

Looking Back on the Beginnings: An Historical Survey of Method & Theory Courses in Canada and the U.S.

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Background

The following unaltered report (apart from formatting and the occasional parenthetical addition or elaboration to ensure that the document is accessible to current readers) was prepared and written by me in the Spring and Summer of 1993; it was done at the direction of Prof. Bruce Alton (1936-2008), then of the Department of Religious Studies at the University of Toronto (his faculty appointment was to Trinity College). At that time I was a doctoral student in what was then the Centre for the Study of Religion (originally known as the Centre for Religious Studies, established in 1976), a program that, at that time, was, to the lament of some of us, poised to transition from being a stand-alone interdisciplinary graduate unit (with faculty cross-appointed from a variety of departments on Toronto's campus) to eventually becoming merely the graduate wing of what previously had been just the undergraduate Department of Religious Studies (an arrangement that remains to this day).¹ I worked for Alton as a Research Assistant (with him

¹ See Wiebe 1995 for a contemporaneous and rather critical assessment of the history of the study of religion at Toronto (an essay that was part of a still relevant special issue of *MTSR*, guest edited by the late Gary Lease, entitled "Pathologies in the Academic Study of Religion: North American Institutional Case Studies"); the onetime autonomy of that graduate unit was linked to early efforts to shield it from direct influences of the various programs on that campus that comprised the Toronto School of Theology (a number of whose faculty were appointed to the undergraduate Department). For a reply to Wiebe's critical portrait, see Richardson 1997.

paying me from his own pocket, as I recall)—something that began by first working as his Teaching Assistant for his undergraduate course on Religion and Science. A long-time faculty member at Toronto, Alton—author of the paper “Method and Reduction in the Study of Religion” (1986), editor of *Religions and Languages: A Colloquium* (1991), and someone who specialized in studying self-deception (1985)—had earned his Ph.D. in philosophy at Stanford, writing one of the few dissertations at the time on the golden rule (1966).² Although Toronto was then seen by some as a hot bed for debates on methods and theories (notably in the person of Don Wiebe, who certainly stood out from the approaches adopted by a number of his colleagues there and elsewhere in the field), Alton was not a prolific writer, taught only in the undergraduate program (i.e., was not cross-appointed to the Centre) and so is more than likely not thought of today as being among the main players in debates that ended up having an impact throughout the field. (Case in point, *MTSR*, founded in 1989 by two Toronto doctoral students [Ann Baranowski and John Morgan],³ took inspiration, to at least a degree, from the full-year course that was then required of all incoming M.A. and Ph.D. students at Toronto—a seminar that, as mentioned in the report, had its share of drama over the years concerning who would teach it and what topics it

² In the early days of using the internet in scholarship, Alton also developed what he called “The Method and Theory On-line Bibliography Project,” which aimed to catalogue all works in method & theory in the study of religion. It was an ambitious project and one with which, early on, I was only tangentially involved as a contributor. Today, more broadly, I think of the role played in the international field by the open access Bibliography of the Study of Religion (<https://relbib.de/>), hosted by the Tübingen University Library—a project that Alton very much anticipated in the mid-1990s.

³ Baranowski, after completing her Ph.D. in 1994 with a dissertation entitled *Ritual Alone: Cognition and Meaning of Patterns in Time* (making it among the earliest dissertations applying the then newly emerging field of cognitive science of religion), trained as a psychotherapist and went into a private practice while Morgan also left the study of religion, going on to a career in education.

would address each year.⁴ That the nomenclature of “method & theory” has by now been adopted field-wide [sometimes strategically inverted as theory & method, I should note] is difficult to overlook, as is the fact that, rather unlike the era when this report was prepared, today many people in the field claim expertise in teaching such a course, though the variety of ways in which it is taught is worth noting.) Alton was, however, a gentle and persistent force at Toronto and his work impacted a number of graduate students at the time, so much so that Willi Braun and I included him among the small number of Toronto faculty from our time there to whom we dedicated the *Guide to the Study of Religion* (2000). His interests, then, to rethink the role of the longstanding method & theory course at Toronto, in the context of my report on not only how various people there saw its past iterations but how faculty on other campuses were (or were not) teaching it, is but one piece of evidence for the role that he played.⁵ What was done with this report once it was submitted to him, or if Alton was acting on behalf of the program or on his own in commissioning it, remains unknown to me.

Being pre-internet days—at least well before the speeds and accessibility, let alone sufficient online content, that would have made it useful for such a project—the effort to

⁴ When, as an M.A. student, I enrolled in the course in the Fall of 1987, it was team taught and involved, among others, Lorne Dawson, Roger O’Toole, Will Oxtoby, and Donald Wiebe—no doubt a compromise structure for the course, especially given the dramatic difference in approach among some who were teaching it then. For, as Wiebe phrased it in a recently published conversation with Richard Newton: “the study of religion was no stranger to contests at the University of Toronto..., somewhat reflective of what we see elsewhere in North American and larger associations” (Newton 2022: 7). Also, for additional background on *MTSR*’s early years see the opening to Hughes 2013.

⁵ In the interest of full disclosure, I should also note that Alton was later among the examiners for my doctoral dissertation (in January of 1995), playing the role of what Toronto then called “the internal external” (i.e., a member of your program who was not part of your supervisory committee).

document whether (and if so how) courses on methods and/or theories were then being taught at a variety of Canadian and U.S. undergraduate and graduate programs focused on (as detailed in the report) telephone calls and letter writing, acquiring photocopies of the relevant pages from course catalogues (then called calendars in Canada) from a variety of campuses. The original report that I submitted (just weeks before leaving Toronto to work for the coming school year at the University of Tennessee) included other elements as well, as made plain by the appendices noted in the table of contents that follows; however, all aspects of the report not reproduced here existed only in the final hardcopy that I submitted to Alton. (Those who were grad students at UCSB at the time will more than likely recall just what Ninian Smart included in the course reading packet that he sent to me when I contacted their program.) In addition, the universities surveyed were, to a degree, somewhat happenstance, dependent as it was on whether anyone replied to my queries, though I think there is still enough representation among the programs then reviewed to get a sense of the field's shape just over thirty years ago.

While I certainly leave to the contributors to this set of papers, let alone its readers, to draw conclusions of their own concerning how far the field has (or has not) come in recent decades—a conclusion that would benefit considerably from someone carrying out a comparable review of course offerings today (prediction: few programs today offer, let alone require, a course on theories of religion)—a few additional opening comments might be in order, to help indicate why, after all these years, it struck me as possibly worthwhile to bring what is by now an historic document to the attention of readers.

