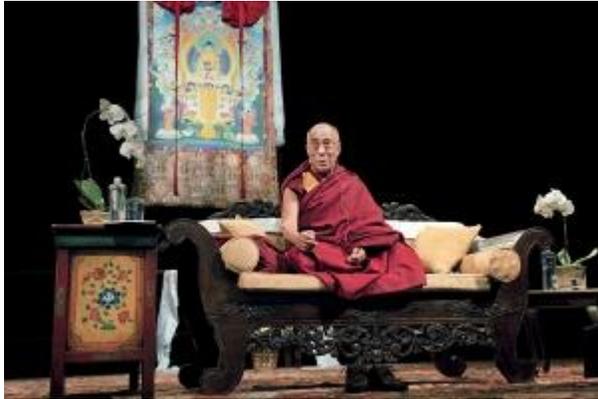


Religious Studies Revival at <http://education.newsweek.com/2010/09/12/religious-studies-thrive-in-troubled-times.html>

## Religious Studies Revival

In trying times, a once esoteric major has become increasingly vital.



Randall Lamb / Courtesy of UC-Santa Barbara

The Dalai Lama, on a national tour, addressing students.

“You want to major in what?”

Such is the anguished cry of parents, who, having scraped together their last dollar for college tuition learn that their child has decided to devote herself not to something useful, like economics or premed, but to religious studies, that esoteric interdisciplinary major in which people study how religious beliefs and practices affect history, culture, politics, economics and the world.

In a world defined by religious conflict—in the Middle East, in Africa, and in the culture wars at home—colleges and universities have come to consider religious studies increasingly important. In 2009, the American Historical Association announced that for the first time the history of religion was the most popular specialty among professional historians. The number of bachelors’ degrees conferred upon graduates in philosophy or religious studies has doubled since the 1970s to nearly 12,000 a year, and has been rising steadily since 9/11. “The study of religion,” says Jeanne Kilde, who has started a new program at the University of Minnesota, “is a growth industry.”

Many schools retain a bias against religious studies, however, as if learning about religious belief and practice is equivalent to religious indoctrination. As books deriding religious faith continue to top bestseller lists (Christopher Hitchens’s *God Is Not Great* comes to mind), scholars who seriously probe questions of belief and worship are sometimes regarded with suspicion. Especially in the Ivy League, notably at Harvard University, the secular, science-oriented culture

is so pervasive that religious studies have the status of a poor relation. In 2009, just 33 Harvard undergraduates chose to major in religion, compared with 704 in economics and 45 in classics.

(And though the Ivy League religious-studies departments are beset by inherited problems of tradition and culture, there are bright spots. Columbia University's famous Core Curriculum requires all undergraduates to take a course in Contemporary Civilization; readings therein include sections of the Bible, as well as Augustine, the Quran, and Aquinas. At Yale, a new program on the interconnections between faith and globalization was launched by former British prime minister Tony Blair in 2008 and is always oversubscribed. And Princeton, unimpeded by an old affiliation with a divinity school, has one of the best religious-studies departments anywhere.)

But elsewhere, the study of religion thrives, often in surprising places. Sociologists, anthropologists, and psychologists are all getting into the religion game, trying to discover the roots of human religious belief and bring quantitative methods to bear on the study of religious practice. A small but growing number of economists are endeavoring to measure the impact of the business cycle on religiosity—and, conversely, the impact of religiosity on prosperity. At the University of California, Santa Barbara, long home to one of the country's most innovative religion departments, two new courses illustrate religious studies' shift in emphasis. One, *The Evolutionary and Cognitive Science of Religion*, looks at the religious impulse of the human mind; the other, *Origins: A Dialogue Between Scientists and Humanists*, is cross-listed as a physics course and is UCSB's answer to the broader culture's larger "faith versus reason" debates.

Public universities often host the best religion departments. For one thing, they are newer and don't have to cope, institutionally, with a legacy of Christian origins. And, as recipients of taxpayer money, they have to be very clear about their secular framework: they can't teach students to be religious; they have to teach about religion.

Finally, public universities' diverse student bodies create a demand for a breadth of courses not found in smaller schools. "If you have a bunch of all-white Anglo-Saxon Protestants, there's a world view that comes with that," says Catherine Albanese, chair of religious studies at UCSB. "We don't have that issue because we have faculty coming from here, there, and everywhere whose basic life orientation is quite different from that Protestant mold."

Smaller private colleges and universities, especially those outside the Ivy League, often host the happiest religion departments. Faculty, unconstrained by more elitist scholarly biases, take imaginative approaches to subject matter and draw passionately interested students into class. Robert Orsi, who teaches American Catholicism, fled Harvard in 2007 and set up shop at Northwestern University, where his course *Religion, Medicine, and Suffering in the West*—with its emphasis on the history of healing—is always overenrolled.

Macalester College, a tiny liberal-arts school in St. Paul, Minn., has what is, by all accounts, an outstanding religious-studies department. With only five full-time faculty members, it attracts a disproportionately high number of majors: 34 at last count. With its emphasis on religious practice rather than on doctrine, it attracts students who, upon entering college, would never have

dreamed of majoring in religion. “Very few students come here saying, ‘I’m going to major in religious studies,’” says James Laine, the department head. “It’s usually the last thing on their minds. So it’s really a matter of getting them interested once they get here.”

Macalester takes an anthropological approach. “A course on Islam wouldn’t emphasize an ideal form of Islam and theology but would actually look at the ritual practice and day-to-day way of life of Muslims in different cultural settings,” says Laine. And a lot of the learning takes place outside the classroom. “We take students to visit a Cambodian temple or a Latino church. We do a lot of things in Minneapolis, which has become a very diverse city.”

Graduates of this tight-knit, experiential-religion program tend to be people who want to do good in the world. Though a few do go on to pursue Ph.D.s in religious studies, the great majority find service jobs in education, social work, nursing, and nonprofits. Others follow an unconventional path. One recent graduate “opened a cheese shop down the street that is booming,” says Paula Cooley, a professor in the department.

For schools with an explicitly religious mission, the problem of how to teach about faith is both easier and more difficult. On these campuses, the importance of religion—personally, culturally, politically—is not questioned. But the line between teaching religion and teaching about religion becomes more blurred. At Georgetown University, founded by Roman Catholic Jesuits in 1789, students have to take two religion courses to graduate. With this requirement, says department chair Terrence P. Reynolds, Georgetown hopes to “introduce students to basic religious issues” and help them “question the grounds on which we’ve come to hold the traditions and beliefs that we do.”

Indeed, the smaller size of religion departments can be an advantage—where those departments are healthy and have good relations with their administrations and among their faculty peers. For students earnestly interested in the Meaning of Life, religious studies is the way to go.

*With Johannah Cornblatt and Nayeli Rodriguez*