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RELIGIOUS STUDIES REVIVAL
IN TRYING TIMES, A ONCE ESOTERIC MAJOR HAS BECOME INCREASINGLY VITAL.

BY LISA MILLER

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 bachelor's 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. At the 2010 Princeton University graduation, one of the four recipients of the president's teaching award was Jeffrey Stout, a specialist in American religion who, according to the news release, "danced to Marvin Gaye at the end of a lecture on civil religion." "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 declaring religious faith continue to top bestseller lists (Christopher Hitchens's God Is Not Great comes immediately 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. The bias on the Harvard campus against religion—indeed, the bias on many of the country's oldest and most elite campuses—is rooted in its very founding. Established in 1636 as a training ground for ministers, the university had to work hard to evolve away from its religious roots. To concede the importance of the study of religion would seem to some to be going backward.

But elsewhere, the study of religion thrives, often in surprising places. Always "interdisciplinary"—historians, art historians, linguists, classicists, and philosophers have long found homes in religious-studies departments—the field now benefits from growing interest not just by humanities scholars but by scientists and social scientists. 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 UCSD'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. “They started without any confusion about their mission, and they never waste a day arguing about what they’re supposed to be doing,” says Stephen Prothero, a professor at Boston University. A case in point: Prothero’s former colleague Timothy Renick, an Aquinas specialist at Georgia State, won an excellence-in-teaching award in 2004 from the American Academy of Religion, a prize often given to teachers at divinity schools and other religiously based institutions.

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.” Albanese cites Tibetan studies and Native American and indigenous studies as particularly strong at UCSB. At Arizona State, home to another prominent religious-studies department, majors must concentrate in a geographic region: China, East Asia, Southeast Asia, South Asia, the Americas, Europe, or Eurasia.

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 over-enrolled. At Atlanta’s Emory University, department head Gary Laderman has launched a Web site called Religion Dispatches, where scholars and believers gather to discuss books, the arts, cultural phenomena, and other religious issues of the day. Mark Silk at Trinity College in Hartford, Conn., runs a Web site called Spiritual Politics, a must-read blog on the nexus between religion and politics.

Visiting the Dalai Lama on a national tour, addressing students at campuses in California, Florida, Washington, D.C., and Iowa.

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.”