For starters, thinking back to the aside that I just offered (on whether programs today even include, let alone require, courses on theories of religion), it raises the question as to

whether such topics should be isolated within a specific course or taught all across the curriculum. After all, what good is a class on rituals in either this or that tradition, for instance, if it fails to ask just what we mean by this analytic term and what sort of work does its varied uses allow scholars to do? After all, the distinction between, say, rituals and habits, customs, or traditions isn't necessarily obvious, is it? But too often the siloed nature of the field, in which mastery over discrete content specialties usually sets the standard, means that once that lone method & theory class is over students can finally get on with their routine description and interpretation (rarely explanation, let's be honest) of the deeply meaningful items in which they are already interested. This was a point correctly understood long ago by Arnal when, writing on his experiences teaching an early version of such a course at NYU, he observed that the students found it very challenging "to apply their theoretical frameworks to their subject-matter in an interesting or even a convincing way"—something that he judged to be shared also by those students' "advanced and professional colleagues," i.e., their mentors and supervisors (1999: 112). In our Department at Alabama there is indeed an undergraduate course on Theories of Religion (one that was originally put on the books some years ago by the late Tim Murphy), which, on just a couple of occasions, I've taught. Instead, the model that I've adopted in my teaching, to avoid what Arnal went on to describe as "an almost universal bifurcation of methodology and those very things to which method is, supposedly, to be applied" (112), is that *every course taught is a theory course*, if by theory we mean a self-reflective, critical attitude not just toward the material under study (i.e., what counts as Judaism or Hinduism, let alone a myth or a sacrifice?) but also directed toward the tools that are regularly used in going about that work (e.g., description, comparison, interpretation, etc.) and the reason(s) for as well as implication(s)

of engaging in our studies. (I'm thinking more broadly than seeing theory as entailing just causal accounts for the possible origins or function of religion, of course—thus a breadth more than likely troubling not just to the humanistically-inclined in our field, who see religion as so deeply meaningful as to transcend explanatory accounts, but also to those cog sci scholars now inhabiting what they refer to as the scientific study of religion [see McCutcheon 2013 for my argument on how an organization such as NAASR might include at least two of these senses of theory].) Lacking that coherent integration across a curriculum, which often requires the collaborative effort of a variety of likeminded (or at least collegial and therefore agreeable) faculty members, one can see the reason why, if we're lucky, the isolated theory course that stands well apart from the other content classes often results.

Another reason why putting this old report into print now seemed like a sensible thing to do concerns what strikes me as our limited historical awareness of our own field. Writing as one who has had an interest in the history of the field, it strikes me as unfortunate that more of our colleagues do not share that interest; in other words, many in the field mistakenly (though perhaps inevitably) seem to assume that its current shape, and canon, somehow sprung from nowhere, thereby existing today naturally and inevitably. Sure, some of us now talk about the colonial-era origins of *Religionswissenschaft*, Comparative Religion, or even the Science of Religion in Europe, along with the invention by Dutch and German scholars of the now common “world religions” category,⁶ all happening about one hundred and fifty years ago, but too few of

⁶ A small number of scholars in the 1990s were already interested in the problematic nature of the category but only with the detailed documentation in Masuzawa's book (2005) did its colonial origins seem to settle into the wider consciousness of scholars across the field. For example, from fifteen years earlier see Fitzgerald's critique of its Christian theological implications (1990).

us entertain that, far more recently, the Cold War context of the field's reinvention in North America may be just as important a setting to take into account (for one effort to correct this oversight see McCutcheon 2004; see also Imhoff 2016)—not to mention the questionable, at best, fate of the current field due to the gradual but steady decline of humanities funding and the increased professionalization and corporatization of universities in many national settings (i.e., cuts in funding that support a shift to prioritizing practical career preparation for students). Too often, history—at least our field's own—is assumed by scholars to be something long past, taking ourselves and how our scholarship is now carried out to exist at its logical end point, as if we constitute the result to which all that happened in the yellowed, distant past has inexorably led (i.e., the so-called end of history—and we know how well that argument turned out for Fukuyama 1992).⁷ Simply put, the human agency along with the happenstance are lost in such a model—out of sight, out of mind; if this is left unchallenged it can result in a generation of younger scholars somehow unaware that the academic domain that they take for granted was in fact established via the hard and sometimes controversial work of their elders—people lost tenure and were fired from jobs, we must never forget, in the not too distant past, all for failing to tow some denominational line in a variety of colleges when they tried to study religion as all too human—and that effort is now up to contemporary scholars, to ensure that an alternative way of studying the material remains viable for those who may follow them.⁸ So, I reasoned when again

⁷ He famously argued that, with the so-called West winning the long-brewing Cold War, the world-wide dominance of liberal democracies was now to be taken for granted. That much has transpired on the world stage since that book's argument was first offered, much of it completely unanticipated by Fukuyama, should make plain how overly confident such a stance turns out to be.

⁸ Or, in the words of Pink Floyd's 1973 song "Times": "no one told you when to run, you missed the starting gun."

seeing this report among my old computer files, that such a dispatch from the fairly recent but still probably forgotten past—a time when m&t, as we often designate it, didn't yet exist as a sub-genre and when *MTSR* was still a journal run by doctoral students at Toronto—may serve as useful to some who are in the field now, especially those who might fail to see the now omnipresent method & theory course, along with this supposed teaching competency that's listed on so many younger faculty members' CVs, as a fairly recent invention.

What's more, that the content of those now ubiquitous courses can differ so much, as already suggested, is something that we also need to document and then mull over a little, asking such questions as just what constitutes a theory and which methods count as being among those to be used by scholars of religion (i.e., is a so-called theological method part of our toolbox?). The variety of ways in which these courses are now taught is linked to how I tend to think that the once controversial—at least for many—focus on the tools, definitions, and assumptions was domesticated, on its way to its current wide adoption in the field—one that was so broad that many students now see such courses not as provocative but, instead, as an arduous rite of passage and thus impediment to just getting on with taking classes on the obviously interesting religious content that they came to grad school to study in the first place. After all, there was a good reason why, back in the mid-1990s, I came up with some cheeky buttons for friends to wear at our annual American Academy of Religion conference which, among other slogans, said “Theory is Not a Four-Lettered Word.”⁹ (Another, thanks to Gary Lease's input when I told him

⁹ As I believe I have previously remarked in print, there was a time, earlier in my career, when I was cautioned while working at the University of Tennessee to avoid the word “method” and, instead, use the apparently less threatening “approach” in a syllabus (as per the title once taught early on by Arnal at NYU [1999]), let alone when I was advised, while later working at what was then Southwest Missouri State University, to include the work of the sociologist Peter Berger in

that I planned to do this, included a line often used by his former colleague at Santa Cruz, Hayden White: “Too concrete; be abstract.”) We would be wise to remember, after all, that those now classic Chicago volumes on *methodology* predictably steered well clear of offering *theories* of religion (and here enters the old reductionism debate, one that certainly remains with us today, if the new *Critical Terms for Religious Studies*’ frequent cautions about reducing religion to nonreligious causes is any indication [Hammerschlag 2025], not to mention the general absence of that sort of article from most of our field’s main journals); for the consensus was (and remains?) that religion was just self-evidently about deeply meaningful things of enduring existential import (which, yes, results from a usually undisclosed theory of religion).¹⁰ But if, as some now seem to assume, a word such as “theory” is simply synonymous with “viewpoint” “stance,” “worldview,” or just “assumptions”—all of which everyone has, of course—then the term seems to me to be considerably less useful to scholars.¹¹

But two additional reasons strike me as being among the warrant for re-considering the distance that our field has (or has not) come in recent decades: first, despite the apparent changes in the field, it is still credible not just to have a major figure in the current field claim that the

a syllabus on theories of religion since, for at least one then influential member of that Department, Berger’s sacred canopy constituted the extent to which one could try to account for the function of religion.

