Final Assessment Report of the Religious Studies program (BA)
June 2012

Review Process
This was the second formal review of the undergraduate program of the Department of Religious Studies (RS). The first review was in 2004. The self-study was written by the Chair with input from faculty members. Unfortunately no formal mechanism existed for consulting the undergraduate student body since this year the RS Students’ Society has not been active. The self-study was submitted 4 August, 2011; the site visit occurred 12 and 13 December, 2011; the review team report was submitted 1 February, 2012; and the departmental and Dean’s responses were received 9 April 2012.

Characteristics of the Program

Historical Review
The Department of Religious Studies was created in 1976 by an agreement of the five agencies:

- University of Waterloo’s (UW) Faculty of Arts
- Four members of the Federated University and Affiliated University Colleges (FUAC), namely: Conrad Grebel University College, Renison University College, St Jerome’s University, and St Paul’s University College.

While the program at its inception tended to focus on Christianity and the religious development of the West, the last 15 years have seen an ambitious expansion of the scope of the discipline to include religions from Asia, Africa and South America. In the 1990’s, the Department offered a Master’s degree, but it was withdrawn because of lack of enrolment.

In 2004, the first class of students was admitted to a joint (with Wilfrid Laurier University (WLU)) doctoral program in Religious Diversity in North America. Today, the combined UW/WLU faculty complement of 23 makes the joint doctoral program one of the largest graduate programs in RS in Canada.

In 2009-10, the Jewish Studies program at UW was fully integrated into the Department adding some administrative challenges. Since Jewish Studies was reviewed independently in 2009-10, it will not be reviewed again here.

The RS program has always been funded through a partnership between UW and the four FUAC agencies. Starting in the 2007-08 fiscal year, the FUAC assumed most of the costs of the undergraduate program, while the Faculty of Arts took on most of the costs of the graduate program, especially the funding for teaching assistants.
The evaluators of the previous program review in 2004 made five recommendations on the curriculum; two on faculty complement; two on administration matters; and three on the physical resources. All have been addressed except for the need for an incremental position in Islam.

With 15 (active) faculty members, the Department of Religious Studies at UW is among the largest of the 45 Departments/Programs dedicated to RS in Canada. It ranks with the Université de Montréal, the University of Calgary and McMaster University. Only the University of Toronto is larger.

The Chair is only directly responsible for two faculty members and one staff member. This is because the FUAC hire their own professors, develop their own courses and evaluate, promote and reward their own faculty members. This means that the Chair cannot assign courses, manage course offerings or schedules, evaluate performance or assign duties in a normal fashion. Moreover, most faculty members have administrative duties in their respective agencies, making it difficult sometimes to run the Department in a normal manner. In order to understand the Department, its priorities, needs, and the means it uses to meet those needs, one must almost think of it as a Centre that uses existing resources. It does not control itself, like a traditional Department that controls its hiring, curricular development, scheduling and assignment of administrative duties.

**Program Objectives**

The goal of the Department is to foster the intellectual development of its students so that they have a broad knowledge of the world’s religious traditions as well as a deeper understanding of a particular tradition, issue or theoretical approach to the study of religion.

The following Undergraduate Degree Level Expectations have been adopted by the Department. Students will:

- acquire accurate information regarding the historical origins, development and geographical transmission of the world’s major religious traditions;
- explain religious doctrines, ethics and rituals from their historical origins in Asia, the Middle East and the West to their contemporary presence in Canada;
- demonstrate knowledge of religion with various historical and cultural contexts;
- analyse the issues, questions and ideas that arise within religious traditions and communities within multi-cultural settings and within the study of religion itself;
- demonstrate a critical approach to the study of religion;
- ask critical questions of religious phenomena as well as scholarly explanations of those phenomena;
- demonstrate their understanding by producing written documents and oral presentations that formulate approaches to current religious and social issues.
Distinctiveness/Benchmarking

RS is the only Department that involves all five agencies on UW’s campus. In addition, RS boasts one of the largest and strongest Departments of Religious Studies in Canada, both in breadth and depth.

