

June 2012

Dear President Faust,

Please find attached a summary of our observations and recommendations related to the study of religion at Harvard. We very much appreciate the opportunity to visit, to offer our thoughts on how the field is organized at Harvard, and to identify areas for enhancement.

We recognize that you have been considering religion through many different frames this year with the search for a new dean of the Divinity School and the search for the Pusey Minister of the Memorial Church. We also recognize that there are others who have studied this issue in the past. We made an effort to incorporate the observations and recommendations of those studies.

The set of issues we confront predates us. No team coming for such a brief visit can offer a totally comprehensive solution, but we very much hope that we have provided a useful framework for considering how you might strengthen the study of religion at the University.

Sincerely,

Caroline Bynum (committee chair)

Arnold Eisen

Jane McAuliffe

Richard Rosengarten

Barbara Savage

Robert Sharf

**The Study of Religion at Harvard**  
Report of the President's External Advisory Committee

## **INTRODUCTION**

### **Committee Charge**

In the fall of 2011, President Drew Faust invited us to serve as an advisory committee to consider the study of religion at Harvard. Recognizing that now is an important moment for the field, she expressed the belief that “Harvard can do more to take full advantage of the intellectual resources across the University to build a strong undergraduate program as well as a more integrated and vibrant scholarly community of graduate students and faculty.” She also charged us with providing insight into how to define the appropriate relationship between the role of professional ministerial training and the scholarly study of religion.<sup>1</sup>

Specifically, she asked us to consider the following questions:

- How can Harvard take fuller advantage of the extraordinary resources available at the University for the study of religion?
- How should the study of religion be organized across the Faculty of Arts and Sciences (FAS) and the Harvard Divinity School (HDS)?
- What is the place of the training of ministers and practitioners within this broader intellectual enterprise?
- How should we think about the mission of the Divinity School in training Christian clergy and other religious and academic professionals?
- How can we connect the resources and expertise of the Divinity School and the Faculty of Arts and Sciences to the work of other professional Schools at Harvard in which religion plays an important role?<sup>2</sup>

### **Committee Process**

President Faust convened our group for an initial meeting in New York City in November 2011 to discuss the project, its central questions, and how we might carry out our work. At that meeting, we decided that the best course of action was to conduct a series of interviews with faculty, students, and staff from the FAS and HDS, and other Harvard Schools where relevant,

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<sup>1</sup> A full statement of the committee's membership and charge is contained in Appendix A.

<sup>2</sup> For a verbatim list of the questions posed by the president to our group, see Appendix B.

over the course of the fall and early winter. We met with more than 75 people— some in groups and some individually — to learn about degree programs, administrative structures, and other pertinent aspects of the study of religion at Harvard.

To supplement our meetings, staff from the Faculty of Arts and Sciences, Harvard Divinity School, and the President’s Office provided background materials on administrative structures, student demographics, courses offered, comparable fields, and peer institutions. Finally, we came together as a group for two days in January 2012 to deliberate about what we had learned and to discuss recommendations for strengthening the study of religion at Harvard. Below is a summary of our observations and suggested approaches.

## **PROBLEM STATEMENT**

*The study of religion is important.*

The power of religion in shaping individuals and societies cannot be overlooked or overstated. Throughout the course of history, human beings have turned to religion to answer their deepest questions. Today, even as developments in science, technology, and other secular fields reshape the way we live and interact with one another, religion remains a fundamental aspect of the human experience. Religious motivation and religion-specific values often drive political debate and influence policymaking. Among such pressing topics as security, disease, poverty, humanitarian relief, climate change, and other issues of global importance, religion is an important subject and, at times, dominates the discourse. Moreover, as a major area of human experience in which the values of the past and present are scrutinized, the study of religion is at the heart of the humanities. At a time when there is widespread desire for humanists to speak as public intellectuals about the cultural traditions of the West and their intersection with the rest of the world, religion must be central to the conversation. In the course of our lives, most of us will encounter a variety of religious perspectives openly expressed, and we will need to react responsibly to them. These factors make the academic study of religion essential for a 21st-century university and make the scholarly and ecumenical training of religious professionals important for society at large.

Universities play a crucial role in promoting understanding across cultural and geographical divides. They provide the structures and intellectual space that allow students to make sense of, and negotiate, our increasingly interconnected and pluralistic world. Like other humanistic endeavors, the study of religion is important for facilitating this understanding. It builds upon a wide array of fields — history, anthropology, philosophy, the study of literature, and psychology — to help us understand the world and how we fit into it. Harvard’s traditional

strength in the humanities and the distinguished and long-standing reputation of its Divinity School make its leadership in the area of the study of religion highly desirable. Indeed, one might argue that, for a university such as Harvard, which plays a role in structuring national conversations on many topics, providing leadership in the study of religion is an opportunity neither to be missed nor to be taken lightly.

