

Religious Studies is not Natural

or,

Climate Changes for the “Critical” Study of “Religion”

Has the institutional climate for religious studies changed significantly in the past fifty years? Speaking metaphorically—of course—can we point to a process of “anthropogenic climate change” in institutions of higher education that has affected our habitats as scholars and students of religion? I fear pressing this metaphor to the breaking point, but, I press on. Have observable changes, noticeable if we just “look up,” resulted in institutional climates that are considerably less hospitable for us? Should religious studies be placed on the endangered species list? Are we—or are we not—encountering a puzzling hyperobject which is actually the death of our field?

How you answer these questions will doubtless depend on your own personal experience. For me, after twenty-two years of teaching undergraduates at a small private four year college in rural Appalachia, I would suggest that the answers to all of them just *might* be: *yes*. But of course, from the perspective of the individual ant, about to be stepped on, naturally the whole world appears to be ending. Maybe it’s not so bad. Maybe it’s just me. Nevertheless, my perspective and experience at my institution are all I really have to go on.¹

The very short version of the history of the study of religion at my institution is that we have lost almost all our faculty capacity in the past fifty years. From 1968 to 1982 we had seven

1. Since 2002 I have worked at Mars Hill University, formerly Mars Hill College (until 2013), located in Mars Hill, North Carolina. For an introduction see the page “About - Mars Hill University” at our university website at <https://www.mhu.edu/about/>

tenured or tenure track professors in Religion and Philosophy, most of whom were full Professors who had been at the institution for more than a decade.² Into the 1990s our staffing remained at six full time faculty.³ Then, from 1994 until 2002, when I joined the faculty, attrition through retirement and churn had reduced the number of full time Religion and Philosophy faculty to three persons.⁴

Twenty two academic years later, today, in the 2023–2024 catalog, only one full-time faculty person is listed (me). However, as the new Dean of General Education at my institution I have a reduced teaching load and actually count as the equivalent of only one half of a full-time faculty person (0.5 FTE)—also as a Dean I lose my vote on the faculty. Whereas Religion and Philosophy once had a substantial voting bloc in faculty decision making at my institution, now it has only a bully pulpit.

This reduction from seven to one-half faculty represents a greater than 93% reduction in my institution’s teaching capacity for religious studies. Our program still offers 9 courses a term (equivalent to 2.25 FTE)—and on average these are comparably well-enrolled courses at our school—but 78% of them are taught by a mix of adjuncts and university staff.

2. There was minimal turnover in the department during that period. But 1977-1978 was an exemplary year, in which we had five full Professors, one Associate, and one Assistant; see *Emphasis* 7:2 (June 1977) pp. 89–95.

3. In the 1987–1988 catalog, there were six faculty, all full Professors. But one was the Provost, so he probably didn’t actually teach. That was Donald D. Schmeltekopf, a 1975 Ph.D. from Drew. He was hired as Provost and held Professor rank in the department. See *Emphasis* 17:2 (July 1987). In 1993–1994, a long time part-time instructor was moved to full time, becoming the first woman hired in the department, Katherine R. Meacham. That brought the number back up to seven faculty. See *Mars Hill College 1993-1994 Catalog* 23 (Aug 1993).

4. Page Lee retired in 1994, leaving six. Bob Melvin retired in 1997, leaving five. Ellison Jenkins retired in 1999, leaving four. Briefly, Barry Jones joined the faculty as an Assistant in 1997, bringing the staff back up to five. The classicist Kendall retired in this period (my notes are unclear on this), again leaving four. Jones left in 2000, was replaced by Kenneth Hutchins for one year, after which Hutchins left, being replaced by Marc Mullinax in 2001. Leininger and Sawyer both retired in 2002, reducing four to two. I was then hired, making three: Meacham (chair), Mullinax, and Baldwin.

The remainder of this essay can be seen as an attempt to make sense of this data—these institutional realities. How has this situation come about? What do they mean for religious studies at my institution? And what do they mean for the species of religious studies in general?

Religious Studies is not Natural

In search of answers, I begin from the premise that—whether it is viewed as a field, a discipline, or a domain of knowledge—there is nothing natural or inevitable about “Religious Studies.” The existence of “the academic study of religion” is an entirely contingent fact. Academic “scholars of religion” just happen to exist, inhabiting departments of “Religion,” “Comparative Religion,” “Religion and Philosophy,” or “Religious Studies.” The fact that we have certification as professional academics in the form of graduate training as “masters of divinity,” or “masters of arts,” or “masters of theological studies,” or “doctors of philosophy,” and so on, this too is a matter of history, not of nature. Our employment by institutions of higher education, our labor as professors teaching undergraduates and graduate students, our work as researchers, writers, and public communicators, all of this could be otherwise than it is. Our existence is *historical* in the academically old-fashioned Germanic sense of the term.

Why is this important to specify? I specify my premises because we are referring here to the contexts of our praxis by the term “ecologies”—the plural “ecologies” is clearly an essential and deliberate choice—and such terminology could be mistaken for an attempt to conceal the social construction of our realities. When we speak about the “research environment,” or, as in this section, the “institutional climate” of religious studies, we are using terminology drawn, figuratively, from the domain of environmental science, environmental studies, or ecology. Those are so-called “natural sciences”—I must ask you to leave aside the humanistic critiques of the idea “nature” for a moment—where the object of the work is to develop theoretical models for objects of study that arguably exist apart from human activity and emerge by necessity from non-human,

non-sentient contingencies: the order of things, the particular world, nature, reality. But pretty clearly “religious studies” belongs to the culture of human beings, and is therefore emergent in an entirely accidental and contingent fashion.

Furthermore “the study of religion” is not even close to being a universal feature of “the human being,” such that “religious studies” might be seen as a primary category in anthropology, the science of the human. Education itself *might* have such categorical standing in sociology or anthropology, as it describes social formative practices that are closer to universal, but certainly not “religious studies.” Instead, our “field” has to be seen for what it is: a recent socio-cultural phenomenon that, considered relative to the probable evolutionary history of our species, amounts to a mere blip in the history of the human being.

Again using analogical language drawn from the biological sciences, let us consider “religious studies” as example species. I am using the plural word species here because there are multiple kinds of “religious studies,” and it would be especially unfortunate for our figurative use of the term “climate” if we understood the term “studies” in the singular. We can speak as ecologists of the evolution of the species, tracing their forms within particular realms formed by specific cultural-historical strands of the human being (institutions primarily). These forms are sometimes referred to casually (and extremely problematically) as belonging to “Western Civilization” whereas I would prefer to name them as emerging from a socio-cultural legacy that emerged mostly in Europe but has proliferated globally at this point. That legacy had its beginnings in the trade, migration and a multi-national project of colonizing expansion of a number of European powers beginning even before the dawn of so-called “modernity.” It is worth noting that these powers were peoples among whom, until recently, institutions associated with Christian traditions were dominant. In any case, European-led Colonialism projected certain cultural and institutional forms and assumptions around the world, many of which have proven to be extremely durable and adaptable in their local settings. They set in motion a process which has issued in the postcolonial complexity of our present world’s hundreds of nationalist

governments, and its global technological-financial system marked by phenomena such as “Americanization” and the wide influence if not dominance of English language in international trade and commerce (aka “Globalization”). In this “global ecology” we can also notice locally the often violent postcolonial and nationalist aftershocks of peoples wrestling to find, as the title of a recent book on Indonesian Papua memorably describes it, “Freedom in Entangled Worlds.”⁵

So, Universities are one of the socially constructed realities that are observable in this globalized world. They are not inevitable or natural. And neither are the compositions of their faculty. Considered among the varieties of such faculty species, academic “Religious Studies” are relatively young. Such studies first emerged in Colleges and Universities in Europe and America during the last, dying stages of European colonial expansion, in the late-19th century. F. Max Müller’s *Introduction to the Science of Religion* was published in 1873. His position in university life was that of a *Philologist*.

As a mythic emblem of the emergence of “religious studies,” people often point with ominous significance to the simultaneous display of late-colonialist triumphalism and pluralistic anthropological theorizing of the human that was evident at the Parliament of World’s Religion, held in Chicago during the World’s Columbian Exposition of 1893.⁶ By that point, in European universities religious studies were already emergent. They drew on a complex discursive heritage in their formation. We can point to the influence of philology, of course, but also to the nascent anthropological field-work that was being undertaken among colonized peoples. We must point

5. Eben Kirksey, *Freedom in Entangled Worlds: West Papua and the Architecture of Global Power* (Duke University Press, 2012).

6. For an accessible treatment of the facts on the ground, see Wikipedia Contributors, “World’s Columbian Exposition,” (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/World%27s_Columbian_Exposition) and “Parliament of the World’s Religions,” (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Parliament_of_the_World%27s_Religions) on *Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia* (accessed October 28th, 2023). For the classic “critical religious studies” treatment of this subject see Tomoko Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions, or, How European Universalism Was Preserved in the Language of Pluralism* (University of Chicago Press, 2005).

as well to the influence of archaeological, historical, philological and linguistic research into Greek, Roman, Egyptian, Ancient Near Eastern, and Indo-European societies (again, made possible in part by colonialism). We should name the emergence of critical studies of Christian sacred texts, aka “the Bible,” which became increasingly well informed by the aforementioned sciences as well as by modern philosophy, enlightenment rationalism, deist theology, and scientific naturalism. And finally, as a grab bag of influences, we must name the volatile and complicated vortex of what I would term “religious discourses” that was being created by academic theologians, popular writers and speakers, metaphysical and spiritualist speculation and experimentation, the creative and reactive writings of priests, preachers, and lay people. Lastly we should point to the influence of the emergence of professional and institutional graduate-level training for clergy and teachers, particularly among Christians, but also among Jews. That “religious studies” are *species*, plural, is doubtless the case, since the departments and programs which loosely can be classified as representing “religious studies” emerged out of the diverse institutional contexts where the aforementioned patterns of study and teaching were taking place.

It is simply a mistake to imagine that humans began by noticing *something* (some one thing) that they all properly identified as *religion*, and then set out to *understand it*. As if religion were like *Sauerstoff* or the microbiome. “Religion” is not a category that emerges naturally from readily available empirical data.⁷ It is rather that humans are doing and saying a variety of diverse and interesting things, and scholars are studying these variety of things for various reasons. Arguably most of the scholars are institutionally or socially embedded in institutions that are

7. This has been said in a famous line by J. Z. Smith; it is such a famous saying I don’t need to quote it again here. A less well-known line comes from Gary Lease: “[t]here cannot be a ‘history of religion’ for the simple reason that there is no religion; rather, such a history can only trace how and why a culture or epoch allows certain experiences to count as ‘religion’ while excluding others.” Gary Lease, “The History of ‘Religious’ Consciousness and the Diffusion of Culture: Strategies for Surviving Dissolution,” *Historical Reflections / Réflexions Historiques* 20:3 (1994) 453–473; quote from 472.

caught up in social-formative practices (the management of empire, the organization of territories, the training of clergy, the education of children, definition of social and political history, defense and critique of ideological orders, theorization of consciousness, contestation of ethical systems). These practices at some point began to organize themselves around a diffuse, quite loosely and ill-defined category; and through this process a set of species of “religious studies” was born. It wasn’t until the 1960s that departments of religious studies, so named, began to be formed in European and American colleges and universities. Prior to that time religious studies was sometimes going on in departments of Bible, sometimes in Classics, sometimes in Literature and Philology, or Psychology, or Sociology, or History, and so on. All of those disciplinary species—while also not “natural” in any sense of the word—are nevertheless older than “religious studies.”

