

The Religion Major and Liberal Education – A White Paper

About the White Paper

With the generous support of the Teagle Foundation, the American Academy of Religion's eighteen-month study of "The Religion Major and Liberal Education" featured the direct participation of over 300 faculty members and stakeholders on more than a dozen campuses.

The initiative's seed grant program funded studies and formal conversations regarding the major that were conducted on individual campuses. Over thirty proposals were submitted with grants awarded to ten institutions: Colorado Christian University, Eckerd College, Lafayette College, Louisiana State University, McHenry County College, University of Minnesota, University of New Mexico, Santa Clara University, Texas State University, and Wofford College.

A day-long leadership workshop on the topic of "The Religion Major and Liberal Education" was held at the 2007 American Academy of Religion in San Diego with twenty-five presenters and discussion leaders and over seventy-five registrants. A "wildcard" paper session at the same meeting featured five formal academic papers on the topic.

A special six-page section of *Religious Studies News* (October 2007) was dedicated to the initiative, with contributions from ten individuals.

The AAR-Teagle Working Group met in Atlanta (twice) and San Diego to discuss and digest the various reports, findings, and essays. The Working Group members would like to thank all of the participants for their invaluable contributions of time, energy, and ideas, and to offer special thanks to the Teagle Foundation for its generous support of this initiative. Under the leadership of Robert Connor, president, and Donna Heiland, vice president, the Teagle Foundation not only supplied financial resources in support of the project, but Bob, Donna, and Cheryl Ching gave generously of their time, experience, and wisdom.

THE RELIGIOUS STUDIES MAJOR IN A POST-9/11 WORLD: NEW CHALLENGES, NEW OPPORTUNITIES

I. Opportunities

New Perceptions

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

As the 1990s came to a close, *The Economist* was so certain of the imminent demise of organized religion that it featured God's obituary in its final issue of the millennium.¹ The editors' perspective was clear, if myopic. Church attendance in much of Western Europe was in free fall. "The cynical, questioning, anti-authoritarian West," often led by college professors, had just completed a century of relentless (and frequently effective) attacks on religious belief. For politicians, intellectuals, and even some clerics, "religion was becoming marginal to public life...[and] faith an irrelevance in foreign policy." The U.S. Secretary of State at the time, Madeleine Albright, was of the opinion that any given world problem was "complicated enough without bringing God and religion into it."² And when Henry Kissinger published his 900-page, career-summarizing *Diplomacy* in 1995, the word "religion" did not even appear in the index.³ Religion was on the way out. Or so the defenders of the Enlightenment canon declared.

How times have changed.

A recent study reports that the proportion of the world's population that claims membership in the world's four largest religions — Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, and Hinduism — actually *increased* over the past century, from 67 percent in 1900 to 73 percent in 2005.⁴ The number is predicted to reach 80 percent by 2050. Last year, Harvard faculty engaged in a very public debate over the importance of the study of religion in the university's core curriculum, with the approved core featuring multiple references to religion (if stopping short of mandating its study).⁵ Former Secretary of State Albright recently has become a highly vocal advocate of the public role of religion, writing that the failure of Americans to understand other religions "poses one of the great challenges to our public diplomacy."⁶ And a few months ago, *The Economist* printed a retraction of its notorious obituary, declaring: "Atheists and agnostics hate the fact, but these days religion is an inescapable part of politics."⁷

Of course, those of us in the field of religious studies know that religion has always been an inescapable part of politics, as well as an inescapable part of economics, foreign policy, social mores, and domestic interactions. The waning years of the twentieth century were certainly no exception. While the reality has not changed in recent years, public perceptions doubtlessly have. World events have led Americans to a new appreciation of the importance of knowledge about religion and to a vivid awareness of the dangers that emerge when we fail to recognize religion as a potent source of

motivation and behavior. In a world shaped not merely by 9/11 but by Iraq, Bosnia, Kashmir, and the West Bank — not merely by abortion, but by gay marriage, intelligent design, euthanasia, and stem cells — Americans increasingly accept the idea that we need better to understand the diverse range of religious phenomena. In one recent survey, over 80 percent of Americans responded affirmatively to the question, “Do you think people should learn more about religions other than their own?”⁸

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

A Return to Liberal Education?