¹⁰ Even in a place like the North American Association for the Study of Religion (NAASR), known for entertaining approaches rather different from those that have long dominated the field and which recently sponsored a remote workshop on the philosophy of religion, participants were flatly informed by a guest that scholars study the texts or ways of other peoples because they are existentially relevant to the scholars themselves.

¹¹ We should keep in mind that redefining the technical term “theory,” as it is used in the natural sciences, and using it far more broadly was a favored tactic of those who attempted first to get Creationism and then, more recently, Intelligent Design into public school science classes—thus, “evolution is just a theory” has considerable rhetorical weight in favor of one set of outcomes in such debates (something I elaborated on in the introduction to chapter 8 of McCutcheon 2024).

Protestant theologian, Rudolf Otto, is better understood as “a theorist of the holy” (Orsi 2012: 86) but for one of our scholarly journals to publish an article concerned with examining whether Otto’s contention that the numinous was distinct from the Kantian notion of the sublime is plausible (see Stutz 2025).¹² Despite some in the field perhaps not expecting much different from the journal in which that article appeared (given the prominence of Christian theological topics in its issues), many others unquestionably have long seen it as being among the standard peer review periodicals in the academic study of religion. (I myself have published book reviews there a couple of times, in fact.) And so, despite those who, in recent years, have called on the field to become post-critical or post-theoretical (as if the critiques of previous years have by now so sufficiently registered that we all just need to get back to studying religion and not just our tools, in a fashion akin to Paul Ricoeur’s second naiveté [on problems with the post-critique approach see Martin 2022]), it nonetheless seems that many basic debates are far from being settled (I refer to the above mention of reductionism as but one example), making clear that something yet might be gained from standing back a little from what we now happen to be doing and, instead, inquiring as to how it is that we got to now. Case in point, despite the necessarily vague and thus over-ambitious (i.e., all-encompassing) way in which religion must be understood (I dare not say defined, since it much of this work no explicit definition is ever offered) in order to be paired up with virtually every and any aspect of human practice,¹³ the so-

¹² The substantial opening chapter to McCutcheon 2021 argues in detail that, in spite of a number of seeming developments in the current field, not much differs in the field today from past decades.

¹³ See Hughes and McCutcheon 2021 for a useful overview of the many (sometimes contradictory) ways in which current scholars of religion use the term and the debates within the field that ensue from such varied usage.

called “religion and...” approach—one that I myself have critiqued in print on a variety of occasions (McCutcheon 2003: 91 ff; McCutcheon 2024: chpt. 12)—remains among the preferred options for scholars, both in their research (e.g., it animates the already mentioned new edition of Chicago’s *Critical Terms for Religious Studies* [Hammerschlag 2025]) and in how they organize and thereby understand the field itself (e.g., the many program units within the American Academy of Religion, from Religion and Cities or Religion and Food to Religion and Science Fiction or Religion and Sexuality). Accordingly, that just a few decades ago there were almost no m&t courses in any degree program in the field, whether in undergraduate or graduate—let alone such a course, or even a history of the study of religion, being required of students as part of their degree requirements—but now they’re everywhere and usually required, *despite the field still being organized around a largely untheorized religious identity or quality* is thus something worth thinking about. (By the way, the discourse on method and theory in general, taking place in other disciplines, was largely an item from only the second half of the twentieth century.)¹⁴

But the final reason that I think this exercise is worthwhile now comes from the subfield long known as the philosophy of religion, an area that I see as so mired in traditional Christian discourses (e.g., proofs for the existence of god, the problem of evil, the plausibility of miracles, etc.) as to make it difficult to reinvent in some cross-culturally, non-normative or at least non-

¹⁴ Among the first job ads that I saw for a position in method and theory was advertised by Western Michigan University back in the early 1990s; as I recall, that search failed and was reconfigured rather more traditionally the following year as a position in religion in America or some such more conservative or normal topic (with only a secondary focus on method and theory). Judging from what was apparent from the outside (speaking as someone who had an initial short and at times terse meeting with the search committee as part of the AAR annual conference’s job placement service) it seemed that the faculty there had no consensus on what that even meant let alone how such a position would contribute to their program.

confessional fashion. Many who are in that subfield are currently trying, of course, and among such efforts is that of those philosophers of religion who, speaking frankly, are attempting to colonize the subfield that is by now widely known as method and theory; their justification is that asking critical questions on disciplinary first principles is the job of something that they're now terming the philosophy of religious studies (akin to the philosophy of science or the philosophy of music).¹⁵ I think here of Jim Kanaris's recent book, *Toward a Philosophy of Religious Studies*, where we read his description of such an inquiry as being "a consideration of the issues, theories, methods that form a second-order tradition, a tradition of studying a phenomenon that, conveniently, though not insignificantly, came to be designated by the catchall 'religion'" (2023: x). That this sounds remarkably like what many of us have, for some years, just called method & theory needs to be recognized (though it is unclear if we get a say in what others get to call what it is that some of us are already doing). What's more, that the work of those trying to rebrand it typically ends up, at least in my reading of it, clearly skewing in a philosophically idealist and therefore exclusively hermeneutical direction that's usually sympathetic to generally liberal theological discourses also requires some critical attention on our part. (After all, in a call back to an earlier point, religion is just obviously about deeply meaningful and therefore transcendental things, no? The ease with which the study of religion is linked, in the minds of many in our field even to this day, with careers in the so-called helping professions, is but one piece of evidence to support this.)¹⁶ And so, looking back to the early

¹⁵ Again, full disclosure prompts me to record here that the philosophy of religion was the field in which I began my doctoral studies (studying the pre-Socratics, Plato, Aristotle, Hume, Kant, etc.) and that a specialty instead in method and theory only became possible later in my program at Toronto (at which time I switched areas).

¹⁶ For example, as but the most recent piece of evidence, the call for the 2027 regional meeting

years of a rubric that's now so taken for granted (possibly because it has been so influential and thereby widely adopted) as to strike some as being ripe for rebranding can't be a bad thing.