In all of this I actually find myself bothered by the phrase “Institutional Climate,” insofar as it appears to be singular. My institution is not like your institution. The socio-cultural history of my institution sets our particular climate apart from yours, as a micro-climate if you will. However, it should be seen that even among diverse micro-climates there are broad patterns. It’s possible to learn from one another. We can speak of a “climatology” of higher education; we can speak as well of directional “climate change,” “anthropogenic,” of course, because we are talking about human institutions. In point of fact, the larger “climate” for higher education and the local “micro-climates” where we actually work are being impacted by larger forces that are centripetal in direction. Just as “the world” in all its variegation of culture and diversity has nevertheless faced relentless centripetal forces such as “Americanization” and “globalization,” so also “academia” faces a variety of regulatory and cultural forces that are affecting diverse institutions in very similar ways. Macro-environmental effects need to be considered.

The larger climate-context of American colleges and universities includes large scale economic and political realities that are in some senses actually global in scale. Think about the global revival of nationalist political movement in just the last ten years.⁸ These forces have been affecting the climates of universities and colleges world-wide and close to home.

For North Americans, the macro-climate also includes more local political and institutional forces such as accreditation and the culture of outcomes assessment that are pushing our institutions in common directions. It includes our national cultural trends that are ideological and economic. All these forces are perhaps pushing us towards a common fate.

Perhaps they could even be pushing us towards eventual extinction, at least in some micro-climates. (This remains to be seen, but I have already presented the troubling data for my situation. What is the data for yours?) When we begin to use the figurative language of “ecology” and “climate” and “species,” the term “extinction” is lurking there, a mere semantic resonance until someone actually names the existential threat. No doubt such language will come across as alarmist to some. Others may be more sympathetic, particularly those who have lived through the dissolution of their programs of study while finding ways to hang on to their identity as scholars of religion.⁹

8. In some circles this phenomenon is being referred to as a global “neo-nationalist movement” referring to trends that began to emerge in the 2010s. The literature on the movement is quite vast. For an overview, see Wikipedia Contributors, “Neo-Nationalism,” *Wikipedia the Free Encyclopedia* [Website] <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Neo-nationalism> (accessed 10/29/23).

9. The work of Gary Lease on institutional realities racing “religious studies” should be required reading for all administrators and critical scholars of religion. I am referring particularly to the aforementioned Lease, “The History of ‘Religious’ Consciousness and the Diffusion of Culture: Strategies for Surviving Dissolution.” See also Lease, ed., Special Issue: Pathologies in the Academic Study of Religion: North American Institutional Case Studies, *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 7:4 (1995), and in that volume, the “Foreword” by Lease (299–304), his own case study of Santa Cruz, “The Rise and Fall of Religious Studies at Santa Cruz: A Case Study in Pathology, or ‘the rest of the story’” (305–324). Also in that volume, Jonathan Z. Smith, “Afterword: Religious Studies Whither (wither) and Why?” (407–414). For a retrospective interpretive essay which deals in part with Lease’s and Smith’s work in these *MTSR* pieces see Russell T. McCutcheon, “Religious Studies: Wither and Why?” forthcoming in *Religious Studies Review* (2024). McCutcheon was a co-editor of *MTSR* in the period in question.

To address the question of “climate change” for “religious studies” species I propose to conduct three layers of analysis.

The first will be to look at the present 21st century context of one particular national setting for “the study of religion:” the United States of America. The second will be to look a little more deeply at the history and dilemmas facing “the study of religion” at one particular institution—my own—the contextualization of which also involves narrowing the scope of analysis of the larger context to the American Southeast, Appalachia, Western North Carolina, etc; hopefully my institution can be treated as representative of a *type* of context, and not just an idiosyncratic case study. In a final layer of analysis I intend to examine the tensions that are generated by (at least some of) the aims of “the critical study of religion” in my own micro-climate and perhaps in those like them.

Although the layers can be separated in theory, they cannot be easily separated in practice. And so in what follows there will be overlapping, retrospection and projection, return and repetition of themes. The hope is that by undertaking this triple contextualization of the question of “institutional climate” for “the study of religion” (examining its form in a particular location) I can shed light on the larger question of how “institutional climate” affects “the study of religion” *generally speaking*. Perhaps by disclosing the peculiarity of my own situation in the midst of its particular American context, we can better grapple with the complexity of our field, and throw into greater relief the precarious position of religious studies, at least in its North American form.

The Nested Political and Institutional Contexts of a Particular Institutional Setting

Mainstream colleges and universities in the United States of America—the sorts of places that house trained professional academics and which offer the majority of college and graduate degrees to American students—generally speaking work within the same federally organized system of accreditation. Institutions which receive any direct federal funding or which depend for their survival on federally-backed students loans are required to be accredited by a recognized accrediting organization. The U.S. Department of Education recognizes such bodies, which are also self-organized by the American Council for Higher Education Accreditation, a public non-profit based in Washington, D.C. which works closely with Congress and the Education Department in maintaining its system of recognition.¹⁰ There are seven distinct recognized institutional accrediting organizations maintaining offices in seven diverse sites across the United States.¹¹ Until recently, these bodies held “regional monopolies” and institutions of higher education were required to belong to their designated regional accrediting organization. My own institution, Mars Hill University, has thus long been accredited by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools / Commission on Colleges (SACSCOC, or SACS for short) which handles accreditation of colleges and universities in the American Southeast, a region stretching from Texas in the West to Virginia in the East.¹²

10. See “About CHEA” on the website of the Council for Higher Education Accreditation, <https://www.chea.org/about-chea> (accessed 10/28/2023).

11. See “Regional Accrediting Organizations,” CHEA website, <https://www.chea.org/regional-accrediting-organizations> (accessed 10/28/2023). Offices are in Sacramento, CA; Chicago, IL; Wilmington, DE; Wakefield, MA; Redmond, WA; Decatur, GA; and Alameda, CA.

12. See “About SACS/COC” at <https://www.sacscoc.org/> Information about affiliated institutions can be found at <https://sacscoc.org/institutions/>

The federally mandated process of accreditation has been designed to operate via a system of “peer-review” to assure a certain degree of uniformity of academic standards within regions. Among other measures pushing centripetally towards uniformity in the industry, accreditors monitor degree structures and requirements,¹³ articulate standards for qualification of faculty teaching in degree programs and offering classes, and require processes such as assessment of student learning outcomes and adoption of Quality Enhancement Plans which direct institutions to maintain cultures of continuous improvement of student learning outcomes consistent with their individual missions. Peer-review based accreditation, especially by placing emphasis on faculty qualification, exerts a system-level pressure on disciplines such as religious studies that over time, exerts a normative and centripetal pressure on practices in the field.

More recently, under guidance from the federal government, the accreditation industry has begun to change course a bit; something more like a marketplace of competition has been introduced into the accreditation process. In 2019, the Education Department “repealed the regional monopoly rules,” and, at least in theory, schools are now permitted to change accreditors.¹⁴ In some cases they may be required to do so. For example, very recently (just over three weeks ago as of the time of this writing) the embattled North Carolina public university system was forced by the state legislature to adopt a potentially disruptive policy of changing accreditors during every accreditation cycle. This law was adopted in imitation of a similar law that was recently adopted in Florida.¹⁵ changes to accreditation rules may at least facilitate a race

13. For example, SACS stipulates that Bachelors degrees must require a minimum of 120 credit hours of coursework and must include a substantive General Education program with a minimum of 30 credit hours of courses, including at least one class each (9-10 credit hours total) in “Arts and Humanities,” one in “Social and Behavioral Sciences,” and one in “Math and Natural Sciences.” But more on this below.

14. Matt Reed, “No More Regional Accreditors: A Small Change that Portends Much Larger Changes,” *Inside Higher Ed* (Sep 15, 2020) <https://www.insidehighered.com/blogs/confessions-community-college-dean/no-more-regional-accreditors> (accessed 10/28/2023).

15. Josh Moody, “Florida’s Accreditation Shuffle Begins,” *Inside Higher Education* (Aug 30, 2023; <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/governance/accreditation/2023/08/30/flas-accreditation-shuffle-begins-one-college-gets-us>). Josh Moody, “North Carolina Forces Changes to Accreditation,” *Inside Higher*

to the bottom among America's colleges and schools; for example accreditors might be incentivized to relax enforcement of certain peer review standards or permit reduction in degree requirements.¹⁶ It is hard to judge whether these changes in rules will ultimately intensify or lessen the centripetal force being applied by federally recognized accreditation.

Nevertheless it seems important to acknowledge the politics that stand behind the changes. While the motives of North Carolina legislators remain a bit murky, in Florida, the law was clearly introduced to break the power of accreditation bodies that might otherwise have resisted a larger push, led by the Governor Ron DeSantis, to wage a "war on woke colleges." This is just one of a number of measures DeSantis has introduced which comprise an avowedly right-wing political plan; for example DeSantis has reorganized Florida's New College, and appointed the notorious "anti-CRT" activist Christopher Rufo to its board. Left-leaning commentary is alleging that DeSantis' measures are spurring a "brain drain" in the state, and placing a "muzzle" on educators in many disciplines.¹⁷ And other states, especially in the Southeast, where I also work, are following suit.¹⁸

Education (Oct 10, 2023; <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/governance/accreditation/2023/10/10/new-north-carolina-law-forces-changes-accreditation>). As Moody's article subtitle explains, the N.C. law was "passed quietly with no debate." For further reporting on federal pushback against the Florida law that North Carolina legislators imitated, see Jim Saunders, "Biden administration pushes back in a Florida higher education fight," *WUSF* (Sep 19, 2023; <https://www.wusf.org/courts-law/2023-09-19/biden-administration-pushes-back-florida-higher-education-fight>).

