

Going Our Way

The 2000 Survey of Departments of Religion

Hans J. Hillerbrand, Duke University

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 decades. Both have been extensive and yielded — I am thinking of Russell McCutcheon and Mark Taylor — provocative insights. However, the translation of these reflections into 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 demurrers notwithstanding, there continues the disposition to see the academic study of religion as more of an existential journey of discovery 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 universe of the academic study of religion 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 physics in the natural sciences or English and history in the humanities. There are over 3,000 departments of English and history in the United States, spread over uni-

versities, colleges, and community colleges; there are only 1,131 departments of religion, religious studies, or theology. This discrepancy in numbers finds a number of explanations, though there should be little doubt that the extensive absence of departments at public colleges and universities is a major factor. There are notable (and distinguished) exceptions — the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, the University of Virginia, the University of Missouri, Arizona State University come to mind — but, looking at the country as a whole, the generalization that anxiety over breaching the wall of separation between church and state has not made public institutions part of our universe holds.

By the same token, the study of religion at church-related and “Christian” colleges and universities is more often than not at the heart of the instructional program of these institutions. Some of these institutions require one or more courses in religion for graduation; others require such courses to fulfill distribution requirements in general education. Moreover, many of these institutions are characterized by strong denominational ties or by a particular understanding of the Christian tradition, be it Catholic or Evangelical. The academic study of religion at these institutions is thus quite distinctive.

It is to be taken for granted that at these institutions “Christian Studies” dominates the curricular offerings.

The 2000 Undergraduate Survey provides empirical data to allow a better grasp of our field, both in a larger context and in its specific manifestations on college and university campuses. The analysis of the results yields a wealth of information about who we are, and what it is we are doing. To be sure, some limitations must be noted. The questionnaire was extensive and called for a host of specific information; one suspects that not all respondents answered the question-

Editor's Note:

With the completion of the data collection and analysis of both our undergraduate and graduate surveys, the Academy gathered a group of experts in the fields of religion, higher education, and the sociology of religion to review the results, identify the core questions and issues, and specify further work needed. After this daylong discussion on October 4 in Atlanta, RSN asked two of the participants who have extensive experience in the areas of graduate and undergraduate education (Richard Rosengarten and Hans Hillerbrand) to further refine and analyze the plethora of data that we had gathered and presented. Their articles in this issue of Religious Studies News highlight the salient features of both surveys. The results of both surveys and their extensive analysis will be posted on the Academy's Web site in the spring. Members will be notified of the location on our Web site in a future e-bulletin. It is the goal of the Academy to conduct regular periodic repetitions of these surveys, which will allow for trend analysis. Such analysis is critical for developing effective strategies to secure and strengthen the study of religion and theology in our colleges and universities.

naire according to the highest canons of scholarly accuracy. Also, not all of the 1,131 institutions with discrete administrative structures for the study of religion — free-standing departments, combined departments, decentered programs, and general humanities/social science programs — responded. However, the return rate (some 870 institutions) is impressive, and statistically that response return makes the findings of the survey valid for the entire field.

Perhaps the most interesting finding of the survey has to do with the nature of courses offered. It surely has been a widespread notion in the field that during the past generation or so departments of religion or religious studies changed from reflecting the model of Protestant seminaries to a new kind of department in which the study of Christianity, not to mention Protestantism, was no longer privileged over the study of other religions. The 2000 survey indicates,

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Most notably, the data dispel a number of myths and generalizations that most of us — including the present writer — have tended to consider revelatory truths about our field.

To begin with, 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 religion courses increased by over 15 percent, while the number of religion majors increased, during the same time, by 25 percent. In absolute numbers, religion courses had 685,000 students enrolled in 1999–2000 and 593,000 enrolled in 1996–97. This is surely impressive, even though both figures need to be viewed in light of the overall enrollment increase in American higher education during those four years.

however, that the nature of the field has changed far less than this might have suggested. The academic study of religion in the U.S. continues to be foremostly the study of Christianity. Here are some figures. Almost half of all courses (exactly 45.1 percent) taught in 1999–2000 were on Christian topics, with courses on “Introduction to the Bible” (11 percent of all courses), “Introduction to the New Testament” (10.5 percent), and “Christian Theology” (9.4 percent) leading the way. By way of comparison, Islam accounted for only 1.3 percent of all courses offered, while courses on Judaism accounted for 3.1 percent.