For these reasons (along with a long overdue public tip of the hat to Alton's impact on my own career) it struck me as being a possible service to at least some colleagues to agree to NAASR's interest in this obviously dated report as an artifact to be added to the field's reliquary—a report that begins, as it was presented to Alton, following this introduction. That the organization saw the document as providing an opportunity to invite others to think through some issues in both the field's past and its present—after all, just what *is* method and theory in our field today, where does it fit into our classes and degree programs, not to mention the scholarship that we produce, and, importantly, what does a meta-orientation to the conditions of our work have to do with this particular moment in higher ed, when news of yet another program merger or even closure reaches us often more than once a week—strikes me as just what I was hoping to see happen.

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of the American Academy of Religion in the southeast, where I work, is focused on “Religion, Health, and Wellness,” as if religion necessarily has beneficial effects in these domains; and some public departments and degree programs, in efforts to reinvent themselves at an admittedly challenging time for higher education, are doubling down on this association, by launching programs offering nondenominational chaplaincy certificates or nonprofit leadership. The longstanding career advice offered on many campuses, which associated a degree in Religious Studies with being a minister or a social worker, is thus confirmed.

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Revising the Methods Course in the Study of Religion

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This report is comprised of the following sections:

- (1) a record of the research methods
 - (2) a summary of the comments made by undergraduate students who participated
in RLG 200Y in 1992-93
 - (3) a summary of the comments made by graduate students who have participated
in REL/RLG 1000Y
 - (4) a summary of faculty responses to the questionnaire
 - (5) a summary of similar courses offered in various North American
undergraduate and graduate programmes in the study of religion
- Appendix 1: Copies of the letters of inquiry sent to all faculty and graduate
students
- Appendix 2: Copies of calendar entries for the schools surveyed
- Appendix 3: Detailed course outlines for a small number of equivalent courses at
other institutions
- Appendix 4: Extract from the undergraduate course book on methodology and
theory from the University of Vermont.

Appendix 5: Two-volume photocopy collection of theoretical and methodological readings prepared by Ninian Smart and used in the graduate programme at the University of California at Santa Barbara

Preamble

The methods and theories course(s) at the Centre and Department for the Study of Religion have what some might characterize as a controversial past. The REL 1000Y [graduate] course, in particular, has gone through a number of versions and adaptations—all of which have prompted yet new problems. This controversy, it would seem, extends far beyond the University of Toronto, for in North America it is not entirely clear what role methodologists and theoreticians play in the academic discourse on religion. Some have argued that, traditionally, European scholars have been more open to the efforts of their peers to critique the academic and non-academic (e.g., political, gender, etc.) presuppositions of their works. Most recently one could appeal to the efforts of Jacques Waardenburg in association with Mouton de Gruyter of Berlin in the *Religion and Reason* series as evidence of this. To others, “theory” has been associated with any one of a number of postmodern critiques of the established canon in a variety of academic fields. To those in positions of power within traditional academic fields, such theorizing can take on a threatening appearance. Whether or not these geographic and postmodern generalizations are accurate, at the University of Toronto, few, if any, professors can agree not only on what method and theory is, but on how it should be taught.

Despite the ill-defined role and uncertain future of the method and theory, the University of Toronto, in the minds of some at least, has become a leader in offering students the

opportunity for advanced research on issues of methodological and theoretical import. In a recent survey of the state of religious studies in Ontario, the authors twice make reference to Toronto's appeal for methodologists:

another recent arrival is a journal edited by graduate students in the Centre for Religious Studies at the University of Toronto. Launched in 1989, it grew out of a course required of all Centre students and took its name from the title of that course, *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion*.¹⁷

And in their conclusion and recommendations, the authors cite not only the journal named above but also the Peter Lang series, *Toronto Studies in Religion* (edited by Don Wiebe), as evidence that the discourse on methods and theories seems to have a bright future at Toronto. If one adds the recent development of Mouton de Gruyter's interest in *MTSR*, then their conclusion takes on an even more significance:

If previous Canadian debates over methodology are any indication, it is a safe bet that methodology will continue to be a concern in religious studies in Ontario.¹⁸

For whatever reason, then, the Centre for the Study of Religion is known by some as one location among very few where issues of methodology and theory can be debated openly. Given the very real disparity over understandings of the role of the academic study of religion, it is no wonder that this reputation seems unwelcome to some. Depending upon how one interprets the

¹⁷ Harold Remus, William C. James, Daniel Fraikin, *Religious Studies in Ontario: A State-of-the-Art Review* (Waterloo: Wilfred Laurier University Press, 1992), 83-4. The attribution of the name for the journal to the REL 1000Y course is, unfortunately, an inaccuracy.

¹⁸ Ibid., 310. [What later became Walter de Gruyter dropped *MTSR* at the end of its volume 9 in 1997, doing so during the November annual American Academy of Religion conference; prior to the end of that event, however, Brill had contracted the journal and has published it since 1998—though recently de Gruyter acquired Brill, of course.]

purpose of the field, views on method and theory can range from one which posits methods and theories about religion as the very substance and unavoidable precondition of all research, to another position which likens methodological and theoretical reflection to an unnecessary yet interesting side-line activity which is, however, unessential to research on religion. In the case of the latter, religious data is simply “out there” and in need of neutral, phenomenological description. From the viewpoint of the former, the phenomenological position overlooks the very significant extent to which theoretical commitments pre-determine research. As indicated by Karl Popper, the command by a teacher for students simply to “Observe” problematizes the common belief in value-free observation. The natural response to such a command would be, “Observe what?” which indicates precisely the value-loaded nature of all observational, descriptive activities.

This brief report, which informally surveys both the opinions of members of the Toronto community as well as the course offerings in this area at a number of other North American institutions, is designed to assist in determining the future direction not only of the graduate course but also of the new undergraduate course, first instituted in 1992-93. In realizing the perception that methods and theories is one area in which Toronto has excelled, perhaps the programmes will develop more concerted and sophisticated introductions to these fields for future undergraduate and graduate students alike.

(1) Research Procedures

One must note that, although the work carried out in this report is systematic, it was by no means carried out scientifically, and extensively.

During April of 1993 all undergraduate and graduate faculty of the Department and Centre for the Study of Religion, University of Toronto, were contacted through a form letter sent via campus mail requesting their input into the design of the methods and theories courses.

During April of 1993 I met in person with three of the five students enrolled in [the undergraduate course] RLG 200Y to inquire into their opinion of the course. On a later occasion I met one other student to augment the comments of the first group of students.

During April of 1993 I circulated a memo to the graduate students at the Centre asking for their input. Unfortunately, only six students came to the meeting. Subsequently, through informal conversations, several more opinions were canvassed.

During April 1993 a variety of schools in Canada and the United States were contacted by telephone and a request was made to obtain any information on their own methods and theories courses as well as information on their degree requirements. Those schools were:

Canada

Concordia University, McGill University, McMaster University, Memorial University, University of Calgary, University of Laval, University of Ottawa, University of Windsor, University of Winnipeg, Wilfred Laurier University

U.S.

