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The Challenge of Changing Institutional Structures

Over the course of the past five years, religious studies at Arizona State University has changed its institutional location and rethought its configuration of course offerings to address broader thematic issues. This move aims to make evident to majors and other students the ways in which the study of religion contributes to the understanding of complex questions and developments. As part of the broader reorganization of many units into schools (within colleges), religious studies three years ago became part of the School of Historical, Philosophical, and Religious Studies. Intellectual and budgetary considerations led to significant alterations in the institutional makeup of Arizona State University. Within this new school, religious studies continues to oversee and define its own major, minor, and course offerings while also searching for new possible collaborative teaching opportunities with the other two faculties comprising the school. These conversations are for the most part just beginning, and how they will impact the way religious studies contributes to the university in general will be made evident in coming years. However, prior to this reorganization, our faculty had already begun to explore how we might reenvision our undergraduate role. These discussions, as well as other developments — including the appointment of a number of colleagues with joint appointments in other units, the pursuit of cross-listing courses with other units, our initiation and ongoing contribution to a number of undergraduate certificate programs, our faculty involvement in a variety of research and program centers, and the overall participation of our faculty in individual and collaborative research — all enhance the visibility of religious studies and its crucial contribution to teaching and learning in public higher education.

Arizona State University is among the largest multicampus universities in the United States, with

over 70,000 undergraduate and graduate students. The largest campus is in Tempe, and the religious studies program resides within the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences. Religious studies became a department in 1979, and has grown to include a full-time faculty of more than twenty. It offers numerous courses leading to undergraduate minor and major, master's, and doctoral degrees. Approximately 4,000–5,000 students per semester typically enroll in religious studies courses. The number of majors, however, has remained in the low hundreds with a significant number of minors as well.

President Michael Crow assumed the leadership of the university in 2002 and put forward a vision for transforming the institution into a New American University. Eight design aspirations comprise this plan, and it includes several that have contributed in important ways to our rethinking the contribution of our undergraduate instruction: fusing intellectual disciplines, engaging globally, and transforming society. We have sought to devise new courses, develop interconnections with multiple units, create new certificate programs, and retool the major to emphasize broad thematic issues that in part take into account these institutional goals. At the same time, these changes also serve student interests in ways that equip them to be contributing members of the local, national, and global society.

“One university in many locations” has also been a guiding principle of Arizona State University. In concrete terms, this has meant that although students pursue their major in a unit housed on one of our four campuses, courses that meet the specific requirements of their major may be offered on any of the campuses and are fully transferable. The rapid growth of online course offerings (many not fielded out of our unit but under the “REL” prefix) has also meant that, other than having initially provided the course description and proposing certain content so as to satisfy general studies requirements, we do not directly supervise many of these particular offerings. Thus, as detailed below, many students often lack a grasp of the overall goals of the study of religion and also of who stands behind courses in which they are enrolled. This is true even after we have initiated some major changes to enhance the overt contribution of the study of religion to the examination of numerous social, cultural, and political issues, and to shape the teaching and especially research and programming related to the study of religion at Arizona State University. In some ways we are not fully in control of the ways in which the study of religion contributes to our overall university. But the general interest in the study of religion remains very high, at least measured in terms of university-wide enrollments in REL courses, which total more than 5,000 students per semester.

In order to understand more recent initiatives undertaken by the faculty in religious studies, I offer the following short history of our unit. From its start, the religious studies department defined the goal of our major as follows:

To cultivate knowledge of:

1. The beliefs, practices, and institutions of Asian religions, Western religions, and religion in the Americas
2. The theoretical and methodological issues involved in the discipline of religious studies
3. The roles of religion in individual and collective life in diverse historical and social contexts

While we had always required comparative analysis, the curriculum initially and for many years was organized around courses on different periods and aspects of specific religious traditions or religions in particular geographic regions. Implicit in these courses was the exploration of broad cultural and social phenomena, such as the role of texts and the nature of interpretation, or religion and social and/or political change and stability. But students would have had to draw selectively from examinations of such matters as they emerged episodically in different classes. Throughout the first two decades of the history of our unit, we routinely attracted some of the university's best students, with nearly a third of our majors being "double majors." Such students tended to be able to make important connections between their learning in religious studies and knowledge gained from their studies in such fields as languages and literature, anthropology, and psychology. Furthermore, colleagues in other academic units, when looking at the list of courses and their descriptions, would not have so easily perceived the multiple connections between our teaching and research and their own interests. Such connections, of course, did emerge from interactions among members of our faculty and colleagues in other units, resulting in a good understanding by many of the faculty and administrators at Arizona State University of the broader and critical contributions the study of religion did and could make.

As part of a septennial review in the late 1990s we initiated some changes in our undergraduate course offerings by introducing what can be seen as topical courses. These offerings drew upon data from several different religions, though the examples would vary depending on the instructor. At the lower division level, courses explored such issues as saints and sinners, living and dying, religion and popular culture, and religion and the modern world. At the upper division level, they explored comparative mysticism; religion, violence, and conflict resolution; religion, nationalism, and ethnic conflict; religion and sexuality; and religion and global politics. The titles of these courses make explicit the specific general issues to which comparative religious data are relevant. A good number of these courses were readily cross-listed with other units, including global studies, psychology, justice studies, and women and gender studies. The cross-listing provided students majoring in other units with exposure to the study of religion, while at the same time satisfying requirements for their own major. These efforts also strengthened connections with faculty in these other units.

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