fringes of society. Secularization theses, once so popular in the academy, now seem largely irrelevant and dangerously outdated. Globalization has included the realization that religions are a real force in our contemporary period and we have to understand how meaning operates differently in different religions of the world. However, 9/11 and subsequent events are not the only reasons religion is alive and well on our campuses. Most undergraduate students, according to the HERI study "Spirituality in Higher Education," are "religious and/or spiritual" and are asking questions about meaning, practice, and community. More and more faculty in departments such as political science, physics, and geology and professional schools including law, medicine, public health, and business consider some aspect of religion as subject matter. The immigration of new religions in America is, as Diane Eck says, "marbleizing" our culture. Finally, some of the major ethical-political-cultural issues of our day, including the environment, stem cell research, and health care, require religious analysis and theological reflection. Undergraduate students need to know how to think about religions as cultural forces (the subject of religious studies) and they also need to know how persons internal to the religion act and believe (the subject of theological studies).

Eugene Lowe Jr.: Over the last generation, academic institutions and academic disciplines have engaged questions of diversity from a number of vantage points. Beginning with issues of access by underrepresented groups, colleges and universities also faced questions about diversity requirements in the curriculum and in student life programs. The study of religion, which from the beginning have exercised such a shaping influence on the development of American culture, provides an important opportunity for undergraduates to engage questions about values, diversity, community, and tolerance. While I do not anticipate a resurgence of interest in the idea of a core curriculum, I do think that an undergraduate education should include exposure to the ways in which the religious heritages of the United States generate both centripetal and centrifugal pressures on our quest for a common culture. Again, in the U.S. context, religion also provides a lens for focusing on issues of race, immigration, and social change. Since large numbers of public and independent institutions claim as part of their mission the education of effective citizens of a democracy, study of religion and U.S. culture provides a way of illustrating formative tensions in our national experience.

Zayn Kassam: Religions are sets of beliefs and practices that provide larger organizational frameworks within which to perceive as well as deal with questions of meaning and

existential realities. Their significance and meaning changes with each generation in response to and conversation with contextual factors: religions are dynamic. In the past, religion may have been construed as an essence that was comprised of unchanging beliefs, and a set of rituals that were cast in stone. Now we know that subjectivity and context alter how a belief is understood and that rituals similarly both structure a person's frame of reference and are themselves structured by the participant's subjectivity and context. The connection of religion to an observer's subjectivity and context suggests that while there is no aspect of that person's life that is not infused explicitly or implicitly with religious ideas, values, behaviors, and practices, at the same time, social, political, cultural, economic, and legal systems are themselves shaped by, in conversation with, expressed as, and interpreted within religious frames of reference, and all subjects, whether religious or not, live within these systems. Does this mean that everything boils down to religion? No. It means simply that religion cannot be compartmentalized: that in meaning making, regardless of what a specific religion's founders or sacred texts teach, religions both structure reality and are themselves understood according to context and subjective realities. And once religious ideas, values, practices, and modes of expression are institutionalized in systems, even if their connections to religion are lost to public memory, the systems continue to shape and be shaped by those living within those systems, whether these persons are explicitly religious or not.



Zayn Kassam is Associate Professor of Religious Studies at Pomona College. She has won the Wig Award for Distinguished Teaching twice at

Pomona College, as well as an American Academy of Religion Excellence in Teaching Award. Her publications include the volume on *Islam in Greenwood's series*, *Introduction to the World's Major Religions (2006)*. Her current research is on religion and the environment, and gender issues in Muslim societies.

RSN: Similarly, are there central skills that every undergraduate major in religion should possess? If so, have these skills changed over the past generation?

Chopp: As I suggested above, I think all students graduating in the twenty-first century need to understand the critical thinking skills offered by religious studies and theological studies. I think undergraduates need to understand how religions can be forces for good and evil and how religions are both social-cultural realities and individual constructs of meaning. Study of intellectual thought, aesthetic performance, ethical codes, and communal practices should be included in undergraduate study of religion.

