

## Religious Studies at a Crossroads

### An AALAC Workshop Proposal

These days, it is a common refrain that Religious Studies is “at a crossroads.” The nature of this crossroads emerges out of the fact that, on the one hand, our departments are generally organized around traditions (Christianity, Buddhism, Judaism, Islam etc.), while on the other, religion is increasingly recognized to have fluid boundaries in terms of its relationship to other social and intellectual phenomena, as well as a cross-cutting role in global affairs. Such a dilemma directly relates to the intensifying tug-of-war in higher education between the humanistic educational model and that which is premised on a “return on investment” (ROI). Students increasingly come to class expecting faculty to provide them with the skills necessary to understand religion’s effect on world affairs, which they can then apply to work in a variety of professional fields. While student recognition of religion’s importance is invigorating, to what extent do we want to let the headlines shape our curricula? How do we devise a curriculum in which courses build fluency in religious traditions, draw upon other disciplines (anthropology, history, biology, etc.) to properly contextualize the traditions taught, *and also* transform our students into competent thinkers with “measurable” abilities in the modern world? Can our field—only newly conceived as “practical” due to recent framings of global affairs around religion (from ISIS to Buddhist nationalists, from tensions around Muslim immigration to the defense of marriage acts)—serve as a laboratory to flesh out the appropriate balance of humanistic and ROI approaches across the colleges?

We seek funding for a workshop that will address these and related questions among faculty at Amherst, Carleton and Reed, as well as any other AALAC Religion Department that wishes to join us. We envision bringing together *teams* from AALAC Religion departments in the spring of 2017 to discuss what a religious studies curriculum should look like at this crucial juncture in the history of our field. By bringing teams from departments together rather than scattered individuals, there will be more likelihood that the kinds of changes we envision will be sustainable, as faculty will be able to discuss *curricular* changes across a department, rather than simply changes in individual teaching methods. We hope to workshop sustainable changes to: 1) the path to the major (from gateway courses, to theories and methods courses required of majors, to the senior thesis project), 2) methods for integrating non-majors, and 3) how potential changes to our curricula and vision impact hiring.

Private liberal arts colleges have a unique ability to shape the field of Religious Studies at the national level, given the comparative paucity of Religious Studies programs at the graduate level as well as sensitivities about teaching religion at many public institutions. Cognizant of our potential leadership, one aim of the workshop would be to find a way to publicize our findings—whether it be through a panel at the American Academy of Religion or in a published venue—as well as to sustain and continue our unique partnership.

**Workshop Liaison:** Noah Salomon, Assistant Professor of Religion, Carleton College.

**Workshop Leaders:** Kenneth Brashier (Professor of Religion and Humanities, Reed College), Kambiz GhaneaBassiri (Professor of Religion and Humanities, Reed College), Maria Heim (Professor of Religion and Elizabeth W. Bruss Reader, Amherst College), Noah Salomon (Assistant Professor of Religion, Carleton College).