



## **Cyclical Review of the Department of Religion & Culture Final Assessment Report**

*Submitted July 2012 by Mike Carroll, Dean, Faculty of Arts and Joan Norris, Dean, Faculty of Graduate & Postdoctoral Studies in consultation with Deb MacLatchy, VP Academic and Pat Rogers, AVP Teaching and Learning*



## *Part I: Synthesis of Review Documents*

### **Summary of Self-Study**

The departmental Self-Study pointed out that

- the Department of Religion and Culture has become an important centre for the academic study of North American religious traditions; faculty members are widely recognized for their scholarship;
- the MA programme (now 30 years old) attracts top quality students who model academic excellence for undergraduates, especially by being teaching assistants; as well, the extra-curricular options, especially the *Interdisciplinary Arts Conference*, and *Religion and Public Life Conference*, enhance the curriculum and student experience in the program;
- MA graduates have secured employment in a number of different careers;
- the joint PhD programme (established in 2004 with the University of Waterloo) has been a success;
- particular faculty from Religion and Culture have won teaching awards and have made strong administrative contributions to the University outside the department itself;
- Religion and Culture has a student society; though more active in some years than others, on average this society enlivens the intellectual life of the department;
- Religion and Culture offers some of the most popular undergraduate courses in the faculty;
- Library resources and computing facilities are adequate;
- in 2008, the department revised its undergraduate curriculum, partly in order to ensure that students acquired skills in an orderly manner over their years in the programme and partly to reflect the research interests of newly appointed faculty members (and the fact that certain areas were associated with faculty who had left the department);
- apart from its focus on North American religious traditions, the department also offers courses on early Christianity, Islam and Asian religions;
- the department is committed to having its core faculty teach first year courses;
- International graduate students are increasingly drawn to the program, and the department is well-positioned to "enhance immigration to Canada and to train foreign students on religious

diversity issues," though their enrolment remains problematic in the absence of a university-wide policy on recruiting and funding such students;

- there is a need to fill the position vacated by a resignation in 2011 with a tenure-track appointment as soon as possible, and that the use of LTAs for graduate supervision and teaching is problematic;
- for the past year-and-a-half, the department had to have a chair from another unit due to a number of circumstances.

### **Summary of External Reviewers' Report and Recommendations**

The external reviewers were Dr. Paul Bowlby, Professor of Religious Studies at Saint Mary's University and Dr. Paul Bramadat, Director of the Centre for Study of Religion and Society at the University of Victoria. The internal reviewer was Dr. Maria DiCenzo, Department of English and Film Studies, Wilfrid Laurier University. The following excerpts are taken from the Executive Summary that these three reviewers prepared:

"Our impressions of both programmes (the BA and MA programmes) and the student experiences of the programmes are quite positive. The Department of Religion and Culture has a distinguished history in the field of Religious Studies in Canada and internationally. Both because of the uniqueness of its thematic focus on religion and culture and the distinguished faculty who have been its leaders since its founding in 1973, the department has been a reference point against which other departments, especially in Canada, have measured themselves. Faculty from Religion and Culture have been leaders in research and teaching in their respective fields and, it is especially important to note, in the study of religions in Ontario, in Canada and internationally. Faculty members and students from these programmes have also been active, even prolific, participants in the Canadian Society for the Study of Religion, the major Canadian scholarly society for religious studies scholars. Such a history of outstanding contributions to the field of religious studies is quite impressive, especially given some of the staffing challenges Religion and Culture has struggled with over recent years. Three established senior faculty have made outstanding administrative and scholarly contributions to the department and their scholarly fields and propose to continue in administrative leadership over the next decade. This bodes well for the immediate future. The department's two most junior faculty members are especially enthusiastic, ambitious and creative, and that bodes well for the future of the undergraduate and graduate programmes. The students we met clearly feel great affection for the programme and faculty, and feel the faculty members are caring and effective teachers."

### **Recommendations**

**Recommendation One:** The Department of Religion and Culture should prepare a simple chart designed to show students what is required for an Honours BA in Religion and Culture and support the chart with a clear statement of requirements.