Lowe: It seems that religious studies scholars are always asking questions about what we should study and how. This fact creates both intellectual dynamism and the danger of inclusive incoherence. A coherent undergraduate program in religious studies provides the opportunity for students to develop critical

methodological selfconsciousness about the data of religious experience and community. In the United States, I think this means a familiarity with the role of Christianity and the Bible in American history, and the ironies and paradoxes associated developing from a historically Christian culture, to becoming the most diverse religious country in the world, while maintaining a dominant identification with its Christian past. Over the last generation, as forces of economic, intellectual, and communications globalization have reshaped our worldviews, the field of religious studies has further expanded its reach. Now an undergraduate major needs also to have experience interpreting the ways in which religion and culture interact in settings outside the United States. I would further add that a religion major should develop basic competence in the interpretation of religious texts in at least one, and preferably two, of the major religious traditions.



Eugene Y. Lowe Jr. is Assistant to the President of Northwestern University. He also holds faculty appointments in the Religion Department in

Northwestern's Weinberg College of Arts and Sciences, and the School of Education and Social Policy, where he teaches courses in higher education administration and the history and philosophy of higher education. A historian of American religion, his writings about religion, race, and American culture have appeared in a number of books and journals, including the *Anglican Theological Review* and *Church History*. His book, *Promise and Dilemma: Perspectives on Racial Diversity and Higher Education (Princeton University Press, 1999)* is based on work sponsored by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation. He received his AB in Religion from Princeton University and the MDiv and PhD from Union Theological Seminary in New York.

Kassam: While in the past every undergraduate major in religion might have been expected to identify the key beliefs and practices of the major religious traditions, which number about five or six, now every religious studies major should emerge with a sense of wonder at the sheer diversity of ways in which human beings are religious. Yes, of course, a student should know the central figures, the authoritative texts, the key rituals and observances, the organizing institutions, and the significant material and devotional forms of expression of the major world traditions. However, all of these must be related to the historical and cultural context in which they arose and a sense of the issues they were grappling with. In addition, and this is what makes the study of religion so exciting for me, seeking to understand how people have understood and found ways to be religious in connection with their existential realities through the ages up to the present time is what makes the study of religion not only fascinating, but also central to understanding human civilization. The image that comes most readily to mind is the one invoked by Salman Rushdie in *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*, in which the source stories generated by the ocean of stories continually interact with, meld with, infuses fresh life

into, and generate new stories that are related to the source story but also different in intriguing ways. What are the afterlives of the text? What happens when religions migrate through conquest or immigration? How does the context create a new story? How do humans make sense of tragedy? What kinds of stories are created to mobilize exercises in power? What are the shadows they create?

RSN: How can we know if we are effectively teaching these central ideas and skills to our students? How can we best show others that we have done so?

Chopp: The study of religion includes disciplinary practices and perspectives shared with the social sciences and the humanities. Almost all social science and humanities disciplines are impossible to assess in order to yield hard-core quantitative data. If the point of intellectual thought and spiritual practice in a religious tradition is wisdom gained over a lifetime, then assessment must be an eschatological event! Still and all, I do think we can assess whether or not a student has learned the basic facts of the study of religion as determined by a particular program: if she can think critically about religion and within a religious tradition (whether or not it is her own); if he can treat a religious event or practice from a multidisciplinary perspective, and if she can give an account of a religious event within a particular historical situation. I think assessment has to be shaped to fit each school. I have not seen evidence to suggest that we can have a "one size fits all" assessment that works for all programs of religion in all schools.



Rebecca S. Chopp was named President of Colgate University on July 1, 2002. Colgate's fifteenth president, she joined the college from Yale University where

she served as Dean of the Yale Divinity School. Prior to joining Yale, Chopp spent 15 years at Emory University, where she held the positions of Provost and Executive Vice President for Academic Affairs. Chopp received her BA from Kansas Wesleyan University, her MDiv from St. Paul School of Theology, and her PhD from the University of Chicago. In recent years her research and publication have focused on changing structures and cultures of higher education, on the role of liberal arts in democratic society, and on religion and higher education. Chopp has written numerous books and articles in the area of women's studies, Christian theology, and the role of religion in American public life.

