

**Navigating Shaky Ground: An Environmental Survey of the Study of Religion in Canada**  
*Pre-Circulation Draft*

Chris Miller, Postdoctoral Fellow, University of Ottawa

The academic study of religion is in a precarious place, as evidenced by the reduction of full-time, tenured faculty and programs being combined with other disciplines (or eliminated entirely). The institutional landscape of Religious Studies impacts the work scholars produce, as these factors dictate the financial support one receives, expected teaching workload, and in which topics expertise is considered valuable. Institutional landscapes also have a ripple effect into the field's future, influencing where senior scholars spend their energy, where junior scholars seek employment, and how students are trained. Based on an environmental scan of Religious Studies at Canadian universities, this paper offers an overview of the field's current state. Overall, the present ecology of Religious Studies should encourage scholars to adopt a transdisciplinary approach, which can help justify the importance of studying religion to students, faculty, administrators, and other stakeholders.

In his history of Religious Studies in Canada, Aaron Hughes demonstrates that context shapes how institutions of higher education organize themselves and their subjects, and by extension, how religion is studied.<sup>1</sup> By focusing on Canadian universities, I recognize that this survey includes details which are irrelevant to scholars in other countries, and ignores factors that are crucial in other places. However, in addition to the importance of understanding the Canadian context on its own, connections between Canada and the United States make this survey useful to broader audiences. Although dominated by public universities, Canada also has a range of institutions (from large, research-intensive schools to small, liberal arts colleges) that exist in a range of contexts (large cities with several universities or small towns). Further, while it is perhaps a coincidence of shared timing, Canadian departments of Religious Studies spring

up around the 1960s and 1970s, roughly the same time this field, under this new name, was emerging south of the border.<sup>2</sup> To borrow Hughes' words, "while my data are region-specific, the conclusions drawn will, I trust, be of value to those working both inside and outside of Canada."<sup>3</sup>

## **Background**

Scholars of religion are no strangers to crises. There have been longstanding discussions on Religious Studies' current state or trajectory, addressing such issues as how to conceptualize religion, whether/how identity matters, or the field's name.<sup>4</sup> The focal point of discussions has ranged from the field writ large,<sup>5</sup> to scholars working on a specific topic,<sup>6</sup> or within a given association.<sup>7</sup> Often absent from such discussions is the role of teaching. To be sure, there have been many important dialogues about how scholars approach the task of teaching.<sup>8</sup> I am specifically referring to the structures that shape where, what, and how scholars teach. Since teaching constitutes anywhere from 40-100% of one's paid workload, providing necessary capital for survival, where scholars are located and what they are paid to study/teach is a crucial consideration.

In a handful of publications, scholars have turned their attention to institutional climate. Several scholars have published reflections on the (often tumultuous) history of a single department.<sup>9</sup> From the 1980s to 2000s, a series of state-of-the-art reviews detailed the history, size, and approach of departments across Canada.<sup>10</sup> A bulletin documenting active departments across the US was published semi-regularly for several years, but discontinued in 1994.<sup>11</sup> To deepen understanding of the material conditions that support and constrain scholars, this paper offers a contemporary glance at Religious Studies' institutional presence across Canada. Kathryn

McClymond argues: “the future of religious studies depends on our ability to recognize and adapt.”<sup>12</sup> Understanding the present terrain will allow scholars to recognize the shifts taking place and adapt more strategically.

In addition to exploring where programs exist and how big they are, this survey pays close attention to labels. That the world religions discourse reflects Western liberal Protestant ideals is well established. Scholars have also traced how sub-fields can promote a singular view of a religion.<sup>13</sup> With regards to teaching, Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst traces how job ads – by outlining requisite areas of expertise – shape understandings of Islam.<sup>14</sup> Given the power of naming and classification, how might we re-think what titles appear in course catalogues, or on students’ transcripts? Through the names of departments, courses they offer, and degrees they award, we shape perceptions of religion. What does it mean to study religion? To what other concepts or fields is religion related? What knowledge or skills would a graduate possess, and why might an employer care? These decisions will shape which departments survive, and therefore play a major role in determining the field’s future.

## **Method**

To conduct this environmental scan, I began by assembling a list of all universities in Canada, then determining a) if they housed a department dedicated to studying religion, and b) what that department was called.<sup>15</sup> I conducted this survey in Winter 2023, and relied on publicly-available data on university websites.<sup>16</sup> The next stage assessed the degrees and courses offered, again consulting department websites. The final stage explored the size and popularity of departments. I contacted faculty and administrators with two questions about their institution: a) how many students are enrolled in your undergraduate programs and b) what are your most

popular courses. After contacting 24 schools, I received responses from 14. This convenience sample only comprises a third of departments, but fortunately reflects a cross-section of Canada, including large and small departments from coast to coast.<sup>17</sup>

In analyzing this data, I acknowledge that I am not currently a faculty member in a Religious Studies department (RS hereafter). Although I have attended department meetings, have experience teaching in different institutions, and – as someone on the job market – have spent hours looking through department websites to discern how to make myself an appealing candidate, I am not privy to the complex inner workings of departments. Therefore, when I propose that  $x$  department should offer  $y$  program or course, I may underestimate the feasibility of that undertaking. However, relying on this outside understanding better represents the impression these departments convey. And after all, it is outsiders – students, administrators, other faculty – we must persuade about the utility of studying religion.

