

AAR Regional Development Grant Application “Religions Texas: Mapping Diversity”

1. Contact Information

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2. Narrative

The Institute for Diversity and Civic Life and the University of Texas at Austin Department of Religious Studies are partnering on an extensive digital humanities project to map and document the religious diversity of Texas: “Religions Texas.” This proposal requests funding for a two-day consultation to develop the conceptual and methodological framework for this initiative. The consultation will bring together scholars of religion and digital humanities as well as leaders in public humanities.

As the second largest, second most populous, and fastest growing state in the country, Texas holds a place of national prominence. In the past 30 years, Texas has seen significant demographic shifts. It is among the top three destinations for new immigrants. The state no longer has an Anglo majority. Its largest city, Houston, now ranks as the most ethnically diverse city in the nation. While Texas is well known as home to the largest number of evangelical Protestants in the US, it also has the largest Muslim population and the second largest Hindu population in the country. Yet few resources exist that document the breadth and depth of Texas’s religious landscape, and those that do focus primarily on Christianity. As Texas continues to experience economic, population, and immigration growth, this presents a valuable opportunity for impactful public humanities programs that facilitate conversations about religious diversity and civic life.

The long-term goal of the Religions Texas mapping project is to develop and maintain a publicly accessible, engaging, and sustainable digital resource on religious diversity in Texas for scholars, educators, students, journalists, policy makers, public service professionals, and community leaders. Understanding religious diversity in Texas, both

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past and present, necessitates a nuanced view of the continuities, shifts, and ever-changing complexities of its religious landscape. And it requires an extensible digital resource with multiple sets of data, both quantitative and qualitative, gathered through interdisciplinary methods, such as oral history, ethnographic interviews, participant observation, and textual collections. Unlike existing databases and digital resources in the state, Religions Texas will include data on “new immigrant” religions, like Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam. It also will account for the religious restructuring of the “established” traditions of Protestantism, Catholicism, and Judaism, as well as the hemispheric patterns that have led to the emergence of Pentecostal and Charismatic movements in Texas. Distinct from existing mapping projects, Religions Texas will feature a balance of qualitative and quantitative data.

This project is currently at a nascent stage. Ultimately, we envision a large-scale research agenda coupled with a layered technology product where research will be stored, organized, and disseminated. However, first, we have a number of questions to explore in terms of the most effective and rigorous approaches for mapping religious and cultural diversity, finding, analyzing, and visualizing meaningful patterns of data, and best practices for public engagement. Many of these questions sit at the cutting edge of scholarship on religion and digital humanities and we seek broad input on these issues. Thus, for this first phase, we will convene an interdisciplinary group of scholars of religion and culture as well as leaders in digital and public humanities. Through a two-day consultation we will explore theoretical, conceptual, and methodological issues related to: 1) the study of religion in Texas as a micro-field, 2) mapping and delineating religion and diversity, 3) creating publicly engaging and accessible resources that foster religious literacy, and 4) digitally organizing data in meaningful and effective ways. The consultation will delve into the relationship between the research agenda and the technology, exploring how each informs the other, and consider the resources available for this mapping work.

The consultation will consist of a keynote address and four dynamic roundtables, each led by a moderator and four presenters. We will extend a Call for Proposals so that we may reach a broader group of scholars in the region. A limited number of additional participants from UT and other regional universities will also be included. While the consultation will be invitation-only, the keynote address will be open to the public. All talks, roundtables, and discussions will be carefully documented through multimedia formats, which will be shared on the project website.

We will compile and assess the results of the consultation in a white paper that documents the event, synthesizes its conceptual insights and conclusions, and makes recommendations for next steps as well as a strategic technology plan. From there, we will engage a graduate student from the UT School of Information to develop an early prototype as a capstone project. This will involve drawing from the white paper to develop a set of comprehensive technical specifications, including a strategic plan for phasing out the entirety of the project, which will then inform the development of the early prototype.

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After completing the first stage of this project through this grant period, we will seek funding for further prototyping and production of this technology product as well as support for research activities. While many details of our technology are still emerging, we are committed to creating a robust, extensible, open, sustainable, and well-documented product that will allow for growth and support years of research and the continual documentation of the changing dynamics of diversity in Texas.

3. Regional significance

This project offers a multiplicity of regional benefits—from convening scholars in the region through the consultation to fostering scholarly collaboration through ongoing research to facilitating an enhanced understanding of the dynamics of religious diversity in the Texas region.

Religions Texas is distinctive in its focus on Texas as a geographic, social, and cultural place, one that attends to a multiplicity of religious and cultural narratives of Texas, exploring both the center and the margins. In addition to investigating the varieties of religion in Texas, we also seek to examine how this multiplicity comes together in meaningful ways to shape the place that is Texas. This project will explore the relationships between religious, cultural, and civic narratives. How do religious and cultural identities shape civic identities? How do they allow diverse groups to participate in the public sphere?

Documenting the diversity of Texas promises a broader impact beyond just the resource it offers scholars and citizens within the state. It provides insight into the social, historical, and political dynamics of a minority-majority population shift, which Texas reached in 2004 and many other American states will follow within the next two decades. Moreover, this project extends a new narrative of American religious diversity. Many older narratives of American diversity concentrate on the East and West Coasts. By putting focus on Texas, a new immigrant destination, this project will shape the discourse on how this region fits in the larger American narrative, as well as how diversity is shaped and engaged in regionally particular ways.

4. Timeline

Phase I: Consultation Planning and Preparation (July –September 2016) Tasks in this phase include distributing a Call for Proposals, finalizing the participant list and logistics of the Consultation, creation of the project website and social media page, and publicizing the keynote address.

Phase II: Consultation Event (September 22 - 24, 2016) This two-day intensive workshop will be held at the University of Texas, co-sponsored by the University of Texas Department of Religious Studies and the Institute for Diversity and Civic Life. The event will be meticulously documented through multiple media, including video, audio, and photographs.

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Phase III: Compilation and Dissemination of Consultation Proceedings (October December, 2016) We will post key findings and media files of the keynote and discussions on the project website as well as in the UT Digital Repository. The discussions and results of the workshop will be compiled in a white paper that will also make recommendations for a strategic technology plan. This will inform the prototype development and serve as a conceptual foundation for the larger project of mapping religions in Texas.

Phase IV: Early Prototyping (January - June 2017) For this phase, we will engage a graduate student from the UT School of Information for a capstone project that will entail developing a prototype for a layered technology product that involves an extensive, searchable research data repository, accessible by an open, well-documented API, and a custom data access portal allowing for compelling data visualizations, robust data searching, and agile access to the deep relationships within the religious diversity of Texas.

5. Budget

IDCL project director stipend	\$
Project assistant stipend (Consultation documentation, promotion, dissemination: \$/hr x 40 hours)	
Consultation meals (4 meals @ \$/person x 25; 1 meals @ \$/person x 25)	
Consultation materials (folders, name tags, paper x 25 attendees)	
Keynote honorarium	
Keynote travel (airfare=\$, hotel=\$/night x 2)	
Attendee travel support	
Consultation meeting space	In-kind, UT
Total	\$
UT contribution	
Local grant (tentative)	
Requested AAR Regional Grant	\$