**Recommendation Two:** The stated objections of both Global Studies and Religion and Culture to the major in Christian Studies and Global Citizenship should be dealt with thoroughly and openly in an effort to determine how the department and the new programmes can work together. Careful analysis of the enrolment patterns for this new programme and an annual assessment of its impact on Religion and Culture should be a matter of administrative and departmental priority both for the department and for the university academic administration.

**Recommendation Three:** The Department of Religion and Culture should review the fields of specialization in the MA programme to ensure that it wishes to offer students training in both religious texts and fieldwork methods.

**Recommendation Four:** The reviewers urge the administration to fill the vacant position created by the 2011 resignation and urge the Department of Religion and Culture to apply immediately to the Dean of Arts for permission to fill the ninth full-time faculty position in the department.

**Recommendation Five:** The Department of Religion and Culture should develop a strategic plan to communicate clearly how it sees the relationship between its three academic programmes. The plan will make clear its on-going commitment to maintain and enhance greater integration of the BA, MA and PhD programmes, incorporating academic objectives, curriculum content and faculty specializations.

**Recommendation Six:** The Department of Religion and Culture should develop a strategic administrative plan for the next seven year cycle in order to ensure that the key administrative positions – chairperson, undergraduate coordinator and graduate coordinator/PhD coordinator, etc. – are shared equitably.

**Recommendation Seven:** The Department of Religion and Culture should obtain comparative data on how religious studies departments are measured for success in other Ontario universities and develop as part of its strategic planning process a clear proposal for how success for the programme is to be measured.

**Recommendation Eight:** The Department of Religion and Culture should consider ways to incorporate a “thesis-like” requirement for those students intending to pursue graduate work. One possible solution

that would not require any broader university-wide changes would be the use of a senior advanced readings course numbered as a thesis course.

### **Summary of the Department's Response**

Because the department's response to the Reviewers' Report was brief, the response is quoted in its entirety.

"The Department of Religion and Culture greatly appreciated the on-campus visit and hard work of the reviewers, Drs. Paul Bowlby, Paul Bramadat and Maria DiCenzo. Following is a response to the External Review Committee's Report for the seven-year cyclical review of the BA and MA programmes in Religion and Culture. The response follows the format of the recommendations.

**Recommendation One:** The Department of Religion and Culture will direct its undergraduate committee chaired by its incoming undergraduate officer to devise a simplified chart with a clear statement of requirements for the Honours BA in Religion and Culture.

**Recommendation Two:** The Department of Religion and Culture welcomes the opportunity to engage in substantive discussions with colleagues in Global Studies, the university academic administration and the Seminary to ensure that there is not unnecessary duplication as well as to investigate areas of future collaboration. For instance, there might be room for Laurier International and CIGI as well.

**Recommendation Three:** The graduate officer and the graduate committee will be charged to ensure that there will be thematic courses which offer students appropriate training in both field work and textual analysis at the MA level.

**Recommendation Four:** The Department of Religion and Culture concurs with the reviewers' suggestion for immediate hiring to fill the ninth full-time faculty position in the department.

**Recommendation Five:** The incoming chair will initiate discussion at a faculty departmental retreat this summer to consider the recommendation of better integration of the BA, MA and PhD programmes as part of a strategic plan. This plan will also consider an initiative to better coordinate the aims of the three academic programmes that the department offers.

**Recommendation Six:** In conjunction with Recommendation Five, the Department of Religion and Culture will also discuss a strategic plan for the next seven year cycle in order to ensure that key administrative positions – chairperson, undergraduate coordinator and graduate coordinator/PhD coordinator – are shared equitably. In accordance with the reviewers' comments in 2.3.2.8 on page 8, "As part of this strategic planning process, each member of the department should be asked to submit for discussion in a department meeting their own vision about how they propose to contribute to the administrative tasks of the department and the university, ranging from committee memberships to senate, review committees, etc. The reviewers recommend that faculty members seek to agree among

themselves about a general plan for their administrative duties over a seven year cycle. As part of the administrative planning process, the department should set up clear administrative objectives and review the administrative responsibilities for each member of faculty.”

**Recommendation Seven:** The Department of Religion and Culture agrees with the recommendation to begin compiling comparative data of other Ontario universities’ religious studies departments as part of its strategic planning process in order to develop a clear proposal for how programme success should be measured.