*Yet the study of religion is not optimally structured at Harvard.*

Harvard, with its rich legacy and immense resources in the field of religious studies, has the opportunity to create a model for the study of religion, encompassing both the training of religious professionals and academic training in the study of religion at both the undergraduate and graduate levels. Yet our committee sensed from the president, deans, and others we consulted that, increasingly, Harvard's academic and curricular structures supporting the study of religion seem underpowered for this task. Given the fact that the center of gravity for the study of religion at Harvard, both in terms of student numbers and in terms of faculty strength, clearly lies in the Divinity School, the failure of current structures to utilize this strength to the extent that would be possible is striking. Our impression from our conversations with both HDS and FAS faculty is that the vast resources available at HDS are not now drawn on to the extent that would be desirable. Nor are the resources of various FAS departments and of Harvard's professional Schools utilized to an optimum extent.

The Committee on the Study of Religion (CSR) — a nondepartmental structure that draws membership from the FAS and HDS — served Harvard well in an earlier stage of the field's evolution. It has been suggested by many, however, that at this point the field of religion has outgrown the committee configuration that oversees the specialization at Harvard today. Likewise, the curricular resources offered to undergraduates concentrating in the field — and to others who take courses to enrich their education — seem insufficiently robust and lacking in coherence. At the graduate level, many of our interlocutors wondered if it makes sense to administer two doctoral programs when the topic areas covered by each now seem to converge. At the professional level, many asked whether the breadth of ministerial training provided at the Divinity School allows the depth of understanding and skill that are necessary for the leaders in a field.

## **OBSERVATIONS AND REFLECTIONS**

### **The Study of Religion at Harvard: History and Current Configuration**

At Harvard, the study of religion is “as old as the College itself,” which was established to perpetuate a learned ministry. Harvard's 1650 charter articulated a mission to educate its youth “in knowledge and godlynes,” and over the past three centuries, the University has built steadily upon this legacy. The oldest professorship at Harvard is the Hollis Professor of Divinity,

endowed in 1721. The first graduate program in ministry was started in 1811, and the Harvard Divinity School was founded in 1816 as the University's second professional School. At the beginning of the 20th century, Harvard's own William James, noting the importance of the field, remarked that religion "is man's total reaction upon life." Today at Harvard, undergraduates take courses in "Culture and Belief," one of eight primary categories in the Program in General Education, as a prerequisite for graduation, and each year the University typically graduates as many as 180 students with master's degrees from HDS, 10 students with Ph.D.s in religion, and six students with Th.D. degrees.

The study of religion at Harvard benefits from regular collaboration among faculty from the FAS and HDS, representing a wide range of disciplines and traditions. Oversight for the study of religion is provided by the Committee on the Study of Religion, whose membership is drawn equally from both Schools. Faculty from many FAS departments, including classics, English, archaeology, fine arts, anthropology, history of science, psychology, and philosophy, serve on the committee, along with colleagues at the Divinity School, who have expertise in many of the aforementioned fields, as well as in theological studies. Faculties of both Schools teach courses and advise students writing theses in the undergraduate concentration and train doctoral students in the Ph.D. and Th.D. programs. HDS faculty regularly teach courses and Freshman Seminars in the College, and courses offered by each School are cross-listed in both the FAS and HDS catalogs. In short, the combined resources are immense.

We were impressed both with the wide range of disciplines contributing to the field at Harvard and with the diversity of perspectives and religious traditions represented in the curricula across the University. In an environment where one in five students comes from outside of the United States and more than 50,000 alumni live abroad, the importance of including many religious traditions in the education and training of students should not be underestimated. This diversity is embraced at Harvard. For example, from the FAS, faculty members in areas such as Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations and East Asian Languages and Civilizations regularly offer courses and instruct students in religion, and Harvard Divinity School offers courses in and trains religious professionals in a broad range of religious traditions. The Center for the Study of World Religions at HDS also serves as an important venue for this pluralistic approach.

Harvard's remarkable resources in humanistic and area studies located in the Faculty of Arts and Sciences and HDS are bolstered by the presence of professional Schools that address issues in which religion plays an influential role. In fields such as human rights, ethics, global health, and justice, the Harvard Kennedy School, Harvard Law School, Harvard School of Public Health, and other Schools at Harvard contribute to the institution's intellectual capital within the field. The Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study also provides a unique interdisciplinary

space for scholarship in the area — the last several cohorts of Radcliffe Fellows have included scholars pursuing projects that focus on some aspect of religion and culture. Harvard’s world-renowned library offers another great asset for students and scholars engaged in the study of religion.

All of these resources combine to make Harvard one of the academy’s main suppliers of scholars and teachers of religion. The doctoral programs in religion are among the strongest at the University, and Harvard graduates have had great success at securing academic jobs in leading universities and colleges.

Despite this enviable situation, however, Harvard students and faculty in the field sometimes report feeling underserved and overwhelmed. Undergraduates find the concentration hard to navigate and describe “piecing together” a curriculum through petitions and waivers. Students in HDS’ master’s degree programs praise the flexibility, but crave deeper training. Doctoral students commend Harvard’s depth of resources and experience the University as a place where they can explore questions in a variety of different ways, but some worry that they are missing out on baseline knowledge and skills that provide the foundations for their intellectual work.

### **The Undergraduate Experience in the Field**

Because the initial exposure to a subject area is so powerful in determining future interest, we began our exploration of issues and solutions with the undergraduate curriculum — both for concentrators and for non-concentrators interested in taking courses in the field.