16. Josh Moody, "The First 3-Year Degree Programs Win Approval," *Inside Higher Education* (Sep 1, 2023; <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/business/academic-programs/2023/09/01/first-three-year-degree-programs-win-accreditor-approval>)

17. The "muzzle" language is found in Melissa Gira Grant, "DeSantis' War on 'Woke' Colleges Gets Even More Absurd—And Dangerous" *The New Republic* (Oct 24, 2023; <https://newrepublic.com/article/176402/desantiss-war-woke-colleges-absurd-dangerous>). For the "brain drain" see Kali Holloway, "Florida's 'War on Woke' is Spurring a Brain Drain," *The Nation* (Sep 20, 2023; <https://www.thenation.com/article/society/desantis-florida-education/>)

18. In this regard see the Chronicle of Higher Education website maintaining resources tracking what they are calling "The Assault on DEI:" <https://www.chronicle.com/package/the-assault-on-dei> (accessed 11/4/23).

The Current Public Backlash Against Higher Education

Whether or not it is correct to “look up” and notice a putatively dangerous trend of right-leaning political pressure on the macro-climate of higher education, no one can deny that our entire industry today is facing intense public scrutiny and criticism. Professors have long been accused of living and working in “ivory towers,” an image that conjures up living and working conditions that are isolated from “real world” forces in a way that leads to unrealistic thinking.¹⁹ However, in the past ten years a seemingly inescapable stream of news reports have appeared that must attract the attention of even the most isolated of academic minds. Popular opinion polling and enrollment and financial trends in American Higher Education reveal serious threats that should be sharpening our attention.

In a September 2023 essay for *The New York Times Magazine*, the journalist Paul Tough collected and distilled the troubling stories that have emerged in recent years. Tellingly, Tough showed how broad swaths of “Americans are losing faith” in their universities and colleges.²⁰ For those of us who had been paying attention over the previous five years, this bit of “Tough love” was not really news. Evidence for the erosion of public support for Higher Education has been widely available. The Gallup organization reported recently that they had measured a significant decline in public trust in Higher Education between 2015 and 2023; the portion of the public reporting some degree of trust in higher education fell in that period from 56% to 36%.²¹ Gallup

19. See Steven Shapin, “The Ivory Tower: the history of a figure of speech and its cultural uses,” *British Journal for the History of Science* 45:1 (2012) 1–27. Accessible online at: https://scholar.harvard.edu/files/shapin/files/shapin_ivory_tower_bjhs.pdf (accessed 10/29/23).

20. Paul Tough, “Americans are Losing Faith in the Value of College. Whose Fault is That?” *The New York Times Magazine* (Sep 5, 2023) <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/09/05/magazine/college-worth-price.html>

21. Megan Brenan, “Americans’ Confidence in Higher Education Down Sharply,” *Gallup* (July 11, 2023)

had already marked a decline in that trust in a widely reported 2018 poll, but the results of the most recent poll are even more alarming. Some 63% of American respondents now tell Gallup that they do not trust our institutions... or us.

We have witnessed a shift in public attitudes, perceptions and practices that has seemed to coincide with the cultural era defined by the ascendance of Donald J. Trump to the Presidency. It appears to have something to do with reactionary polarization emergent in the wake of any number of cultural changes which just happened to coincide with the introduction of social media and smartphones and the historic presidency of Barack Obama, the first black man in the oval office. These include among other things: the controversial Obergefell decision granting marriage equality regardless of the gender of partners (Obergefell vs. Hodges, 2015); broad controversies over how sexual assault is handled in our society (the “Me Too” movement); and protests sparked by murderous police violence against minoritized Americans (the “Black Lives Matter” movement). Subsequent to the election of Trump there has further emerged coordinated right-wing critique of “woke culture” in general and higher education in particular. It has been directed against “intersectionality” on university campuses²² and “critical race theory” in schools;²³ and with respect to gender, marriage and equality, there has been particularly rancorous and ongoing “simmering conflict” over transgender rights and gender ideology.²⁴ Additionally, we should not fail to mention that these trends appear related to the American version of the aforementioned “post-liberal” neo-nationalist movement as well, which is manifested in “economic nationalism”

<https://news.gallup.com/poll/508352/americans-confidence-higher-education-down-sharply.aspx>

22. See Andrew Sullivan, “Is Intersectionality a Religion?” *New York Magazine* (Mar 10, 2017) <https://nymag.com/intelligencer/2017/03/is-intersectionality-a-religion.html> (accessed 11/4/2023).

23. See Rashawn Ray and Alexandra Gibbons, “Why are states banning critical race theory?” *Brookings Institution* (November 2021) <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/why-are-states-banning-critical-race-theory/> (accessed 11/4/2023).

24. Geoff Mulvihill, “Conflict over transgender rights simmers across the US,” *Associated Press* (April 28, 2023) <https://apnews.com/article/lgbtq-laws-states-gender-affirming-zephyr-fc2528326823c8232cb0aaa7ece0beab> (accessed 11/4/2023).

(ala Steve Bannon) and even more troubling, in so-called “Christian Nationalism.”²⁵ This last movement is known for its controversial (pseudo-) intellectualist theologies and sometimes militant leaders like Doug Wilson of Moscow, Idaho,²⁶ who once approvingly cited H. L. Mencken’s satirical recommendation that our public schools be reformed by burning them down and killing the teachers.²⁷

Regardless of what a detailed sociological analysis of the present moment might reveal about the socio-political influences on our institutional environments, it has been clear for at least five years that Americans of all political persuasions have been openly voicing their growing discontent with American colleges. In 2018, the Pew Research Center was reporting that an astonishing 61% of Americans saw American higher education as moving in the wrong direction.²⁸ More troublingly, perhaps, a partisan divide was evident in the responses; 73% of those who lean republican and 52% of democrats agreed on the negative direction of Higher Education—but for different reasons.

Overall, 84% said tuition costs were too high, but more Blue-leaning respondents than Red cited this concern (92% versus 77%).

25. See Andrew Seidel, “Christian Nationalism and the Capitol Insurrection,” written testimony delivered to the House select committee to investigate the Jan 6th attack on the United States Capitol (March 18, 2022); <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/GPO-J6-DOC-CTRL0000062431/pdf/GPO-J6-DOC-CTRL0000062431.pdf> (accessed 11/4/2023).

26. Jack Jenkins, “‘Christian patriots’ are flocking from blue states to Idaho,” *The Washington Post* (Feb 24, 2023) <https://www.washingtonpost.com/religion/2023/02/24/idaho-christian-nationalism-marjorie-taylor-greene/> (accessed 11/4/2023).

27. Doug Wilson, “Burning All the Schools,” *Blog & Mablog* (Nov. 1, 2018) <https://dougwils.com/books-and-culture/s7-engaging-the-culture/burn-all-the-schools.html> (accessed 11/4/2023).

28. Anna Brown, “Most Americans say higher ed is heading in wrong direction, but partisans disagree on why,” *Pew Research Center* (July 26, 2018) <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2018/07/26/most-americans-say-higher-ed-is-heading-in-wrong-direction-but-partisans-disagree-on-why/>

Overall, 65% said students weren't getting needed workplace skills, but more Red-leaning respondents (73%) than Blue reported this concern (56%).

Again, over half (54%) cited campus cultures which are overly focused on protecting student sensitivities ("too much concern about protecting students from views they might find offensive"). However far more Red-leaning respondents than Blue cited this concern (75% versus 31%).

Most starkly, over half of respondents complained of the ways that professors' social and political views intrude into the classroom ("Professors are bringing their political and social views into the classroom"). But the partisan divide here on this point was overwhelming. Only 17% of Blue-leaning respondents cited this reason; whereas 79% of Red respondents agreed.

In short, liberal or left leaning critics of higher education have been particularly worried about the skyrocketing costs of higher education, citing problematic levels of student loan debt among other things. Accordingly, Parents and students are increasingly looking for a pragmatic return on investment in higher education. On the other hand, conservative or right leaning critics of higher education are elaborating what has been a long-building narrative about the allegedly leftist bias in academia.²⁹

29. Of course, none of this is new. Concerns about "political correctness" in higher education were the watchword of Reagan years; the new widespread concern about "Wokeness" in higher education is the same critique in a different guise. Unfortunately, self-professed right-leaning "liberals" like the independent scholar, academic practical joker, political activist and twitter troll James Lindsey—well known for his notorious participation in the "Grievance Studies Hoax"—are beating the drum for right-wing attacks on education at all levels. Lindsey has built a following by incessantly attacking "cultural Marxism," "woke Marxism," and "American maoism" in higher education circles. See his recently self-published book *The Marxification of Education: Paulo Freire's Critical Marxism and the Theft of Education* (2022). Lindsey today makes his living speaking constantly to eager right-wing audiences. For more about his earlier career as a hoaxer, see Wikipedia Contributors, "Grievance studies affair," *Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia* https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Grievance_studies_affair (accessed 11/4/2023).

These cultural discursive trends might appear to some academics as only so much white noise coming over the ivy covered walls. But in the American Southeast, in places like Florida and North Carolina, such discourses have to be assumed to be very much in the environment, poisoning the ideological air our students breathe, and the intellectual waters their parents and our other constituencies are drinking.

Enrollment Trends

The news gets even worse if you look at enrollment trends and their relationship to the economic viability of small schools such as the one I teach in. I am tempted not even to examine the data, but we might as well briefly survey the most troubling trends. First of all, over the past decade and a half, overall, absolute enrollment in college has fallen (it is not just a slowing of growth in enrollment) by about 10%; nearly two million fewer students are enrolled in U.S. colleges today than in 2010; most of that decline has been since 2019.³⁰ Males are abandoning colleges at much rates higher than females.³¹ These enrollment pressures have hurt for-profit schools very badly, but also, since 2020, “at least 45 public or non-profit colleges” have just shut down operations.³² Tuition dependent institutions like mine have had to figure out how to compete for applicants in an increasingly competitive marketplace. A long term demographic trend is at work. From 2013-2017, the rate of growth in the population of high-school aged Americans slowed dramatically. After 2017, that population actually began to fall. An increase in

30. Lyss Welding, “U.S. College Enrollment Decline: Facts and Figures” *Best Colleges* (Aug 16, 2023) <https://www.bestcolleges.com/research/college-enrollment-decline/> (accessed 11/4/2023).

31. Alcino Donadel, “Men are falling behind in higher ed and the trend may not be letting up,” *University Business* (May 23, 2023) <https://universitybusiness.com/men-are-falling-behind-in-higher-ed-and-it-may-not-be-letting-up/> (accessed 11/4/2023).

32. Evan Costillo and Lyss Welding, “Closed Colleges: List, Statistics, and Major Closures,” *Best Colleges* (Oct. 16, 2023) <https://www.bestcolleges.com/research/closed-colleges-list-statistics-major-closures/> (accessed 11/4/2023).

the rate of graduation between 2017 and the present has been predicted mitigated the impact of this shrinking population, but after 2025 the population of high school age students is predicted to fall more precipitously, with the downward trend continuing until 2037. This 2025 threshold has been called a “demographic cliff” for colleges.³³ What happens after 2025 is likely an increase in the pace of closures, and of course, a further tightening of the job market for academics working across all disciplines.