## **Departments**

Of the 68 public universities in Canada, 38 have a department that grants degrees for studying religion (see Table 1).<sup>18</sup> Unsurprisingly, over a quarter of departments are in Ontario (10), and over a fifth in Quebec (8).<sup>19</sup> That roughly half of all schools have RS programs speaks to the general state of the field: fairly well-represented, but not considered a core concern of the humanities and social sciences (in the vein of English or Philosophy).

Department titles reveal how religion and the field is understood. Is this a scientific endeavour? With what other topics or themes is religion related? The most common title is simply Religious Studies ( $n = 15$ ).<sup>20</sup> Deriving from the German *religionswissenschaft*, this term reflects the field's history, but more importantly, connotes a scientific endeavour. Regardless of

whether scholars apply a scientific approach to study religion, the title aims to signal that religion is a phenomenon which these departments study through non-confessional, objective approaches.

**Table 1.** *Schools in Canada that grant degrees in Religious Studies*

<b>Province</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>% of Schools in Province</b>	<b>Total # of RS Depts. in Canada</b>
			38
Ontario	10	45.45	
Quebec	8	72.73	
Nova Scotia	5	83.33	
Alberta	4	66.67	
Manitoba	3	75.00	
British Columbia	2	20.00	
New Brunswick	2	50.00	
Saskatchewan	2	100.00	
Newfoundland	1	100.00	
PEI	1	100.00	
Territories	0	0.00	

**Table 2.** *Titles of Departments in Canada that offer degrees in RS<sup>21</sup>*

<b>Department Title</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>Total # of RS Depts. in Canada</b>
			38
Religious Studies	15	39.47	
Religion & Culture	5	13.16	
Religion	4	10.53	
Sciences des religions	3	7.89	
Religion, Culture and Society	2	5.26	
Study of Religion	2	5.26	
Classics and Religious Studies	2	5.26	
History, Classics and Religion	1	2.63	
Religious Studies, Ethics and Philosophy	1	2.63	
Gender, Religion, and Critical Studies	1	2.63	
Humanities	1	2.63	
Centre d'études du religieux contemporain	1	2.63	

Several departments combine religion with other topics (see Table 2). This includes five departments of Religion and Culture (plus two Religion, Culture, and Society departments), two departments of Classics and Religious Studies (and one History, Classics and Religion department), and one department of Gender, Religion, and Critical Studies. Combining religion with Classics reflects practical considerations, as scholars who study ancient Greek and Roman contexts, or are trained in Greek, Latin, and Hebrew, have expertise in both areas. However, such departments often maintain distinctions between Classics and Religion, such as different course codes.

The most popular pairing – religion and culture – seemingly responds to declining interest in religion. Many students (or administrators, or the broader public) hear ‘Religious Studies’ and assume that department trains priests, rabbis, and monks. At best, people think religion is antiquated and not worth studying. Culture, on the other hand, has a broader appeal and houses a range of topics. Movies, Victorian novels, gender, AI; Cultural Studies covers all of these and more. This naming convention capitalizes on the fact that religion intersects with all aspects of culture. Departments may not even need to change their course offerings, but enjoy a greater pull on students’ interests.

Unfortunately, combined departments also reflect declining enrolments. Ottawa’s Department of Classics and Religious Studies marks a 1996 merger, while Classics and Religious Studies at Calgary is a more recent union.<sup>22</sup> The University of Alberta’s Department of History, Classics, and Religion results from a merger in 2020, as does Regina’s Gender, Religion, and Critical Studies Department. For programs with consistently low enrollments, amalgamation allows for “more effective deployment of staff resources.”<sup>23</sup> Mergers can help keep RS alive, but present numerous drawbacks. For instance, the field with which religion is

paired can influence how scholars or students approach religion.<sup>24</sup> By nature, combined departments also require less specialists in religion, meaning ultimately fewer opportunities for scholars of religion.

## **Degrees**

Of the 38 schools with RS Departments/Programs, nearly all offer a Minor in Religious Studies (n = 35) (see Table 3).<sup>25</sup> Most schools also offer a Major (n = 32). While requirements vary by school, a Major requires students to complete 10-18 courses, therefore requiring slightly more faculty support, and explaining why these are a little less common. A more advanced or focused degree is available at 25 schools. Admittedly, this category is somewhat muddy. Called a Specialization at some schools and Honours BA at others, there is wide variation in requirements. Broadly speaking though, these degrees require further courses, more upper-level courses, and/or a major research project. In other words, students explore religion in greater depth. In turn, these degrees require more faculty – to teach more courses or supervise theses – and so are slightly more rare. Overall however, both large and small departments offer this advanced degree option.