American Academy of Religion Head Office, Columbia University, Dartmouth College, Drew University, Northwestern University, Syracuse University, University of California at Santa Barbara, University of Chicago; University of

Iowa, University of Tennessee at Knoxville, University of Vermont, Western
Michigan University

To supplement the mailings from some of the above schools (to date, a variety have not responded and so do not appear in this informal survey), I photocopied a sampling of course information from the collection of calendars [or what others call course catalogues] housed at the Centre. Unfortunately, in many cases, this information dates only to the 1989-91 academic year. These additional schools are:

Canada

Carleton University, Queen's University, University of Alberta, University of
Manitoba

U.S.

Arizona State University, Brown University, Colgate University, Emory College,
Princeton University, Stanford University, University of Denver, University of
North Carolina at Chapel Hill, University of Oregon

Again, it must be observed that this list is hardly authoritative. These schools were contacted simply as a means to canvas opinion and sample ideas to determine in general outline the types of courses presently offered in North America.

(2) Undergraduate Student Comments - RLG 200Y

The comments of the undergraduate students regarding RLG 200Y are summarized in several categories.

Goals of the Course

The 1992-93 course was attended largely by upper year or mature students because this was the first year it was offered. Therefore, what I refer to as the “menu” aspect of the course (i.e., a chance for second year students to survey options for further study) was not a prominent feature in the comments of the students I interviewed. All but one were already interested in a specific area of the study of religion (e.g., Religion and Literature). For the one student who was not in this category, the course did provide an opportunity to survey a variety of alternative approaches to studying religion and in that regard was helpful. The other students believed that in the future this aspect of the course would be of more importance (because the course would be attended by second year students once the new curriculum is better established). One helpful suggestion regarding this “menu” goal was that there should be a way of ensuring that a student tackle a diverse number of areas in the various assignments (essays, seminars etc.), rather than relying upon their own speciality too often. Note that the course was for this year ‘adapted’ to the needs of these upper year students and, therefore, a variety of issues around this menu option may not have been entirely relevant.

Texts and Readings

The students all found the readings used this past year to have been helpful.

However, a few problems are apparent. The first seems inescapable: the general lack of philosophical context of many of the students. Most acknowledged that, coming into the course, they did not possess any substantial knowledge of various philosophical issues. As well, their own critical reading abilities were limited and so the readings and critique assignments in the opening of the course were rather difficult at times. The students all generally liked the supplementary collection of photocopied readings. Interestingly, few recognized the high degree of Canadian content in these selections. One student voiced the concern that in a course such as this (a broad introduction to the field), students may want to read the “big names” rather than some of the writers selected this past year. The readings for the lectures and critiques functioned for some students as the basic variety to the course, while the readings they pursued for their individual research papers afforded them the opportunity to concentrate upon (and take advantage of) their own area of specialization.

Course Requirements

Given the time required for the preparation and subsequent writing of critiques, the students were generally in agreement that these assignments should be worth a greater percentage of the final grade. Alternatively, they said that perhaps the

number of critiques could be cut in half, since they could not agree as to where the marks should be lessened so as to make room for a greater percentage to count as critique. Otherwise, they had little to say regarding the present distribution of marks.

Writing Critiques

On the topic of assigned weekly reading critiques, the students acknowledged that they were an important part of the course and that they were a lot of work—especially in the first term. They were thankful that the critiques lessened in the second term. They all believed that their writing had benefitted considerably from these exercises. One significant comment which generated much discussion was that the class should have “walked through” the first reading/critique together to get an idea what critical reading can be. They suggested that one class could be spent working through the reading. Presuming that the students have all read the material beforehand, this would enable everyone to grasp the significance of detecting underlying authorial assumptions etc. Furthermore, some students thought that the potential for in-class discussions was lessened because much of this discursive energy was being put into the critique and therefore the discussion was largely a monologue from the student to the professor.

Other Assignments

One student found some of the seminars problematic, i.e., lack of integration with

the material of the rest of the course. It was suggested that pre-set topics which complemented the lecture/class material would be more helpful, as well as material that the class could read in preparation for the seminar.

Student Input to Design of Second Term

As was already observed, the 1992-93 course was adapted to allow for the upper year students' needs. All of the students appreciated the opportunity to contribute to the shape of the course in the second term. However, one person did note that in an undergraduate introductory course this may be an unnecessary luxury. As was noted, students largely unaware of the field come to such a course precisely for the expertise of the professor. However, the chance to delve deeper into topics touched lightly in first term, depending upon the requests of the students, was seen as positive.

Pedagogy

The teaching style, which seems to have been a mixture of introductory lectures followed by class discussion, was more than adequate. As was previously observed, the students noted how they were, at times, hampered by their general lack of philosophical background in the study of religion. In this area especially they were thankful for introductory remarks by the professor to situate them within the general context of an issue or a text. The overall size of the class was sometimes harmful they thought since at times the number of students was so small as to limit conversation. However, more than one said that this course was

one of the few they enjoyed and looked forward to. Additionally, the professor's flexible office hours and "open door" feeling was greatly appreciated.

Course Prerequisites

All remarked how important it was to have some technical knowledge of vocabulary, doctrines, and practices of a variety of religions prior to entering this course, if only to be aware of what, e.g., karma or nirvana was. In a somewhat related comment, one student wondered about the apparent emphasis placed upon Christian, or at least, North American and European writers and topics in the course.

General Comments

After finishing the course, some students still confessed to being a little intimidated by the general "jargon" of the field. They felt that they lacked a general knowledge of what certain terms mean, e.g., hermeneutics or phenomenology. As well, one student was more interested in the present theoretical or methodological debates rather than studying the "classics." The opportunity to be exposed to journal articles was very important for one student, since in many undergraduate courses textbooks are the only readings. Finally, the chance to have a guest visitor for a portion of the class was exciting to several students. This way they have a chance to speak with professors on their work after having read it. One student appreciated having the course instructor present during guest visits to provide continuity and support. As well, another thought the chance to meet briefly as a class prior to the visit was an important way of preparing for a

productive time with the visitor. Finally, one student lamented the Department's general lack of courses on "religion" in the singular as opposed to courses on various historical religions. RLG 200Y, in a way, seems to have provided that student with an opportunity to think about theoretical issues concerning religion *an sich*.

(3) Graduate Student Comments - RLG 1000Y

The comments of the graduate students mostly revolved around their common frustrations with the past versions of the REL 1000Y course. The history of the course has varied from being taught by a team (of two or several), to a course with one professor. While some people thought it to be important to "see new faces," all generally acknowledged the importance of having one professor for the sake of unity.