Lowe: I think a good test of our teaching is how students learn to take on and analyze questions that address experiences and values different from their own. In a time when accountability looms as an important question for many stakeholders outside colleges and universities, being able to explain and justify outcomes is important. We need to exercise caution here, and make clear that religious studies as a part of the academic humanities does not

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Proposals Offer Insight into Complexities of Religion Major

EARLIER THIS YEAR, 31 religious studies departments submitted proposals to secure a “seed grant” to study their unique academic environment vis-à-vis the religion major and liberal education. The working group for the project, with advice from the Academic Relations Committee, selected ten programs to receive the seed grants, funded by the AAR through the Teagle Foundation grant it received for the Religion Major and Liberal Education Project. Here, we are reprinting portions of the grant proposals from some of those programs to give readers an idea of what is envisioned.

Religious Studies at the Community College

Steve Young, McHenry County (IL) College

Close to half of all American college students attend community colleges, and the bulk of these young men and women complete the majority of their general education requirements before transferring to a four-year institution. Approximately 70 percent of these transfer students will change their major at least once as an undergraduate. From this it follows that (a) community colleges are poised to play an important role in developing the pool of potential religious studies majors at four-year institutions, and (b) a large percentage of teaching about the academic study of religion that students ever receive as non-majors will occur in the community college setting.

McHenry County College in Crystal Lake, Illinois, contributes to this trend more today than ever before. Located in one of the fastest growing counties in Illinois, the college now serves a younger, more traditional student body. Since the mid-1990s, it has experienced a 64 percent increase in fulltime, associate degree-seeking candidates and a 47 percent increase in those students who plan to transfer to a four-year institution. Meanwhile, the Humanities Department has seen a 109 percent increase in annual credit hours. Most notably, “Philosophy 261: Religions of the World” — the cornerstone to building a larger religious studies program at MCC — has grown apace from 466 annual credit hours enrolled for in 1995–1996 to averaging over 1,000 credit hours each year from 2001 through 2006.

Yet in their first two years of college, most students at MCC are exposed to religious studies mostly and indirectly through other disciplines. For example, different aspects of Islam might be touched upon in an introductory course on the history of Western civilization, an English course on comparative literature, or even during art history class. More in-depth teaching — to promote intercultural knowledge, to engage the moral and spiritual issues central to humanity, or to invigorate more critical and constructive learning in light of recent global events — is not, however, offered in the core coursework most students will complete before transferring to a four-year institution.

The challenges for religious studies at MCC, therefore, are similar to those at many other community colleges. And attempts to identify and address these challenges should be useful for both MCC and potentially for other community colleges as well. The key challenges we face at MCC are as follows: few course offerings in religious studies; few faculty trained in religious studies; difficulty in finding qualified adjunct instructors; coordinating the interdisciplinary study of religion; addressing the appropriateness of religious studies at a secular educational institution given cultur-

al marginalization and privatizing of religion; identifying appropriate course offerings and linking them with Illinois Articulation Initiative and programs at four-year schools; and generating and sustaining sufficient enrollment for new courses in religious studies.

The religion major is central to a liberal education in America. Students must become more religiously literate to better understand the root belief systems of other cultures, the foundations of their own culture, and intelligently and ethically judge the pressing public policy issues of the day in a more global context. Community colleges can be decisive in offering religious studies courses to serve as a foundation to baccalaureate-seeking transfer students who will continue this field of study at a four-year institution. To that end, by fostering a sustained dialogue over the challenges listed above, and based on the popularity of the “Religions of the World” course thus far, the Philosophy Department hopes to explore the possibility of instituting a much broader religious studies program at McHenry County College.

