

## **“Religion in the Rocky Mountains and Great Plains” Conference**

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### **Summary**

In October 2012, the University of Denver will host the first of three Presidential Debates, which will be devoted to domestic issues. Questions of religious identity and practice will play an important role in the 2012 Presidential Election, whether with respect to candidates, voter preferences, or national identity. The University has already taken steps to include in certain courses and public programming a focus on various aspects of the relationship(s) between religion and politics, and how religious identity and practice may shift from region to region. This project proposes expanding that focus beyond the University of Denver community.

This proposal requests funding to support a one-day conference on religion in the Rocky Mountains and Great Plains, which would bring together scholars from around the region. This conference will probe the specific contours of religious identity and practice (or lack thereof, as secularism must also be considered), and provide an opportunity to connect with and learn from colleagues in what is an expansive but often low-population-density region.

### **Project Description**

This proposal envisions “Religion in the Rocky Mountains and Great Plains” as a one-day conference that engages DU, Denver-area and regional faculty, students, and our public constituents in inter-disciplinary discussion of current research on religious identity and practice in the Rocky Mountains & Great Plains. It takes advantage of the University of Denver’s hosting of the October 3 Presidential Debate, using it and the election season as an opportunity for bringing greater interest to issues of religious identity and practice in Colorado and the other states of the Rocky Mountains and Great Plains. It further envisions the conference as a catalyst for sustained regional community building among faculty and graduate students.

The conference will consist of four panels, either arranged denominationally (for example, one on Christianity, one on Islam and Judaism, one on spirituality and “Eastern” religions, and one on secularism) or thematically (for example, one on religion and new media, one on philosophy of religion, one on emergent churches, and one on freedom of religion). These panels will enable a significant number of regional scholars to present their current research, fostering a broader sense of community and facilitating intellectual engagement across universities and disciplines. They will collectively highlight the region’s religious diversity, while also probing specific manifestations of faith, practice, and identity. Each panel will feature scholars from around the region and will include at least one graduate student, to support career stage diversity. Panels will take an inter-disciplinary approach, with multiple disciplines represented, and will leave ample time for an interactive discussion with audience members.

The participatory element of the conference will conclude with a final session: a roundtable discussion in which panel chairs present the highlights of each panel, reflect on the day's presentations, and offer suggestions for future research. The conference will conclude with a keynote speech by an eminent regional scholar.

### **Benefits for AAR Members in the Region**

#### *Intellectual Support*

This conference will shed new light on the religious diversity of the Rocky Mountains and Great Plains, providing a forum for the discussion and dissemination of current research on expressions of religious faith, identity, and practice around the region – including expressions of secularism. It will consider minority as well as majority communities, and investigate how religious identities and practices are evolving in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

#### *Networking and Relationship Building*

This conference will bring together participants from around the Rocky Mountains and Great Plains region, including faculty and graduate students, and will attract undergraduate students and interested community members from greater Denver. This audience, estimated at approximately 80 people in total, will directly engage with or experience the conference as it happens. The goal for them is an enriching intellectual and community-building experience, which the conference will facilitate by presenting stimulating panels during the formal sessions, and providing opportunities for informal conversations during the lunch and coffee breaks.

#### *Graduate Student Professional Development*

This conference will support the professional development of graduate students in the Rocky Mountains and Great Plains region by including them as panelists and attendees. For panelists, it will provide an opportunity to present their work in a collegial setting, with scholars at a range of career points. For panelists and attendees, it will provide an opportunity to learn about current research around the region, and to meet scholars in their field.

### **AAR Regional Development Funding**

AAR funding will support this conference by making it financially more feasible for participants and attendees, thus opening it up to a broader, region-wide array of participants. The funding that will underwrite the conference program development, publicity, and media set-up charge will eliminate the need to charge a registration fee, while the lunch and coffee break will make participation in this conference less cost-prohibitive – particularly for graduate students and faculty who do not have access to travel funding from their home institutions. Reducing the cost of attendance and participation will directly serve the goal of this conference by encouraging a broader spectrum of participants. Region-wide participation will not only improve the quality of the scholars who participate, but will also facilitate the building of region-wide intellectual connections that may lead to future research collaborations.

**Adaptability to Other Regions**

This conference will adapt itself easily to other AAR regions, whether as discrete conferences in particular AAR regions or as a series of connected conferences that might collectively investigate religious identity and practice in other regions of the United States. Conference organizers look forward to sharing information and experiences and to collaborating with conference organizers in those other regions.