Harvard is well-equipped to offer the highest-quality academic study of religion to undergraduates. Yet, our conversations with undergraduate concentrators and the faculty who instruct and advise them revealed that students face many challenges upon entering the field at Harvard. These include the lack of a coherent curriculum, the lack of introductory and foundational courses, the lack of General Education courses for non-concentrators, the lack of access to faculty as advisers, the location of many courses remote from Harvard Yard; and the fact that many courses on offer are designed primarily for the needs of graduate students.

Regarding the curriculum, many undergraduate students report that they find the offerings in the concentration difficult to navigate. As a previous study found, religion courses are offered across several departments, are offered in at least two different Schools, and are not typically offered on a regularly occurring schedule.<sup>3</sup> Among the students interviewed, one

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<sup>3</sup> In 2009, the Religious Studies Working Group was organized by Dean Michael Smith (Faculty of Arts and Sciences) and Dean William Graham (Divinity School) to study the undergraduate program in

noted that he could find only one non-introductory course in his area, and it was a graduate course above his skill level. Other students talked about creating “independent studies” to meet requirements. From the faculty who spoke to us about this issue, we heard that the challenges for mounting a coherent curriculum for the concentration can be traced to the inadequate administrative structure supporting the Committee on the Study of Religion. For example, the director of undergraduate studies for the Study of Religion turns over frequently — eight different individuals have served as directors over the past 10 years. Furthermore, faculty participation on the Committee on the Study of Religion occurs on a rotating basis, with committee members typically serving three-year terms. Additionally, the number of FAS faculty available to serve on the committee tends to be limited; in order to maintain rough parity between the number of faculty from the Faculty of Arts and Sciences and the Divinity School, the committee is artificially small in comparison to the number of faculty on campus teaching in relevant fields. The combination of the committee’s small size and rotating membership makes it difficult to design and maintain a coherent curricular framework for the undergraduate study of religion.

When discussing entry into the field, a central theme that emerged from our conversations with undergraduates was that the curriculum needs to offer a menu of foundational courses that ignite interest and excitement for the study of religion. Several undergraduates interviewed mentioned that they became interested in the field through a gateway course on existentialism, but the professor of that course is now gone. Students were also disappointed that many of the courses offered were not designed for students at their skill level. There was a clear desire among students to be offered a range of introductory courses before having to dive deeply into one tradition or being expected to navigate comparative approaches. Also, although students concentrating in religion find the range of courses “exciting,” many also find the lack of courses within their specific subject areas frustrating.

Demands on faculty participating on the Committee on the Study of Religion and others who offer courses in the field have put the curriculum at a disadvantage. For instance, one faculty member remarked: “I thought I would teach a ‘Jesus’ course to undergraduates — that there would be great interest in it. But given my responsibility to my subfield, I couldn’t do it.” Students feel the stress of overcommitted faculty as well. One student remarked: “My adviser is pulled in lots of different directions. He is advising doctoral students on their dissertations and teaching classes in another department. If he could just be a religion professor, the concentration could explode numbers-wise, and concentrators would be OK.”

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religious studies at Harvard and to look for ways in which to strengthen the program, course offerings, and the overall curriculum. The working group issued its report in October 2009.

Faculty demands also hinder undergraduate concentrators in their search for suitable advisers. Because most of the faculty teaching religion have appointments outside of the CSR, locating an adviser in the particular area of interest of a given student can be challenging. Even those professors who sit on the committee are not always able to give undergraduates the advising time they may need. On the occasions when they can, such professors may not be serving on the CSR the following year, so continuity in advising can be difficult to achieve. Because topics in the field are so wide and varied, it is critically important that students in the concentration have clearly identified advisers, and there should be an expectation that each student will be able to work with the same adviser for more than one year.

Currently, the number of undergraduates in the concentration is approximately 30 students each year and was as low as 18 in 2006. By contrast, numbers for other concentrations that might be expected to attract students with similar interests are much higher. For example, the number of History and Literature concentrators is currently at 150 per year, the number for English is generally around 200, and the number for Social Studies is around 300. In addition to the challenges noted above, the relatively low participation rate in the study of religion may also be attributed to the lack of courses offered in the Yard. Of the 216 religion courses offered at the University this academic year, 177 of them were offered at the Divinity School.

Although many students noted that HDS professors were welcoming and inclusive, they felt that the experience was different from other courses they had taken at the College. One student said: "I am the only undergraduate in one of my classes. I just feel it is a different culture." Another student in the concentration who had taken courses offered at the Divinity School remarked: "Undergrads have no sense of what's going on at HDS." One other student put it simply: "There is a difference between intellectual exploring and professional training."

### **Doctoral Programs in Religion**

The doctoral programs in religion — the Th.D. offered through the Divinity School and the Ph.D. offered through the Faculty of Arts and Sciences — are of exceptionally high quality. The programs attract talented students, who have interests in a variety of religious issues and traditions, and place them in leading academic programs across the country upon completion.