Academic Programs Offered

RS is an interdisciplinary Department defined by its subject rather than its method. In modern Departments of Religious Studies one assumes that both professors and students will have a variety of religious beliefs, or none at all. However, all courses must be taught in a way that allows them to be accessible to all students.

In the Department of Religious Studies, students are exposed to the spectrum of the world’s religious traditions, including Hinduism, Buddhism, Sikhism, Japanese and Chinese religions, Judaism, Christianity, Islam as well as the religions of the world’s indigenous peoples. Taught in an non-confessional perspective, courses reflect on religions from the historical, anthropological, cultural, psychological, social, artistic, theological and philosophical perspectives. In recent years, courses organized a theme (e.g. Evil, Love and Friendship, etc.) instead of a tradition or geographical area have introduced a more interdisciplinary as well as globalized approach to the study of religion.

The Department offers the following programs:

- Three-Year General BA in Religious Studies;
- Four-Year General BA in Religious Studies;
- Honours BA in Religious Studies;
- Honours BA in Religious Studies (co-op);
- Joint Honours BA in Religious Studies with Department X;
- Specializations in World Religions; Christian Traditions; and Religion, Culture and Society;
- Minor in Religious Studies;
- Minor in Jewish Studies;
- Diploma in Jewish Studies.

Students

Students enter the Department of Religious Studies in second year. During the period 2004-05 to 2011-11 inclusive, the annual average number of students registering in RS was 11, equally divided between the Honours and General programs. The dramatic increase to 15 and 16 students entering the program in 2005-06 and 2006-07 was due to the double cohort when
grade 13 was eliminated in Ontario high schools. What is worrisome is the steady decline in Honours students entering the program from eight in 2005-06 to two in 2010-11.

Over the period 2004-05 to 2010-11 inclusive, the average grades from high school of students entering RS in their second year ranged from less than 65% to over 95% with the majority in the 80% to 89% range. The reviewers were impressed with the qualifications of the students.

The Department does not offer any upper-year scholarships.

In 2010-11, there were 1,670 student enrolments in RS courses. The average class size was 33 but ranged from a high of 272 to a low of one.

RS students rate their courses at the same level as those for the Faculty of Arts as a whole, with an average of 4.25 for all courses bases on a five-point scale where five is the highest rating. Course ratings are slightly lower for classes of more than 100 students and higher for classes of less than 30 students.

RS is one of the most internationalized academic units in UW. The program is structured to ensure that students learn about religious phenomena from every part of the globe. In addition, there are a number of specific courses or cluster of courses that give students an opportunity to travel, study and work abroad. Examples of these are: studying at the Lessing Institute in Prague; the field course to India; the field trip through Germany, Poland and the Czech Republic to visit the major sites important in the life of the German theologian, Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Students regularly complain that there are not enough 300- and 400-level courses offered in RS. Because the FUAC need to concern themselves with the teaching equity levels (this is related to the equity funding formula between the FUAC and UW) both in RS and at an institutional level, the agencies are often reluctant to offer small-enrolment, specialized courses.

The Department is actively involved in extended learning through online courses. It offers 18 courses across a variety of areas and specializations. At present, the Faculty of Arts offers no RS online courses. By contrast St Jerome’s University offers four courses, some of which are offered several times a year. Conrad Grebel University College offers three online courses and St Paul’s University College offers nine online courses. From spring term 2008 to winter term 2011 inclusive, 45 online courses were offered averaging 85 students per course and ranging from a high of 225 students to a low of 26 students.

Of the class cohorts from 20001-102 to 2004-05 inclusive, 83.3% of students graduated from RS, most graduating within four years, while 92.9% graduated from some University Department.

