

The AAR Graduate Survey at First Blush

Some Initial Thoughts on Institutional Definition and Doctoral Areas of Concentration

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THE AMERICAN ACADEMY of Religion seeks to develop reliable data on the field, and it has taken an important step toward that goal in its recent surveys of undergraduate and graduate programs. The difficulties entailed in such an undertaking will be familiar to most readers of this piece, but merit brief rehearsal: as even a cursory review of *Openings* illustrates, programs in religion at the undergraduate level are idiosyncratic, with reference both to what individual appointments are expected to cover (Hinduism and New Testament, e.g.), and to each department's self-understanding and articulation. Graduate programs also have their own self-understandings and articulations, and it will be especially interesting and crucial in the future to learn what we can about how they do and do not "map onto" undergraduate curricula. In seeking data from the graduate programs, the AAR hopes to compile a database of how those who teach undergraduates are trained, and thus to achieve a reliable and ongoing taxonomy of the field of graduate education and, presumably, some sense of how graduate education shapes undergraduate instruction in religion.

My assignment is to offer preliminary observations on the data in the graduate survey. What we have is responses from 60 of the 99 institutions contacted (15 Canadian institutions on the original mailing list had to be dropped due to under-reporting). While possibly less reliable than the undergraduate survey, the graduate survey presents some useful and interesting data. Space conveniently excuses the challenge of a full review (the survey itself is 40-plus pages in length), and in what follows I focus on two tables: the actual names of the 60 participating programs, and the "Areas of Concentration" within which students at these institutions pursue their programs of doctoral study. A general reason for my choice of these tables is that the data they provide is the most straightforward self-reporting in the survey; there is the least room in these responses, and in a reader's analysis, for misconstrual of a program's self-understanding. Other survey data, perhaps especially the numbers that describe placement, are comparatively opaque. But each of these tables also holds intrinsic interest. As the list of eligible institutions (see Web address below) underscores, the survey on graduate programs raises taxonomic questions about graduate education in religion. I want to suggest that such questions begin, and may in fact end, with questions of nomenclature. Table II's list of areas of concentration highlights important issues about the location of the study of Christianity in graduate education, and the relationship of confessional and non-confessional perspectives within the academy.

What's in a Name?

The full list of eligible institutions, including those who responded, is available at www.aarweb.org/department. The institutional names listed are the ones they provided (they are not chosen from a pre-set listing). The immediate reaction some will have to this table is that it is "apples and oranges." These appear to be very different institutions in terms of their purposes in devoting themselves to the study of religion. We find departments of religion and theological seminaries, schools of theology, religion, and divinity, and variations on these. The student at Andrews Theological Seminary and her counterpart at Syracuse University's Department of Religion would appear to have very different concep-

tions of the business of their graduate education. So how we organize this list of institutions into some set of categories will be crucial to understanding both who is in this survey and, by extension, who is doing graduate education in religion.

Editor's Note:

The Academy surveyed those universities, theological schools, and seminaries in the United States and Canada that offered an academic doctoral program in religious studies or theology. We defined academic doctoral programs as those in which students earn a doctorate with the intent of becoming scholars, researchers, or professors. The purpose and nature of such a doctoral degree must be to prepare individuals for research and teaching in religion and theology. Typically the resultant degree would be the PhD, ThD, STD, DHL, or DHS. We were not soliciting information on professional doctoral degrees whose intent and purpose is to further an individual's administrative, or counseling competence, such as the ministerial degree.

The following chart, which I construct from the list of responding institutions, offers an elementary organization by their common designation.

Table I

Participating Program's Designation	# respondents
Department of Religion/Religious Studies	20
Theological Seminary	12
Department of Theology/Theological Studies	7
School of Theology	6
School of Religion	3
University-related Divinity School	2
Seminary	1
Department of Near Eastern and Judaic Studies	1
Free-standing Divinity School	1
Committee on the Study of Religion	1
School of Religious Studies	1
Institute of Religion	1
Graduate Division of Religion	1
Graduate Department of Religion	1
Theological Union	1

The immediate question raised by such "sorting" has to do with the degree to which this reflects a common syntax that supports even this minimal taxonomy. Is there a difference between "religion" and "religious studies"? Does the moniker "school of" transform or merely underscore the differences implied in the institutions that follow that phrase with

theology (6), religion (3), and religious studies (1)? What difference is there, for instance, between my own institutional home, a university-related divinity school, and the Committee on the Study of Religion at Harvard, with which we occasionally compete directly for PhD students? (It would be especially interesting to hear the answer to this question from the Harvard Divinity School, which offers a ThD but did not respond to the survey.)