The Committee on the Study of Religion administers both programs, and, over time, the distinctions — administrative and substantive — between the programs have blurred. The CSR handles admissions to both programs, and faculty from both the Divinity School and the FAS teach and advise students without regard to their degree designation. Courses of study and dissertation topics in the two degrees have become largely indistinguishable. Although the small number of dissertations focused on theological topics is still more likely to be found in the Th.D. program, the vast majority of dissertations could be written under either program.



Indeed, given the common admission to the two programs, there was some suggestion that the Ph.D. was largely the “first-choice” program for applicants, and the Th.D. the second choice.

The chief complaint from faculty regarding the doctoral programs concerned the disconnect between admissions decisions — which are made by the CSR — and actual advising, which draws extensively on faculty from across the Divinity School and the FAS. Because HDS has many more faculty in relevant fields, this imbalance was felt acutely by HDS faculty who complain that they do not have a say regarding which students are admitted (unless they happen to be on the CSR in a given year), but then are expected to shoulder a disproportionate burden in doctoral instruction and advising.

To get a sense of how these administrative issues play out at curricular levels, the committee interviewed students from both doctoral programs. Like the undergraduates we interviewed, doctoral students were quick to note the significant strengths of pursuing religious studies at Harvard. In particular, they praised the depth of resources in religious studies and in languages, history, anthropology, and related fields. They also commended the way a broad range of departments embodied religious studies within their disciplines. Many students cited having a secondary concentration in fields like African and African American Studies and pursuing interdisciplinary studies, such as women and gender studies. The students also appreciated what they consider complementary perspectives from FAS and HDS faculty. For instance, one student remarked: “Getting perspectives from the intellectual historians at FAS and HDS faculty has been valuable. It’s great to see how texts are treated from different intellectual vantage points.”

At the same time, however, doctoral students identified several challenges to pursuing religious studies at Harvard. For instance, although students noted that moving across departments was an essential approach to 21st-century religious studies, they also asserted that it can be a challenge at Harvard and would be bolstered by better advising. One student remarked: “We can put things together for ourselves, but how?” Among interviewees, the advising experience differed, and some students noted that the best advisers tended to be sought out and were overcommitted.

Other students found the absence of introductory or foundational courses for doctoral work challenging. Many doctoral students do not come into the program with a deep background in religion and want to develop their knowledge base as part of their graduate work. Some students thought that the relative shortage of such courses was a reflection of being at an elite research university where faculty want to teach courses related to their research interests. “We have people here who could teach those classes, but they haven’t since I’ve been here,” said one student.

Finally, a major theme that emerged from our conversations centered on the status of religious studies at Harvard, in general. Some students identified what they felt was an institutional prejudice against the study of religion and wondered why the field was supported by a committee and not by what they perceived as a stronger infrastructure like a department. Other students noted the location of the Divinity School — calling it “halfway to Somerville” — as another sign of the marginalization of religious studies at the University. Yet they were quick to point out that the research methods of the religious studies faculty at HDS do not differ from those in other departments in the Yard. In the words of one student: “It’s not a confessional school over here. But there’s the view that HDS is a self-contained intellectual universe. I’d say this is probably less true of the Ph.D.”

## **The Mission of Harvard Divinity School**

### *Master’s Degree Programs*

In addition to undergraduate courses and the doctoral programs, Harvard – through the Divinity School – offers two major masters programs –the three-year master of divinity (MDiv) for religious practitioners, and the two-year master of theological studies (MTS), which provides academic preparation in the study of religion. There is also a one-year master of theology (ThM) program, which is very small, enrolling approximately 3 students per year. These students typically come to the program with advanced ministerial training.

Currently, the M.Div. program has 150 students (approximately 50 per year), and an admission rate of roughly 50 percent over the past several years. The M.T.S. program currently has 170 students (85 per year) and an admission rate of 50 percent over the past several years.<sup>4</sup> M.T.S. students pursue a variety of fields following graduation; only some of these fields are directly related to religion.

Over the past decade, Harvard Divinity School has been at the forefront in addressing the crucial question of how the University might prepare students for leadership in our increasingly interconnected and pluralistic world. Under William Graham’s leadership, the School has expanded its scope considerably to include the major religions of the world as well as local, indigenous traditions around the world, and these changes have been embraced by both students and faculty. Students regularly identify their recurring engagement with diversity as one of the most rewarding aspects of their education at HDS.

As with the other students we interviewed, the master’s degree students were quick to identify the strengths of their programs and the Harvard experience. At the outset, they

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<sup>4</sup> In 2009, admissions rates for both the M.Div. (28 percent) and M.T.S. (31 percent) were atypically low as both programs received an unusually high number of applications.

reinforced the major theme we have heard throughout all of our discussions: Harvard is a place with extraordinary resources in religious studies that enables students to pursue a range of topics and issues that would not be possible at other institutions. These master's-level students also noted that the flexibility of the master's degree programs was especially helpful in allowing them to tailor a course of study based on their individual interests, and, like the doctoral students, they maintained that exposure to both theological and historical perspectives in religion was a distinct advantage of pursuing graduate work at Harvard, noting that it "may be the only place where an unbeliever can take faith claims seriously."