The Decline in Humanities Majors, and of Religious Studies Majors in Particular

In spite of the erosion of public trust, in spite of the vicious partisan opposition to educators and against academic liberty, in spite of demographically driven enrollment problems that have been exacerbated by economic problems and natural disasters such as the Covid-19 pandemic, and the closure of a large number of schools, total enrollments in American colleges and universities, which briefly fell during the pandemic, are actually creeping up again. The absolute number of degrees granted each year actually continued to increase between 2016 and 2021. However, it is rather easy to demonstrate how that this growth in the Higher Education sector has actually failed to proportionally benefit programs in subjects associated with the Humanities, such as English, History, Religion, and Philosophy.

Some of these statistics were reported on in depth by the journalist Nathan Heller in a widely cited and debated February 2023 essay from the *The New Yorker*, “The End of the English

33. Eric Hoover, “The Demographic Cliff: 5 Findings from New Projections of High School Graduates,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (Dec. 15, 2020) <https://www.chronicle.com/article/the-demographic-cliff-5-findings-from-new-projections-of-high-school-graduates> (accessed 11/4/2023). Compare: Craig P. Smith, “High School Graduation Trends in the Years Ahead,” *Cognia* (Fall 2021) <https://source.cognia.org/issue-article/high-school-graduation-trends-in-the-years-ahead/> (accessed 11/4/2023).

Major.”³⁴ Citing research by Robert Townsend, Heller reported that Humanities disciplines had experienced a seventeen percent decline in enrollment in the past ten years.

Academics were predictably divided in response; a huge number of public responses could be described as forms of “whistling past the graveyard.” The marketing department of the Graduate Center of the City University of New York claimed confidently in a blog post, missing the point, that “the humanities remain relevant,” arguing that the study of English is still a great way to learn skills of analysis and rhetoric.³⁵ Probably true, but not in itself a solution to the evident problem.

The point is missed if we think the problem with the Humanities is that people don’t understand that they are *relevant*. This sort of thinking mistakes our work for something akin to a *natural kind* that has arisen *necessarily* in order to solve *particular problems*, that, without our efforts, would have unendurable costs for the world. There are good reasons to think that isn’t true at all, but rather that study in the humanities (including the study of “Religion and Philosophy”) have historically played a cultural role as socially formative practices. And the question is rather, whether huge segments of our population may increasingly regard these practices themselves as outmoded.

In any case, the problems we face as religious studies programs are probably far worse than what Townsend and Heller are reporting for the Humanities as a whole or for English in particular. When it comes to Religion and Philosophy, to rely only on their reports of decline and backlash may be to soft-pedal the problem.

34. Nathan Heller, “The End of the English Major,” *The New Yorker* (Feb 27, 2023) <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2023/03/06/the-end-of-the-english-major>

35. “End of the English Major? Hardly! Graduate Center scholars say ‘The New Yorker’ story is a clarion call, but the humanities remain relevant,” *CUNY Graduate Center* (March 8, 2023) <https://www.gc.cuny.edu/news/end-english-major-hardly>

Consider the data for degrees awarded at American institutions of higher education, as reported by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES).³⁶ NCES collects and reports on the data regarding degrees issued, and their numbers let us look at historical trends in both absolute and relative numbers. A table published in the 2022 NCES *Digest of Education Statistics* (Table 322.10) offers an historical overview of “Bachelors degrees conferred by postsecondary institutions, by field of study: Selected academic years, 1970-71 through 2020-2021.”³⁷ Just over fifty years ago, in 1971, institutions higher education in America awarded only 839,730 degrees; two years ago, in 2021, there were 2,066,445 degrees awarded; this represents a 246% increase in the absolute size of American Higher Education—as measured by graduates—reflecting an enormous period of growth of our industry during the last half-century. But that growth has not exactly benefitted scholars and teachers working in Humanities disciplines. The negative trend goes back much further than our recent period of political and economic crisis.

English Degrees Granted

In 1971, degrees in English language and literature/letters numbered 63,914, or 7.6% of all degrees conferred. In 2021, there were only 35,762 degrees granted in the field of English, reflecting not only a drop in the absolute numbers (during a time of 246% growth), but a drastic drop in the percentage of overall degrees granted, to a miniscule 1.7% of the total. Forget Townsend and Heller’s reported 17% decline. English has experienced a 77% over the past 50 years.

Even in absolute terms this data points to forces that would reduce the demand for full time English faculty at any university; hypothetically, assuming that degree structures have

36. See IES > NCES National Center for Education Statistics [Website] <https://nces.ed.gov/>

37. “Table 322.10. Bachelor's degrees conferred by postsecondary institutions, by field of study: Selected academic years, 1970-71 through 2020-21,” *IES>NCES* (2022) https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d22/tables/dt22_322.10.asp (accessed 10/29/2023).

remained fairly stable in size over the past fifty years, we would need about 45% fewer English professors working on educating the English *majors*. And so, quite clearly, what has sustained the field of English in the past fifty years is only its work as a *service discipline*, primarily meeting the demands of universities for General Education courses in Composition, Literature and general Humanities.

Social Sciences and History Degrees Granted

A similar but less drastic story must be told about degrees granted in the field of History. Because of the accidents of how the field of History was organized in higher education in the early 1970s—a period in which History was commonly classified among the social sciences and housed (as it was at that time in my institution) in departments including sociology and political science—the NCES has and continues to combine data for degrees in history with the data for degrees in the social sciences. This includes Sociology and Political Science and a few others (but not Psychology, which has its own category). In 1971 there were 155,324 degrees granted in the “Social sciences and history” amounting to an impressive 18.5% of all degrees granted. In contrast with English, in absolute terms, the number of degrees in this area *has* actually increased since then... but only very slightly, to 160,827. This growth of about 7% is miniscule compared to the overall growth in the number of degrees; the share of degrees in the Social sciences and History has plummeted to just 7.8% of all degrees granted. That is a 58% drop in market share over the past fifty years.

Religion and Philosophy Degrees Granted

I introduce statistics for English and History because they neatly frame a larger issue facing us that is sometimes called the “crisis of the humanities.” That crisis is real enough, but oddly, Religion and Philosophy have a different story to tell in the midst of the crisis. Our story is that, while our present numbers of majors are really dismal, nationwide—local microclimate

variations notwithstanding—it is actually the case that we have never been that popular anyway. The data is strongly suggestive that, as a whole, the American public is just not that into doing the academic study of religion in college.³⁸

The NCES combines data for degrees granted in Religious Studies with degrees granted in Philosophy.³⁹ Below, I share the NCES data for “Philosophy and religious studies” degrees in the years 1971–2021. NCES provides data points taken at five year intervals for the years 1971–2016, and in one year intervals thereafter. See figure 1 below for a graph of Philosophy and religious studies degrees in absolute terms, and figure 2 below for the graph of Philosophy and religious studies degrees in relative terms, as a percentage of total degrees conferred.

38. This is not at all to say that the American public isn't into talking about “religion” (i.e. there is plenty of data for scholars interested in “discourses about ‘religion’”); nor is it to claim that no market exists for the work done by scholars of “religion” (or reporters on the “religion beat”). It's not even an observation about the popularity of our courses. It's just a comment about how popular are *degrees in “religious studies” as a field*.

39. This may frustrate some of our colleagues, but it fits well for the longstanding practices of my program, which has been termed a program in “Religion and Philosophy” since the early 1960s. See *Mars Hill College Quarterly* 59:4 (Mar 1963) pp 115-117 and cf *MHCQ* 58:4 (Mar 1962) pp. 107-108, when the program was called simply “Department of Religion.” Prior to the first adoption of the four year degree in 1962, the professors who would later become the “Department of Religion” faculty at MHC belonged to a department of “Bible.” More on the history of the study of Religion at MHU below.

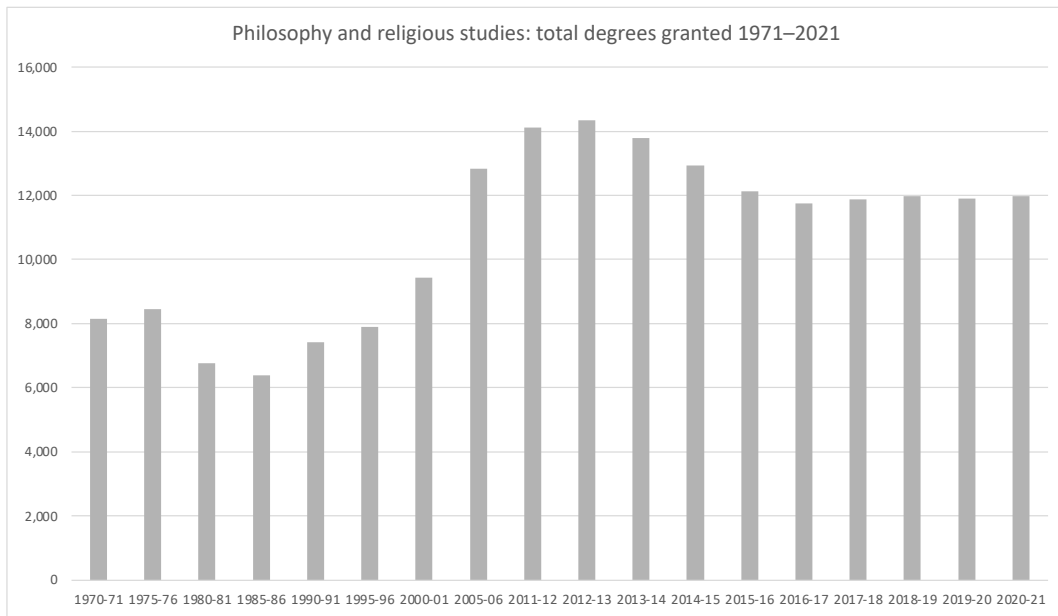


Figure 1. Total number of degrees granted in Philosophy and Religious Studies, 1971–2021.