The name of the degree awarded generally matches the name of the department, meaning most schools grant a degree in Religious Studies (or some variation). A small number of schools also offer degrees in specialized sub-topics (n = 14) (see Table 4). The most common areas are Jewish Studies, Muslim or Islamic Studies, and Catholic Studies.<sup>26</sup> These options indicate a large, diverse faculty that can train students to become specialists in several distinct areas. Unsurprisingly, it is mostly the largest schools/departments that offer these options.<sup>27</sup>

**Table 3.** *Types of degrees awarded by Canadian RS departments*

<b>Schools that...</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>% of Schools with RS Depts</b>	<b>% of Schools in Canada</b>
have a Religious Studies Department/Program	38	100.00	55.88
offer Minor in RS	35	92.11	51.47
offer Minor in additional sub-areas (e.g., Jewish, Catholic, or Muslim Studies)	11	28.95	16.18
offer a Major in RS	32	84.21	47.06
offer Major in additional sub-areas (e.g., Jewish, Catholic, or Muslim Studies)	6	15.79	8.82
offer either a Specialization or Honour's BA in RS	25	65.79	36.76
offer a Certificate in RS	4	10.53	5.88
offer a MA in RS	20	52.63	29.41
offer a MA in additional sub-areas	5	13.16	7.35
offer a PhD in RS	14	36.84	20.59
offer a PhD in additional sub-areas	4	10.53	5.88

Three schools offer some flexibility in the title of a student's degree. Western University, for instance, awards a Major/Minor in 'World Religions and Cultures' or 'Religion and Society.' McMaster offers three options: 'Religion & Diversity,' 'Society, Culture & Religion,' or 'Health, Well-being & Religion.' Reflecting different approaches to studying religion, these options require slightly different compulsory courses. More importantly, these degrees represent different ways to outwardly signal why a student's knowledge about religion might be useful. These differences can matter greatly to students (and employers), but do not seem to require considerably greater resources. More customizable degree options may present one way that even smaller programs can attract interest.



**Table 4.** *Specialized degrees awarded by Canadian RS departments*

<b>Category</b>	<b>Sub Category</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>Total # of Schools</b>
Specialized Minor Degrees			11
	Jewish Studies	6	
	Muslim/Islamic Studies	4	
	Catholic Studies	3	
	Abrahamic Religion	1	
	African Studies	1	
	Asian Studies	1	
	Middle East and South Asian Studies	1	
	Christian Studies	1	
	Theology	1	
	Philosophy and Religion	1	
	Health, Well-being, and Religion	1	
	Religion and Society	1	
	Religion and Diversity	1	
Specialized Major Degrees*			6
	Jewish Studies	3	
	Catholic Studies	2	
	Muslim/Islamic Studies	2	
	Buddhist Studies	1	
	African Studies	1	
	Religion and Society	1	
Certificates			4
	Certificate in Religious Studies	2	
	Certificate in Religious Literacy	1	
	Certificate in Jewish and Christian Origins	1	
	Graduate Certificate in Religious Studies	1	

Finally, a few departments offer certificates (n = 4), which only require students to take several courses. The University of Saskatchewan’s Certificate in Religious Literacy offers a model other departments could adopt. Requiring fewer courses than a Minor, this certificate “equips students pursuing degrees in Law, Business, Healthcare, Social Services, Education, and

Public Policy with a working knowledge of the beliefs and practices within a variety of religious traditions.”<sup>28</sup> This certificate carefully frames the relevance of studying religion to students in other disciplines. Though currently rare, certificates may help garner interest in taking at least a handful of courses from RS departments.

### Current Enrollments

A department existing is one measure of the field’s health; how many students are enrolled is another matter. As noted, 14 schools shared their department’s numbers. These schools represent a cross-section of Canada, including schools with between 6-60,000 students, located across the country, in large and small cities. All provided numbers of current Majors/Minors, and some spoke to recent trends in their program. While mostly anecdotal, these comments offer a glimpse of the general climate across Canada.

**Table 5.** *Average Enrolment in RS Departments (based on data from 14 schools)*

Category	Mean	SD	Min	Max	N
Total Students in Department	53.14	62.06	4	256	14
# of Minors	27.54	30.52	1	118	13
# of Majors	23.71	28.70	2	117	14
# of Honours or Specialization	6.75	8.86	1	21	8

The total number of students pursuing any degree ranged from 4 to 256 (See Table 5).<sup>29</sup> The mean number of students was around 53. However, none save the largest department in the sample had over 70 students, and over half of the schools had fewer than 50. Overall, the number of Minors outnumber Majors, with a mean of 27.54 Minors and 23.71 Majors. Students pursuing ‘specialized’ degrees are especially rare, with a mean of only 6.75 students.

While these numbers are concerning, more troubling were sentiments shared by faculty. Many noted that numbers had declined in the last several years. Massive drops during the COVID-19 pandemic were partly to blame, but the decline often predated 2020. Notably, some shared that while less students were pursuing degrees, the number of students enrolled in classes remained steady, sometimes even rising. This suggests that RS is often a service department.<sup>30</sup> With low ratios of faculty to Majors, teaching is mostly geared towards students from other departments.

## **Courses**

Considering the number of schools in Canada, and the number of courses each department offers, I opted for an overview that groups courses into broad categories of similar topics or approaches. This list is not exhaustive, nor is it a checklist – suggesting the best schools *must* cover these bases. Rather, I hope these categories encourage reflection on what departments usually offer and where there is room for innovation.<sup>31</sup> Undergraduate courses are the field's entryway, and survival depends on making this entrance appealing.<sup>32</sup> In what follows, I highlight these common categories and the most popular courses from several schools.