Concurrent with (if largely coincidental to) these changes in public perceptions of the importance of religious literacy, there emerged a new (or reemerged an age-old?) debate about the quality of the education provided by American colleges and universities. In 2006, former Harvard President Derek Bok reported that American college students “improve far less than they should in such important areas as writing, critical thinking...and moral reasoning” and lamented that students often fail in “learning what they need to know to become active and informed citizens.”⁹ In 2007, UCLA’s Higher Education Research Institute, after surveying over 100,000 college students, released a national study of students’ engagement with issues of “meaning and purpose,” categorizing “spiritual development as a core component of a liberal arts education.”¹⁰ Meanwhile, the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) was conducting a multi-year study of liberal education that concluded, “The world in which today’s students will make choices and compose lives is one of disruption rather than certainty, and of interdependence rather than insularity.”¹¹ It called for a widespread shift in the “focus of schooling from accumulating course credits to building real-world capabilities.” In its influential 2007 report, *College Learning for the New Global Century*, the AAC&U mapped out four essential learning outcomes for all American college students:

* **Knowledge of Human Cultures and the Physical and Natural World**, “focused by engagement with big questions, both contemporary and enduring.”

* **Intellectual and Practical Skills**, including “critical and creative thinking,” “inquiry and analysis,” and “written and oral communication.”

* **Personal and Social Responsibility**, including “civic knowledge and engagement — local and global,” “intercultural knowledge and competence,” and “ethical reasoning and action.”

* **Integrative Learning**, including the synthesis and “application of knowledge, skills, and responsibilities to new settings and complex problems.”¹²

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

At a time when leaders in higher education are increasingly asking students to engage the large issues of life’s meaning and to think critically and responsibly about their role in the world, religious studies offers unique opportunities. Other disciplines such as philosophy, literature, and the creative arts doubtlessly engage questions of ultimate meaning. Yet these endeavors are largely the province of the talented few: the philosopher, the novelist, the poet, the painter, the dancer. The rest of us are the audience. While, to be sure, we can learn to appreciate the creations of these artists and scholars, we remain observers. Religion, by contrast, is largely created by its adherents. Millions of worshipers and hundreds of thousands of local religious communities — through their prayers, rituals, devotions, and acts of charity; their conversations about scriptures; and their hierarchies and institutions — shape and are shaped by the religious meanings of their traditions. If we truly wish for students to engage the tremendous variety of human understandings of life, death, suffering, love, and meaning, there is perhaps no more direct path than through the study of religion.

Clearly, the field of religious studies now finds itself at a pivotal moment. An unprecedented confluence of world events, public perceptions, and educational insights has created exciting possibilities for the growth and re-imagining of the field — possibilities that were unthinkable even a decade ago. The current moment presents important opportunities for the academic study of religion — and poses a series of challenges.

How we, as scholars of religion, respond to these challenges may well have much to say about the future of the discipline — not to mention the future of American public literacy about a broad range of religious phenomena.

II. Challenges

The Religious Studies Major in Transition

The religious studies major is in a state of flux. By most indicators, the field is growing, perhaps significantly. The number of religious studies majors increased by 22 percent in the past decade (to an estimated 47,000 students), with like percentage increases in the number of total courses offered, course enrollments, and faculty positions in the field.¹³ The number of religious studies majors at public institutions has grown even more

rapidly, by 40 percent during the same period, signifying a sea-change in the field. What was once a major situated largely within liberal arts colleges and denominationally-linked institutions is now establishing a widespread presence at state universities. In the past five years alone, new degree programs or departments of religion have been proposed or established at the University of Texas, Ohio State University, Florida State University, Georgia State University, the University of Minnesota, the University of North Carolina, Charlotte, the University of North Carolina, Asheville, and Towson State University, among other public institutions. In part shaped by this trend, the number of religion degree programs that are housed in free-standing religion departments also appears to be on the rise, with the total now topping 50 percent.