Such questions would seem to lend credence to the much-invoked distinction between theology and religious studies. Following that lead, there are 30 "theological" and 29 "religious studies" respondents. If we examine the programs in each, however, the distinction does not disappear but it does become more complex. An example underscores the complexity. Princeton University's Department of Religion, a respondent, includes in its curriculum doctoral areas of concentration in ethics and in biblical studies. Princeton Theological Seminary, also a respondent, also includes these areas of concentration in its doctoral curriculum. Despite these parallel programmatic structures that ensure their common inclusion in the survey, and student cohorts that might well identify their interests similarly and apply for at least some of the same jobs, they are not in my experience commonly grouped together in discussions of graduate education in religion. The reasons for this are not unrelated to the fact that one calls itself a department and resides in a university, while the other is a free-standing theological seminary. Some, perhaps many, feel confident that they know the difference between the two New Jersey respondents. But any account that offers a straightforward

and uncomplicated distinction will quickly bump into the important fact that these two responding institutions share a principled and vigorous endorsement of academic standards. This raises a set of questions that merit more serious conversation than they have received, about classic distinctions between the academic and the confessional in the study of religion.

A look at these names, and consideration of the questions they raise, also invites a caveat concerning the degree to which the survey actually captures graduate education in religion in the United States. There always has been, is today, and should always be significant scholarship on and teaching of religion not only in the departments, programs, schools, and committees that make such work their explicit business, but in related departments (philosophy, anthropology, literature, history, etc.) at many of the academic institutions to which some respondents belong. For understandable reasons, the AAR Graduate Survey does not capture that information in this survey. Yet if we are going to understand fully the structure and institutional self-understandings of graduate programs in religion, we will need to know a good deal more about this. It may also help us to frame the questions raised in the following section about the place of Christianity in graduate curricula.

Areas of Concentration

The AAR Survey solicited a set of data describing the areas of concentration of students in these doctoral programs. The responses to this question in the Survey are listed seriatim in Table II.

Table II
Distribution of students' primary concentration

Area of Concentration	Distribution
Christianity: New Testament/Christian Origins	397
Christian Theology: Constructive	372
Christianity: History	322
Old Testament or Hebrew Bible	241
Christian Theology	208
Christian Theology: Practical	195
Christianity: Ethics	175
Judaism	127
Missiology & Evangelism	103
Christianity & Judaism in Antiquity	100
Philosophy of Religion	86
Christian Education	71
Bible Exposition, Liturgical Studies, and Preaching	57
Culture and Theory in Religion	56
Pastoral Care and Counseling/Religion and Personality	53
Buddhism/Japanese/East Asian Religions	53
Social Scientific Studies	47
Hinduism/South Asian Religions	43
Ethics and Religion	43
Islam/West Asian Religions	33
Religion and Modernity; Religion and Social Change; Theology and Society	32
Theological Studies	19
American Religious History	18
Christianity	16
Religion in Antiquity	13
Bible and Theology	13
Confucianism/Chinese Religions	12
Middle East Studies	6
Interdisciplinary Studies	5
Rabbinics	4
Indigenous Traditions	3
African/African-Diaspora Religions	2
World Mission	1

AAR would like to thank the following outgoing program unit chairs whose terms ended in 2003.