One debate among these students revolved around whether primary or secondary sources ought to be read in such a course. Among the students who had opinions on this, it was pretty much divided. The goal of the course, simply put, was interpreted to be an introduction to the field so that by its end the student would both understand the history of the field and be oriented within its contemporary debates. To achieve this goal, the students thought a mixture of primary and secondary sources would be useful. While some had little interest in reading any of the "classics" at this stage, they did recognize the value of confronting certain issues and being able to handle references to certain historical concerns in the field. When I proposed a mixture of Eric Sharpe's book, *Comparative Religion: A History* and a collection of secondary readings which would introduce the reader to general areas of the field, some students agreed that they would have been more interested in such readings.

Another important topic was the relevance of the material from the RLG 1000Y course to the various areas of expertise of each of the students. Too often, the students seem to have been left with no application or coordination between their own specialty (e.g., psychology of religion) and the theoretical material presented in the course. One person suggested that each student, while participating in the weekly general readings, could coordinate with the course professor and their supervisor in devising a reading list of theoretical pieces in their own field which would serve as the basis for a seminar or research paper. Integration certainly was an issue for a variety of students. Given the new structure of the comprehensive examinations—with a portion devoted to the application of method and theory issues to the student's particular programme—such integration may very well be provided.

One student raised a critique which has rocked English Departments but has yet to reach the study of religion: the presumed self-evident status of our theoretical and methodological “canon.” It was suggested that continually re-reading the “old men” of the field (e.g., Durkheim, Müller, etc.) served purposes not in keeping with the generally self-critical nature of the field. Therefore, a reading list ought also to include texts from writers who have traditionally been excluded from the prevailing reading fashions in the field. As well, some students questioned why the many developments in such areas as post-colonial and post-modern critiques of anthropology, literary criticism, or feminist criticism have not been included in the course. If the field is as cross-disciplinary as some would have us believe, so the argument goes, then method and theory courses are one important point of cross-fertilization. In this regard, one student suggested that, in the least, the introduction to Edward Said's *Orientalism* ought to be included among the required readings since our own field relies so heavily upon the knowledge and power

explosion which followed European imperialism across the world.

As well, just as in the case of RLG 200Y, the students of RLG 1000Y believed that they are still in need of a useful introduction to the “jargon” of the field. Some believe that they still have an inadequate grasp upon “the fundamentals.” Although they do not wish to read large portions of, e.g., Durkheim, they think it still necessary to be able to speak intelligently on such topics as projection theories of religion, hermeneutics, or phenomenology of religion. Although most acknowledged that in the future it would be up to them to read on many topics, they thought that the RLG 1000 course could provide them with a map to guide later readings in the form of thematized reading lists or bibliographies.

I am not entirely sure of the role my own opinions play in this reporting and so, like a good post-modernist, I will be clear (oh, those darned metaphors of transparency!) on my own thoughts on the topic. Ninian Smart’s collection of readings, while not entirely satisfactory, does provide a useful introduction to the methods and theories in the field. Such an introduction would also have to cover a narrative history of the field since the development of a lineage is one of the primary strategies utilized by scholars to establish social identity and authority. With this in mind, Smart’s collection could be reshaped to include a variety of readings similar to those outlined in William Paden’s REL 100 course at the University of Vermont (see an appendix for sample of the course outline). Paden includes readings from, e.g., Müller and Durkheim, which would complement the temptation to stress modern disputes. However, modern disputes as found in academic journals have been particularly interesting and provide students with an initiation into theoretical squabbles. A fine example, and one which emphasizes the Canadian content of these disputes, is the “Failure of Nerve” debate in the journal *Studies in Religion*. The many

writings on problems over definitions of religion would be another useful thematic area.

To conclude this portion, presuming that the course is structured around one professor and would somehow use Sharpe or Samuel Preus' *Explaining Religion* as introductions to some of the history of the field itself combined with a collection of essays, journal articles etc., I can see two different approaches to ordering the material. First, it could be arranged in the manner of Smart's anthology: by methods and theories, e.g., structuralism, hermeneutics, projectionist theories of religion etc. In this way, having established a historical foundation, the course would move through a series of readings deemed useful to understanding each of these methodological contributions to the field. Second, the collected readings and the course itself could be arranged thematically covering such issues as gender and scholarship, problems of definition, debates on reductionism, post-modernism and the study of religion, materialist explanations of religion. This second approach would introduce the student to several key areas in the modern study of religion where they themselves may very well end up working. While the first approach would be more traditional, introducing theories and methods themselves, the second would, it seems, be a little more radical by posing questions concerning the theories themselves.

(4) Faculty Comments

In total, eight faculty responded to the questionnaire distributed to them. Understandably, those who responded conceived of method and theory largely as it relates to their own speciality within the field. Such specific issues as the insider/outsider problem, the place of cross-cultural philosophy of religion, the continued necessity of confronting the "classics" of the field, as well as way that a common, required course in both undergraduate and graduate programmes assists

in building departmental cohesion were of concern to the respondents. Of particular importance is the extreme diversity of views on the topic of the place (or importance) of methods and theories courses.

One respondent, not in favor of the present emphasis upon methods and theories here at Toronto, observed that there was a need, at the graduate level, for an increase in knowledge of religious content rather than theories about religion. Accordingly, the recommendation was to decrease REL 1000Y to a half course [rather than a full year/two semesters] to be complemented by a half course [i.e., one semester] in comparative religion. (Others, no doubt, would question whether a half course either in methods and theories or comparative religion would be of any worth to the student.) In a very different vein, another respondent thought that one of the primary goals of the graduate course in method was to ensure that students could read primary and secondary literature critically. That same respondent concluded that “I strongly believe that theory and method courses should be required of all undergraduate majors and entering graduate students, early in their studies; and that the courses should be surveys of the range of views that exist in the discipline.” Yet another respondent thought a cross-disciplinary and somewhat demanding approach best for the undergraduate course, where the course would culminate in reading “some of the people who ... are read, and their views adopted, by scholars in a wide range of fields, including Religion.” Suggestions for such a reading list ranged from Michel Foucault and Edward Said to Clifford Geertz and Mary Douglas. A recent text for a graduate student reading list was suggested by another respondent: Jonathan Z. Smith’s *Drudgery Divine*. In this respondent’s experience, the graduate course’s success depends not so much on its content but on the professor’s pedagogy and the course’s ability to allow each participant to be

heard. The “home room” function of the RLG 1000Y course was, to this respondent, of importance.

Although two of the respondents did suggest specific outlines for courses, the views of the group as a whole did not represent a consensus on what exactly method and theory is. For some (represented, no doubt by the respondent who thought more comparative content was needed) this lack of definition might constitute reason enough to curtail Toronto’s involvement with the topic. However, for others, such apparent disunity might provide rather fertile ground to begin a process of reflection among the faculty on theoretical issues of second-order importance which would complement the student curriculum in this area now under discussion. Perhaps the weekly colloquia could be one site for such reflection and staff-student interaction on “things theoretical.”