New Global Emphases

What constitutes the religious studies major is also undergoing rapid change. The American Academy of Religion conducted comprehensive surveys of undergraduate course offerings in religion in both 2000 and 2005. The results are striking, if not surprising. The number of sections taught of courses in Islam and Hinduism each almost doubled during the five-year period; by most indications, courses in Christian Theology, Old Testament, and New Testament were all flat or down. Sections of Introduction to World Religions grew in number; sections of Introduction to the Bible declined.¹⁴ There is a very real shift occurring in the field of religious studies — not a shift away from the study of Western religions per se (indeed, courses in the Introduction to Western Religions were up significantly during the five-year period), but one away from the study of Christianity in isolation.

The eighteen-month-long, American Academy of Religion study of the religious studies major, supported by the Teagle Foundation and resulting in this White Paper, found much evidence corroborating these numbers — as well as evidence of challenges that have emerged amid the rapid change.

Rethinking the “Seminary Model”

At religiously-linked schools such as Colorado Christian University (Council of Christian Colleges and Universities) and Santa Clara University (Jesuit), efforts are underway to re-conceive and to globalize the study of religion on campus. Colorado Christian provides a particularly interesting example of the transformation of the field. An evangelical university that “purposefully seeks to foster spiritual as well as intellectual growth,” Colorado Christian has just added its first comparative course in world religions and seeks to establish a religious studies major. On a campus where “Christianity isn’t a religion, it’s a life,” such undertakings can be controversial. As Frank Ames reports, “Although many parochial institutions maintain high academic standards for students and appoint capable scholars and teachers to their faculties — and often succeed in providing excellent education — it is fair to say that religious commitment at times diminishes empathy toward the Other and awareness of the Self, which are essential in religious studies.”¹⁵ While Ames and his colleagues at Colorado Christian are currently negotiating

the at times subtle lines between personal religious commitment and the scholarly study of religious traditions, they are convinced of the importance of the academic study of other religions amid a Christian devotional context.

At Santa Clara, the department is consciously involved in efforts to “explore the shape and function of theological studies in relation to other approaches to religion,” including political science, history, classics, women’s and gender studies, and environmental studies.¹⁶

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

Faculty and Administrator Misperceptions of the Field

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

But old perceptions die slowly: on one university campus in Texas, while 98 percent of the faculty agree that religion influences world events in significant ways, 10 percent of the faculty members are still of the opinion that religious studies courses are, by their very nature, unconstitutional.¹⁷ Such sentiments fly in the face of nearly unanimous legal consensus. As early as *Abington v. Schempp* in 1963, the United States Supreme Court declared the constitutionality of religious studies in the state setting. Speaking for the majority, Justice Thomas Clark wrote: “[I]t might well be said that one’s education is not complete without the study of religion. . . Nothing we have said here indicates that such study of the Bible or of religion, when presented objectively as part of a secular program of education, may not be affected consistent with the First Amendment.”¹⁸ Despite such assurances, the concerns of some faculty members, in Texas and elsewhere, who fear that religious studies necessarily entails an encroachment of religious practice into the classroom can still present real obstacles to the development of the discipline in state settings.

In some senses, what is happening in the Texas state system parallels the movements at Colorado Christian and Santa Clara — a transitioning of the religion major from a seminary to a comparative model. In Texas and other state-school contexts, though, the common fear faced is not that religious studies is not Christian enough, but rather that it might be too much so.

Evolving Interdisciplinary Efforts and Sub-fields

Amid already established programs of religious studies, the challenges are often of a different nature. At the University of Minnesota and Louisiana State University, efforts are underway to increase the interdisciplinary outreach of relatively small programs as a means of growing both curricular resources and institutional allies. In these settings, the size and scope of the religious studies major is growing, but largely through increased collaboration between core faculty and colleagues in cognate departments. The university appointment of a scholar in Hinduism, for instance, might be jointly shared between Religious Studies and Asian Studies. Gail Hinich Sutherland of Louisiana State observes, “This is going to mean that we probably have to leave the narrow textualists for seminaries and well endowed private universities. No one wants to trade scholarly profundities for glib generalities but we must take note of the world we are preparing our students to inhabit.”¹⁹ This is not to say that textual studies is unimportant to students of religious studies. Still, in certain interdisciplinary- and area-studies settings, emerging perceptions of the public importance of religious studies are already shaping the nature and direction of the field, pointing the way to courses and faculty appointments in some sub-fields and not in others. Indeed, such directions may be partially responsible for the rapid nationwide increase in the number of courses in areas such as Hinduism and Islam but decline in the number of courses in Bible and theology.