Despite these strengths, students also identified several areas that could be improved. In particular, they felt universally that advising for master's-level students, especially those considering doctoral programs, should be stronger. Students also cited the difficulty of coordinating their study with the offerings of key faculty in their research areas. One student remarked: "Only once you enroll do you learn that everyone in your field is on leave. It's difficult to get the necessary background." Gaps in certain fields — either as a result of leaves or of recent departures and retirements — were also identified, particularly in the fields of American religious history and the History of Christianity.

Within each program, we also discerned areas where enhancements may be considered. Within the M.Div. program, for example, we learned that students appreciate the diversity of the curriculum, but sometimes worry about the depth of their training. They also crave more support in defining "ministry" within certain religious traditions. One student put it this way: "If you don't have the theology, that's a problem — that's ultimately what you need for practice. If you're a Buddhist ministering to a dying person and they ask you where the soul goes, you need an answer for that." Also related to ministerial training, some students worried that too many of the ministry faculty are in adjunct roles and that there are not enough faculty committed to ministerial studies. These students cited difficulties in acquiring tools for practice and said that they look for these resources outside of Harvard, such as in their church communities. In particular, they noted limited resources for scriptural interpretation and say that a confessional perspective is missing at HDS.

Within the M.T.S. program, we found that the size of the program challenged students when it came to navigating resources and developing a coherent course of study. The program, which has 18 different areas of focus, seems very large. One student's story reinforced this theme: "I came from a communication and political science background expecting a common framework for understanding religion. But now in applying to doctoral programs, where do I apply? Is my interdisciplinarity hampering my application? I found myself having to go to the Yard, bringing a religious perspective, petitioning for credit, and cross-registering, but there's

no central place where you feel you're being trained." Students also found the absence of a required course in theology puzzling.

### *Depth, Breadth, and Balance in the Mission of HDS*

The concerns noted above point to a set of structural issues at Harvard Divinity School that our committee debated at some length. Over the course of the past decade, the Divinity School has moved increasingly toward a model of professional ministerial training in a range of religious traditions while at the same time building a faculty representing both strength and breadth in the academic study of religion. Indeed, at this point HDS has what amounts to one of the stronger religious studies faculties in the nation.

With respect to the training of practitioners in the M.Div. program, our committee members' views varied. Some members lamented the loss of the historic strength of the Divinity School in various dimensions of Christian studies — particularly languages, scripture, the Reformation, and Medieval Christianity. Others see the dual commitment to training Christian practitioners for a pluralistic world — while also training professionals in other traditions — as an appropriate mission for a university-based divinity school. Given the inherently global nature of religious studies and the increased representation of a range of religions within the United States, a strong argument can be made that training “religious leaders” in a range of traditions and training Christian leaders in a pluralistic way is the correct direction for Harvard Divinity School.

All committee members, however, felt that this approach is very difficult to get right. How, with a relatively small faculty, does one teach practitioners in a range of fields without sacrificing depth and rigor? We were concerned that we may be seeing a “de-skilling” in the preparation offered to both M.Div. and M.T.S. students. The conclusion of the committee's discussion was that, even if it is the correct path, this pluralistic approach is at a very early developmental stage in the academy. It will be very important, therefore, for the new dean of the Divinity School to monitor both appointments and curricular issues closely to assure sufficient quality and rigor across whatever programs are offered.

Another dimension of the Divinity School culture that we considered was the question of “confessionalism” as an element of teaching and research across the programs offered. Although it is clear that some faculty and students in FAS perceive the HDS approach even to the academic study of religion to have a confessional element, we found that view unsupported by the facts. Indeed, many or most of the faculty members teaching the academic study of religion at the Divinity School have come from departments of religion elsewhere and are indistinguishable from arts and sciences faculty. Likewise, although there was some concern that faculty and students at HDS tend at times to substitute “advocacy” for legitimate academic

argument, this theme was rarely mentioned in our interviews and did not emerge as an important concern in our committee.

Finally, the committee considered the size of the master's degree programs at the Divinity School as a potential contributing factor to the sense of diffuseness and lack of focus mentioned of by some of the individuals we interviewed. We discussed whether reducing the size of both the M.Div. and M.T.S. programs might be a means to improve student quality and selectivity, sharpen the curricular focus in each program, and better concentrate faculty resources on teaching and advising.

### **APPROACHES TO CONSIDER**

The academic structures and faculty relationships of any university are particular to the history, culture, and administrative arrangements found in that institution. At Harvard, the highly decentralized academic and administrative structures make the question of rationalizing the study of religion across the Divinity School and the Faculty of Arts and Sciences unusually challenging. Exacerbating the situation is the fact that the study of religion has never been recognized within the Faculty of Arts and Sciences as a “field” worthy of departmental status and dedicated faculty lines.<sup>5</sup>

Doubtless, the absence of a department in the Faculty of Arts and Sciences is due in part to the existence of a distinguished Divinity School at Harvard antedating the emergence of the study of religion as a field with recognized methodological approaches and substantive coherence. At this point, however, the absence of a religious studies department in the Faculty of Arts and Sciences at Harvard is, in our view, a troubling omission for a university of such comprehensive distinction across a broad range of the humanities and social sciences.