(5) Programme Summaries

The summaries presented here have been taken from the academic calendars [or catalogues] from each institution. If the courses are required for the major or honours student, this is noted. Related courses which emphasize a theoretical or methodological approach to a topic, most likely myths and symbols, are also noted. As well, the year of these calendar entries are recorded.

Since the two courses of concern to Toronto are undergraduate and graduate, the following summaries are arranged in the following manner: first the Canadian and U.S. undergraduate entries, then followed by the graduate offerings for both countries. Due to the limited availability of research materials, not all programmes which offer both undergraduate and graduate programmes have both listings.

(5.1) Canadian Undergraduate Programmes

Carleton University 1989-90

The first course is required of those in the Pass and Honours programme.

REL 34.202 *Interpretations of Religion*. This course surveys modern enquiries into the nature of religion from various perspectives such as anthropology, psychology, sociology, and theology. Contrasting views of self, society, nature, God, history, and ultimate destiny conveyed by the myths, symbols, scriptures, doctrines, codes and rituals of religious traditions are examined.

REL 34.331 *Theory and Method in the Study of Religion*. Examination of selected theoretical and methodological models used in the interpretation of religious data. For example, a study of historical, phenomenological, or theological approaches to religious studies. The specific topic may vary from year to year.

REL 34.488 *Seminar in Modern Religious Thought and Culture*. Topic for 1989-90: A Critical theory of Religion. The course examines the implications of the Frankfurt School's critical theory and sociology of religion for an understanding of religion and religious experience within the wider context of recent theoretical approaches to the study of religion.

Memorial University 1989-90

Required of the fourth year Religion, Ethics, and Modern Culture specialist:

REL 3810 *Modern Interpretations of Religion*. A study of modern attempts to analyze, interpret, and reassess the place and significance of religion in human life. Attention will be given to thinkers such as Nietzsche, Marx, Freud, Sartre, Otto, Eliade, and Tillich.

Queen's University 1991-92

Among the two courses required of minors and honours students is this third year course:

RELS 353 *The Interpretation of Religion*. An examination of the origins, nature, and development of religion and various religious patterns that have appeared in human history. Problems of methodology encountered in the study of religion are introduced.

University of Alberta 1989-90

Although the RELIG 200 qualifies as a *junior elective*, it is one of eight possible religion courses which contribute to a B.A. (Hons) in the Humanities.

RELIG 200 *Introduction to the Study of Religion*. The origin and development of the history of religion as a separate academic discipline. Principles and methods of this discipline. Some account of the major living religions in their history and distinctive features.

See also, RELIG 462 *Methodology in Religious Studies*. A study of how one arrives at normative patterns.

University of Calgary 1990-

Required of all fourth-year majors:

REL 447 *Methodology in the Study of Religion*. Works by Malinowski, Eliade, Smith, etc., representing different approaches to the study of religion, will be examined in detail.

University of Manitoba 1989-90

Fourth year elective course

REL 20.447 *Method and Theory in the Study and Interpretation of Religion*. A survey of the major schools and theories in the field of religious studies over the past century, with focus on the work of the most prominent scholars. Introduction to the research techniques used in the various approaches.

Wilfred Laurier University 1993-94

No equivalent course.

(5.2) Canadian Graduate Programmes

McMaster University 1992-93

Required:

REL 741 *Issues in the Study of Religion*. The question this year's seminar seeks to answer is: What is religious experience. its nature, manifestations, and modes of symbolization?

The course employs, in addressing its question, several different methods and approaches and reflects on the performance of so doing. Course outline appended.

See an appendix for the course outlines for two previous versions of this course, both of which focus upon issues of methodology

Memorial University 1989-90

Required for the MA:

REL 6000 *Method in the Study of Religion*. No description provided.

University of Calgary 1990-

No specific methods or theories course in the MA

See REL 605 *Studies in the Nature of Religion*, no description provided.

See also REL 447 *Methodology in the Study of Religion*, in their undergraduate curriculum.

Université Laval 1993-94

All graduate students will be required in the coming year to read, Bruno Deshaies, *Méthodologie de la recherche en sciences humaines* (Montréal: Éd. Beauchemin ltée, 1992), 400p. Table of Contents is appended. Otherwise, they are unclear as to the expectations of the course and its

requirements.

University of Manitoba/University of Winnipeg Joint MA 1989-90

The calendar says that “students must have some formal training in Methodology. A student who has had no previous training in Methodology will be required to take such a course.” The course is they recommend is REL 20.447. See undergraduate listing for information on this course.

University of Ottawa 1992-94

Required course in the MA is SRS 5115 *Seminar in Religious Studies*.

Required course in the PhD is SRS 8115 *Seminar in Religious Studies*. Neither has a description and it appears doubtful that they are method and theory courses.

See also the related elective courses,

SRS 5100 *Special Questions in the History and Methods of the History of Religions*

SRS 5901 *Histories of the Sciences of Religions*

University of Windsor 1992-94

There are no method and theory courses in general. Rather, methods courses are offered within each of their areas of specialization in the MA.

REL 35-500 *Hebrew Bible: Critical Methods*

REL 35-502 *Methods in New Testament Studies*

REL 35-511 *Ethical Methodologies*

REL 35-542 *Phenomenology of Religion*

Wilfred Laurier University 1993-94

No equivalent course is offered.

(5.3) U.S. Undergraduate Programmes

Arizona State University 1989-90

One of two courses required of all majors and minors:

REL 405 *Problems in Religious Studies*. Selected topics and methodological problems in religious studies, involving students in the research interests of the instructor.

The other course is REL 305 *Ritual, Symbol, and Myth*

Brown University 1989-90

REL 100 *Methods in Religion*. This is a required course.

Colgate University 1989-90

Elective Course:

RELG 447 *The Comparative Study of Religion: History and Methods*. An introduction to the comparative study of religion, its history, and methods. Readings treat the comparative study of religion as well as anthropological, sociological, phenomenological, historical and theological approaches. The course seeks to enable the student to recognize

major contributions in the context of the continuing study and to develop a critical capacity to evaluate these methods.

Dartmouth 1992-93

Majors must take one of three possible intermediate courses. Two of those three are:

44. *Myth, Ritual, and Religious Symbols*: A study of various explanations of myths and rituals in religion. Particular attention will be given to a critical analysis of interpretations of religious symbolism by such scholars as Durkheim, Freud, Malinowski, Levi-Strauss, and Eliade.

45. *Classical Approaches to the Study of Religion*: This course is an introduction to the study of religion through its history. Students will read the classics of the field—Müller, Tylor, Durkheim, Mauss, van der Leeuw, and others. By the end of the term students will have acquired a familiarity with the ways in which religion has been studied, and will have had occasion to reflect, themselves, on the major questions that have engaged scholars for the last 150 years. What is religion? Why is there religion at all? How does it function?