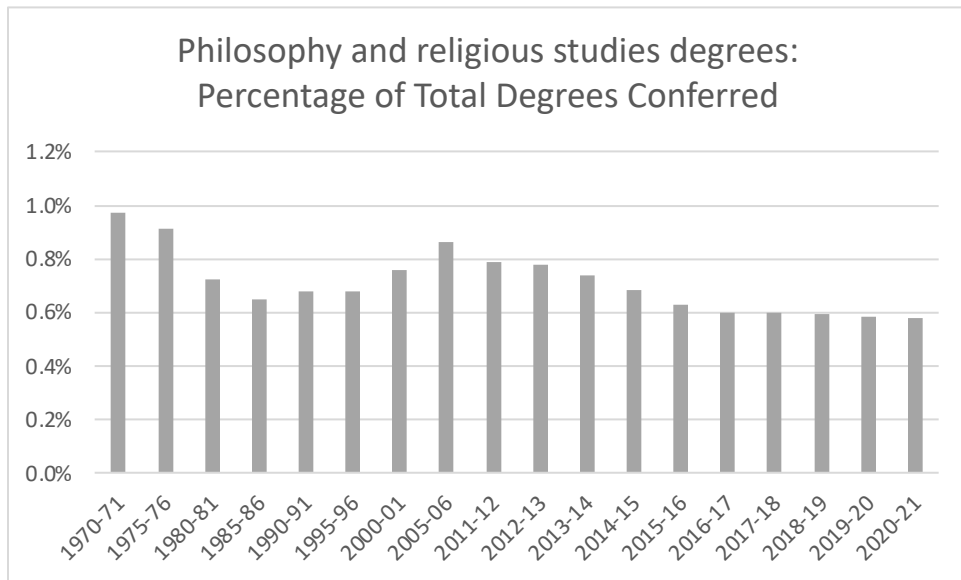


Figure 2. Religion and Philosophy degrees conferred as a percentage of all degrees.

In 1971, NCES reports that degrees in “Philosophy and religious studies” numbered 8,149, which amounted at the time to about 1.0% of all degrees conferred. Although it looks like the

lowest point in Figure 1, in terms of market share, that year was the peak for our fields. We have not reached that level of market share since.

Oddly, the data shows that the number of Philosophy and Religious Studies degrees actually declined in absolute terms until the mid-1980s, when the number of degrees conferred bottomed out at its all time low of 6,396, which was just 0.6% of all degrees conferred. That represents a 40% decline in market-share. Perhaps this decline in the absolute numbers in the early to mid-80s was due to the period of economic recession that definitely impacted schools like mine negatively.⁴⁰ After the mid-1980s, the absolute numbers of degrees conferred in Religion and Philosophy climbed again, reaching a peak in 2013, when 14,338 degrees were conferred. Those numbers have since declined. Even at the 2013 peak, Religion and Philosophy degrees made up only 0.8% of all degrees, which was still a 20% lower market share than in 1971. The past decade has brought a decline in both the total number of degrees awarded, and the relative percentage of all degrees. In 2021 universities and colleges awarded a relatively feeble number of 11,988 Philosophy and Religion degrees; this was below 0.6% of all degrees awarded, and our all time lowest share of the market and a decline of 25% from the numbers in 2013.

Is that good news or bad? Arguably, it's just a sign of the overall weakness of our field. While we have fallen less than History, and much less than English—which seems like good news—the bad news is that Religion and Philosophy is as unpopular today as it has ever been. Philosophy and religious studies degrees combined are only about one-third as popular as English majors, and are less than one-tenth as popular as degrees in the Social Sciences and History. So if, in these conditions, the English major is at an end, where does that leave us?

40. My institution declared financial exigency in 1982, its one time to use that drastic restructuring tool, because of a huge slump in enrollment that had taken place immediately after the end of the post-Vietnam War enrollment boom. Enrollment dropped from nearly 3000 in 1974 to less than 1500 in the early 80s. Today our total enrollment sits at around 1100.

The Blessings of Service

It leaves most of us depending on service to General Education.

Yes there may be variations, where a particularly robust program or institution bucks national trends. That can happen for any number of reasons, such as in places where financial scholarships are granted to students willing to declare Religion minors and majors.⁴¹ But in the majority of settings, the median prevails. Larger institutions may be able to maintain small faculties to serve a small number of Religion and Philosophy majors, but the situation is particularly challenging for faculty in smaller institutions. If your share of degrees is only 0.6% of the total, then only one in 170 graduates is a Religion Major. What if your institution usually graduates only 150 students a year? One or more semesters could pass without a Religion or Philosophy major walking the stage. And in such settings, where only a precious few complete the Religion and Philosophy degree, unless there is a way to have upper level courses “count”—satisfy General Education requirements for students—then your more advanced courses will tend to be extremely small, attracting unwanted attention from the Deans and Provost.

At this point, faced with the reality of our dependence on satisfying General Education requirements, it is tempting for members of our field, along with their friends and supporters across the campus and outside academia, to embrace the mythos of our field’s naturalness. The mythos can take several forms. In one version, it will be said: “We are a religiously affiliated school (or historically religious school), so of course we will always have the study of religion.” In

41. This was the situation of my institution; until about a decade ago there were a significant a number of variously named and themed scholarships, all legacies of 20th century donors, which had encouraged young people of various descriptions to declare minors and majors; known collectively as “Church leadership” scholarships, they were mostly targeted at supporting North Carolina and Baptist students willing to declare a vocation into ministry. These scholarships were folded into the general fund by a previous Academic CEO after 2012-2013

another version, it is said, “religion is such a fundamental part of human life/society/politics/history, we could never do without a program in religion.” These comforting lies we tell ourselves obscure the precariousness of our situation. There’s nothing natural about the study of religion.

We certainly don’t all have our positions in higher education because of our field-shaking, invaluable and inevitable—let alone *natural and necessary*—work on some self-evident object of study. In point of fact our field lacks a clearly articulated public goal, focusing our efforts around solving well-defined problems; compare our field’s extraordinarily diverse, unfocused, and incoherent range of studies (as evinced in the AAR’s annual meeting catalog, for example), with the discipline of Psychology’s focused use of scientific and clinical methods to define and understand mental illness and promote mental health.⁴² Compare also the work done in the field with the largest share of undergraduate degrees, that is, Business.⁴³ Business, often accused of being a non-academic “professional” degree, is widely treated as a self-evident good because of its (illusory) promise of a pathway to success in the post-college career. Nobody ever asks, “a Business degree? what are you going to do with that?”

Because our field’s position in the academy is not, in fact, *natural*, but rather has emerged as a result of *specific historical forces*, it remains to be seen whether we can hold on to our present role. Presently, because of the historical position we occupy in our micro-climates, supporters and practitioners of “religious studies” often just *assume* that our services are essential

42. Psychology graduated more than 10x the number of students than Philosophy and religious studies combined in 2021, or 126,944, amounting to 6.1% of all degrees.

43. There were 391,375 Business degrees granted in 2021, amounting to about 20% of all degrees conferred (versus just 13.7% in 1971). The second most popular area in our time are degrees in the Health professions and related programs, which have grown tremendously from only 3% of degrees in 1971 (just above the status of Math and statistics at the time) to about 13% in 2021. For what it is worth, Math and statistics degrees today comprise just 1.3% of all degrees granted. These statistics will, I think, demonstrate that it is not just the humanities, but the traditional liberal arts which are under threat in our current practices of higher education.

and inevitable. If we lack majors, the reasoning goes, at least we have General Education. Everybody needs the study of religion in General Education, right?

But do they really?

Given that the macro-climate that shapes our institutions, with its changing to student demographics and enrollment patterns, given the evolving pressures presented by regimes of accreditation and cultures of outcomes assessment, and given the apparently mounting public distrust in and hostility towards our institutions and in some cases our very being, it seems less and less likely that this mythos of our field's naturalness will continue to seem persuasive.

Mars Hill University as a Case Example

To explore my assertion that our situation is more precarious than many would imagine, I propose to share the story of the study of Religion and Philosophy at my own institution, using that story to frame the larger question of whether we can continue to count on our *service role within higher education*.

My institution was founded in 1856 by members of the French Broad Baptist Association in Western North Carolina. The association is named for the French Broad River, which flows North and West through the Blue Ridge Mountains of rural Appalachia, past the city of Asheville in Buncombe County, and through the town of Marshall in Madison County, and on into Tennessee. These French Broad Baptists, described as “dedicated but struggling local families” on my institution’s website, build a small secondary school and early college known as the French Broad Baptist Institute, because they “wanted their children educated and instructed in the Baptist faith.”⁴⁴

44. See “History of Mars Hill University” on the Mars Hill University website at <https://www.mhu.edu/about/who-we-are/history-of-the-university/> (accessed 11/4/2023).

Rapidly the school was renamed Mars Hill College (after Paul's stand in witness to the Philosophers on the Areopagus of Athens as described in Acts 17:22). For its seal the association adopted the motto, in Latin, "pro Christo adolescentibusque," which translated means *for Christ and for youth*. Thus, from the beginning, the mission of the school was anchored in promoting the interests of a particular religious tradition, playing a role in the social formation of youth; literally, the school was founded for Christian pedagogy. In 1859 the college was chartered by the State of North Carolina.

A town, also called Mars Hill, grew up around the school. Mars Hill College later, in 1921, was chartered by the State officially as a two-year "Junior College." Then in 1923 it changed its affiliation and established official ties with the larger, and better funded, Baptist State Convention of North Carolina. For the first 106 years of its operation, until 1962, Mars Hill College was a two-year school serving up a liberal arts curriculum designed to prepare its students for further study and completion of the Baccalaureate degree at other schools.

In 1962, under the leadership of its President, Dr. Hoyt Blackwell—incidentally, Blackwell was a Biblical Scholar active in the National Association of Biblical Instructors (NABI), the institutional precursor to the AAR⁴⁵—the school began offering courses of study leading to the Baccalaureate degree. As if it formed a natural part of a liberal arts college, one of the majors offered came through taking courses taught by faculty in the newly formed Department of Religion.⁴⁶

45. The almost forgotten roots of the AAR in the NABI was disclosed to my generation of scholars by Jonathan Z. Smith, whose incandescent plenary address at the Boston SBL in 1999 seriously derailed my own naive thinking about the relationship of Biblical studies to religious studies in American higher education. This address was published as "Bible and Religion" in the *Bulletin for the Scientific Study of Religion* 29:4 (November 2000) 87–93, and was later reprinted as Chapter 9 of Smith, *Relating Religion* (Chicago, 2004). The address should not be confused with Smith's 2008 SBL Presidential Address, also delivered in Boston, during the first of the three separate annual meetings (in 2008, 2009, and 2010) which were held during the brief divorce of the AAR and SBL national meetings. The later address, entitled "Religion and Bible," was printed in the *Journal of Biblical Literature* 128:1 (2009) 5–27.

46. From the 1962 Catalog: "Students who are primarily interested in the fields of art, dramatic arts and

Among private American schools with a religious background, I suppose Mars Hill College was relatively typical for its time. It prided itself on the rigor of its general education requirements applying to virtually all of students, putting them through the two full years of study in a breadth of subjects. In addition to requiring courses in science, math, language, composition and literature, and the social sciences, all students took six credit hours of courses taught by faculty in the Department of Religion, in the form of two three credit hour introductory survey courses in Bible: Old and New Testament.