The most ubiquitous category follows the World Religions model. This includes courses that cover 'all' world religions, those that divide Western from Eastern or 'Asian' religions, and ones built around a single tradition.<sup>33</sup> Despite longstanding criticisms of the world religions model, among the fourteen schools that shared their most popular courses, ten listed some variation of these. Often attracting several hundred students, intro courses of this size support a faculty member (or in many cases, the "cheap itinerant labor" of sessional faculty<sup>34</sup>), offset lower enrollment in upper-level courses, and provide roles for Teaching Assistants.<sup>35</sup> These courses

encapsulate a conundrum the field faces. Scholars largely agree that dividing data in this way perpetuates inaccurate assumptions about religion(s). However, high enrollments in these courses support a department's budget.<sup>36</sup> Another conundrum is that most students in these department-sustaining courses will not study religion beyond that semester. A good chunk of interaction with students is therefore not training them to become experts in this area, but providing some basic knowledge and supporting skills in reading, writing, and critical thinking.

A staple in many departments are courses that focus on topics in Christianity or Judaism, including history, languages, the Bible, or specific books/figures therein. Such courses were rarely listed among the most popular, but are offered nearly universally. Especially considering that multiple courses on other religious texts are nowhere near as common, these courses reflect the enduring impact of Christianity on the field.

Several schools offer what can be called standard approaches to religion. This includes topics like Material Religion or Religion and Ritual, as well as Anthropology or Psychology of Religion. Such courses were not as ubiquitous as I initially expected, nor did any school list these as especially popular. Notably however, at schools without a RS program, this is the primary way that religion appears, giving some idea of how non-specialists see the study of religion.

What I call thematic courses were frequently listed among a department's most popular offerings. With titles like 'Love,' 'Evil,' or 'Death,' these courses allow room to cover a range of traditions as well as explore how love, for instance, surfaces in a religion's history, texts, and rituals, or in the lives of contemporary practitioners. Building around topics that are relevant to religion, but not inherently *perceived* as religious may help combat the issue of disinterest.<sup>37</sup> Students may view religion as irrelevant, but are keen to explore death, nature, or yoga.

Another common category involves magic, the paranormal, or simply, weird stuff. These courses may cover traditional RS fare such as NRMs or esotericism, but also topics which do not immediately *seem* religious, like monster lore and conspiracy theories. Four schools listed these among their most popular courses, with one school offering two courses that each attract over 200 students. Capitalizing on fascination with the bizarre, this topic clearly has a wide appeal.<sup>38</sup>

Religion and popular culture is the final broad category that I discovered. In addition to the basic introductory 'Religion & Pop Culture' – which four schools listed among their most popular courses – some courses also focus on specific mediums or genres, such as TV, graphic novels, or Disney. These courses generally rely on the built-in appeal of pop culture, while sub-topics potentially increase the number of high enrollment courses departments can offer.

## **Discussion**

The data from Canada reveals that Religious Studies is unlikely to be a large department that trains specialists. Rather, the typical department has between three to ten faculty. While areas of expertise vary, the biggest classes – which sustain the department – cover Eastern, Western, or all the World Religions, as well as pop culture, the abnormal, or love, death, and evil. While a typical department has 20 students pursuing a Major and 30 pursuing Minors, the above courses can attract a couple hundred students each.

Navigating the field's future may require accepting that RS typically operates as a service department, and encourage greater attention to the courses offered and how these are presented. "University administrations distribute funds in correlation with figures that prove the efficiency of the unit,"<sup>39</sup> and as this survey demonstrates, several topics in particular consistently attract widespread interest. While survival requires meeting a quota of bums in seats, scholars can still

achieve their typical goals – prompting deep reflection and critical analysis to enhance understanding – by developing courses that simultaneously appeal to students pursuing electives, and the few students completing a Major or Minor. Based on the categories discussed above, I highlight a few such approaches below that might be helpful.

As noted, introductory courses following the World Religions model are generally popular. This is admittedly a tough reality to confront, considering that such courses “serve to further entrench troubling, outmoded, and inaccurate notions of ‘authentic’” religion(s).<sup>40</sup> There is the ability, however, to rely on these broad categories to garner interest, then deconstruct them in the classroom. By restricting these ‘World Religions’ courses to a specific region or topic, one can also sidestep or at least downplay any essentializing perceptions. Examples include Asian Religions in North America or Muslims in Canada. This model often already appeals to students, and by situating these traditions within regional contexts, scholars can destabilize the assumption that ‘Asian Religions’ have some universal essence. Additionally, a regional approach may appeal to students interested in studying that region’s history/culture, and creates opportunities for cross-listings with other departments.<sup>41</sup> Finally, these examples also give opportunities for students who are more invested in studying religion (and may have already taken ‘Asian Religions’) to advance their knowledge.

Building on this, I also wish to highlight courses that look at subsets of popular culture. By selecting a broadly appealing topic, instructors can ensure these courses maintain decent enrollments. However, courses like Jesus at the Movies or Religion and Culture in Bollywood Film simultaneously offer more advanced learning opportunities for RS Majors/Minors, who perhaps already took courses about Christianity or religion in India.

Another approach which may help ensure strong enrollments requires taking stock of one's institutional context, and the programs which are most popular/successful at a given school. For instance, Saint Mary's University, home to the Sobey School of Business, offers Neoliberalism and the God of the Market. Likewise, reflecting their respective Commerce and Public Policy programs, Queen's offers Religion and Business Ethics, while McGill offers Religion and Public Policy. Courses that explore the intersection of religion with a given topic (healthcare, economics, architecture) can better appeal to students pursuing those other degrees. Building connections with relevant departments, courses could potentially become cross-listed or even requirements of other degrees, further strengthening the survival of RS programs.