Religion at Colorado Christian University: The Challenge

Jeffrey Mallinson and Frank Ritchele Ames, Colorado Christian University

The American Academy of Religion’s mission “welcomes all disciplined reflection on religion — both from within and outside of communities of belief and practice — and seeks to enhance its broad public understanding.” Colorado Christian University’s School of Theology is arguably located near the geographical epicenter of North American Evangelicalism. The challenge, in this context, is to help students and community members understand the tools of the academic study of religion to the extent that it can become appropriately self-critical, even within a community of belief and practice. This proposal solicits much-needed help toward creating a viable and respectable religion major despite the historic difficulties of such work within the evangelical academy. A seed grant would help our academic unit formulate a strong proposal for a religion major, complete with guidelines for preserving academic freedom and the integrity of scholarship alongside confessional restrictions. We believe this process will produce both a successful religion program as well as an interesting report to the American Academy of Religion regarding the unique challenges of a comparative religion program at a distinctly Christian institution, especially regarding programmatic emphases on the nature of fundamentalisms.

After careful planning and study, the School of Theology hopes to inaugurate a religion major. This will differ from those confessional institutions that use the term “religion” as an umbrella for a variety of dogmatic, historical, and textual studies within Christian theology. Rather, the religion program at Colorado Christian

University will train students in the methodologies and literature current in the top religion programs in the academy.

Oversight for curricular development will come from Jeffrey Mallinson, dean of the School of Theology. The primary faculty member to direct the process will be Frank Ames. . . . Planning will emphasize the role of the study of fundamentalisms, and strategies to ensure academic freedom within a confessional institution. Long term, our goal is to create a center for the understanding of American Evangelicalism within the movement, in order to provide students with the academic tools for productive and sensitive self-criticism.

Religious Studies in Texas: A Mission without a Major

Rebecca Raphael, Texas State University—San Marcos

No public university in Texas has an independent department of religion. Only one, the University of Texas at Austin, has a religion major. Attempts to establish majors and departments often meet with entrenched opposition at both the local and state level. The purpose of this project is twofold: first, to examine the barriers to the expansion of religious studies at Texas State University—San Marcos; and second, to explore what the American Academy of Religion can do to support religious studies in the absence of a major or department. Since the second most populous state is unlikely to support departments in the near future, the AAR should plan outside the department-centric model of religious studies in the liberal arts.

In 1999, the Philosophy Department hired Rebecca Raphael as the only religious studies scholar on the faculty of Texas State University. She revised courses formerly taught by local ministers, obtained normal academic funding for all of them, and became the coordinator of the department’s interdisciplinary minor in religion. Enrollment in the minor has increased six-fold, and average course enrollment has tripled. In spite of this demonstrated demand, the department’s proposals to establish a tenure line and to move toward a major have been consistently rejected by administrators. In fact, the religion minor remains the only minor in the university not supported by at least one tenure line.

During the 2007–2008 academic year, the principal investigator will organize two public panel discussions. One will bring biblical scholars and First Amendment specialists to campus to discuss academic study of the Bible in the state’s public high schools and universities. The other will initiate a dialogue on how a liberal arts curriculum, absent a religion major, can better address the urgent public need for better knowledge of the world’s religions. Speaker invitations will draw on experts familiar with the issues in Texas, e.g., Mark Chancey of SMU or Douglas Laycock of the University of Michigan School of Law. In addition, the principal investigator will conduct a survey of students and adminis-

Seed Grant winners:

- Colorado Christian University, School of Theology
- Eckerd College, Letters Collegium, Religious Studies discipline
- Lafayette College, Religious Studies Department
- Louisiana State University, Philosophy and Religious Studies Department
- McHenry County College, Philosophy Department
- University of Minnesota, Classics and Near Eastern Studies Department
- University of New Mexico, Religious Studies Program (Interdisciplinary)
- Santa Clara University, Religious Studies Department
- Texas State University, Philosophy Department
- Wofford College, Religion Department

trators to determine perceptions about religion studies. The survey and follow-up interviews will determine the relative importance of several factors (e.g., perceptions about constitutionality or the academic quality of the field) in obstructing development of a major. The results should also provide the AAR with insight into how to promote the study of religion in the absence of a major or a department.

Texas State University trains more public school teachers than any other university in Texas. The presence or absence of religious studies in its curriculum thus directly affects what prospective elementary and secondary teachers take into their future classrooms. Finally, the AAR still needs to attend to suspicion of religious studies, especially in the public university system of such a large and influential state as Texas.