Defining and Assessing the Major

The faculties of other established programs of religious studies are grappling with the challenge of assessment. Amid a national wave of assessment initiatives, programs are scrambling to find ways to fit the notoriously broad and ever-evolving field of religious studies into rubrics both literal and metaphorical. Of the 30 programs submitting “seed grant” proposals to the AAR-Teagle initiative on the religious studies major, fully one-half already offer some kind of capstone course/experience to their majors. Many other programs are contemplating adding such a capstone. But what should be the nature of such courses, how specifically do they contribute to assessment, and are there alternate models for assessment that might be more effective? Eckerd College, for example, blends comprehensive examinations in three fields with a substantial paper that together form the basis for an extended conversation between the student and the departmental faculty. Rhodes College has experimented with a model of faculty-student research collaboration.²⁰

Clearly, part of the challenge in developing assessment strategies for the discipline is the fact that there is continuing debate about the appropriate *content* of the religious studies major (though Section III of this report suggests that the depth of these debates may be

exaggerated at times). Unlike a number of undergraduate disciplines that have accrediting bodies enforcing uniform content for the major or that spring from long-established disciplinary histories, religious studies is relatively new and evolving. Its strong interdisciplinary content complicates assessment further, as the major often straddles multiple departments. A final problem is the relative lack of reliable data collected by departments and the discipline about the career paths of students graduating with undergraduate degrees in religious studies.

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

Growth in Community Colleges

At any given moment, 46 percent of American college students are attending community and two-year colleges.²¹ While courses in world religions, introduction to religion, philosophy of religion, Bible, and even Islam are increasingly common in these settings (over 40 percent of community colleges now offer coursework in the field), few of the instructors — often burdened by high teaching loads and no travel support — are members of the AAR. By one accounting, of a total AAR membership of 11,000, only about 100 members are on the faculties of community colleges. In light of the rapid increase in the number of religious studies majors at state universities, it is safe to assume that community colleges provide the training ground for many majors in the field. For the subset of community college students who do not continue on to four-year institutions, their community-college education might provide their only formal opportunity to take courses in religious studies (As Steve Young has poignantly pointed out, this subset features a disproportionately large number of military personnel who will take their newfound knowledge of religion — or lack thereof — overseas to apply in real-world situations in Iraq, Afghanistan, and other locales). In many cases, contact, let alone coordination, between the faculties of four-year institutions and those of the “feeder” community colleges in their areas is all but non-existent. How can the discipline better coordinate efforts between community colleges and four-year institutions to educate students in religious studies and to provide greater access to the discipline?

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The challenges to the religious studies major are thus multiple: rapid growth, especially in public universities; a pronounced if uneven shift away from a seminary and toward a comparative model for the major; a range of misperceptions about the major and its goals on the part of administrators and colleagues; new, emerging subfields and interdisciplinary emphases; questions posed about the content of the major and its assessment; and the rapid and newfound growth of religious studies in community-college contexts.

The most common request made by the more than 300 faculty members who directly contributed to the AAR-Teagle initiative on the religious studies major was a desire for

more frequent and more structured conversations in sorting through the various challenges that they face on a day-to-day basis. All of us, as scholars or religion, continually grapple with questions about the major: How should it be conceived? What is essential for our students to learn? How can we convey and assess these essential outcomes effectively? Indeed, those of us in the new and changing field of religious studies often do not appreciate how rarely some of these same questions are considered in other disciplines. Religious studies scholars have been exceptionally circumspect about the bases of the discipline (often because they have been compelled by skeptics to justify the field's existence), and doubtlessly individuals in the field have devised innovative responses to a host of challenges, but thus far most of these responses have been formulated on a local, ad hoc basis.

A signal contribution of the AAR-Teagle initiative has been to provide contexts and support for colleagues to compare their emerging articulations of the nature and value of a religious studies major, the substance and shape that it should have, and the multiple ways in which it contributes to broader institutional and educational objectives. The American Academy of Religion has a unique and critical role to play in sustaining and advancing these conversations, but there are things that all of us, as scholars in the field, can and must do. The remainder of this White Paper is dedicated to mapping out seven concrete actions that we, as scholars of religion, can take for studying, defining, and strengthening the religious studies major.