A final option that departments might pursue are offering certificates. As noted, these generally require students to take only a handful of RS courses, while they pursue degrees in other topics. Through their naming and the courses they comprise, these certificates can explicitly signal why knowledge about religion is useful. To ensure built-in interest, departments can develop certificates that specifically appeal to students from the most popular disciplines at their school.

If survival requires partnerships with larger disciplines, then fortunately, interdisciplinarity is central to the field's history.<sup>42</sup> Working in a field without a discipline, many scholars already adopt interdisciplinary approaches, and are likely already adept at navigating discussions with diverse conversation partners. This experience is already on display when teaching students whose interests are in other areas. These skills should also apply when working with stakeholders in the university. To support the field's survival, scholars must identify and express why religion is relevant to whatever areas these stakeholders *do* want to study, and broker arrangements with these units.

As one illustration, I draw on the experiences of Harold Coward, who wrote extensively on the history of RS in Canada, and founded the Centre for Studies in Religion and Society at the University of Victoria. This “community of academics” sponsors a variety of programs and encourages dialogue from specialists across disciplines.<sup>43</sup> Coward writes that interdisciplinary research requires that all team members “be willing to learn the technical terminology and methodology of their colleagues.”<sup>44</sup> The aim is for colleagues to integrate these new perspectives and eventually, to “‘see’ what the other ‘sees.’”<sup>45</sup> This is not dissimilar to what happens in RS classrooms; students from Psychology, Nursing, or Engineering bring these perspectives to a discussion about, say, religious headwear.

Since this already resembles how many approach teaching, I reference the Centre at UVic because it also requires considerable administrative work. As evidenced by siloed departments, universities do not naturally foster interdisciplinarity. Such initiatives require considerable (unpaid, thankless) labour from administrators, faculty, and students. Recognizing that managing relationships within just one department has challenges,<sup>46</sup> then forming ties to other faculties will likely present even greater challenges. However, by foregrounding an interdisciplinary approach of listening and cooperation, departments can build relationships that, at least from the perspective of Religious Studies, are necessary for survival.

Another crucial intervention to address the issues the field faces is greater dialogue about institutional contexts. As noted, there are a handful of publications in which scholars reflect on developments in their department. Such conversations also occasionally find space on conference panels, and of course, in conversations between colleagues. However, this lacks the kind of permanence and visibility which could help scholars become more adept institutional navigators. Being an effective administrator is yet another role for which faculty receive little to no training.



However, as McClymond writes: “blissful administrative ignorance is no longer viable; we must prepare religious studies professionals to enter, navigate, and assume leadership in institutional settings.”<sup>47</sup> There are many options for where this training can take place, whether it is seminars that departments offer to students directly, or initiatives that professional societies undertake. At the very least, we can foreground greater dialogue on the challenges and successes of managing a department.

## **Conclusion**

While Religious Studies is facing a series of challenges, it is worth noting that similar issues impact the humanities and social sciences more broadly.<sup>48</sup> Scholars and other observers have been sounding warnings for some time, and each new year seems to bring lower numbers and new challenges.<sup>49</sup> It is important to recognize this broader struggle, as confronting common issues also invites collaborating with other fields to find solutions.

The health of Religious Studies depends on scholars conducting innovative and insightful research about religion and its impact(s) across time and space. However, health also means ensuring that departments exist to employ scholars and train students. Addressing these issues requires scholars to reckon with the context of the modern university. David W. Atkinson offers the warning: “We cannot go backward. That the university is about practical education and wealth creation is not going to change. We know what students and their parents want – a good job – and we cannot blame them for gravitating towards disciplines where a job seems the natural outcome.”<sup>50</sup> As outlined here, strategic decisions for survival may require catering to students’ (and/or parents’) desires. Talking or teaching about religion in these ways may conflict with traditional ideals of a university education or what it means to study religion. However, the

writing on the wall is clear: such ideals are outdated and untenable in contemporary institutions of higher education. This would also not be the first time that scholars studying religion shifted focus based on changing priorities or sensibilities at the levels of society, government, or school administration.<sup>51</sup> Likewise, scholars must once again act in response to changing interests and demands.

## Notes

---

<sup>1</sup> Hughes, *From Seminary to University*.

<sup>2</sup> Hughes, *From Seminary to University*, ix-x.

<sup>3</sup> Hughes, *From Seminary to University*, 4.

<sup>4</sup> For a comprehensive reader of important works from a range of figures, see Elliott, *Reinventing Religious Studies*.

<sup>5</sup> See for example: Martin and Wiebe, "Religious Studies as a Scientific Discipline," and one of the several responses: Taves, "A Response to Martin and Wiebe."

<sup>6</sup> See for example: Hughes, "The Study of Islam Before and After September 11."

<sup>7</sup> See for example Ali and Serrano, "The Person of the Author"; Tweed, "Valuing the Study of Religion."

<sup>8</sup> See for example Sutcliffe, "The Problem of 'Religions'"; Baldrick-Morrone, Graziano, and Stoddard, "'Not a Task for Amateurs'"; Ramey, "The Critical Embrace."