In 1961, just prior to the adoption of a four year curriculum, the catalog entry for the Department of Religion listed only three courses in its rotation: Old Testament, New Testament, and a course called Economics in the Bible, which was designed for students in the associates of arts business concentration (who were required to take only three credits in religion).⁴⁷ The Department of Religion existed to serve the interests of the school, and those interests were parochial. The faculty of three were trained in Christian ministry and held graduate degrees issued by what is today referred to as the “pre-fall” Southern Baptist Theological Seminary; later legend would emphasize the mild, scholarly, and theologically moderate ideas of these men who were dedicated to the idea that study of historical-critical Biblical scholarship was the proper basis for supporting the Churches with an informed laity and well educated pastorate.⁴⁸ A faculty

speech, elementary education, history, languages, literature, music, religion, or social studies will receive the B.A. degree because its name implies an emphasis on the liberal arts.” See *Mars Hill College Quarterly* 58:4 (Mar 1962) pp. 47 ff.

47. *Mars Hill College Quarterly* 57:4 (Mar 1961) pp. 84-85.

48. Mr. Mumford Holland Kendall, also chair of Classical Languages, SBTS 1937, had been on faculty since 1939. Dr. John Raymond Nelson, SBTS 1928, had been on faculty since 1950. Mr. Bob Melvin, SBTS 1957, joined the faculty of MHC in 1958.

Old-timers today are often embarrassed to admit their ties to Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, which has become a bastion of Fundamentalism in the wake of the Fundamentalist Takeover of the Southern Baptist Churches. Since 1993, SBTS has been led by its President J. Albert Mohler, who is known today for his robust public defense of Biblical inerrancy and other conservative dogmas (and also for his belated embrace of Trumpism). When forced to admit their ties to SBTS, embarrassed elders will often tell you they studied there “before the fall.” “The Fall” refers to a dynamic transformation of that institution that began in the mid-1980s but was not completed until the late 1990s when the last of the “moderates”

in Classical Languages and Literatures supported scholarship on the Bible with Greek and Latin study and study of the classics, partly by coordinating studies of MHC students with work in Classics done at nearby UNC Asheville.

When the Baccalaureate degree programs were adopted in 1962, the faculty had expanded to four, and for the first time, a faculty person with less parochial credentials.⁴⁹ To support the new Religion major, the catalog added eight additional courses to the mix. There were now upper level biblical studies courses on Jesus, Paul, and the Prophets, a presumably practical course called “The Teaching of Religion” (presumably for Church leaders and teachers in parochial and public secondary schools), and also, a course called “World Religions,” which was described as follows:

(folks many today would call liberal Christians) were pushed out, retired or died. It is instructive in this regard to read the obituary notice of James Blevins, a New Testament Scholar who had been a professor of religion at Mars Hill College from 1969 to 1976, and who subsequently went on to teach at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary from 1976 until his retirement in 1999. Blevins is the author of an interesting and occasionally cited book *Revelation as Drama* (Broadman Press, 1984). He was one of the teachers and mentors of the well-regarded feminist Biblical Scholar, MHC alumna, and “pre-fall” SBTS graduate Tina Pippen, author of *Death and Desire* (Westminster/John Knox, 1992).

After Blevins’ death in 2004, when Al Mohler, as the President of SBTS, was contacted by a staff reporter at the Baptist Press looking for comment on Blevins’ passing, Mohler’s mild praise for Blevins conveys no trace of the satisfaction that I imagine the fundamentalists must have felt when Blevins had finally retired from SBTS in 1999; for me, Blevins was the symbolic last leaf of “the fall” at SBTS.

“Jim Blevins was an enthusiastic teacher,” Mohler reportedly said, “who brought passion to his teaching, mixed with an engaging sense of humor and genuine concern for his students... He touched many lives and taught thousands of students during his tenure at Southern Seminary. He loved his calling as a teacher.” Reported in “Prof. James Blevins dies; taught at SBTS 1976-99,” *Baptist Press* (July 27, 2004) <https://www.baptistpress.com/resource-library/news/prof-james-blevins-dies-taught-at-sbts-1976-99/> (accessed 11/4/2023).

For an overview of “the fall” at SBTS and in the SBC, see Wikipedia Contributors, “Southern Baptist Convention conservative resurgence,” *Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia* https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Southern_Baptist_Convention_conservative_resurgence (accessed 11/4/2023). The fundamentalist takeover came to SBTS beginning with the replacement of Roy Honeycutt as president in 1990, and his replacement three years later by Mohler; with the election of Paige Patterson to the Presidency of the SBC in 1998, the resurgence was almost complete. The SBC’s adoption, two years later, of the reactionary statement called the Baptist Faith and Message 2000, cemented the SBC into the position of dogmatic Fundamentalism that characterizes its leadership today.

49. Mr. Page Lee, M.A. from UNC in 1962, brought more secular credentials to the program.

“The great living religions of the world, their origin and the fundamental doctrines involved. The essential dogmas of other religions as compared to the Christian Faith.”⁵⁰

It is thus fair to say that in both its historical origin, and in the original direction of its curriculum, religious studies at Mars Hill College were firmly planted in what is called “the seminary model.” Even in comparative religion courses, the centrality of “the Christian Faith” was assumed; its normativity always de facto asserted. For decades this model dominated at Mars Hill, as elsewhere. When the AAR conducted surveys of undergraduate and graduate programs of study in Religion in 2000, 2002, and 2004, commentators often expressed astonishment at the continuing durability of this model and its assumptions, as found at schools nationwide. Linell Cady, of Arizona State University, wrote in 2002 that:

“What stands out most prominently is the extent to which the study of Christianity dominates the curriculum, with courses in the Bible taught at the highest percentage of responding programs. The centrality of Christianity in the curriculum is, of course, not all that surprising given the roots of the field in the seminary model, the dominance of Christianity among the North American student body as a whole, and the Christian affiliation of over half the responding institutions.”⁵¹

In the four decades spanning 1962, and 2002 when I was recruited to join the faculty of Mars Hill College, a great many things had changed about the study of Religion and Philosophy. In 1993, the first woman had been listed in the catalog as a full-time member of the Religion faculty.⁵² A diversity of topics had been added to the catalog including area studies courses on Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, Taoism, Zen, Hinduism, Philosophy, Church History, American Studies, and Theology. I was fresh out of my Ph.D. work at the University of Chicago Divinity

50. *Mars Hill College Quarterly* 58:4 (Mar 1962) pp. 107-108.

51. Linell Cady, “What does the census data say about the study of religion? A public sector perspective,” *Religious Studies News* 17:2 (March 2002) 7, 21; quote on p. 21.

52. Dr. Kathy Meacham (Ph.D. Temple, 1994, Philosophy of Religion).

School, full of fire about combining critical Biblical studies, anthropologically and theoretically oriented Religious Studies, and fired up to begin teaching in Mars Hill's almost brand new core curriculum in its newly adopted General Education Program, which was branded as "Liberal Arts in Action." I one one person, hired to replace two retiring professors.⁵³ These were men who had been present during the hay-day of Religious Studies at Mars Hill, when as many as seven men, mostly Baptist professors trained in Biblical Studies, made up the faculty.⁵⁴ I didn't wonder too much about my situation at the time. I was just glad to have a job. In retrospect, I might have asked more questions.

For example, why had the number of professors in Religion and Philosophy been allowed to dwindle from seven, in Spring 1982, to only three, in Fall 2002? Not that I wasn't happy to do it, but why exactly was I being hired to teach 50% of my 4/4 teaching load in MHC's new, 15 credit hour interdisciplinary core sequence, taught not just by Religion faculty, or by Humanities faculty, but by faculty from many departments across the campus? Why was the 400-level course on the Life and Letters of Paul I was tasked to teach in my first semester actually populated by only four students? Why were there so few students in my Greek language classes? Why were my introduction to Old Testament and Introduction to New Testament courses relatively small? Had people heard that a dastardly big-city liberal from Chicago come to steal their faith away?

Answers to all of these questions remained obscure to me then, but seem clear as day now, twenty-two years later. My circumstances had been produced by big changes in the nation's culture and the specific demographics of MHC's student body. The preferences and ideas of the faculty had shifted.

53. Dr. Earl Leininger, a theologian and philosopher, Th.D. SBTS 1967, had been on faculty since 1968. Dr. Tom Sawyer, Ph.D. SBTS 1968, had joined the faculty in 1976. Sawyer was, like me, a New Testament Scholar, and teacher of Greek. Both retired in Spring 2002. I have occupied Sawyer's former office in Cornwell Hall since 2002 and still possess some of his old books. Twenty-two years later, I feel a little bit like Huckleberry Finn, tricked into painting the fence.

54. Seven faculty made up the department from 1977–1982.

Most importantly, Mars Hill was in 2002 on its sixth cycle of revised General Education programming since the inception of its four-year programming in 1962. A review of the history of the curriculum at my institution shows pretty clearly how religious studies—albeit religious studies with a decidedly parochial and Christian bent—had once occupied a central and powerful position in the college’s academic culture. Yet in the thirty-three years between 1968 and 2001 the study of “religion” had been decentered at Mars Hill. The college had come crashing into the 21st century and was, unwittingly and without any clear intentions regarding what might happen to religious studies at the institution, shedding its parochial history in favor of a new approach to liberal education, which it called “the liberal arts in action.”

From 1962 until 1971, the college had required two courses in Religion, which were satisfied mostly by taking a pair of survey courses in Bible (OT and NT). In fact this two course sequence had been a part of the MHC two-year requirements from well before 1962; as far as I can tell, they had been in place for many decades. In addition, in 1968, faculty had introduced a two course Humanities core sequence (replacing six required hours in literature), which formed a sort of great-books course called “Man’s Search for Identity.” Religion and Philosophy faculty contributed to staffing this course. They had plenty to do, and the school was growing.

In 1971, the faculty switched the basis of most courses from 3 credit hours to 4 credit hours (four credit hour courses lasted until 1982, when financial exigency killed the innovation). At that time, the number of required Religion courses was reduced to one, but Religion faculty still had 12 credit hours of courses to field, as the two-semester successor course to “Man’s Search for Identity,” continued being offered, though now under the more gender-sensitive title “Human Society.” By the mid-1970s, with enrollment approaching nearly 3000, and 12 credit hours of courses to teach in Bible, Religion, and “Human Society,” it was no wonder MHC had seven faculty on its Religion staff.

From 1974 to 1987, Religion department faculty for the first time were forced to compete for a share of student’s general education curriculum. Religion courses became one optional way

to fulfill a two-course GE requirement called “Cultural Values,” which comprised both an “American Studies” and a “Foreign Studies” element. History, Religion, GE, Foreign Language, Classics and Literature courses all competed in this multidisciplinary choice basket. Religion faculty still provided the bulk of the staff for the two course Humanities core sequence, now called “Synoptics.” Synoptics was an ambitious attempt at providing a Junior-level seminar leading to integral studies in the Humanities. But for the first time a student at MHC could graduate without taking any course in Religion.