**Recommendation Eight:** Regarding the suggestion of adapting a “thesis-like” requirement, the Department of Religion and Culture has recently adapted a full year, one credit fourth year capstone course to be taken by Religion and Culture fourth year honours students. The department will also consider other ways to enhance the fourth year learning experience for students through a consideration of high impact teaching and learning strategies.

## ***Part 2: Executive Response***

While the recommendations made by external reviewers must inevitably focus on change, it is important to note that their extended report identifies a number of strengths:

- the department has a good reputation and a distinguished history in the field of religious studies, both in Canada and internationally at both the undergraduate and graduate levels.
- the scholarly profile of current department members, especially regarding publications and conference presentations, is very good

More mundanely, but still worth noting, the reviewers indicate that:

- the department is currently supplied with adequate office space, though there is some need for "additional shared work space for graduate students and meeting space for all of [the department's] students."
- library facilities for the department are adequate at the moment, though it is recommended that the library "continue to expand its electronic resources in the area of religion and culture to support undergraduate teaching, graduate student research at both the MA and PhD levels and faculty research."

- the department is well-supplied with computer facilities

Generally, as becomes apparent from comparing the recommendations made by the reviewers and the department's response to those recommendations, the department is quite willing to accept most of the recommendations made by the reviewers.

In meeting with the reviewers, the Dean of Arts raised a number of issues and questions. These issues and questions had been raised with the department earlier in the year and included:

- a concern that the logic of the undergraduate programme was not clear
- a concern that administrative responsibilities were not being equitably shared within the department
- a concern that the department might not have the resources to maintain BA, MA and joint PhD programmes

The reviewers agreed (in their extended report) that the logic of the undergraduate programme could be made clearer, and that is reflected in Recommendation One, which the Dean of Arts fully supports.

The reviewers, perhaps wisely, did not comment directly on the matter of equity (or really, inequity) in the sharing of administrative positions within the department. They did, however, call on the department to develop a "strategic administrative plan" that outlines who will take on major administrative responsibilities (notably chairperson, undergraduate officer, graduate officer) over the next seven years (Recommendation Six). As part of its own internal planning, the department has already mapped out chairperson succession over the next several years and has already simplified its administrative structure by merging the roles of MA and PhD coordinators. The Dean of Arts fully supports the recommendation that such a plan be developed. On the other hand, the department had engaged in this exercise previously; for it to be effective this time around there will need to be a change in departmental culture such that all full-time members feel an obligation to share major administrative tasks. The Dean of Arts' office will monitor this situation, and will initiate discussion with both the chairperson and the department (and if necessary, with particular departmental members) to facilitate this cultural shift.

Unfortunately, the reviewers did not really address the third concern of the Dean of Arts about whether the department has the resources to maintain their BA, MA and PhD programmes. Implicitly, however, their positive review of the BA and MA programmes, and their noting that the joint PhD programme was recently reviewed positively (which is correct), suggest that they support maintaining all three programmes. The Dean of Arts is still not entirely convinced of this. The department - in response to this issue that was raised with them earlier this year - has taken some steps to scale back a

bit the resources expended on the graduate programme. The Dean of the Faculty of Graduate & Postdoctoral Studies recommends that courses in the MA program be reviewed for their learning objectives and connection to the central goals of both programmes. For the time being then, the Dean of Arts sees nothing that needs to be done, but will be keeping close track of Religion and Culture's use of part-time faculty at the undergraduate level to ensure an appropriate balance between the number of undergraduate and graduate courses taught by full-time faculty.