In light of this history, a succession of deans and committees — most recently the Religious Studies Working Group chaired by Michael Puett, Walter C. Klein Professor of Chinese History — have struggled over a number of years and decades with the kinds of questions presented to our committee.<sup>6</sup> Given our far briefer and more superficial exposure to the programs and structures at Harvard, we are not prepared to suggest that we have easy answers to these questions. Nonetheless, we did reach agreement on a few structural changes that we believe deserve consideration if Harvard is serious about optimizing the extraordinary intellectual resources that it has assembled. Outlined below are some proposals for consideration, together with the thinking behind them.

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<sup>5</sup> The Committee on the Study of Religion has two full and four split faculty appointments, but, as discussed above, is primarily staffed through a series of rotating “volunteers” whose primary appointments are elsewhere.

<sup>6</sup> The Religious Studies Working Group, chaired by Professor Puett, issued its report in October 2009.

**First, we recommend that the Faculty of Arts and Sciences give serious consideration to creating a department of religious studies with dedicated faculty lines and responsibility both for mounting a coherent undergraduate curriculum and for coordinating graduate instruction.**

Before deciding to recommend this approach, we considered a variety of alternatives, including continuing current arrangements, strengthening the Committee on the Study of Religion along the lines recommended by the Puett report, and creating a joint study of religion department across the Divinity School and the Faculty of Arts and Sciences. Our thinking about these approaches is as follows.

First, with respect to continuing current arrangements, it is gratifying to see that collegial relationships among faculty within the Divinity School improved markedly under the leadership of Dean Graham over the past decade. Likewise, in many cases, relationships between faculty at HDS and the FAS are also strong and productive. These advances, however, have manifestly not led to a well-structured curriculum for the undergraduate study of religion. Nor has greater comity done anything to solve the workload problem for faculty in the Divinity School, who find themselves consistently overstretched in terms of teaching and advising duties, given the number of students in HDS master's degree programs and the over-representation of HDS faculty in doctoral instruction and advising. Furthermore, although good collegiality and productive collaborations have arguably increased in recent years, there have also been noteworthy instances in which faculty from the Divinity School have not felt well-received by departmental colleagues in the Faculty of Arts and Sciences at the level of both undergraduate and graduate instruction. These occurrences seem to have contributed to some notable departures. In a field as important to undergraduate education as the study of religion, we feel that it is inadequate to rely on goodwill and diplomacy to solve problems that are substantive and structural in nature.

Second, the proposals advanced by the Puett report to improve the coherence of the undergraduate curriculum by giving greater continuity to appointments and curricular planning within the Committee on the Study of Religion are eminently sensible as far as they go, but they fall short of providing suitably robust solutions. Even with the more structured approach suggested by the Puett report, the rotating membership of the CSR creates problems of continuity in both curriculum and advising. Furthermore, the desire for parity in the representation of faculty from each School on the CSR is a fundamental problem, given the underlying imbalance in the number of faculty with relevant expertise from HDS on one hand, and the FAS on the other. Because the number of FAS faculty who can be freed up at any given time from responsibilities in their home departments is limited, the commitment to parity has the ironic effect of artificially constraining the total faculty resources arrayed for the study of religion as a whole. Finally, the committee, by virtue of including many faculty from the FAS

who are specialists in fields relevant to religion but not in the study of religion *per se*, is, by its nature, ill-equipped to serve as the framing body for an undergraduate concentration in the field.

Third, we discussed at length the creation of a joint religion department, staffed and administered by faculty drawn from the FAS and HDS, along the lines of the Stem Cell and Regenerative Biology Department, which includes faculty from the Harvard Medical School and the Faculty of Arts and Sciences, and sponsors both an undergraduate concentration and a doctoral program. This suggestion had intuitive appeal, because it would, in principle, allow the University to aggregate under one administrative structure the “religious studies” faculty from the Divinity School and faculty in related fields from the FAS. Yet, upon further examination, we felt that the difficulties with this approach outweigh the merits. A joint religious studies department would have the effect of creating a divided faculty within the Divinity School — e.g., those who are “solely” affiliated with HDS, and those included in the new, joint department. Furthermore, simply merging certain HDS faculty with relevant FAS faculty into one administrative unit would not solve the workload problems faced by HDS faculty who already teach large master’s degree programs, many doctoral students, and some undergraduate courses. Nor, in the absence of new faculty lines, would a joint department necessarily provide the teaching resources needed to create a robust undergraduate curriculum. In the end, we decided that a structure that would involve merging many HDS faculty with few FAS faculty might well exacerbate, rather than alleviate, the historical ambivalence of the Faculty of Arts and Sciences about the study of religion as a field.

Creating a religious studies department within the Faculty of Arts and Sciences, with dedicated faculty lines and responsibility both for offering undergraduate instruction and for coordinating graduate instruction, is not uncomplicated, but we feel that it offers the most promising path forward. First, considering the establishment of a department would give the FAS faculty an opportunity to grapple intellectually with the field of religion as it stands today and then decide how best to support it within arts and sciences. Creating a department in the Faculty of Arts and Sciences would also permit Harvard to seek appointments of scholars who will have as a major concern the design and teaching of an undergraduate curriculum. Dedicated faculty appointments would also enable the FAS to hire faculty with methodological expertise in the study of religion, rather than relying simply on disciplinary specialists in related fields. Finally, the existence of a fully legitimate religion department within the FAS would arguably smooth the avenues of collaboration among faculty from HDS and the FAS by creating a group of colleagues with symmetrical sophistication in the field on both sides of the dialogue.