Then again, in 1987, the faculty implemented a new, NEH-funded General Education program; this program persisted until 2001, just before I arrived. This new program was designed for the new era of computing, and focused GE more than previously on quantitative, technological and scientific literacy outcomes. But Humanities was still prominent. A three course sequence in the Humanities called the Humanities Commons was adopted. The first of these three HUM-prefixed courses was a survey of Biblical literature and early Christianity in Europe; it drew heavily for staffing on religion faculty. But in addition to providing this course, Religion faculty contributed options to multidisciplinary choice requirements like American Culture (one course required, and several Religion courses qualified), Foreign Culture or Language (depending on program, one course might be required in “Foreign Culture,” a special interest of Religion faculty); and finally there was a good chance a Religion faculty person would be one of the instructors in the interdisciplinary, team-taught GE Capstone course, “Ethics, Science, and Technology.”

Religion faculty had plenty to do in this period, and staffing remained at five persons from 1987 until the dawn of the new century. But by century’s end, the “old guard” of the Religion faculty began to leave the institution; four faculty retired between 1997 and 2002.⁵⁵ Two new, rather differently credentialed faculty were recruited to replace them; one, a Theologian, in 2001;

55. Bob Melvin (SBTS 1957, faculty since 1958) retired in 1997; Ellison Jenkins (New Orleans Baptist Seminary 1954, MHC faculty since 1954) retired in 1999. Earl Leininger (SBTS 1967, faculty since 1968) retired 2002. Tom Sawyer (SBTS 1968,

another, a Biblical scholar, in 2002.⁵⁶ The program was now staffed by a threesome of persons who were credentialed rather differently than had been the previous generation. Notably, none of us had been trained at a Baptist Seminary in the south. Perhaps more notably, none of us attended a local Baptist church.⁵⁷

Coincidentally, perhaps, a new GE program was adopted in 2001. As in the 1987–2001 curriculum, this new GE included a humanities-heavy commons sequence, “Liberal Arts in Action,” or LAA as we called it. (The courses had an “LAA” as their prefix.⁵⁸) Three of the five LAA courses were designed to feel close to the wheelhouses of History and Religion and Philosophy faculty, so, while LAA courses were taught by teams of faculty from across the campus, Religion and Philosophy faculty were deeply engaged in the design, implementation, and staffing of them all, and also in the development of and pedagogical support for faculty teaching the courses. Although there were no Religion or Philosophy courses explicitly required in the curriculum, we also managed to get Religion courses to count as options for the one-course “American Diversity” requirement, and we even managed to get a Biblical literature course listed among the “Literature” options. As a consequence, all three Religion faculty taught at least fifty-percent of their loads in the new GE program. I was hired explicitly to teach 50% in Religion and 50% in GE, or LAA as we called it; this was specified in my original appointment letter, and I

56. Marc Mullinax (MHC 1977; Ph.D. Union Theological Seminary, 1993). Matthew Baldwin (Ph.D. University of Chicago Divinity School, 2002).

57. There were rumors, which I have never personally confirmed, that Trustees and alumni of MHC, not to mention members of the old French Broad Baptist Association and the Baptist State Convention of North Carolina, were unhappy about this shift of alignment in the Religion faculty. I do not know whether discontent about the Religion department among our constituencies led to the unsuccessful attempt by a faction of the board, in 2004, to install a fundamentalist President at the helm of MHC.

58. These were LAA 121, Character (a Great-books style course on human nature), LAA 221, Civic Life (a History-based survey of five exemplary human social-cultural systems), and LAA 231, Critique (a Philosophy-heavy survey of mostly Western ideas). The other two LAA courses were LAA 111, our college-introduction first-semester first-year seminar, and LAA 321, Creativity, a GE capstone type course which attempted to synthesize Aesthetic appreciation and Social Scientific problem solving.

understood what I was getting into. Or rather I imagined that I did. Unfortunately, in the experience of many instructors, the LAA courses were not as popular with the students as we would have liked.⁵⁹ Discontent with the curriculum built also among the faculty, and over time, staffing the courses became more difficult as many faculty openly preferred teaching in their program-specific courses.

From the 1960s and into the 2000s, I do not have concrete data, unfortunately, on Religion majors at MHC. The story I was told was that there were always just enough Religion majors to justify the Department staffing and to fill the upper level courses. The other story I was told was that our Religion majors, like MHC students in general, had long played a role in helping to define and defend a culture of theological moderation in North Carolina Baptist life. Although many Religion majors from MHC have gone into many different careers, at times as many as half of our graduates were going on into seminaries and careers in Christian ministry. The story we enjoyed circulating was that a great number of churches in Western North Carolina and East Tennessee had MHC Religion and Philosophy graduates in their pulpits.

Things were changing at MHC throughout the 2000s. After facing down our own close call with the “conservative resurgence” in North Carolina Baptist Association and the SBC in 2004, our President, Dan Lunsford, led a consortium of five Baptist colleges in North Carolina and, in 2008, managed to secure a formal separation of our institution from the North Carolina Baptists.

59. In this author’s opinion, the LAA courses were an example of how good intentions and big ambitions for a GE program can go awry, especially in the absence of a critical mass of committed and properly credentialed faculty. The curriculum had a “too many cooks in the kitchen” feel, and turf-wars over the syllabus content had resulted in problems with internal coherence and organization of the courses. Besides this, it is doubtful whether the students we were recruiting in the early 2000s were ready, fresh out of High School in the American Southeast, for the kinds of assignments we were asking them to complete.

As a result we lost a small stream of scholarship funds. But in return, the Board of Trustees of Mars Hill College was granted independence from the Baptists.⁶⁰

Based on my observations in the early 2000s, the number of declared religion majors at MHC was often between 2-3% of total enrollment. If you compare that to the NCES data for the same period, it meant that Religion and Philosophy at our MHC was able to maintain a market-share at something like three to four times larger than the national average. We were small, but I told myself that we were doing relatively well.

In 2008 I hadn't realized that having even a few students taking Baptist scholarship monies was supporting Religion program enrollments. Nor did I realize how important the other named Religion program scholarships were to the life of our major. First, after 2008, we lost Baptist monies; later, after 2013, we lost other named scholarships. The 20th century donors who established those scholarships had wanted to encourage future "church leaders" to major or minor in Religion. When we lost these scholarships, I initially didn't mourn their passing, partly because it seemed that our program had evolved in a way that no longer supported their goals. Also, the school just wasn't attracting students with an ambition to serve churches any more. In most years, we were struggling to find candidates who met the criteria of the scholarships.⁶¹ The Religion program scholarship monies were gradually incorporated into the general scholarship fund. Losing them probably had a greater impact on our major numbers than I realized.

60. Certainly I celebrated our independence. It led to positive changes on our campus, especially for student life, and especially for our LGBTQIA population of students.

61. For example, I recall that we had one scholarship meant to support 'a female member of a Baptist church from Gastonia, NC, who had articulated a call into ministry.' I can speak from personal experience that the several young women who fit those criteria whom I had worked with did in fact tend to be really great students for our program. However, by the second decade of the 21st century, we just weren't seeing them in attendance at MHU.

When the institution dropped LAA and adopted a new GE program in 2013—in the same year we also adopted a new name, Mars Hill University—initially I thought the Religion program would benefit greatly. No longer were we expected to teach in a sometimes contentious commons course sequence, offering courses outside of our areas of expertise. Religion and Philosophy courses could find homes in the new GE as options within multidisciplinary choice requirements; students could take a Religion or Philosophy course to meet a Humanities Perspective requirement; they could take one to meet a Global Perspectives requirement; they could take one to meet a GE Capstone requirement we called “Ideas and Innovations.” Theoretically, an MHU student could satisfy GE requirements with three Religion or Philosophy program courses. It was also possible, of course, for them to graduate while taking none. We accepted the risk. For the most part, it has paid off.

For the first few years, we managed fine under the new GE regime. We were careful about our course rotations, keeping an eye on our enrollment numbers. Our upper level classes were always too small for comfort, but because we could offer a lot of GE-related courses, we were able to keep our average enrollments (our Student to Faculty ratio in our courses) high enough to avoid scrutiny. In 2015, the President requested that we welcome a new visiting assistant professor to our ranks. For a brief time, we were four faculty again.⁶² Students were choosing our courses to meet their GE requirements. We were doing fairly well.

62. The Rev. Dr. Guy Sayles (SBTS 1981, D.Min. Emory, 1989) was added to our staffing in the 2015-2016 academic year. Intellectually gifted, curious and open, a great orator, and a friendly, thoughtful man, Sayles was a wonderful colleague; we therefore welcomed this unusual appointment, complying with the unconventional request of President and chief academic officer, who asked us to make space for Sayles among our program faculty. Sayles had just stepped down as the pastor of First Baptist Church of Asheville (where he had served since 2001), for personal reasons. As a graduate of the “pre-fall” SBTS, and an active Christian clergyman, his credentials closely resembled those of the old-school of Religion faculty at MHU.

Nevertheless throughout the second decade of the 21st century, our major numbers were falling. Our program-specific upper-level courses were always small. This had long been a problem in the eyes of the chief academic officer of our institution, who first me, as program coordinator, to devote more of our offerings to the GE-related courses, as early as Fall 2012. Over the years my colleagues and I have made many tweaks and adjustments to our curriculum and requirements. We built more choice into our requirements. We reduced our required hours from 39 to 33. We redesigned our two-year rotation of course offerings so that upwards of 80% of the courses we teach meet GE requirements. In some semesters, all of our offerings are GE-related courses. We became an almost exclusively service-oriented program. Perhaps predictably, this has not saved our majors. I haven't had enough majors with senior standing to hold a senior seminar course since Fall 2019. We graduate our majors one at a time, using independent studies so they can write their theses.

At present I have two majors, both about to graduate. I see no new majors in the pipeline. I am aware of four students who are Religion and Philosophy minors. Students seem to enjoy our courses. They are always filled. But we seemed to have dipped far below the national average for total degrees in Religion and Philosophy, as our majors make up about 0.2% of the total present enrollment at our institution. We are getting crushed.

Today, Mars Hill College recruitment focuses very heavily on Athletics (61% percent of our student body are in varsity sports). Our students come in wanting to major in Business, Nursing, Criminal Justice, Health and Human Performance, Allied Health Sciences, Psychology, Art Therapy, Social Work, and Education. Our student body today is also radically more diverse than it was 20 years ago. We are the most diverse institution in our local region. Our college boasts

large percentages non-white and international students.⁶³ By my observations, religious self-identification plays a notably less prominent place in our students lives than it used to. Still the majority of our students identify with some form of conservative and evangelical protestant Christianity. Non-denominational Evangelicals outnumber the Baptists. Our thoughtful and sedate weekly chapel services are basically empty of student participants. The biggest student ministry is Fellowship of Christian Athletes. But our students tend to identify only very superficially with conservative politics and religion. They aren't deeply engaged with either politics or religion. Their hearts are on the gridiron, the field, or the court. They are in school for practical reasons: it lets them get away from parents, continue to compete in the sport they love, and prepare for a hopefully successful career in the secular economy. They aren't that interested in books or big ideas. They are only infrequently "called into ministry," and they are not particularly curious about or open to critical engagement with "religion."