- Jonathan E. Brockopp, Pennsylvania State University (Study of Islam Section)
- Rüdiger V. Busto, University of California, Santa Barbara (Latina/o Religion, Culture, and Society Group)
- Sarah Caldwell, Holliston, MA (Hinduism Group)
- David Daniels, McCormick Theological Seminary (Afro-American Religious History Group)
- Kathryn Greene-McCreight, Yale University (Reformed Theology and History Group)
- Harvey Hill, Berry College (Modern Historical Consciousness and the Christian Churches Seminar)
- Barbara A. Holdrege, University of California, Santa Barbara (Comparative Studies in Hinduisms and Judaisms Group)
- Suzanne Holland, University of Puget Sound (Bioethics and Religion Group)
- Christopher Ives, Stonehill College (Japanese Religions Group)
- Jane Naomi Iwamura, University of Southern California (Asian North American Religion, Culture, and Society Group)
- Sarah Iles Johnston, Ohio State University (Europe and the Mediterranean in Late Antiquity Group)
- Zayn Kassam, Pomona College (Study of Islam Section)
- Thomas P. Kasulis, Ohio State University (Philosophy of Religion Section)
- Bockja Kim, Hong Kong University (Korean Religions Group)
- Lois Lorentzen, University of San Francisco (Religion in Latin America and the Caribbean Group)
- Michael M. Mendiola, Pacific School of Religion (Bioethics and Religion Group)
- Randall Nadeau, Trinity University (Chinese Religions Group)
- Scott Noegel, University of Washington (Relics and Sacred Territory [Space] Consultation)
- Stephanie Paulsell, Harvard University (Christian Spirituality Group)
- Tracy Pintchman, Loyola University, Chicago (Hinduism Group)
- Jeffrey C. Pugh, Elon University (Bonhoeffer: Theology and Social Analysis Group)
- Rubina Ramji, University of Ottawa (Religion, Film, and Visual Culture Group)
- Jennifer Rycenga, San José State University (Lesbian-Feminist Issues and Religion Group)
- Andrea Smith, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor (Native Traditions in the Americas Group)
- Bron Taylor, University of Florida (Religion and Ecology Group)
- Anne Thayer, Lancaster Theological Seminary (History of Christianity Section)
- Brannon M. Wheeler, University of Washington (Relics and Sacred Territory [Space] Consultation) ❖

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This data is in part shaped by a set of choices offered to the responding institutions, so in part reflects preconceived rubrics. As with the responding institutions, the resulting tabulated list is initially bewildering but the sheer number and variety of the responses requires more interpretation. Table III, which I constructed from Table II, offers one set of rubrics to organize the data.

Approximately three-fifths of the reported doctoral students in these programs pursue graduate study in some aspect of the Christian tradition, and four-fifths do so if one includes what I here designate as the “applied” fields. The six largest sets identify a concentration in an aspect of Christianity (New Testament/Christian Origins; Theology: Constructive; History; Old Testament/Hebrew Bible; Theology; Ethics). No other religious tradition in the survey differentiates, and Christianity does so in profusion. It is also present implicitly in several cohorts in the “methods” rubric, and in at least one of the “non-Christian traditions/regionally organized.” The “applied” section outnumbers the “methods” and “non-Christian traditions/regionally organized” sections. In short, these responses organize decisively around the Christian tradition.

This point merits further discussion, but some preliminary observations can be made. First, to understand the place of Christianity in graduate education, one crucial question concerns how it is studied. Taking the most prominently featured area of concentration, New Testament/Christian Origins, as an example, suggests that the answer may vary substantially. Visits to Web sites of the responding institutions reveal a range of programmatic emphases (and combinations of these) in this concentration: historical-critical, history of interpretation, literary criticism, history of religions, deconstructive/critical-theoretical. The graduate survey raises crucially for our future consideration the ways in which Christianity is de facto the center of gravity in the academic study of religion. This is all the more notable when one correlates these questions with the responses about curriculum in the undergraduate survey, which together leave little doubt that — however it is studied, and whomever is teaching —

the Bible remains the touchstone text for the study of religion in the United States.

It is also interesting to think about this question with respect to what one could designate as the “border territories” that Table III creates, and that challenge its rubrics: Christianity and Judaism in Antiquity, Religion in Antiquity, and American Religious History are all uneasy placed in these categories. We would need to know more about the specific programs involved to understand and organize better their placement. While their respective numbers do not loom particularly large in the aggregate directions described in the chart, it may nonetheless be the case that these areas present a useful entrée into questions about how religion is studied in graduate programs.

