Alive, but only barely:
Graduate studies in religion at the University of
Toronto

DONALD WIEBE

1. Graduate study of religion: The need for independence

Although the academic/scientific study of religion is still institutionally alive at the University of Toronto, there is a sense in which its future at the graduate level has been seriously compromised. A primary indicator of that, I suggest,

---

1. This essay was written at the invitation of Professor Gary Lease as a contribution to the special issue of Method and Theory in the Study of Religion on "the place and future of the academic study of religion(s) in North America" (Lease, 22 Feb., 1994) which he will edit. My analysis here of the current state of affairs in the study of religion at the University of Toronto is based on my experience as a member of the graduate Centre for Religious Studies since 1981, and my two years as its Associate Director (1990-1992). It is not a dispassionate analysis of the situation, even though I have attempted to ground my judgements upon historical accuracy and to prevent the distortions that often accompany the assessments of one actively involved in the events about which one writes. Some of my colleagues in Toronto will, no doubt, think my assessments to be excessively harsh. I wish to note here that I have been a strong supporter of the study of religion in Toronto and think that the Graduate Centre has in many respects functioned admirably under often very difficult circumstances. My aim in writing this account, therefore, is not to undermine the achievements of the Centre, its students, or its staff, but to "sound a warning" about recent developments which I think are likely to be detrimental to its future development. The documentation cited is that in my own possession at the time of writing. Although most of the documents came by way of my participation in the Centre, I am grateful to a former student, Ms Marion Wyse, for copies of some University of Toronto archival materials she collected in writing a paper in her Toronto School of Theology programme, and to the Toronto School of Theology for making available to me materials in regard to the University of Toronto/Toronto School of Theology Joint Council deliberations. I am deeply grateful as well to several members of the Centre, especially Professors Peter Richardson and Neil McMullin, for critical comments on an early draft of this paper which have been helpful in matters of interpretation and in "getting the facts straight". I did not always heed their advice and so I alone am responsible for errors which remain, whether with regard to the facts or matters of interpretation. Thanks are also due to Professor McMullin and Ms Martha Cunningham for their considerable help on matters of grammar and style; errors which remain are, of course, my responsibility. (The documents with clearly attributable authorship are cited in the text by name and date, while those without such designation are cited by abbreviated title [as found in the references at the end of this article]).

Method & Theory in the Study of Religion
7-4 (1995), 351-381

© Walter de Gruyter, Berlin
is the recent amalgamation of the university’s graduate Centre for the Study of Religion with its undergraduate department. As unlikely as this suggestion may at first appear to be, this paper will show, in light of the history of the study of religion at the University of Toronto at both the undergraduate and graduate levels, why this is so.

There is sufficient reason to question whether a genuine religious studies programme at the University of Toronto has ever existed at the undergraduate level. There is, to be sure, a Department for the Study of Religion, but it is clear that, despite insistent endeavours on the part of some of its members, it has not really committed itself to the kind of study of religion and religions generally expected by the field. The fundamental problem for religious studies at the University of Toronto in this regard has been its inability, from the earliest creation of an undergraduate department in 1969, to free itself from Christian (theological) domination – an inability which stems from its historical associations with the federated Christian colleges with their required ‘religious knowledge’ components in all undergraduate arts programmes. As a mid-1980s review of the department put the matter, the department was diligent in fulfilling the role it had defined for itself by offering a curriculum that reflected “current student interests, the origins of the department in college ‘religious knowledge’ courses, and wider conceptions of religious studies”. but it failed to recognize how drastically such a curriculum diverged “from the recent development of the discipline” (Drummond et al. 1984: 1). It is clear from that review, moreover, that the department saw its role primarily “in terms of ‘service’ to students who seek knowledge and truth through religious studies” (Drummond et al. 1984: 1), and therefore emphasized the “pastoral” function of the department to the detriment of scholarship and critical analysis in the classroom. As the authors of the report put it:

... since the University of Toronto does assign priority to scholarship and to research, a department which ignores these activities is not likely to be taken very seriously within the university. The point is worrying to us, because it is not clear to us that the department does see itself in a way that parallels these university priorities. (Drummond et al. 1984: 2)

At the graduate level of the university’s programme for religious studies, on the other hand, there appears to have been an attempt to demarcate the task of the student of religion from the pastorally oriented task of the ‘Religious Knowledge’ professor and the theologian. According to a recent “state-of-the-art” review of the study of religion in educational institutions in the province of Ontario, however, that was not a simple undertaking:

The road to graduate degrees in religious studies at the University of Toronto was long and rocky. What had to become clear, both within the university and to the OCGS [Ontario Council of Graduate Studies], was that the study at the graduate level