Our lack of majors, and lack of an assured role in GE, has made it difficult to make a persuasive case for the need to hire faculty to keep our programmed properly staffed. As a result, the churn in my program staffing over the past seven years has almost eliminated my program.

In 2016, my longtime colleague Kathy Meacham retired, leaving us with three Religion faculty.⁶⁴ When our senior colleague Marc Mullinax began serving as Faculty Chair and had a reduced load, and because of our Provosts' initiative to encourage "ethics across the curriculum," and because our new GE program included a first year seminar in "practical ethics" – while no ethicist remained on the university payroll, we were able to convince university leadership to hire

63. According to our Fall 2022 IPEDs report, MHU has 1032 students, of whom 51.1% are male and 48.9% female; 64% are white, 17% black, 9% hispanic, and 5% international ("non-resident alien").

64. Kathy Meacham (Ph.D. Temple University 1994) began her career at MHC in 1988 as an adjunct in Philosophy, was listed as an Instructor in the catalog in 1993, and was added to the Tenure track in 1994.

a replacement for our Philosopher. Elizabeth Whiting joined our program staff in 2017, and was also appointed as the Director of our new MHU Center for Ethics.⁶⁵ This nominally brought us up to four persons again. However because of course releases, we remained at an FTE of 3.125.⁶⁶ Two academic years later, Guy Sayles stepped down.⁶⁷ Then in the following year, near the start of the pandemic, Liz Whiting took a job at Wake Forest University.⁶⁸ Suddenly we were just two. Two years later, my colleague Marc Mullinax took incentivized early retirement at the end of Fall semester 2022.⁶⁹ I was the last Religionist standing. At the same time, I accepted a new role as Director (later Dean) of General Education.

Today, Religion and Philosophy is almost just me. Well, it's me and my hodge-podge of adjuncts.⁷⁰ Full time Religion faculty supply just 0.5 FTE because of my service release. Together with my adjuncts I manage to offer nine courses a semester, eight or nine of which meet GE requirements, equivalent to an FTE of 2.125. I have lost my vote in faculty meetings.

It remains an open question whether our cash-strapped institution would see fit to hire at least one full-time Religion and Philosophy professor. Our courses meet GE requirements, to be

65. Elizabeth Whiting (Ph.D. Emory 2017) was hired as Assistant Professor of the Philosophy of Ethics and first Director of the Center for Ethics. She was hired in August, and thus does not appear in the 2017–2018 academic year catalog.

66. We had four faculty, but at the time the four of us had, between us, seven course releases related to administrative service, which meant our FTE was only 3.125.

67. Guy Sayles (SBTS 1981, D.Min. Emory, 1989) faculty since 2015.

68. Elizabeth “Liz” Whiting Pierce, later simply Elizabeth Whiting (Ph.D. Emory 2017, was faculty for three full academic years, 2017–2020).

69. Marc Mullinax (Ph.D. Union Theological Seminary, 1993), faculty since 2001.

70. At present my adjuncts include Rev. Stephanie McLeskey, our university chaplain; Dr. Serena McMillan (MHC 2008; Ph.D. Vanderbilt, 2023), an Old Testament scholar and our assistant university chaplain; Chrystal Cook, M.Div., is an independent chaplain and a GE adjunct workhorse; Nathan McMahan (MHC 2004, M.A. Philosophy University of Memphis, 2007), Meredith Doster (Ph.D., Emory, 2017), and returned Emeritus colleague Marc Mullinax.

sure, but *so do other options*. We meet requirements, but we aren't required. And yes, our majors and minors *need* us. But there just aren't that many of them.

In 2023, as I lead my faculty colleagues in a Strategic-Plan mandated process of GE redesign for MHU, one thing I notice is that none of them mention religion very often. "Religion" is rarely mentioned as an important topic for students to study. Nor do they often mention "religion" specifically as an aspect of human culture and history that needs to be understood. They will talk about students understanding contexts, knowing world history, understanding diverse cultures. They probably assume, with good reason I think, that religious studies courses *could* meet requirements in a redesigned GE. Once we adopt goals and outcome statements for the new program, and specify actual requirements, they probably assume that religious studies courses *will* meet those requirements.

I don't think that is a safe assumption.

I think it is an important and interesting question to ask about the causes of the 90% decline in religion majors at my institution from 2% to .25% of total enrollment. With absolute certainty, I can state that I can view it to be multifactorial. In my darker moments, of course I blame myself. In more realistic moments, I look to cultural trends to the national trends in higher education, to the extremely fraught environment, in which higher education operates in the 21st century, to the general decline in popular support for the liberal arts, and humanities in particular, the widespread rejection of higher education among the right wing of American polarized American society, and so on. I look to the polarization of Americans of matters of religious identity, the rise of the category known as the nones who disavow any affiliation with any church, or tradition, as reflective of a generally applicable lack of interest in serious discourse

about “religion” and even a perception on the public, that even critical examination of discourse about “religion” is not to be taken seriously.

Like many of our students now, my colleagues at Mars Hill are mostly very secular in orientation. They, like students and parents, seem to assume that interest in “religion” is always a result of the religious orientation of the scholar or student. And while it remains extremely easy to excite masses of people with discourses that impinge upon or seemingly support “religious” views, convincing people to engage in academic and critical “religious studies” has seemingly become more difficult. Even at a small private institution, such as my own.

When I look at the history of “religious studies” at MHC and MHU, I have to admit that I see a great mismatch between “critical religious studies,” at least as I think it ought to be done, and as I think my colleagues in the North American Association for the Study of Religion think it should be done, and the form of “study of religion” that was the long-standing tradition at my institution, prior to the early 2000s. We view “religious studies” as a critical discipline focused on explaining specific forms of human behaviors, which are arguably “religious” (involving, for example, to borrow Melford Spiro’s phrase, “culturally patterned interactions with culturally postulated, superhuman beings,” or to borrow Bruce Lincoln’s phrasing, involving “discourse which aims to speak of things, eternal, and transcendent within authority equally eternal and transcendent”). But historically Baptists, who founded my school and dedicated it to “Christ and adolescents” clearly viewed what later became “religious studies” as a pedagogical exercise in social formation, meant for the development of expertise and capacity among the religious laity and church leaders.

I believe the history of religious studies at my institution raises important questions about whether what critical scholars want from “religious studies” matches what the public wants for their children. I speak not of what the public “needs.” Generally people decide for themselves

what they need and they vote with their feet, with their tuition dollars, with the monies they spend on subscriptions and books and streaming services, etc.

Americans say they want colleges and universities to develop students' critical thinking skills as a matter of enhancing the *career readiness* of graduates. But do Americans actually want us to teach their children to think critically about Religion? Do they really want us to advance the cause of *critique* in the study of religion?⁷¹

An outstanding recent publication from Bloomsbury, *Teaching Critical Religious Studies: Pedagogy and Critique in the Classroom* offers valuable pedagogical insights and practical tips to the would-be professor of critical religious studies.⁷² But I feel uneasy. What all the essays seem to have in common is they they context of a "the religious studies classroom" will continue to offer itself to scholar-teachers as a site for ongoing projects of critique. To me, this assumption does not feel safe or self-evident. The continuing existence of the "religious studies classroom" as a site of critique depends on an ongoing *constructive* political and historical process of negotiation between institutions, faculties, and their constituencies.

Developing skills and competencies are at the heart of general education programs, which rely for content on programs in the "humanities," which, in today's higher education institutions, have become "service programs." In these macro and micro- climates, where does "religious studies" fit in?

In the national context, the market-share of degrees in "Religion and Philosophy" appears to be dwindling towards zero. Given the logic of faculty development used by most provosts and deans, this trend tends to reduce faculties' capacity for staffing "the religious studies classroom."

71.

72. The volume is edited by Jenna Gray-Hildenbrand of Middle Tennessee State University, Beverly McGuire of the University of North Carolina Wilmington, and independent scholar Hussein Rashid (Bloomsbury, 2023).

People want career ready students, but do my constituencies (the conservative Christian board, the career-pragmatic conservative Christian students and parents, the local people who staff the institution) really want students to "think critically" about "religion"? They want students to be prepared for "the world of work." Sure, politically, they might want them to be critical of Islam; but do they want them to be critical about social formation in their own religious communities? Arguably, not.

We all know that "the study of religion in culture" cultivates all sorts of secondary and primary competencies economically valuable to employers and politically useful in the world. I would never dispute that. But potential utility is different from necessity. Our ability to sell ourselves as cultivating those competencies is limited (in my context) in part because my constituents perhaps rightly see "religious studies" as a hotbed of liberal-critical corrosion of theological and traditional institutional authority.⁷³

I would contend that a part of the struggle in a climate such as my own is that the institution itself sees our topic area as socially problematic and dispensable, assuming that the same skills we teach could arguably be cultivated in more popular areas of study like political science, criminal justice, or the equally under-enrolled and under-staffed field of sociology. The disciplinary context is the fungible element when it comes to developing NACE competencies, no?

It's not so much that religious studies classes will be deemed inappropriate as general education options, as it is that they are deemed optional. Therefore maintenance of a well qualified faculty in them is optional. This is what is happening in my institution. What is happening at yours?

73. I find that I can't teach about the Bible, e.g. without undermining the commonly held fundamentalist viewpoint about its authority that dominates among my actual students.

I think that it remains fairly clear that, absent a *religious motive* for requiring specific courses in religious studies that serve to tie people to life in a particular *religious tradition* (e.g. the required survey in Bible for a presumably Christian student population), the motive for including religious studies per se in university education appears to be absent. Studying and understanding religion is optional. We all know it is a *good option*, but it's optional. This the future existence of "the religious studies classroom" very much in doubt.

As Russell McCutcheon suggests, we should not be willing to surrender our sense of "tactical agency that might impact our situation."⁷⁴ Perhaps the path that leads away from our status as *optional* and towards a stronger position that would make us *indispensable* is professionalism of the field. It was suggested by J. Z. Smith thirty years ago, and it gets echoed by McCutcheon today. The micro-climates we inhabit are inhibited by our localism, our diversity, and our overall failure to produce a truly fungible *general education in religious studies* that would, for example, make the "introductory course in religion" an actually commensurate experience at public and private institutions (the way that say, the intro-level survey course in Psychology is fungible).

If we are going to convince people that they need university-level studies in Religion in *this America*, at *this moment in time*, we are going to need better arguments. But we first need to acknowledge that there's nothing *natural*, or necessary, about what we're offering at present.

74. Russell McCutcheon, "Religious Studies Wither and Why," *forthcoming in Religious Studies Review* (2024).