The reviewers characterized the five percent growth in departmental enrolments over the past five years as "quite impressive." This is a bit of an overstatement. Overall growth in enrolments in the Faculty of Arts for the last ten years has been two percent, and there are several departments that have seen growth rates of 20-30 percent. On the other hand, it is true that some departments have experienced serious declines in enrolment. Religion and Culture is certainly holding its own at the undergraduate and master's level. A consideration of enrolments, however, led the reviewers into a discussion of the best way to assess a programme like Religion and Culture. They note, in particular, that many religious studies departments have few majors but offer a great many high enrolment service courses for students in other programmes. This led the reviewers (in their Recommendation Seven) to suggest that the department survey other religious studies programmes to find out how "success" is measured in those programmes, that is, whether the measure is "number of majors" or "enrolments." The Dean of Arts has no objection to such a survey. Still, over the past two years, the Dean's office has gathered (and disseminated to all faculty) data on both issues. In the case of Religion and Culture, for example, the ratio of "majors" to "full-time faculty" is the lowest of any department in the faculty. Is that balanced by the fact that they are teaching a disproportionate number of students in service courses? Not really. Looking at the ratio of "total enrolments in Religion and Culture courses" to "full-time faculty", Religion and Culture is in the middle of the pack for the faculty. Recommendation Seven, then, is a relatively low priority item. What the data suggest, rather, is that the department must increase the number of its majors (and the programme clarification mandated by Recommendation One might help with that) or it needs to offer more service courses. The Dean will be asking the department to send him a report by December 15, 2012 outlining the steps they have considered in order to achieve these goals.

The Dean of the Faculty of Graduate & Postdoctoral Studies is concerned about the declining numbers of applications and admissions to the MA programme in recent years. A review of the purpose and course content of the programme should be done to ensure that its substantial strengths and unique qualities are obvious to incoming and current students, including those in other graduate programs who might benefit from enrolling in them.

With regard to Recommendation Two, the Dean of Arts notes that the department has adopted a more conciliatory tone than the reviewers themselves (compare the reviewers' Recommendation Four with the department's response to Recommendation Four). For some background: this past year the

Seminary proposed a new undergraduate programme in Christian Studies and Global Citizenship. Although the reviewers' recommendation might be read as suggesting that this was done without consultation, the reverse is true. The Seminary contacted both the Department of Religion and Culture and the Department of Global Studies several times over the Fall and Winter terms to open a dialogue - and indeed the Seminary made changes to its original proposal to accommodate some of the concerns raised. What the Seminary was not willing to do, and what was requested by members of the Departments of Global Studies and Religion and Culture, was to postpone indefinitely introducing their new programme. Eventually, the matter was considered at Senate, and after a heated discussion, the Seminary proposal was approved. The Dean of Arts supported the Seminary's new programme because it would serve a niche market (basically students from strongly faith-based traditions who wanted nevertheless to engaged in critical reflection on religion) and because it was obvious that enrolment in the programme would be very limited (that in fact has proven to be the case). In the end, the Dean doesn't believe that the two programmes are really in competition. Still, the Dean can certainly endorse the department's willingness to engage in a dialogue with both the Seminary and Global Studies to "ensure that there is no unnecessary duplication as well as to investigate areas of future collaborations." (from their version of Recommendation Two).

Recommendation Five asks the department to better integrate its three programmes. This makes eminent sense.

In their discussion of the three programmes, the reviewers (Recommendation Four) indicate that the position left vacant by a resignation in June 2011 (which this past year, and for the upcoming year, is/was filled with a Limited Term Appointment) should be filled with a tenure-track appointment. Given the positive review of all three programmes, the fact that undergraduate enrolment in Religion and Culture has grown by five percent over the past five years; and given the department's willingness to make changes over the last year and to embrace the changes recommended by the reviewers - the Dean of Arts will indeed recommend to the Vice-President Academic that this position be filled with a tenure-track appointment in 2013-2014 (though contingent upon resolution of the issue raised by the reviewers' Recommendation Three; see below).

In the case of Recommendation Three, it seems to the Dean of Arts that the department has misread the reviewers' intent. Thus, in their full report the reviewers say:

". . .the first stated objective of the MA - "to cultivate advanced research and methodological skills in both textual study and fieldwork" - requires some further consideration. The fieldwork component has a clear connection to the specializations among most members of the faculty in the department. However, with the loss of three senior faculty and a resignation of a junior member in 2011, it is not as obvious that "textual studies" is as great a strength in the department as it was historically. The question worth asking is whether or not this objective as currently stated can be fulfilled with the current faculty complement. If this is no longer possible,

perhaps the department may wish to rephrase its objectives so they are more consistent with the kinds of training it is capable of providing for students."

