Some Initial Thoughts on Institutional Definition and Doctrinal Areas of Concentration

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The AAR Graduate Survey at First blush

The American Academy of Religion seeks to develop reliable data on the field, and 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 a canary report, the present data illuminate the institutional landscape of religion at the undergraduate and graduate levels in a way that reflects a common syntax that supports even this preliminary overview. Table I illustrates, the survey on education in religion at the undergraduate level are idiosyncratic-with reference both to what individual programs are expected to contain (Hinduism and New Testament, e.g.) and to each department’s self-understanding and articulations. 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, presum-ably, sense of how graduate education shapes undergraduate instruction in religion. My assignment is to offer preliminary observa- tions on the data in the graduate survey. What we have is responses from 60 of the 99 institu- tions contacted (15 Canadian institutions on the original mailing list had to be dropped due to under-reporting). While possibly less reli- able than the undergraduate survey, the gradu- ate 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 par- ticipating 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 least room in these responses, and in a reader’s analysis, for misconstrual of a pro- gram’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 a 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 I’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.

Table I: Distribution of students’ primary concentration

Area of Concentration Distribution
Christianity: Christ-centered/Christian Origins 397
Christian Theology: Constructive 372
Christian History: 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

Area of Concentration Distribution
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

Table II: Distribution of students’ primary concentration

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 “sort- ing” 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

thology, (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 multi-stroked 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 com- plexity. Princeton University’s Department of Religion, a respondent, includes in its curricu- lum doctoral areas of concentration in ethics and in biblical studies. Princeton Theological Seminar, also a respondent, also includes these areas of concentration in its doctoral cur- riculum. 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 reli- gion. 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 differ- ence 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 rigorous endowment 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 scholar- ship on and teaching of religion not only in the departments, programs, schools, and com- mittees that make such work their explicit business, but in related departments (philoso- phy, 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 gradu- ate programs in religion, we will need to know a good deal more about this. It may also help to frame the questions raised in the follow- ing 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.

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 varia- tions 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-
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This data is in part shaped by a set of choic-es 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 rubrics 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 have designated 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 in several cohorts in the “methods” rubric, and in at least one of the “non-Christian traditions/regionally organized.” The “applied” section outnumbered the “meth-ods” 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 them) in this concentration: historical-critical, history of interpretation, literary criticism, history of religions, deconstructive/critical-theoreti-cal. The graduate survey raises crucially for our future consideration the ways in which Christianity as 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 curricu-lum in the undergraduate survey. It is much too early for us to write off doubt that — however it is studied, and whenever it 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 ques-tion with respect to what one could designate as the “border territories” that Table III creates, and that challenge its rubrics. Christiani-ty and Judaism in Antiquity, Religion in Antiquity, and American Religious History are all unevenly 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 look particularly large in the aggre-gate directions described in the chart, it may nonetheless be the case that these areas present a useful entry into questions about how religion is studied in graduate programs.

This data is all the more striking in the con-text of the recent decision by the AAR to hold its annual meetings apart from the Society of Biblical Literature. On this sur-vay’s accounting, at least, study of Christianity is a central component of graduate educa-tion 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 profes-soriates they aspire to serve.

Conclusions

The common challenge presented by these relatively straightforward Tables might be described as the difficult relationship between what is studied and its application to the ground in juxtaposition with its complex invocation: that these emphases are present in the survey fully captures the range and idiosyncrasy of prac-tice 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 cat-egories of analysis on the basis of generated data. I am here suggesting that such a process will raise immediately a set of diffi-cult 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/departmental cultures in which our respondents’ work embraces. All that redounds, I want to sug-gest, 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.

Correlational analysis with the undergraduate survey also will be a crucial next step. It is a small survey which we have only very revealing, specific questions to ask. For example, to follow up on the dis-cussion 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 train-ing reflected in graduate programs in bibli-cal studies “map onto” the undergraduate curriculum? Such specific answers will help us in beginning to address the much larger, equally fascinating question of the degree to which graduate programs really shape undergraduate education in religion.

A third consideration for current and future reflection concerns the places in which reli-gion is taught. This survey and its counter-part 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 encounters is the even more fascinating question of the degree to which religion is taught. We are now invited to measure the degree to which our guesswork is correct. Our debt is to the widest possible dissemination, includ-ing 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.

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