III. Actions

The American Academy of Religion will celebrate the centennial of its founding in 2009. In conjunction with this landmark, it is appropriate that the AAR and its members commit themselves to a series of actions for improving the major.

Studying the Major

The discipline of religious studies must begin to define, develop, and nurture practices and structures for sustained scholarly discussion of the undergraduate major. Towards this end, the AAR-Teagle Working Group makes the following two recommendations to the AAR Board:

1. Starting with the 2009 Annual Meeting, the American Academy of Religion should inaugurate a consultation on “The Religious Studies Major” with the goal of integrating the section into the permanent structure of the Annual Meeting.

While the AAR Annual Meeting features hundreds of sessions each year, there is no continuing forum for the discussion of the scholarship of the major. Currently, multiple sessions focus on teaching and on strategies for individual courses, but we rarely pause as scholars to compare and engage ideas concerning the aim and content of the undergraduate curriculum in religious studies, as such. Adding a consultation on “The Religious Studies Major” would take an initial step toward filling this void. Individual sessions could focus on topics such as “The Capstone Course and Its Role in the Major,”

“Building Interdisciplinary Bridges,” “Integrating the Major and the Goals of Liberal Education,” “Balancing Required Courses and Electives,” “Making the Case for the Major with Administrators,” and “The Challenge of Teaching Ethics in the Major.” The aim would be to provide a forum for scholars to share challenges, best practices, successes, and failures. Additionally, the creation of a consultation on “The Religious Studies Major” would provide an administrative structure for a continuing conversation that might be sustained in various settings (including regional meetings) throughout the year. This structure would also serve to support step 2, outlined below.

2. Beginning in 2010 and continuing through 2012, the AAR should convene three annual, day-long workshops on the Religious Studies major, with each workshop focusing on a different theme related to the major.

Colleagues across the discipline are grappling with a range of issues — from trying to establish the religious studies major amid hostile environments to re-conceiving long-entrenched curricula to address the evolving needs of a liberal education. Sharing best practices for the formulation, implementation, and assessment of learning outcomes; exploring the successes and failures of particular curricula for the major; and exploring the lines between serving students’ academic and spiritual needs are all undertakings that demand give-and-take between participants over an extended period of time. The workshop model has proven highly effective in such contexts, not merely in allowing for dialogue but in helping to establish a core network of stakeholders and leaders in the discussion. There appears to be much enthusiasm for the workshop idea among the membership of the AAR: the day-long workshop on “The Religion Major and Liberal Education” held at the 2007 Annual Meeting in San Diego drew record-enrollment, filling with over 75 registrants from almost 50 institutions. Contingent on the ability to secure outside funding to support the initiative, the Working Group recommends that the AAR “jump starts” the scholarship of the major by holding a series of three annual “Leadership Workshops” on the major between 2010 and 2012.

Defining the Major

The discipline must continue to work to articulate the distinctiveness of the religious studies endeavor and to define the specific characteristics and value of the religious studies major. Towards this end, the Working Group makes the following two recommendations to the AAR Board:

1. Beginning in 2009, the AAR should parallel its highly successful “Syllabus Project” web pages by launching a new web feature, “The Major Project,” compiling discipline-wide information on central aspects of the undergraduate major.

The AAR’s “Syllabus Project” collects almost 400 syllabi for dozens of different courses submitted by individual faculty members. In an ever-evolving field, it affords scholars of religion — new and seasoned alike — the opportunity to peruse the nature, details, and

content of their colleagues' course offerings on a range of topics. It also allows scholars to locate and to network with colleagues in the discipline who are engaged in teaching projects similar to their own. The web pages featuring the "Syllabus Project" have proven highly popular among the AAR membership, becoming the second most visited pages on the entire AAR website.