<sup>9</sup> Most notable is a 1995 issue of *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion* that published case studies from various departments.

<sup>10</sup> A total of 6 volumes were published, with one each for Alberta, Ontario, British Columbia, and Quebec, and then combined volumes for Manitoba and Saskatchewan, and the Maritime provinces.

<sup>11</sup> Remus, "For Such a Time as This," 16.

<sup>12</sup> McClymond, "Future of Religious Studies," 107.

<sup>13</sup> See for example Morgenstein Fuerst, "Job Ads Don't Add Up"; Hughes, *The Study of Judaism*; Davidsen, "What is Wrong with Pagan Studies?"

<sup>14</sup> Morgenstein Fuerst, "Job Ads Don't Add Up," 918.

<sup>15</sup> This survey was confined to public universities, excluding, for example, Trinity Western University in British Columbia and Tyndale University in Ontario. I also excluded departments solely geared toward Theology. Acadia University, for instance, has a School of Theology, but not a Religious Studies department. This way may exclude scholars whose research would fit within traditional definitions of Religious Studies. While the line separating theological from 'secular' approaches to studying religion has always been blurry (Hughes, *From Seminary to University*, 3-4), my approach defers to the outward positioning of an institution, which in these cases, is geared towards training students for roles within religious communities.

<sup>16</sup> Collecting the data this way means information is subject to inaccuracy (e.g., websites being out of date). However, this also reflects what students see when deciding what degree/courses to pursue.

<sup>17</sup> I received responses from the following schools: University of Alberta, University of Calgary, University of British Columbia, University of Victoria, University of Manitoba, Memorial University of Newfoundland, Cape Breton University, Dalhousie University, Saint Mary's University, McMaster University, Queen's University, University of Toronto, University of Waterloo, and York University. I wish to thank the faculty and administrators at these institutions for their assistance.

<sup>18</sup> Some schools, such as York University, do not technically have a dedicated Religious Studies department. Rather, through their Department of Humanities, students can major in and earn a degree in Religious Studies. Since they award a named degree in the field, such schools are included in this survey.

---

<sup>19</sup> By comparison, smaller provinces have one or two schools with RS departments. This dispersal reflects the longer history of post-secondary education in these provinces (Hughes, *From Seminary to University*) and concentration of Canada's population (Statistics Canada, "Canada's Population Clock").

<sup>20</sup> Additionally, two schools use the name 'Study of Religion,' and three francophone schools use Sciences des religions (which translates to Religious Studies).

<sup>21</sup> In order to create more coherent categories of similar titles, slight changes were made to some departments. Please note that 2 of the schools grouped as "Religion & Culture" are actually titled "Religions and Cultures" (pluralized). Of the two schools grouped as Study of Religion, one of these is officially titled the "Department for the Study of Religion" (U of T), while the other is titled the "Program in the Study of Religion" (UBC). Finally, of the 2 schools grouped as "Religion, Culture and Society," one of these is titled "Religion, Society and Culture."

<sup>22</sup> Coward, *Fifty Years of Religious Studies in Canada*, 207; Hughes, *From Seminary to University*, 177.

<sup>23</sup> Lachacz, "Faculty of Arts Releases Ten Scenarios for Departmental Restructuring."

<sup>24</sup> Neumaier Dargyay, "The Department of Religious Studies at the University of Alberta," 344.

<sup>25</sup> The three schools that have a RS Department, but do not award a Minor are St. Francis Xavier University, Université du Québec à Montréal, and Université du Québec à Chicoutimi. The first two offer degrees higher than a Minor, while UQAC only offers an 'Undergraduate Short Program in Ritual and Symbolic Intervention.'

<sup>26</sup> A handful of other degrees similarly focus on specific traditions/contexts, including Buddhist, Asian, or African Studies.

<sup>27</sup> Indeed, the schools that offer degrees in specific sub-topics are an indication of Canada's more robust departments. While some smaller schools grace this list, it also includes McMaster, McGill, Concordia, and U of T, which are among the largest RS departments in Canada.

<sup>28</sup> University of Saskatchewan, "Religious Literacy."

<sup>29</sup> This high variation is expected, considering the ranges in school size.

<sup>30</sup> As Nefsky suggests, this arrangement with a small number of majors but many enrolled in courses has always been fairly standard for Religious Studies (Nefsky, "The Rise and Fall of Religious Studies," 330).

<sup>31</sup> I also want to acknowledge the work that goes into creating and developing courses. My review is based on publicly-available course catalogues, which typically fail to mention the instructor who teaches (or created) a course. While encouraging others to draw inspiration from the ideas presented here, I admit some uneasiness with building on the uncredited ideas of others. If anything, this highlights the need for greater discussion around teaching, creating a culture where scholars can credit each other.

<sup>32</sup> To extend the metaphor, a really good entryway might inspire curiosity to explore the rooms off the front hall, or in this case, encourage students to pursue Minors/Majors.

<sup>33</sup> One variation of such courses I wish to briefly highlight are those which focus on nonreligion (atheists, agnostics, and the spiritual but not religious). Such courses partly reflect the World Religions paradigm (simply adding another 'tradition'), but may appeal to students who are increasingly less likely to identify as religious.

<sup>34</sup> McCutcheon, "Late Capitalism Arrives on Campus," 205.