While students in RS may participate in the co-op program, few do. Over the last seven years, only four RS majors have graduated from the co-op program compared to 170 from the regular program. Over the period from 2003 to 2009 inclusive, an average of 25 students graduated annually from RS; of those 20.7% were on the Dean’s Honours List.
RS graduates do not typically go into careers associated with “religion”, that is, the professional ministry, administration of religious communities or institutions, or the academic study of religion. A significant number do become religious teachers in the Ontario Separate (i.e. Roman Catholic) School system.

Faculty

The Department at the time of the review consisted of 19 members of whom 15 were active in the Department. Four members are administrators at the FUAC and have little or no responsibility for teaching or service in the Department. The 19 consisted of seven full professors; seven associate professors; three assistant professors; one lecturer; and one adjunct faculty member. Of these 19, six are listed at St Jerome’s University; four at Conrad Grebel University College; four at St Paul’s University College; two at Renison University College; and two at UW.

There has been one resignation and one retirement in 2011 and another retirement is expected in 2012. Two of these positions will not be replaced.

Faculty members from the FUAC normally teach five courses per academic year while those from UW teach four. Since 2005 faculty members in the Department of Religious Studies have published 20 authored books; 13 edited books; 63 book chapters; 71 refereed journal articles; 23 refereed articles in conference proceedings; and 104 conference presentations. In addition, faculty members have received $200,000 in grants from such organizations as SSHRC and the Department of Canadian Heritage.

Faculty members are heavily involved with academic journals – they edit seven journals and sit on 16 editorial boards. In addition faculty members are involved at the executive level with many professional societies, e.g. the American Academy of Religion; the International Bonhoeffer Society; the Shastri Indo-Canadian Institute; the Canadian Theological Society; the Frieberg Genizah Project; the Association for the Sociology of Religion; and the Canadian Society for the Study of Religion.

Concerns/Opportunities for Improvement

The Department has identified three areas of specialization that are reasonable within the scope of their research strengths and teaching abilities.

The first area, World Religions, is important within the discipline of Religious Studies but is probably the weakest of the Department’s three areas. Although they aim for “depth and breadth” of knowledge, this is limited by the lack of consistency in teaching particular courses,
especially at the upper level, in two key areas: Hinduism and Islam. The former area is represented in the research interests of a few faculty members but seems not to be taught very often as these faculty members are engaged in administrative work. More problematic is the lack of a full-time specialist in the study of Islam on the Waterloo campus as a whole, and it is a glaring lacuna for a Religious Studies Department in the twenty-first century.

**RECOMMENDATION 1:** That the Dean of Arts immediately gives Religious Studies a position to hire someone in the area of modern Islam who can also teach in other Departments.

**Response:** The Department strongly supports the creation of a full-time, tenure-track position in the study of Islam. In the past five years, it has presented the Dean of Arts with three proposals for such a position, the last of which was shared with the Department of History. Indeed, it is embarrassing, as the assessors note, that the University of Waterloo does not now boast a single expert in the area of Islam. This position should be rooted in the RS Department but could be shared with History, Political Science, Philosophy or Women’s Studies. The possibility of sharing this appointment with Women’s Studies could help the Department address its gender imbalance.

The Department will approach the Dean of Arts as well as the heads of the other agencies about securing a position in Islam and will develop with the Dean of Arts a proposal to submit to the Provost/VP Academic. Deadline: June 1, 2012.

In the University’s mission statement there is an emphasis on the UW’s “distinctive” and “innovative” approach to student learning through “co-operative education, distance education, technology transfer and research partnerships.” Other than offering a healthy

1. Since then, Renison University College has established a program in Studies in Islam, a program that has as its director a Contract Academic Staff member, who is now more than half-way through a three-year contract. The program is not sustainable under these conditions. Students may find themselves halfway through a minor without any means of acquiring the necessary credits.
2. The current director of the Studies in Islam program has a degree in Library and Information Science.
3. Number of online courses, the reviewers did not find a lot of evidence for this in the Religious Studies Department. That said, the Department mounted a striking and successful experiential learning opportunity last year with their study abroad course in India. The reviewers encourage more such experiential opportunities would enhance the program.