Analogously, courses on Christian topics were offered by more departments: New Testament courses were offered by 84 percent of the departments; Old Testament courses

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They Also Serve

Contingent Faculty in the Academy

Carey J. Gifford, American Academy of Religion

AT A SPECIAL TOPICS Forum at the 2003 Annual Meeting (“The Use and Abuse of Adjunct Faculty in Religious Studies”), further data analysis was presented on the state of contingent faculty in the field of religious studies and theology in the U.S. and Canada. As a result of our further analysis of the data that we collected in our 1999–2000 survey of undergraduate departments of religion and theology in the U.S. and Canada, we have now confirmed empirically what many have felt — based on anecdotes and insights — to be the case.

The number of male contingent faculty in 1999–2000 was 2,443 and the number of female 1,051, making for a total of 3,494, a 32 percent increase over 1996–97. The ratio of women to men was 1 woman for every 2.3 men. The ratio of contingent

faculty to full-time faculty was 1 contingent for every 1.6 full-time positions.

We also found that contingent faculty taught 5,303 courses in 1999–2000. The average number of courses taught by any one contingent faculty was 6.45, for which the average per course compensation was \$2,445. Freestanding departments (as opposed to combined philosophy and religion departments, programs which borrow faculty from a number of departments, or humanities or social science divisions) paid the most for any single course taught by contingent faculty, with 33 percent paying \$1,000–\$1,999, and 27 percent paying \$2,000–\$2,999 per course.

Sixty percent of all male contingent faculty were employed by freestanding departments. However, we found that fully 28

percent of all institutions did not have any male contingent faculty. Twenty-one percent had only one contingent male, with only 16.5 percent having two. The greatest concentration of males (36.2 percent) were in Protestant institutions.

With regard to women, 65 percent of female contingents were employed by freestanding departments. Fifty-two percent of all institutions did not have any female contingent faculty. Twenty-four percent had only one, and only 11 percent had two. Again, the greatest concentration (36 percent) was in Protestant institutions.

We were curious, then, about what the census figures might show regarding the geographical dispersion of contingent faculty across the Academy's ten regions. The following statistics reflect our findings:

- The percentage of women contingent faculty was greatest in the Midwest region.
- The percentage of men contingent faculty was greatest in the Southeast region.
- The percentage of all contingent faculty was greatest in the Southeast region.

When we look at the number of contingent faculty by types of institutions, the number of majors in those institutions, and the number of courses taught, the same geographical concentration patterns are present. These three facts regarding geographical concentration mirror the results of the census as a whole: that our field is geographically concentrated in the Southeast, especially among Protestant baccalaureate institutions. ■

CONFERENCE, from p.4

respond to this scholarly work, especially when practitioners don't agree with scholarly outsiders. He also asked the workshop participants to think about how religious and scholarly voices in religion relate, if at all. The session also raised the issue of who gets to decide what counts as "good" or "bad" religion. Mona Siddiqui (University of Glasgow) later commented that "this workshop managed to touch upon all the complexities of representation, and especially the contribution of scholarship. The assumption that there is a gulf between practitioners and scholars is an erroneous one, as some of the best scholars of religion have also been practitioners of the faith. One thing was clear — the academic world is resilient and perhaps the only forum where the most sensitive of conversations can be held in the open."

In her introduction to the "Engendering" workshop, Ursula King (University of Bristol, emerita) lamented the "double blindness" that prevents gender studies and religious studies from "seeing" one another. And in the "Human Rights" workshop, discussion revolved around the idea that while there is a need for a "universal" standard of human rights to protect human flourishing, that standard must be (and is) constructed by different human communities and institutions.

Midway through the conference, participants attended a gala dinner on the Emory University campus. After dinner the Atlanta Community Chorus led by Dwight Andrews (Emory University) performed. On the bus ride back to the hotel from campus, participants serenaded their bus driver with the chorus's closing gospel hymn.