It is proposed that in 2009 the AAR should launch parallel web pages dedicated to "The Major Project" and collecting data specifically on that nature of religious studies majors from a range of institutions. The AAR membership will be asked to submit descriptions of the major requirements, prerequisites, and rationales from their home institutions. They also will be asked to volunteer their own contact information so that they might serve as resources in response to any questions that might emerge. The goal here is simple but important: a free exchange of information. If faculty members on one campus are seeking a way to conceive (or to re-conceive) of major requirements, they will be able to turn to these web pages as a clearinghouse for ideas and approaches utilized by colleagues on other campuses. As a result of the Teagle-supported Leadership Workshop at the 2007 Annual Meeting, on the major, three dozen plans already have been collected in this effort.

2. In light of a growing consensus about the characteristics of the religious studies major, the discipline and its members should work to distinguish the religious studies major from undergraduate majors in theology, history, philosophy, sociology, classics, and other distinct disciplines.

The AAR-Teagle initiative on the religious studies major has revealed at least one important, and somewhat surprising, truth: despite the diversity of the field, there is emerging a strong and growing consensus about the basic characteristics of the religious studies major. In part prompted by recent world events and in part shaped by educational movements, religious studies programs in almost every setting — public, private, denominational, and secular — are converging upon certain core concepts as essential to the major. These concepts can be found in the directions taken by religiously-linked programs such as Santa Clara and Colorado Christian, in public university settings such as Texas and Louisiana State, and in liberal arts contexts such as Eckerd and Rhodes.

While setting these characteristics forth is, at best, a preliminary step in a larger discussion, it is nonetheless important that we do so — to assist our colleagues in their discussions with administrators who might otherwise blend the lines between the study of religion and its practice, to make clear to others and to ourselves the links between the discipline and the essential components of a liberal education, and to avoid misrepresenting and mislabeling the major as something it is not to students and colleagues alike. In discussions with dozens of scholars who are seeking to establish or to refine undergraduate majors in religious studies, several common characteristics emerge. The religious studies major is, by its very nature:

* **Intercultural and Comparative:** The major explores more than one religious tradition and engages the phenomena of religion comparatively across and within cultures.

* **Multi-disciplinary:** The major promotes the understanding and application of a range of methodological and theoretical approaches to religious phenomena.

* **Critical:** The major teaches students to examine and engage religious phenomena, including issues of ethical and social responsibility, from a perspective of critical inquiry and analysis of both the other and the self.

* **Integrative:** The major applies theoretical knowledge of religious phenomena to lived, practical contexts, both historical and current.

* **Creative and Constructive:** The major employs knowledge of religious phenomena and the skills of religious studies in the solving of complex problems, including those raised in the personal and social engagement of issues of life, death, love, violence, suffering, and meaning.

There are obvious and strong affinities between the characteristics of the religious studies major and the AAC&U outcomes of liberal education, discussed in Section I. These links should be embraced and strengthened through our continued articulations of the major, the development of clear learning outcomes, and the implementation of robust assessment plans.

While there are many worthwhile manners by which students can study religion, not all such approaches are appropriately labeled a “major in religious studies.” The field of religious studies has rightly come to mean things distinct from the disciplines of history, theology, sociology, philosophy, and so forth. To persist in labeling either a degree that examines a single religion or one that explores multiple religions from a single methodological perspective a “major in religious studies” is to fuel confusion on the part of colleagues, administrators, students, and the public. It is also, by definition, to disassociate the major in religious studies from at least some of its core connections to the values of a liberal education.

Strengthening the Major

One clear challenge to efforts to improve the major in religious studies is the fact that the discipline and its members currently lack key data about certain central issues. A second challenge is that many of us find our programmatic assessment plans (as well as our knowledge of assessment, in general) to be in their infancy. Toward the end of addressing some of these deficiencies, the Working Group makes the following three recommendations to the AAR Board:

1. Beginning in 2009, the AAR should assist in the coordination of several pilot studies on individual campuses dedicated to the tracking of religious studies majors after graduation and in the collection of data with regard to students’ career paths.