**RECOMMENDATION 2:** that the Department explore the integration into the program of experiential learning and engagement with the wider community through co-op placements
and/or internships, either volunteer (for credit) or for pay (e.g., NGOs; media outlets; school chaplains).

**Response:** The Department supports the idea of a greater integration of experiential and community-based learning opportunities for our students. That being said, only a small number of RS majors are interested in co-op education. The RS Department offers the semester-in-India program (RS 495) but lacks the resources to provide additional experiential learning opportunities. Consequently, we rely on the agencies to provide such experiences. For example, any student at UW can participate in the Beyond Borders program at St. Jerome’s. The Department will request that each agency offer at least one experiential learning opportunity open to all RS students.

Students are not admitted into Religious Studies until their second year of their undergraduate program. This latter practice helps to ensure that incoming students know what will be expected of them in order to complete their undergraduate programs and is thus conducive to a greater degree of success. The Department has taken a number of steps to facilitate student success. To further these endeavours the reviewers recommend the following:

**RECOMMENDATION 3:** That the Department of Religious Studies considers producing a handbook for undergraduate students outlining the procedures established by the Department. Examples would include information on how to select classes, and how to progress through the program, etc. It could also include information on frequently asked questions.

**Response:** The Department members felt that a handbook was not necessary. Instead, the important matters at the heart of this recommendation should be dealt with by rethinking and updating the departmental website. All of the issues outlined in this part of the report – and a host of others – could be dealt with through renewing and rethinking the website.

**RECOMMENDATION 4:** That the Department gives special attention to creating a more navigation-friendly website.

**Response:** The Department will engage a person with website design experience to make its website more accessible to undergraduate students. It has undertaken securing the funding to hire an undergraduate student to assist in this review and revision the web site as well as in the exploration of the use of social media in keeping students connected to the program and department. Website review and revision deadline: September 1, 2012. Addition of social media to RS communications deadline: November 1, 2012.

Students, the reviewers met, were very enthusiastic outlining various ways in which the program met with their expectations and whetted their appetites for further knowledge in the field. This focus is due in large measure to the major overhaul of the curriculum that the Department completed in 2008.
RECOMMENDATION 5: That the Department continues to review and revise their course offerings by considering the following:

- articulating more clearly their curriculum philosophy, particularly in terms of learning outcomes for the program and the affiliated outputs (particular attention should be given to articulating what students must do to demonstrate these outcomes);
- reconsidering the relationship between their 100, 200 and 300 level courses especially in light of their requirements for upper level courses for their majors, but also in terms of the sequencing of these courses;
- giving more attention to articulating /establishing course prerequisites;
- raising the RS 121 ( Evil) course to a 200 level; and rethinking 260;
- being more attentive to which courses serve as gateways to the Religious Studies major and minor and how they do so;
- developing more 300 and 400 level courses (the reviewers note that the Department is well aware of the dearth of offerings at the 300 and 400 levels and they concur);
- better integrating all traditions across their upper year thematic courses;
- deleting some courses from their curriculum.

Response: While the external assessors have identified some important distortions in the undergraduate program, one would not want to exaggerate its problems. While inelegant in theory, it works in practice. That being said, the Department has long been aware that a number of distortions of the undergraduate program have been introduced because of the decentralized nature of the Department. The curriculum problems identified in the report have two sources, one which can be addressed relatively easily and internally and a second which must be the subject of a broader and more complicated conversation (i.e., among the five agencies).

On its own, the Department can work towards defining learning outcomes more clearly, integrating all traditions across upper-year thematic courses and cleaning up the number of dormant courses (courses not offered in the last five years). Deadline: April 1, 2013.