Emory College 1988-90

No equivalent course.

Princeton University 1991-92

Required only of Major, Social Scientific Specialists:

REL 222 *Approaches to the Study of Religion*. An examination of theories concerning the origin and history of religion, the sociological and psychological aspects of religion, and the phenomenology of myth, ritual, and symbolism. Attention will be given to a variety of Western and non-Western religious forms, as interpreted by Frazer, Durkheim, Freud, Jung, Weber, Eliade, Levi-Strauss, and others.

Stanford University 1989-90

Elective course:

REL 149 *Theories of Religion*. Attempts to explain the origin and persistence of religious behaviour and belief in the modern period. Philosophical, sociological, historical and psychological theories, “classic” and contemporary.

Syracuse University 1993-94

No equivalent course.

University of Denver 1989-91

RLGS 0700 *The Study of Religion*. Basic approaches to the disciplined study of religion. Required for the Religious Studies major, minor, and area major.

RLGS 3801 *The Comparative Study of Religions*. Critical analysis of the literature concerning (a) methods, (b) primary problems, and (c) perspectives in the comparative

study of religions. Examines historical, anthropological, psychological, phenomenological approaches to the study of religions. Basic to graduate study in Religious Studies.

University of Oregon 1989-90

No equivalent courses.

University of Tennessee at Knoxville 1992-93

Required for majors:

REL 300 *Ways of Understanding Religion*. Sources and methods used in the study of religion and religions; analysis of approaches to the study of religion. Course outline appended.

University of Vermont 1991-92

Majors must take REL 100 and REL 201

REL 100 *The Interpretation of Religion*. The aims of this course are to gain (i) familiarity with influential concepts, figures, and writings in the modern study of religion, (ii) a sense of the respective contributions of different interpretive frameworks, (iii) awareness of different uses of the terms “religion” and “religious,” and (iv) an understanding of the culturally and historically situated nature of interpretation. Course outline appended.

REL 201 *Senior Seminar: Creative Hermeneutics*. Selected contemporary issues in

theory and interpretation.

Also, see the attached portion of Prof. Robert Gussner's course-book for freshmen and sophomores which deals with methodological and theoretical topics, culminating in what he terms the study of "developmental deep structuralism." The latter portions of this work appear to be more an example of the application of this method while the earlier portions of the text seem more in line with the demands of our RLG 200.

(5.4) U.S. Graduate Programmes

Brown University 1989-90

Required of all PhD students:

REL 200 *Theory of Religion*. Critical examination of major approaches to the study of religion, together with disciplined efforts to define and explain religious phenomena.

Particular attention to such topics as: psychological and social functions of religion; theories of religious myth and ritual; debates about the rationality of religious beliefs and practices.

See also REL 201 *Interpreting Religion: Theory and Practice*.

Northwestern University 1992-93

Either 429-D81-1, D81-2 or D82 is required of MA students. All three units are required for PhD students.

429-C95 *Theories of Religion*. Modern theories about the nature of religious experience, religious language, and critical examination of ways of thinking about religion.

429-D81-1,2 *History of the Theories of Religion*. Classic works in the study of religion from the 18th to 20th centuries. First quarter: Philosophy of religion and comparative religion. Second quarter: Anthropology, sociology, and psychology of religion.

429-D82 *Current Issues in the Study of Religion*. Examines contemporary literature on the theory of religion and method in the study of religion.

Stanford University 1989-90

Required course for MA and PhD students:

REL 304A *Theories and methods in the Study of Religion*. Various approaches to the study of religion. 1989-90 topic is on psychological approaches, e.g., Freud and William James.

REL 304B *Theories and Methods in the Study of Religion*. Completion of 304A.

Syracuse University 1993-94

Elective course:

REL 695 *Theories of Myth*. Methodological Seminar on contemporary Theory in relation to the study of religion and mythology.

See also REL 668 *Critical Theory in Theology*; and
REL 676 *Religion and Literary Theory*.

University of California at Santa Barbara 1992-93

Ninian Smart sent a copy of his two-volume photocopy collection of assorted introductory readings used in their required graduate course on methods and theories. This collection breaks down the area into such traditional sub-fields as ritual, symbol, ideology, phenomenology, hermeneutics, etc., and contains samples of the works of such writers as Mary Douglas, Roland Barthes, Mircea Eliade, and Ugo Bianchi. See attached material.

University of Chicago 1989-90

History of Religions Specialist

Of the five qualifying exams PhD students must write, one must be *History and Methods of the History of Religions*. Major thinkers on the theory and practice of history of religions, the history of the discipline, and the application of the theories to major problems (definition, validation, communication etc.).

Elective course:

HR 437 *Methods in the History of Religions*. Graduate course.

University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill 1989-90

All MA and PhD students must take the following two courses:

REL 200 *Pro-Seminar in Religious Studies*. A basic problems and methods course.

REL 299 *Topics in the Study of Religion*. Topics vary from year to year.

See related elective courses:

REL 105 *Myth, History, and Religion*

REL 183 *Theories of the Religious Imagination*

REL 188 *Methods for the Cross-Cultural Study of Religion*

REL 247 *Theories of Religion and Culture*

REL 284 *Theories of Religious Experience*

REL 309 *Otherness and History in the Study of Religion*

Postscript

Of interest to me as I worked through this research was how such names as Said or Foucault (to only provide two examples) have appeared at a variety of times, not only in the response of faculty but in student comments as well. For some reason, the study of religion seems to have escaped the critical scrutiny of much postmodern discourse. If anything, and many essays in the *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* will attest to this, postmodern theories of reading and interpretation have been addressed by many scholars of religion only inasmuch as such writers have attempted to defuse what would otherwise be a rather harsh critique of virtually the entire enterprise known as the academic study of religion. Much of their time is spent attempting to defend “being religious” or “being ethical” in a postmodern world. If programmes such as Toronto continue to isolate and ignore a debate which has raged within so many other university

disciplines and fields, it can only be detrimental to the professional readers, writers, and researchers such departments of religion are producing. A method and theory course which addresses such “tough issues” as the critique of essentialism, the utter vagaries of the debate on the definition of religion, the virtual contemporary silence around reductionistic theories of religion *à la* Durkheim, Marx, or Freud, or the harsh political critique of such writers as Eliade, will surely stimulate rather than threaten the future development and debates within the field.

If, as I tend to believe, much of the history of the field is the history of battles over control of the discourse, and if, as Foucault has helped so many of us to realize, methods of study—as well as the social interests of those who do the studying—manufacture the content of study, then the method and theories course is the primary site of battle within the discourse. The differing—even conflicting—opinions on how one *ought* to study, define etc., this thing commonly referred to as ‘religion’ is evidence of the importance to continue to provide an open, critical, and intellectually and socially stimulating focus for future discussions—faculty as well as student—around topics of methodological and theoretical import.