As a prototypical course of study in liberal education, the undergraduate major in religious studies rightly makes no claim to being a professional degree. Its requirements and nature should not solely or even primarily be determined by their usefulness and applicability to the job market, per se. Such valid sentiments, however, do not mean that our responsibilities to our students end at graduation or that what we require in the major should not be informed by an awareness of the lives students will lead after college. Almost 50,000 undergraduates currently are majoring in religious studies in the United States. Yet most religious studies programs have only limited and anecdotal knowledge of what happens to students after their final classes. As one faculty member at Wartburg College put it, at present “it’s really more a matter of [students] keeping track of us than our keeping track of them.”²²

What have students found helpful about the religious studies major? What needs to be improved? Is the discipline equipping students with skills that they feel serve them well in life beyond college? Effective assessment clearly hinges, at least in part, upon student input, and there are rich insights to be mined from graduates who have gained the perspective afforded to them by life experiences and a little distance from their undergraduate studies. The discipline needs to develop a set of best practices for the tracking of undergraduate majors post-graduation, including models for overcoming the practical challenges in the process and examples of survey instruments that might be employed in various contexts. Contingent upon the securing of external funding for the initiative and perhaps in cooperation with the AAR Job Placement Task Force, beginning in 2009 the AAR should partner with a group of three or four institutions to pilot potential tracking techniques and survey instruments with an eye towards sharing effective models with the larger AAR membership.

2. Beginning in 2009, the AAR should coordinate several pilot programs designed to connect community-college faculty who are teaching courses in religion with colleagues in the field at four-year universities in the same geographical area. The goal will be to produce best practices for fostering effective collaborations between such faculties.

As the field of religious studies matures, it increasingly must address challenges that, in some instances, have been faced by other academic disciplines for decades. Twenty years ago, the number of community colleges offering courses in religious studies was likely nominal; today, over 40 percent of community colleges offer courses in the discipline. How faculties at two-year and four-year institutions collaborate to train students in religious studies will increasingly shape the health of the discipline in the years ahead. There is a need for scholars of religious studies to develop mechanisms that are effective in bridging the often deep institutional and bureaucratic chasms between two- and four-year schools and to establish common expectations, content, and goals for curricula in the major. In cases in which community colleges are not offering courses in religious studies, the faculties at neighboring four-year institutions might serve as critical resources for fostering awareness of the nature and importance of the discipline. Contingent on the securing of external funding to support the initiative, in 2009 the AAR should begin to coordinate a series of two to three pilot programs connecting the faculties of established

religious studies programs at four-year universities with the faculties at neighboring community colleges. The goal will be to develop and then to share with the AAR membership a series of best practices for productive collaboration in such contexts.

3. Starting with the 2009 Annual Meeting, the American Academy of Religion should inaugurate a consultation on “The Assessment of the Religious Studies Major” with the goal of integrating the section into the permanent structure of the Annual Meeting. In 2010, the AAR should add to the proposed “Major Project” web pages listing assessment plans from various institutions.

The argument that calls for increased collaboration and consultation among members of the AAR with regard to the nature and structure of the major also applies to the major’s assessment once it has been established. As we learn more about our students, their strengths and their weaknesses, we need simultaneously to establish structures that will promote a sustained dialogue on effective means of maintaining and refining what we do well and identifying and improving what we do less well. Establishing a consultation at the Annual Meeting is a first step in this direction. Sharing assessment plans and ideas through the AAR website provides another means of promoting dialogue and the exchange of ideas. As with the proposed “Major Project,” the goal of the accompanying Assessment web pages will be for colleagues from across the discipline to voluntarily submit the assessment plans from their home institutions and agree to serve as resources to others who might have questions or need advice.

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Even collectively, the seven actions outlined in this section represent only a starting point for a much larger discussion of the religious studies major within the discipline. Through developing mechanisms for a sustained conversation about the major, defining the major more fully and carefully, filling gaps in our present knowledge about the major, and assessing it more robustly, the hope is that we, as scholars of religion, can foster a rich and productive dialogue that creates a genuine “scholarship of the major” in the years ahead.