However, the most important distortions are tied to the attempts of the agencies to meet their equity level teaching requirements (see Recommendation 6 below). This has meant that various agencies need to offer large-enrollment classes. Since most students who take our courses do so as electives, it means offering courses at the first and second year levels. It also means that agencies are reluctant to impose prerequisites on upper year courses since this negatively affects numbers. This accounts for a variety of problems that the assessors note above, including difficulty in integrating the program in a coherent manner, covering all traditions (some topics draw fewer numbers than others), refusal to impose or enforce course prerequisites, offering courses at inappropriate levels (e.g. offering RS 121 Evil at the 100 level instead of the 200 level), difficulty in organizing gateway courses (RS 100 and 260), and scheduling upper level classes (which tend to be low-enrolment). Consequently, it is impossible
to address these curricular matters without addressing Recommendation 6. Given the teaching load of the faculty members and the service load many of them carry in their home institutions within the FUAC, the reviewers recommend the following:

**RECOMMENDATION 6:** That the University considers revisiting the equity document in light of the uniqueness of the Department of Religious Studies as a unit at the University and renegotiate how equity is met in the case of RS.

**Response:** The Department welcomes the idea of more flexibility in terms of how the agencies meet their equity level teaching requirements. As noted above, the equity agreement has had the unintended effect of distorting the RS undergraduate program. However, reconsidering the equity teaching requirements in RS may not require a renegotiation of the entire equity agreement. It is proposed that the agencies sign a letter of understanding that current equity level teaching requirements in RS be rethought and that a fair and equitable distribution of teaching be achieved through other means. Without some such informal agreement, the equity level teaching requirements will continue to undermine all efforts to fashion a more rational and coherent undergraduate program. Deadline December 1, 2012.

There is a clear and obvious sense of camaraderie and collegiality among departmental members. Given their diffuseness across multiple Departments and the FUAC, this collective ethos is admirable. This same diffuseness, however, also suggests that there does not exist a clear sense of how the Department as a whole is assessing student learning.

**RECOMMENDATION 7:** That for each course taught in the program the instructor articulates how the student outputs in each course are connected to one or more of the overall program outcomes.

**Response:** The Department welcomes the opportunity to reflect on its curricular philosophy. This seven-year review has allowed us to re-examine the extent to which the current course offerings and program structure allow students to meet the goals set out in that program review. The Department can now ask faculty members to articulate how their courses are connected to the program goals.

The Chair will approach the Centre for Teaching Excellence (CTE) regarding the organization of a departmental study-day on its curriculum and the place of their courses in the context of the program objectives. Deadline: December 1, 2012.

Given that the Department has spent a few years working on and implementing a fully revised curriculum, the next step is to establish clearly articulated learning expectations (outcomes) specifically tied to the program and the types of evidence that would demonstrate student progression toward the outcomes (the “outputs”).
RECOMMENDATION 8: That the Department establishes clear, focused program-specific learning outcomes linked to specific types of student engagements within the program. These should be linked to the outputs of the required courses and some frequently offered electives so as to establish that all students in majors and minors are engaging with the outcomes.

Response: The self-study – along with the curriculum review of 2008 -- has already resulted in clearly articulated “focused program-specific learning outcomes.” The Department does need to do more thinking about how to connect required courses, as well as its overall course structure, to the program goals.

The reviewers noted that UW prides itself on diversity. However, this diversity is not lived in the Department of Religious Studies, either in terms of race or gender.

RECOMMENDATION 9: that the University, the Department and the FUAC address this imbalance in diversity in the Department of Religious Studies.

Response: The Department recognizes the serious imbalances in terms of diversity among its members. Ongoing.

One problematic area that was noted, particularly in conversations with current undergraduate students and with graduate student teaching assistants was the lack of a clear sense of community among undergraduate Religious Studies majors and minors. The Department’s student association is currently inactive and students in the major identify one another only after noticing each other in multiple classes, sometimes over a few semesters. There exists a small but adequate undergraduate student lounge, but the undergraduate students with whom the reviewers spoke seemed not to know that it exists for their use.

RECOMMENDATION 10: In order to foster a better sense of community among RS students the Department should consider using half of a Teaching Assistantship to have a graduate student focus on organizing undergraduate student events to connect students with one another (e.g., social gatherings) and with professors (e.g., informal presentations and discussions; film nights).

