Religious Studies News — AAR Edition

Going Our Way

The 2000 Survey of Departments of Religion
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THE 2000 SURVEY of undergraduate departments of religion and theology is of considerable significance for understanding the academic study of religion in North America. It is by far the most informative empirical assessment of our field to date. It deserves (and begs for) extensive discussion and reflection, on both the national and the local institutional level, especially since the data encompass both the expected and the unexpected.

In a way, this census might be seen as a parallel to the theoretical reflections on the nature of "religion" and the "academic study of religion" that have accompanied our work during the past two decades. Both have been extensive and yielded — I am thinking of Russell McCutcheon and Mark Taylor — provocative insights. However, the usefulness of these reflections in the academic and administrative realities of American higher education has proved to be rather complex. There is the argument that no separate administrative units (departments) for the study of religions are necessary since such a study is part of the agendas of other behavioral sciences and humanities departments. There is also the legacy that identifies "religion" with "Christianity." And, emphatic detractors notwithstanding, there continues the dispo-
sition to see the academic study of religion as more of an existential journey of discov-
ery than an intellectual endeavor.

With these preliminaries before us, what does the 2000 Survey tell us?

First of all, the survey makes it clear that the undergraduate study of the field in North America is both far more extensive than in any other country and yet is modest in size compared to such fields as chemistry or biology. In the United States and Canada, religion is a significant academic field.

In terms of the number of students taking courses and majoring in religion, the survey makes it clear that our field is anything but embattled. It is exceedingly healthy in terms of the number of students taking courses and majoring in religion. During the four-year period (1996–97 to 1999–2000), enrollment in reli-
gion courses increased by over 15 percent, while the number of religion majors increased, during the same time, by 25 percent.

The survey makes it clear that our field is geographically concentrated in the ten regions. The field is considerably more extensive in the Southeast, especially among Protestant institutions, than in any other region.

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The survey also reveals the following facts:

- The percentage of women contingent fac-
culty was greatest in the Southeast.
- The percentage of men contingent fac-
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by 75 percent of departments; courses on the history of Christianity by 71 percent of departments — while courses on Islam were found only at 32 percent, courses on Buddhism at 20 percent, and courses on Judaism at 40 percent. In short, the survey indicates that the academic study of religion contributes to show a Christian emphasis. This finding is, in its own way, substantiated by the statistics of the AAR Employment Information Directory. These data, which show that 48 percent of religions comprise the majority of positions advertised and candidates available. One must note, however, that seminaries are important partners in the employment field, in addition to arts and sciences departments, and will influence the statistics.

While the 2000 survey does not explicitly say so, in its findings surely allow the conclusion that this traditional Christian distribution of courses is not evenly distributed over all types of institutions — public, private, church-related, etc. Our field is, as regards departmental taxonomy, not uniform and the academic study of religion in this country is divided into departments in which Christianity does continue to occupy a privileged place and others in which that is not the case.

The survey contains a number of additional surprises. They range all the way from one department reporting an impressive annual budget — one is not quite sure whether to see this as an error or an intent — to the mere lack of majors for the total number of majors in the reporting institutions (54 and 13 respectively), two rather impressive numbers. Impressive also is the fact that roughly half of the reporting institutions indicate that a religion course (or courses) is a prerequisite for graduation.

The survey also indicates that only roughly half of the reporting departments are, in fact, standing departments of religion. Some 32 percent of the reporting departments are combined departments, usually combined with philosophy. The remainder of the reporting units is in various other administrative arrangements. Again, this finding underlines the distinctiveness of the academic study of religion in this country. Interestingly enough, only 87 percent of the reporting departments offer a religion major, surely attributable to the fact that half of the organizational administrative arrangements involve other components than religious studies and may preclude a major in the field.

Another surprise pertains to the gender distribution of the faculty. At the senior (full professional) rank, men greatly outnumber women (by about 7:1), a ratio which could not come as a real surprise. However, surprising is that even at the assistant professor rank — that is, reflecting a time 10 years — the female-to-male ratio is 1:2.2. This means that recent hiring has favored men over women by 2:1. The implication to be drawn from these numbers is that the traditional preference for males has been modified to reflect the proportionate number of women and men finishing their graduate work (roughly two-thirds of new PhD’s are male, one-third are female).

A survey can be an antiquarian inventory-taking, or a call for reflection and discussion. Surely, it behooves us, as individuals and members of a larger guild, to engage in the latter.