Religious Studies in a Jesuit Context

Paul G. Crowley, SJ, Santa Clara University

Santa Clara, a Jesuit University in the heart of California’s Silicon Valley, is the oldest institution of higher learning in the State of California. Santa Clara is today a comprehensive master’s university with some 5,500 undergraduate students, most of whom are enrolled in the College of Arts and Sciences, the remainder in the Schools of Business and Engineering. As part of the Santa Clara Core Curriculum, all undergraduates take

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Do You Know Where Your Students Are? Tracking Undergraduate Religion Majors

Darby Kathleen Ray, Millsaps College



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and brain drain caused by such efforts; about the homogenizing and flattening of program types, expectations, and learning that can come about when we all march to the same drummer (or accreditation rubric, as the case may be); about the loss of risk-taking courses, teachers, scholars, and students.

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Whatever our attitude toward the assessment wave, we are inevitably in its wake. Even those who register dissent about its motivations or methods might still benefit from considering this question: How does the fact that our students studied religion as undergraduates inform their post-baccalaureate working and living? (e.g., Do they tend to pursue discipline-related work? Do they employ a “religious studies” knowledge base or set of methodological tools in their professional or personal lives? Do they pay special attention to or


enjoy an agility in interpreting or interrogating “religion” as it presents itself in the complexities of today’s world?)

I expect many of us would be interested to know this sort of thing about our students and, by extension, the long-term impact of our teaching. But are any of us actually asking the questions and considering the answers? What strategies of inquiry seem to work best, and what difference does the information make? My preliminary queries indicate that most departments track their majors (and minors, in some cases) only informally. We know what our graduates are doing because we bump into them at a homecoming football game or are asked to serve as references for them as they pursue a new trajectory. Often, and as a colleague at Wartburg College in Iowa notes, “it’s really more a matter of [students] keeping track of us than of our keeping track of them.” They send us the occasional e-mail, invite us to keep up with their blogs, send us a wedding invitation, or drop by our office when they pass through town.

Increasingly, and often under the impress of accrediting bodies, religion departments are developing more formal tools. Most often, these take the shape of exit interviews for graduating seniors and brief surveys for alums. Seattle Pacific University, for example, sends surveys to religion major alums at two years and five years after graduation, while in Minnesota, the College of Saint Benedict/Saint John’s University conducts a senior exit survey. An abiding concern in relation to such tools is the rate of response or overall number of responses, which can undermine the statistical significance of the data collected. On the whole, it appears that assessment practices that can yield meaningful longitudinal information about the religion major are relatively rare in our field at this time. Given the increased emphasis on assessment in higher education, however, this situation is bound to change. A key partner in the work of

tracking religion majors, says Chris Stanley of Saint Bonaventure University in New York, is an institution’s alumni office. When contact information for graduates is out of date or difficult to access, tracking one’s students becomes that much more arduous.

Based on my preliminary, unscientific review of the field, informal and formal strategies for keeping track of religion majors appear to produce similar conclusions. By and large, graduates of our programs have good feelings about the time they spent with us learning about religion; though they are not without complaint or constructive criticism, our alums feel like they were well served by their major. One trend many institutions report these days is an increase in double majors — students who major in religion because they’re genuinely interested in the subject matter but who also accrue a “safer” (i.e., more marketable) major. The choice of the nonreligion major seems to depend in large part on the particular strengths, programs, character, and priorities of individual departments. Not surprisingly, undergraduate religion majors do a variety of things after graduation. It appears that up to one-third of them pursue religion-specific vocations, most often in the church or the academy; and roughly another third work in a human services field (social work, Peace Corps, counseling, nonprofit work, etc.). The final third engage in a wide range of pursuits, from medicine and law to arts administration and exercise physiology.

The time is ripe for considerations of whether and how best to track our undergraduate religion majors. My initial inquiries revealed a surprisingly high level of interest in the topic among my colleagues around the nation, most often motivated by the recognition that traditional anecdotal methods may well need to be augmented by more systematic and thorough approaches. 