The reviewers, in other words, are clearly raising the possibility that the department may at this point in its history not have the resources to continue to offer training in "textual studies" as well as fieldwork. Hence their recommendation:

Recommendation Three: The Department of Religion and Culture should review the fields of specialization in the MA to ensure that it wishes to offer students training in both religious texts and fieldwork methods. [emphasis added]

The department's response i.e.:

Recommendation Three: The graduate officer and the graduate committee will be charged to ensure that there will be thematic courses which offer students appropriate training in both field work and textual analysis at the MA level

seems to prejudge the very review that the reviewers are calling for, by suggesting that both fieldwork and textual analysis will be offered at the MA level.

It is the Dean of Arts's view, especially in light of the larger concern about resources mentioned earlier, that the department needs to follow the recommendation made by the reviewers. To sharpen the discussion, the Dean of Arts will be asking the department to provide a written and convincing justification for any continued emphasis on textual studies at the MA level before approving the posting of the ad for the new tenure-track replacement.

From the perspective of the Dean of Graduate & Postdoctoral Studies, there has been too much made of this alleged "gap" in the master's program since it has no approved "fields of specialization." This terminology pertains to very definite program areas that must be fully justified and approved in the course of accrediting a program. Rather than studying in various "fields of specialization," students in the the MA program in Religion and Culture may work with individual faculty members in their areas of interest and specialization. If the program believes that there is a gap in their course offerings, they may propose additional requirements through Graduate Faculty Council. They may also propose the addition of fields, but these would need approval through the province's Quality Council. Putting aside the field issue, however, the Dean of the Faculty of Graduate & Postdoctoral Studies recommends that a review of the learning objectives of the program and how these are supported by courses currently listed in the Graduate Calendar be undertaken.

Finally, the reviewer's Recommendation Eight suggests that the department consider a "thesis-like" requirement for those students intending to pursue graduate work. The department, in its response,

doesn't comment directly on the possibility of such a "thesis-like" requirement but does talk about improving the fourth year experience (presumably, given the reviewers' comments, for students intending to go to graduate school). The reviewers have not clearly established that fourth year students are unprepared for graduate school; moreover, many undergraduate programs prepare students who then go on to graduate school even without a "thesis-like" project at the undergraduate level. The Dean of Arts looks forward to the proposals that the department brings forward in this area. It is understood, however, that any such changes must be revenue neutral, so the costs of any such changes would have to be assessed against the consequences of redirecting resources from other parts of the Religion and Culture programme.

### Part 3: Implementation Plan

RR = Reviewers' recommendation

DR= Departmental version of Reviewer's Recommendation

Recommendation to be Implemented	Responsibility for Implementation	Implementation Date	Additional Notes
RR1 - logic of programme to be made clearer	Department	Fall 2012	Department to provide Dean with brief summary of what has been done by Dec 15, 2012
DR2 (not RR2) - consultation with Seminary and Global Studies	Department	Fall/Winter 2011-12	
RR3 (not DR3) - can department continue to emphasize both fieldwork and textual studies?	Department	Fall 2012	Department must resolve the issue raised by the reviewers to the Dean of Art's satisfaction before new tenure-track position (in RR4) is posted; the program coordinator should meet the FGPS dean to discuss the need for curriculum change or the addition of fields. A review of the learning objectives with the assistance of Teaching Support Services is also recommended.
RR4 - advertise for new tenure-track hire	Department, after final authorization from Dean	Fall 2012	See RR3 above
RR5 - better integration of BA, MA and PhD	Department	Fall/Winter 2011-12	Department will provide Deans with a report by April 30, 2013
DR6 - develop a strategic plan for next 7 years re admin positions	Department	Fall 2012	Plan to be discussed with Dean no later than Dec 15, 2012
RR7 - collect data from other programmes to determine if "success" measured by majors or enrolments	No need to implement (see text) - # of Majors relative to # of faculty is low; total enrolments only mid-range for Faculty		
Dean of Art's Recommendation (given discussion of RR7 above) - Department needs to increase majors and/or increase enrolments	Department	Fall 2012 (so that any changes can be approved by Senate in time for 2013-14)	Department to provide Dean of Arts with brief summary of what steps they will be taking by Dec 15, 2012
DR8 (not RR8) - develop ways of preparing fourth year students for grad school	Department	Fall/Winter 2012-13	Not a high priority (see text) but department is right to consider a range of options beyond the "thesis like" requirement mentioned in RR8