This data is all the more striking in the context of the recent decision by the AAR to hold its annual meetings apart from the Society of Biblical Literature. On this survey’s accounting, at least, study of the Bible is a central component of graduate education in religion in the United States. The undergraduate survey correlates substantially with this emphasis. The ensuing division of these professional societies will not reflect the wider professional practice in the profession they aspire to serve.

Conclusions

The common challenge presented by these relatively straightforward Tables might be described as the difficult relationship between what is overwhelmingly on the ground in juxtaposition with its complex invocation: that these emphases are present is manifest, but whether the survey fully captures the range and idiosyncrasy of practice is dubious. This is not to fault an important survey, but to say that the first general step it invites is the standard one of the refinement and reformulation of its categories of analysis on the basis of generated data. I am here suggesting that such a process will raise immediately a set of difficult yet crucial questions: about the place of Christianity in the study of religion, about the complex interaction of constructive, historical, and human scientific approaches to the study of religion, and about the very broad institutional matrices that our work embraces. All that redounds, I want to suggest, to the glory of our work and testifies

to the complex phenomena that is religion; and it would be a shame not to pursue the groundwork established here because it raises such fundamental and complex matters.

Correlative analysis with the undergraduate survey also will be a crucial next step. There are a set of important, and potentially very revealing, specific questions to ask. For example, to follow up on the discussion of areas of concentration above: are the graduate programs in New Testament/Christian Origins training the faculty who are actually teaching all the undergraduate biblical studies? To what degree do the schema of disciplinary training reflected in graduate programs in biblical studies “map onto” the undergraduate curricula? Such specific answers will help us in beginning to address the much larger, equally fascinating question of the degree to which graduate programs really do shape undergraduate education in religion.

A third consideration for current and future reflection concerns the places in which religion is taught. This survey and its counterpart on undergraduates together teach us a great deal about where religion is formally taught and how it is taught. But what everyone who teaches in a liberal arts or university context knows merits investigation: that religion is taught elsewhere too, and that such work not only influences our enterprise but sometimes constitutes it. More understanding of the roles of common values of interdisciplinarity, formal and otherwise, would be a tremendous boon to our understanding.

All of this is only possible, however, because of the work that has been done. All of us who study and teach in the field of religion are now invited to measure the degree to which our guesswork is correct. Our debt to the AAR will perhaps be best paid if in the years ahead we press, prod, and massage what is here to learn more fully what it means. To that end, this survey deserves the widest possible dissemination, including established professionals and graduate students, the latter of whom can learn much for their own professional formation and training from it. All who do engage it surely shall be grateful to the AAR for an initiative of great import and considerable long-term potential. ❖

Table III

Rubric	Christianity	Methods	Non-Christian Traditions/Regionally Organized	Applied Christianity
Total	1,876	320	301	480
Components	NT/Christian Origins (397) Theology: Constructive (372) History (322) OT/Hebrew Bible (241) Theology (208) Ethics (175) Christianity & Judaism in Antiquity (100) Theological Studies (19) Christianity (16) Religion in Antiquity (13) Bible and Theology (13)	Philosophy of Religion (86) Culture and Theory (56) Hist. of Religions/Comp. Religions/Study of Religion (51) Social Scientific Studies (47) Ethics and Religion (43) Religion and Modernity; Religion and Social Change; Religion and Theology (32) Interdisciplinary Studies (5)	Judaism (127) Buddhism, Japanese, East Asian Religions (53) Hinduism/South Asian Religions (43) Islam/West Asian Religions (33) American Religious History (18) Confucianism/Chinese Religions (12) Middle East (6) Rabbinics (4) Indigenous Traditions (3) African/African Diaspora Religions (2)	Theology: Practical (195) Missiology and Evangelism (103) Christian Education (71) Bible Exposition, Liturgical Studies, and Preaching (57) Pastoral Care and Counseling/Religion and Personality (53) World Mission (1)