OUTCOMES. Assessment. Feedback loops. Like it or not, we in higher education have had to add these terms to our lexicon. Some of us are undaunted, even excited, by the new challenges and possibilities. We are genuinely curious to know how we’re doing: We know what we’re trying to teach, but what are our students actually learning? And what are they doing with that knowledge and skill set once they graduate? Are we preparing them well for their diverse postbaccalaureate lives in a complex, globalized world? We wager that answers to such questions will help us improve our teaching, our curriculum, and maybe even the reputation, vitality, and utility of our discipline. Others of us are not so sanguine. We worry about the time, energy,

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three courses in the department, one of the largest units in the university.

We find that we are a unique department among Catholic and even Jesuit universities.

The department strongly identifies itself as a “religious studies” department, and offers courses in areas broadly defined as Theology, Ethics and Spirituality; Scripture and Traditions; and Religion and Society. . . . Several faculty and their courses make use of the department’s own Local Religion Project, which connects local religious communities (Christian, Buddhist, Muslim, etc.) with academic projects in the classroom. In addition, faculty (and their courses) participate in various interdisciplinary programs on campus (Women & Gender Studies, Asian Studies, Catholic Studies, Ethnic Studies, Environmental Studies, the newly forming Islamic and Near Eastern


Studies, African Studies, etc.). And other departments, including Classics, History, English, and Political Science, offer some courses for the major. Finally, the department cooperates with the Bannan Institute and the Markkula Center for Applied Ethics in arranging for programming and cooperative efforts, including community-based learning and international immersion programs. . . .

While our program has proven successful, due in no small part to excellent teaching and scholarship, we are facing three challenges that are leading us to a review of the major: (1) a review of our departmental curriculum, including the “area” structure of the department, with a view toward deeper interdisciplinarity within the department; (2) an interest within the department to explore the shape and function of theological studies in relation to other approaches to religion; and (3) new Core Curriculum at Santa Clara, which will

emphasize assessment of learning outcomes more explicitly than the current system does.

Each of these challenges, in turn, will affect our major: (1) by stressing interdisciplinarity in a structured way; (2) by providing structures for focus and concentration within the major; and (3) by situating the major, or parts of it, within the Core Curriculum, and not alongside it. The portfolio in particular can be incorporated into new Core structures and receive a more rigorous and useful framing, especially for purposes of assessment.

The department will meet in early September for an all-day retreat to discuss item no. 2 above (the relation of theological to religious studies in the curriculum, including within the major). This departmental retreat will be followed by two meetings in fall quarter with representatives of interdisciplinary programs with which

our department interacts in order to discuss how reforms of our major curriculum might work in concert with their program objectives. By March 2008, the end of winter quarter, the department will produce a working model for the major based on these meetings, and on the completion of the department’s own curricular review and new Core requirements, particularly those regarding assessment of the goals of the major. This leaves much work to be done, particularly the coordination of our major with the new Core Curriculum, but this would establish a foundation from which to work. 

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make simplistic claims about outcomes. Our goal is to illuminate and critically analyze central questions about the meaning in human experience across the ages and around the world.

Kassam: I'm not much interested in quantifying excellence, although I realize that it is necessary to do so for administrative purposes. What interests me is what goes on in the classroom, as that is our first point of contact with students. We are lucky in that the study of religion in the academy continues to evolve and continues to surface the many complexities associated with the study of religion, which now is no longer just the study of "essences," if I might use that term. We have been so greatly enriched through appropriating multidisciplinary approaches to the study of religions, bringing in the wealth of fields such as anthropology, political science, cultural studies, economics, fine arts, theater, music, philosophy, gender studies, ethnic studies, linguistics, literature, media studies, and others. So, effectiveness in teaching the central ideas and skills pertaining to the study of religion all depends on what is done in the classroom, as a first indicator. Religious studies are by and large a service department that

trains far more students than it produces majors, so showing how many students actually take religious studies courses, and how well they do in those courses, is one way to measure whether students are even being exposed to the skills necessary to read religion, let alone master such skills. That said, I prefer to take the longer view. Is the study of religion being mainstreamed into the larger academy sufficient that every student, regardless of major, feels they must take at least one course in religious studies? How is religion being factored into the theorizing being done in other disciplines? Education about religion is so critical, more so today than ever before, so to me the best indicator of effective teaching about religion is when you have opinion makers in society who can talk intelligently about religion. I'm afraid I don't think we are there yet.