IV. The Task Ahead

In 1999, precisely the time when *The Economist* was releasing its obituary of God, historian D. G. Hart was publishing an obituary of another sort. In *The University Gets Religion: Religious Studies in American Higher Education*, Hart presented a bleak picture of the future of academic study of religion, declaring it a “field in search of a rationale.” He concluded: “as religious studies strives to sever ties to communities of faith, it cannot do so without self-immolation.”²³

Like *The Economist*’s declaration of God’s demise, Hart’s prediction may have been premature. The last decade has seen rapid growth in the academic study of religion and, by many indicators, this growth has been spurred on by an emerging consensus, both public and academic, about what the scholarly study of religion entails and why it is important to students and society. If Madeleine Albright is correct that the failure of

Americans to understand world religious traditions “poses one of the great challenges to our public diplomacy,” then the members of the American Academy of Religion face an awesome responsibility in the years ahead. With almost 50,000 students majoring in religious studies in American colleges and universities at any given time (and with that number increasing rapidly), we, as scholars of religion, will play a significant role in shaping what the next generation of Americans knows, thinks, and does with regard to religion. Clearly, our efforts to improve the major in religious studies and to strengthen its links to the goals of liberal education are anything but purely academic.

Notes

¹ *The Economist*, December 23, 1999.

² See, for instance, Albright's recollections in *Religion and Ethics Newsweekly*, May 19, 2006.

³ Henry Kissinger, *Diplomacy*, Simon & Shuster, 1995.

⁴ World Christian Database, 2007; cf. *The Economist*, November 1, 2007.

⁵ For one summary, see Jeremy Caplan, "As Harvard Goes . . .," *Time*, March 5, 2007.

⁶ Madeleine Albright, *The Mighty and the Almighty*, Easton Press, 2003.

⁷ *The Economist*, November 1, 2007.

⁸ Robert Wuthnow, "Religious Diversity in a 'Christian Nation': American Identity and American Democracy," in Thomas Banchoff, ed., *Democracy and the New Religious Pluralism*, Oxford University Press, 2007.

⁹ Derek Bok, *Our Underachieving Colleges: A Candid Look at How Much Students Learn and Why They Should Be Learning More*, Princeton University Press, 2006.

¹⁰ Higher Education Research Institute, "Spirituality in Higher Education: A National Study of Students' Search for Meaning and Purpose, 2006, <http://www.spirituality.ucla.edu/>.

¹¹ *College Learning for the New Global Century: A Report from the National Leadership Council for Liberal Education and America's Promise*, Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2007.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ All statistics in this paragraph are derived from the American Academy of Religion, Census of Religion and Theology Programs, 1996, 2000 and 2005.

¹⁴ American Academy of Religion, Census of Religion and Theology Programs, 2000 and 2005. Because the numbers of institutions responding to the survey differed during the two survey periods, the statistics cited in this paragraph are based upon the number of sections offered of the particular course as a percentage of the total number of sections offered during each survey period.

¹⁵ Frank Ames, Establishing the Religious Studies Major: Stories from the Colorado Christian University Trenches," Leadership Workshop, "The Religion Major and Liberal Education," 2007 AAR Annual Meeting, San Diego.

¹⁶ Paul G. Crowley, "Religious Studies in A Jesuit Context," *Religious Studies News*, October 2007, 24.

¹⁷ Rebecca Raphael, "Religious Studies in Texas: A Mission Without a Major," Leadership Workshop, 2007 AAR Annual Meeting, San Diego.

¹⁸ For a discussion of *Abington* and other constitutional cases, see Stephen Prothero, *Religious Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know—And Doesn't*, Harper San Francisco, 2007, 127-129.

¹⁹ Gail Hinich Sutherland, "Report on the AAR/Teagle Seed Grant," January 2008.

²⁰ Bernadette McNary-Zak, Rhodes College, Leadership Workshop, 2007 AAR Annual Meeting, San Diego.

²¹ Kay Randall, "No Average Student: Community College Students Not Your Typical Undergraduates," <http://www.utexas.edu/features/2--5/college/index.html>, cited by Steven Young, "Out of Sight. Out of Mind: Religious Studies and the Community College," Wildcard session on "The Religion Major and Liberal Education" at the 2007 Annual Meeting of the AAR, San Diego. All other statistics and quotations in the paragraph are taken from Young's essay.

²² For a fuller discussion of these issues, see Darby Kathleen Ray, "Do You Know Where Your Students Are?: Tracking Undergraduate Religion Majors," *Religious Studies News*, October 2007, 25.

²³ D.G. Hart, *The University Gets Religion: Religious Studies in American Higher Education*, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999, 10.

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