Response: The Department enthusiastically supports this recommendation and is working on implementing it immediately. It will explore various means of ensuring that a senior student has a mandate to encourage student engagement. Half of this student’s time would be spent organizing and publicizing Department events for students along with developing social media tools to coordinate our outreach to undergraduates more effectively.
The Department must also rethink the way it uses its newly acquired physical space. The Department now has access to a conveniently located student society office and reading room, both of which could be put to better use in terms of promoting student engagement in the program. Deadline: ongoing.

Finally, student engagement in the UW Department of Religious Studies is complicated by the fact that most majors, like most professors, have a connection with one of the FUAC institutions. Consequently, it is important that the Department not compete with these agencies for the loyalties and commitments of RS students. The Department will encourage partnerships with the various agencies in organizing and hosting RS-related events.

It was also striking that undergraduate students did not have a voice or vote on any departmental committees or in the operations of the Department as a whole. Involvement in such would give students a better sense of connection to the Department and strengthen their identity as RS majors.

**RECOMMENDATION 11**: That the Department includes student representation in structural discussions whenever possible, including discussions of curriculum and course offerings.

*Response*: The Department will explore how to encourage student participation and representation in structural discussions. The options include having student representatives on departmental committees and at the monthly meetings of the Department itself. Deadline: December 1, 2012.

By its own admission, “the Department does not systematically track its graduates and lacks the administrative resources to do so” (*Self-Study*, p. 64), although they do offer some brief anecdotal evidence.

**RECOMMENDATION 12**: That the Dean allocates resources for an initial survey of graduates of the RS program at the University of Waterloo and that the Department hires someone (perhaps even a graduate student) to design and undertake this initial survey.

*Response*: The Department supports the idea of periodic surveys of its graduates, in cooperation with the Faculty of Arts. The Administrative Assistant of the Department provides invaluable service to the undergraduate programming as well as the graduate studies program, including formal and informal support.

**RECOMMENDATION 13**: That the Administrative Assistant’s job grade be raised from its current level to a 6 or even a 7.

*Response*: The University’s Human Resources did a review of the Administrative Assistant
position in 2011 and raised it from a level USG4 to a level USG5. Whatever the merits of this recommendation, the Department feels that this discussion does not belong in a review of its undergraduate program.

The reviewers were concerned that the one-course release granted to the current Undergraduate Advisor for his service is being covered at the expense (and good will) of his affiliated college during this year rather than being paid for by the Department. There is not necessarily a commitment to cover this cost by that College. Given that the one-course release is appropriate for this level of service and that it is service to the University, the reviewers recommend the following:

**RECOMMENDATION 13:** That the University of Waterloo, through the Department of Religious Studies, fund the cost of a sessional instructor to teach a course to cover the course release of the Undergraduate Advisor. This is an important issue to have resolved before the coming fiscal year, since the current Undergraduate Advisor is pre-tenure and at risk if asked to continue in the role of Undergraduate Advisor but not compensated in a fair manner.

*Response:* It is important that the Department, along with the five agencies, have an open discussion on compensation for departmental officers.

*Summary of Actions:*

**Action:** Proposal regarding a position in Islam to Dean of Arts. **Deadline:** June 1, 2012.

**Action:** Website review and revision. **Deadline:** September 1, 2012.

**Action:** Addition of social media to RS communications. **Deadline:** November 1, 2012.

**Action:** Curriculum review and deleting dormant courses. **Deadline:** April 1, 2013.

**Action:** Renegotiate equity teaching levels for RS. **Deadline:** December 1, 2012.

**Action:** Approach CTE for study workshop on curriculum. **Deadline:** December 1, 2012.

**Action:** Address gender and equity issues in departmental personnel. **Deadline:** ongoing.

**Action:** Employ senior student to encourage student engagement. **Deadline:** September 1, 2012.

**Action:** Explore student participation in structural discussions. **Deadline:** December 1, 2012.

**Action:** Undertake five-agency discussion on departmental officers. **Deadline:** November 1, 2012.