RSN: What do you think is the greatest strength about the way our field currently trains its undergraduates? What is the greatest weakness?

Chopp: Our greatest strength is the incredible expansion of our field and the sheer creativity of the scholarship over the last 30 years. We have expanded the number of religions studied and the

tools with which we study them. We have begun to embrace seriously the diverse experience of men and women within any one religious tradition. We have also embraced studying popular religion as well as official religion. The greatest difficulty is that we are still too nervous about engaging our students in theological reflection — in understanding how and why persons create meaning within a religious tradition. Many of the undergraduates I talk with wish faculty members would be more open to this kind of discussion in and outside of the classroom.


Low: As a field that uses several disciplines and modes of analysis in the examination of ideas, practices, and texts, we are a diverse community of scholars. The more diverse we become, the more we are vulnerable to merely describing differences, and not taking the time to analyze and make critical distinctions and evaluations. The susceptibility across many traditions to terrorism is a case in point. We need to be able to point out ways in which religion is a "problem."

Kassam: Our greatest strength — and concomitantly, our most vulnerable area — is and will continue to be our faculty. Creative and innovative ways in teaching students how to engage with, think about, study, understand, and explore religion and ways of being religious have the greatest impact on what a student takes away from perhaps just that one class in one's entire career as an undergraduate. No matter how small the institution, and how low the numbers of faculty teaching religious studies, the quality of the faculty member matters. We need continually to pay attention to faculty development. In addition, it is clear to me that educational institutions have to make a concerted effort to include religious studies as part of their curriculum, and the field as a whole needs to be strengthened in that area. I also think that the move to include a lived understanding of religion in addition to the traditional text-based curriculum is a move in an enriching direction, and we need much more of that, whether through the incorporation of films, site visits, ethnographic accounts, and so forth. What we need much more of are study abroad programs that will allow students to participate in, observe, discuss, debate, experience, and add to the complexity of the variety of understandings of religions. We need to work with the study abroad programs at our institutions to see if there are ways that the study of religion could be incorporated into their programs. A third area is the study of languages. To be able to read source texts or newspapers in their languages of production is so critical to understanding the nuances of what is going on.

RSN: Harvard University recently has been in the news for revamping its undergraduate core curriculum. How do you see the needs and nature of liberal education evolving? Is this a good thing?

Chopp: After spending five years in a residential liberal arts college, I think that this type of school (not only Colgate, but others as well) should be the model for all undergraduate education. What I have learned from faculty members and students at Colgate about the evolution of liberal arts is three-fold: 1) Creative thought can and must be married to integrative thought. The twenty-first century may be about disassembling information but is always and everywhere about recreating. Synthesizing will be as important as the specialization of knowledge which has dominated since the 1950s; 2) Technology shapes not only to whom we convey knowledge but how we manage and produce it; and 3) The liberal arts, according to tradition and contemporary aspirations, teach the obligation of being a citizen-leader in society. To educate for leadership, which seems to be the requirement of the liberal arts in the twenty-first century, means formation of skills, values, and habits as well as the mastering of critical, creative, and integrative thinking.

Low: The idea of liberal education has been evolving for centuries. The Harvard effort, which is still a work in progress, is a reminder both that we should resist a simplistic consumerism in undergraduate education, and that it is very difficult to get faculty to agree about anything. The educational principle of "In loco parentis" — which is very out favor — had some good things about it; one is that students should not be expected to know everything about what is good for them before they matriculate in college!

Kassam: Liberal education faces the challenge of striking a balance between traditional subjects and newer epistemologies that become increasingly relevant as societies change and new fields of analysis and knowledge open up. We need to bring the fields of religious studies and environmental studies to the attention of the intellectual community for, regardless of whether one is religious or concerned about global warming, one needs to understand the currency, the issues, and the ways in which each of these exercises significant power in creating and exacerbating the challenges of the 21st century and simultaneously, in providing the means to address them. 

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