<sup>35</sup> Revealing further ways that undergraduate teaching has cyclical effects on the overall health of the field, these TA roles are often a considerable portion of the funding that graduate students receive.

<sup>36</sup> Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions*, 9.

<sup>37</sup> The three topics listed above are seemingly staples, offered by many departments. Other courses adopt this approach, but use themes including sports, sex, food, the environment, yoga, myths, and childhood, to name a few.

<sup>38</sup> It is important to note that these courses partly attract interest by capitalizing on the cultural fascination with 'cults.' This parallels the situation in Islamic Studies, where "ignorance, paranoia, and...global politics" offer a "boon, however troubling," to that field (Morgenstein Fuerst, "Job Ads Don't Add Up," 922).

<sup>39</sup> Neumaier Dargyay, "The Department of Religious Studies at the University of Alberta," 348.

<sup>40</sup> Morgenstein Fuerst, "Job Ads Don't Add Up," 916.

<sup>41</sup> An even narrower application of this approach includes Celtic Christianity or Celtic Paganism (at St. Francis Xavier University) and Doukhobor Culture in Canada (at the University of Saskatchewan). Focusing on the surrounding locale, such courses offer opportunities to visit local sites and engage with community members, making possible a range of more diverse learning experiences.

<sup>42</sup> Coward, "Taking Its Interdisciplinary Heritage Seriously," 404.

<sup>43</sup> University of Victoria, "Centre for Studies in Religion and Society."

<sup>44</sup> Coward, *Fifty Years of Religious Studies in Canada*, 181.

<sup>45</sup> Coward, "Taking Its Interdisciplinary Heritage Seriously," 405.

---

<sup>46</sup> See for example the reflections shared in Neumaier-Dargyay, “Department of Religious Studies at Alberta”; Wiebe, “Alive, But Only Barely”; Nefsky, “Rise and Fall at Lethbridge”; Lease, “Rise and Fall of Religious Studies at Santa Cruz.”

<sup>47</sup> McClymond, “Future of Religious Studies,” 110.

<sup>48</sup> Atkinson, “Humanities and Religious Studies.”

<sup>49</sup> As far back as 1978, the Council on the Study of Religion convened a conference to discuss, among other topics, how Religious Studies might navigate environmental challenges facing the field (Capps, “Impressions from Wingspread.” For contemporary discussions on the humanities more broadly, see for example: Stover, “There is No Case for the Humanities”; Schmidt, “The Humanities Are in Crisis”; Berezow, “Humanities Enrolment is in Free Fall.”

<sup>50</sup> Atkinson, “Humanities and Religious Studies,” 110.

<sup>51</sup> Hughes notes, for instance, that during the 1960s, changes in Canadian society shifted “what could and could not be funded by federal dollars,” making it “inevitable that how, where, and by whom religion was studied would change” (Hughes, *From Seminary to University*, 155).

## Works Cited

Ali, Kecia, and Lolo Serrano. 2022. “The Person of the Author: Constructing Gendered Scholars in Religious Studies Book Reviews.” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 90, no. 3:554-578. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jaarel/lfac047>.

Atkinson, David W. 2020. “Humanities and Religious Studies: Reflections on the Future.” *Religious Studies and Theology* 39, no. 1: 106-120. <https://doi.org/10.1558/rsth.40944>.

Badertscher, John M., Gordon Harland, and Roland E. Miller. 1993. *Religious Studies in Manitoba and Saskatchewan: A State-of-the-Art Review*. Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press.

Baldrick-Morrone, Tara, Michael Graziano, and Brad Stoddard. 2016. “‘Not a Task for Amateurs’: Graduate Instructors and Critical Theory in a World Religions Classroom.” In *After World Religions: Reconstructing Religious Studies*, edited by Christopher R. Cotter and David G. Robertson, 37-47. New York: Routledge.

Berezow, Alex. 2018. “Humanities Enrolment is in Free Fall.” *American Council on Science and Health*, July 31, 2018. <https://www.acsh.org/news/2018/07/31/humanities-enrollment-free-fall-13243/>.

Bowlby, Paul W.R. 2001. *Religious Studies in Atlantic Canada: A State-of-the-Art Review*. Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press.

Capps, Walter H. 2013. “Impressions from Wingspread: Religious Studies – The State of the Art.” In *Reinventing Religious Studies: Key Writings in the History of a Discipline*, edited by Scott S. Elliott, 43-45. New York: Routledge.

Coward, Harold. 2006. “Taking Its Interdisciplinary Heritage Seriously: The Future of Religious Studies in Canada.” *Studies in Religion/Sciences Religieuses* 35, nos. 3-4: 403-412. <https://doi.org/10.1177/000842980603500303>.

---

Coward, Harold. 2014. *Fifty Years of Religious Studies in Canada: A Personal Retrospective*. Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press.

Davidson, Markus Altena. 2012. "What is Wrong with Pagan Studies?" *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 24, no. 2 (January): 183-199. <https://doi.org/10.1163/157006812X634881>.

Elliott, Scott S. ed. 2013. *Reinventing Religious Studies: Key Writings in the History of a Discipline*. New York: Routledge.

Feltmate, D. 2019. "Towards a Theoretical Agenda in Religion and Popular Culture Studies." Conference presentation at American Academy of Religion. Religion and Popular Culture Unit. San Diego, CA. November 24.