During the conference, co-directors Sheila Davaney (Iliiff School of Theology) and Gary Laderman (Emory University), along with a few conferees, conducted a phone interview with media representatives. The Associated Press picked up the story about the conference as a result.

Immediately following the conference, the majority of conferees participated in the AAR Annual Meeting. *JAAR* sponsored a special topics forum entitled "Contesting Religions: Prospects and Perils in a Global Context." Well over 100 attendees crowded into the room to participate in the conversation, further expanding the conference's reach.

For more than ten years, the AAR has included international connections and public outreach among its primary goals. Enhancing awareness of the international context for the study of religion, increasing involvement in the AAR by scholars and teachers from around the globe, and contributing to the broad public under-

standing of religion are all core aspects of the Academy's mission. This project is serving these objectives, fostering the inclusion of largely absent voices in global scholarship and public conversations about religion. It is the fruit of the reflection of the *JAAR* editorial board, under the direction of editor Glenn Yocum, on how best to engage more fully with international scholars in the study of religion. Thanks largely to the vision and commitment of book review editor Sheila Davaney, the entire project garnered the interest and support of the Ford Foundation. The project's international planning committee included Davaney and Laderman, as well as Yocum, Moosa, Kazmina, and Sunil Goonasekera (University of Peradeniya).

In addition to the conference, the grant supports the publication of a special issue of *JAAR* from the conference, a dedicated Web site for continuing the conversation, the ongoing internationalization of the *JAAR* editorial board, and the distribution of *JAAR* to libraries throughout the world that could otherwise not afford subscriptions. At the AAR Annual Meeting, the first of three sets of new *JAAR* Editorial Board members met with the rest of the editorial board. These members are Kazmina, Goonasekera, and Michiaki Okuyama (Nanzan University, Japan). The next three members will attend the Annual Meeting in San Antonio in November 2004. ❧

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RSN: What can the ACLS do to promote a better understanding of the role of the humanities in our nation's current climate?

Yu: There's no doubt that we need to enhance our ability to communicate with all publics: the academic public, opinion leaders, policy-makers, and the general public. Some of our light is under a bushel. I hope we can find a way to present more readily the superb work that many of our fellows accomplish — they will provide examples of excellence in the humanities. Many of our publications, like the American National Biography and History E-Book Project, are also sterling examples of how rigorous scholarship can create tools for knowledge that are public goods.

RSN: What are your ideas about the current and future condition of the humanities?

Yu: The humanities are intellectually vibrant, and that's been accomplished with financial resources that would be considered "decimal dust" in other domains. I would not have taken on this new position if I were not optimistic about the future, but as always that will take work. I think we'll need to pay particular attention to the place of the humanities in the broad spectrum of higher education outside of our leading research universities and prominent liberal arts colleges.

RSN: What individual or movement has been the most influential in your intellectual life?

Yu: The person who most shaped my intellectual interests is probably unaware of the role she played. She was Christa Saas, who was an assistant professor of German literature at Harvard (now at Toronto, I think) when I was an undergraduate. I took a course on German poetry (Rilke, Trakl, and Benn) as a junior that kindled my love of the genre. The class was extremely small (two undergraduates, two graduates), and I was terrified most of the time because I'd only recently learned German and knew very little about German literature, but I thought she was terrific. She was my senior thesis advisor, too, and even though I eventually went on to focus on classical Chinese poetry in graduate school, she was the person who set me on that path. ❧

HILLERBRAND, from p.6

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 32 percent, and courses on Judaism at 40 percent. In short, the survey indicates that the academic study of religion continues to show a Christian emphasis. This finding is, in its own way, substantiated by the statistics of the AAR Employment Information Service, where "Christian fields" 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, 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 irritant — to the mean and median for the total number of majors in the reporting institutions (34 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, free-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 professorial) rank, men greatly outnumber women (by about 7:1), a reality that should not come as a real surprise. However, surprising is that even at the assistant professorial rank — that is, reflecting hires of recent years — the female-male ratio is 1:2. 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. ❧



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