It should be noted that in discussing the creation of a department of religion in the FAS, we recognized that many of the best scholars to populate such a department may well be

found among the religious studies faculty currently housed at HDS. Thus, if the University decides to pursue this recommendation, we assume that current HDS faculty would be among the logical candidates to recruit. Additionally, it seems sensible to explore whether any of the faculty lines currently housed in the Divinity School could, by their terms, be shared with an FAS department. Likewise, we assume that there would be many opportunities for joint appointments between the Divinity School and a department in the Faculty of Arts and Sciences.

**Second, we recommend that serious consideration be given to collapsing the Th.D. and Ph.D. programs into a single Ph.D. program facilitated by a joint doctoral committee, encompassing all relevant faculty from HDS and the FAS.**

**The essence of this recommendation is that the University should give serious consideration to moving away from the dual-degree–Committee on the Study of Religion structure for administering the doctoral program, so that all students receive the same degree and all faculty who teach and advise doctoral students are included in admissions decisions. As stated above in our first recommendation, we recommend that oversight for this doctoral program be located in the new FAS department. We also recommend that all faculty from HDS and the FAS who are involved in graduate instruction be fully included in a joint standing committee to decide graduate admissions to the single Ph.D. program now located in this department.**

**Furthermore, we recommend that, even if a department is not created, the University consider moving in the direction of a joint doctoral committee.**

The first dimension of our recommendation concerns the designation of the doctoral degree. Our discussions with students and faculty revealed that the Th.D. and Ph.D., while originally meant to denote separate substantive emphases, have become, for all intents and purposes, identical in terms of the fields studied. One possible exception is dissertations focused on explicitly theological topics. Although some faculty suggested that it might be harder to pursue theological topics in the absence of a separate Th.D., we learned during the course of our discussions that, even under the current program, Ph.D. students focus occasionally on theological topics, and Th.D. students overwhelmingly focus on topics that straightforwardly belong to arts and sciences. Thus, at this point the Th.D./Ph.D. distinction seems to be a historical artifact, and the dual designation is confusing to outside audiences. We were told, further, that students admitted to both programs almost always choose the Ph.D., as it is regarded as the stronger designation. Given that admissions and advising for both programs are currently shared across HDS and the FAS, and administered by a single committee, we believe that Harvard should decide how many doctoral students in religion it wishes admit, *in toto*, and provide a consistent designation for the degrees conferred.



The second dimension of our recommendation — to create a joint doctoral committee consisting of all relevant faculty from both the Divinity School and the Faculty of Arts and Sciences — is meant to alleviate the disconnect in the current joint doctoral program between admissions, on the one hand, and instruction and advising, on the other. The larger, standing committee structure would give faculty much greater control over the number of and quality of students being admitted to their subfields. It would also allow all faculty to better calibrate and control their workloads in doctoral advising and would permit them to better monitor the production of Ph.D.s by subfield, year to year. It would also ensure that, even with the elimination of the Th.D. designation, HDS faculty would have access to doctoral students on the same terms as FAS faculty. Recognizing that our recommendations for the creation of a small department and a large joint doctoral committee would be complicated to achieve, we have left open questions about where the design of graduate curricula would lie under such new structures.

We note that a structure similar to the one we recommend, with a small department and a large committee of religion specialists deciding on admissions, has some similarities to arrangements in place at the University of Toronto and Emory, where they seem to work well.

**Third, we recommend that the Divinity School give serious thought to reducing the size of its M.T.S. program.**

There is no question that Harvard Divinity School should continue to train practitioners in ministry and related fields, and that it should provide a master's-level entry point into the academic study of religion. Given that most ministerial training occurs in denominational seminaries, a university-based Divinity School has the potential to play an extremely important role in educating religious leaders with scholarly depth and broad ecumenical approaches. In light of the role of religion in driving a broad range of issues and debates both domestically and globally, now is not the time to shrink from the training of religious professionals.

That said, we debated among ourselves whether the Divinity School should consider reducing somewhat the size of its M.T.S. program as a way of increasing student quality and better focusing faculty resources in teaching and advising. We also discussed whether to recommend the reduction of the M.Div. program but felt that a reduction in this program might compromise the confidence of ecclesial bodies in the Harvard-trained M.Div. students whom they ordain. We offer the suggestion that some reduction be considered with trepidation, as we don't pretend to be well-versed in either the intellectual or practical and financial reasons that the programs are operated at their current levels. Our assumption is that HDS may have the freedom to consider a reduction in program size because most students who attend the Divinity School receive significant financial aid. Thus the Divinity School, unlike most professional Schools at Harvard, may not need to admit large numbers of students in order to generate

revenues in the “every tub on its own bottom” system. If this is true, it may be worthwhile for the new dean to revisit the question of the optimal size of the master’s degree programs.