Fraser, Brian J. 1995. *The Study of Religion in British Columbia: A State-of-the-Art Review*. Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press.

Hughes, Aaron W. 2020. *From Seminary to University: An Institutional History of the Study of Religion in Canada*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

Hughes, Aaron W. 2012. "The Study of Islam Before and After September 11: A Provocation." *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 24, nos. 4-5: 314-336. <https://doi.org/10.1163/15700682-12341234>.

Hughes, Aaron W. 2013. *The Study of Judaism: Authenticity, Identity, Scholarship*. Albany: State University of New York Press.

Lachacz, Adam. 2020. "Faculty of Arts Releases Ten Scenarios for Departmental Restructuring." *The Gateway*, October 22, 2020. <https://thegatewayonline.ca/2020/10/faculty-of-arts-releases-ten-scenarios-for-departmental-restructuring/>.

Lease, Gary. 1995. "The Rise and Fall of Religious Studies at Santa Cruz: A Case Study in Pathology, or the Rest of the Story." *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 7, no. 4: 305-324. <https://doi.org/10.1163/157006895X00117>.

Martin, Luther H., and Donald Wiebe. 2012. "Religious Studies as a Scientific Discipline: The Persistence of a Delusion." *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 80, no. 3: 587-597. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jaarel/lfs030>.

Masuzawa, Tomoko. 2005. *The Invention of World Religions: Or, How European Universalism Was Preserved in the Language of Pluralism*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

McClymond, Kathryn. 2020. "Future of Religious Studies." *Religion* 50, no. 1: 106-112. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0048721X.2019.1681121>.

---

McCutcheon, Russell. 2013. "Late Capitalism Arrives on Campus: Making and Remaking the Study of Religion." In *Reinventing Religious Studies: Key Writings in the History of a Discipline*, edited by Scott S. Elliott, 199-209. New York: Routledge.

Morgenstein Fuerst, Ilyse. 2020. "Job Ads Don't Add Up: Arabic + Middle East + Texts ≠ Islam." *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 88, no. 4 (December): 915-946. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jaarel/lfaa058>.

Nefsky, Marilyn. 1995. "The Rise and Fall of Religious Studies at the University of Lethbridge." *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 7, no. 4: 325-339. <https://doi.org/10.1163/157006895X00126>.

Neufeldt, Ronald. 1983. *Religious Studies in Alberta: A State-of-the-Art Review*. Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press.

Neumaier-Dargyay. 1995. "The Department of Religious Studies at the University of Alberta." *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 7, no. 4: 341-349. <https://doi.org/10.1163/157006895X00135>.

Ramey, Steven W. 2016. "The Critical Embrace: Teaching the World Religions Paradigm as Data." In *After World Religions: Reconstructing Religious Studies*, edited by Christopher R. Cotter and David G. Robertson, 48-60. New York: Routledge.

Remus, Harold. 2013. "For Such a Time as This: The Council of Societies for the Study of Religion, 1969-2009." In *Reinventing Religious Studies: Key Writings in the History of a Discipline*, edited by Scott S. Elliott, 1-30. New York: Routledge.

Remus, Harold, Daniel Fraikin, and William Closson James. 1992. *Religious Studies in Ontario: A State-of-the-Art Review*. Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press.

Rousseau, Louis, and Michel Despland. 1988. *Les Sciences Religieuses au Quebec Depuis 1972*. Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press.

Schmidt, Benjamin. 2018. "The Humanities Are in Crisis." *The Atlantic*, August 23, 2018. <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2018/08/the-humanities-face-a-crisis-of-confidence/567565/>.

Smith, Jonathan Z. 1995. "Afterword: Religious Studies: Whither (Wither) and Why?" *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 7, no. 4: 407-414. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23549677>.

Statistics Canada, n.d. "Canada's Population Clock (Real-Time Model)." *Statistics Canada*, accessed August 6, 2023. <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/71-607-x/71-607-x2018005-eng.htm>.

Stover, Justin. 2017. "There is No Case for the Humanities." *American Affairs* 1, no. 4: 210-224. <https://americanaffairsjournal.org/2017/11/no-case-humanities/>.

---

Sutcliffe, Steven J. 2016. "The Problem of 'Religions': Teaching Against the Grain with 'New Age Stuff.'" In *After World Religions: Reconstructing Religious Studies*, edited by Christopher R. Cotter and David G. Robertson, 23-36. New York: Routledge.

Taves, Ann. 2012. "A Response to Martin and Wiebe." *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 80, no. 3: 601-604. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jaarel/lfs032>.

Tweed, Thomas A. 2016. "Valuing the Study of Religion: Improving Difficult Dialogues Within and Beyond the AAR's 'Big Tent.'" *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 84, no. 2: 287-322. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jaarel/lfw019>.

University of Saskatchewan, n.d. "Religious Literacy." *University of Saskatchewan*, accessed August 2, 2023. <https://programs.usask.ca/arts-and-science/religious-literacy/index.php>.

University of Victoria, n.d. "Centre for Studies in Religion and Society." *University of Victoria*, accessed August 23, 2023. <https://www.uvic.ca/research/centres/csrs/about/index.php>.

Wiebe, Donald. 1995. "Alive, But Only Barely: Graduate Studies in Religion at the University of Toronto." *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion* 7, no. 4: 351-381. <https://doi.org/10.1163/157006895X00144>.