**Fourth, we recommend that the dean of the Divinity School play a leadership role in convening interested parties from within and outside the University on religious questions that have public significance and/or implications for other fields.**

Given the broad salience of religion, we encourage the new dean of the Divinity School to devote significant leadership energy to creating intellectual and policy connections with faculty and students at Harvard’s other professional Schools. Likewise, we encourage HDS to adopt a more robust and intentional strategy for convening the Harvard community and outside constituencies to consider religious issues of broad public concern and to explore the religious dimensions of various issues. We suggest that more prominence in this enterprise could be given to the Center for the Study of World Religions, which has forged such links between disciplines and faculties in the past. Either individually or in partnership with other Schools, the Divinity School could serve as an important catalyst for raising the level of both public and University discourse concerning religious questions. For example, the new dean might wish to consider partnering with the Institute of Politics (IOP) at the Harvard Kennedy School on public issues and with the Mahindra Humanities Center or the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study on the more scholarly dimensions of the field.

## **CONCLUDING THOUGHTS**

We greatly appreciate the time and care taken by everyone we interviewed and by the staff who worked to make sure that we had the documentation we needed to gain an overview of the various programs and offerings. We recognize that our time on campus was limited, but we hope that we have provided useful insight and suggestions on at least some of the questions raised. We of course acknowledge that any changes to existing structures will need to be considered with great care by the deans and faculty of the Divinity School and the Faculty of Arts and Sciences, under the guidance of the president and provost.

We welcome feedback from anyone reading this report, at the following email: [religioncommittee@harvard.edu](mailto:religioncommittee@harvard.edu).

## **Appendix A:**

### **Religion Committee Announcement**

October 13, 2011

Dear Colleagues,

I write to make you aware that I have asked a group of distinguished scholars and academic leaders from outside the University to offer me their advice on how we can strengthen the study of religion at Harvard.

This is an important moment for the study of religion, and I believe that Harvard can do more to take full advantage of the intellectual resources across the University to build a strong undergraduate program as well as a more integrated and vibrant scholarly community of graduate students and faculty. I hope that the committee can also help us gain insight into how we can define the appropriate relationship between the role of professional ministerial training and the scholarly study of religion.

It is my expectation that committee members will come to Cambridge this fall to consult with students, faculty, and administrators in the Divinity School, the Faculty of Arts and Sciences, and in other Schools and fields as relevant, following up with recommendations to me later in the academic year. I have asked Caroline Bynum, Professor emerita of Medieval European History in the Institute for Advanced Study, Princeton and University Professor Emerita at Columbia, to serve as chair of this external committee, and I know that she will provide outstanding leadership. The group represents expertise in a wide range of religious traditions and experience in varied settings for the study of religion. Committee members include:

- **Jane McAuliffe**, President, Bryn Mawr College
- **Arnold Eisen**, Chancellor, Jewish Theological Seminary
- **Richard Rosengarten**, Associate Professor of Religion and Literature in the Divinity School, University of Chicago
- **Barbara Savage**, Professor of American Social Thought and Professor of History, University of Pennsylvania
- **Robert Sharf**, D.H. Chen Distinguished Professor of Buddhist Studies, University of California, Berkeley

Staff in my office will work with individuals in the Divinity School and the FAS to identify materials that should be shared with committee members, as well as individuals who should be

consulted. Additionally, we have set up an email account to receive input from interested parties. Please feel free to send any thoughts you may have to [religioncommittee@harvard.edu](mailto:religioncommittee@harvard.edu).

As you know, we are also commencing a search for the new dean of the Divinity School. I have recently appointed a search advisory committee that will meet within the next several weeks.

I would very much appreciate your input on the issues outlined above.

With all best wishes,  
Drew Faust

**Appendix B:**  
**Questions to Consider**

1. How can we take fuller advantage of the extraordinary resources available at Harvard for the study of religion?
  - How can these resources best be mobilized and organized to support a strong undergraduate program in religion both for concentrators and non-concentrators?
  - How should the scholarly study of religion at the graduate level optimally be structured?
  
2. How should the study of religion be organized across the Faculty of Arts and Sciences and the Divinity School?
  - What methods, structures, and divisions of the field are appropriate for the 21st century?
  - How should we integrate thinking about the “great traditions” with the substantive and methodological dimensions of disciplines such as anthropology, visual studies, and law into the study of religion?
  
3. What is the place of the professional training of ministers and practitioners — including those who go into public service, NGOs, nonprofits, and a broad range of chaplaincies — within this broader intellectual enterprise? What challenges does it pose and how should we address them?
  
4. The Divinity School has evolved from an institution dedicated to the training of Christian clergy to an institution having a far more ecumenical view of its purposes in producing religious and academic professionals. What is the impact of this evolution on the Divinity School’s academic and professional effectiveness? What is the impact on its role within the broader study of religion at Harvard?

5. Although the preponderance of resources devoted to the study of religion at Harvard are located within the Divinity School and the FAS, a number of other Schools are engaged in teaching and research in which religion plays a critical role. How can we best connect these Schools' academic needs and resources to the capacities and programs within the FAS and HDS?