



# Thematic Changes in Religious Studies Research: An Analysis of Recent Trends and Developments

By Maria Stanton


*Director of Product Management and Production / Atla*

## Introduction

The landscape of religious studies research has undergone significant transformations over the past decade, reflecting broader shifts in academic inquiry and societal interests. This paper aims to analyse these thematic changes, drawing on examples from the Atla Religion Database®, also known as Atla RDB®, and other scholarly resources. By examining the expansion of interdisciplinary studies, the inclusion of under-represented perspectives, and the evolution of research practices, this analysis highlights the dynamic nature of religious studies and its response to contemporary challenges.

## Expansion of Interdisciplinary Studies

One of the most notable trends in religious studies research is the growing emphasis on interdisciplinary approaches. Scholars increasingly cross traditional disciplinary boundaries to explore religious phenomena, integrating insights from sociology, psychology, anthropology, and even natural sciences.



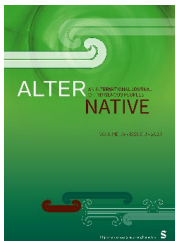
In 2016, Ithaka S+R conducted a study to understand the changing research methods and practices of academic religious studies scholars in the United States, aiming to identify how services could better support them. Collaborating with 18 academic libraries and the American Theological Library Association, the project involved interviews with 198 scholars, analysing 102 transcripts. The resulting paper, "[Supporting the Changing Research Practices of Religious Studies Scholars](#)," outlines several areas needing improved services, most notably, discovering and accessing information, especially digital resources and for scholars in seminaries or studying non-Western religions. The report highlights structural barriers to methodological innovation in religious studies and suggests re-thinking research support, particularly in how scholars collect and access information.<sup>1</sup>

To support this trend, Atla has actively added titles to Atla RDB that embody this interdisciplinary spirit. Such research enriches our understanding of religion's multifaceted role in human life and fosters dialogue between diverse academic fields.

## Inclusion of Under-Represented Perspectives

A significant development is the deliberate effort to include historically marginalized or overlooked perspectives in religious studies. This includes a focus on indigenous religions, feminist theological perspectives, and the experiences of LGBTQ+ individuals within religious contexts. The Atla Religion Database has made strides in supporting this change by introducing titles and updating subject headings that reflect a more inclusive and respectful representation of diverse religious experiences. This shift not only broadens the scope of research but also aligns with broader societal movements toward inclusivity and equity.

A few of the journals that publish indigenous studies and research include:



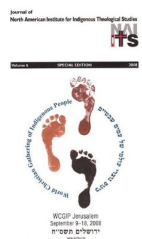
"AlterNative: An International Journal of Indigenous Peoples," an international, peer-reviewed interdisciplinary publication by Sage, established in 2005. "AlterNative" is dedicated to publishing scholarly research that delves into Indigenous worldviews and experiences of decolonization from Indigenous perspectives worldwide.

Another significant publication is "Oral Tradition," a journal from Harvard founded in 1985. Although not exclusively focused on indigenous content, "Oral Tradition" is an open-access journal that explores the world's oral traditions, both past and present, and publishes articles on the vitality of spoken, sung, or performed words and the traditions of creative expression they embody.



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<sup>1</sup> Cooper, Danielle M., et al. "Supporting the Changing Research Practices of Religious Studies Scholars." *Ithaka S+R*. Ithaka S+R. 8 February 2017. Web. 10 April 2024. <https://doi.org/10.18665/sr.294119>



Journal of NAIITS (North American Institute for Indigenous Theological Studies) publishes the proceedings of their annual symposia, centering on Indigenous engagement with Christian theology through Indigenous cultures, values, and histories. In 2020, the journal introduced reviewing circles, a unique process where authors receive in-person feedback and engage in dialogue with their reviewers, fostering a community-centric approach to academic discourse.

Along with important title additions, Atla has undertaken a comprehensive review of our controlled vocabulary to modernize our subject terms to ensure our subject terms support inclusivity and accessibility. Recognizing that accessibility and inclusivity are interconnected, Atla aimed to make searches more efficient and intuitive, using straightforward, clear terms that would better serve its diverse user base, which includes undergraduates, academics, scholars, lay religious, and clergy. This initiative was part of Atla's broader commitment to equity, diversity, and inclusion, which was highlighted during their presentation at the 2023 American Library Association Meeting.

To advance inclusive representation, Atla has replaced outdated and unrepresentative terms with those that reflect the self-descriptions of the groups in question. This shift is particularly evident in the terminology used to describe Indigenous peoples. For example, the term "Indians of..." has been updated to "Indigenous peoples of...", and specific tribal names have been revised to align with the terms used by the communities themselves. These changes, such as using "Dakota" instead of "Sioux" and "Ojibwe" instead of "Chippewa," not only enhance sensitivity and accuracy but also improve the discoverability of research materials related to these groups.

We also addressed potentially confusing, misleading, or outdated headings to ensure clarity and modern relevance. Terms like "Indians—Medicine" and "Indian mythology" have been updated to "Traditional Medicine" and "Indigenous peoples—Mythology," respectively. Additionally, terms that are considered insensitive, such as "Indians as mascots," have been removed. These updates are not limited to the Americas; they have a global reach, ensuring that Indigenous peoples from regions such as Australia, New Zealand, Asia, Europe, and Africa are represented in a manner that is both respectful and comprehensive.

Atla's global approach to updating its vocabulary reflects a commitment to a more inclusive and respectful representation of Indigenous peoples worldwide. By adopting self-descriptive terms and removing outdated language, Atla has improved the accuracy of its subject headings and the ease with which researchers can find relevant materials. This initiative demonstrates Atla's dedication to fostering an environment that values diversity and promotes the equitable treatment of all cultural groups within its databases.



## Theological Education for Women

The American Academy of Arts and Sciences recently published a Humanities Indicator analysing the [Gender Distribution of Degrees in Religion](#), which includes an examination of trends in theological education for women.<sup>2</sup> Between 1987 and 2014, women saw an increase in their share of degrees earned in the field of religion across all levels of higher education, though they still earned a smaller percentage of these degrees compared to those in the broader humanities field. In 2014, women accounted for 45% of bachelor's degree recipients and 46% at the master's level in religion, up from around 40% in 1987. The peak share of degrees earned by women in religion was nearly 50%, occurring in 2005 for bachelor's degrees and in 2002 for master's degrees. Additionally, the proportion of women earning doctoral degrees in religion rose significantly by almost 15 percentage points from 24.9% in 1987 to 39.5% in 2014, indicating a gradual but consistent increase in female representation in religious studies academia over this period.

## Evolution of Research Practices

The practices surrounding religious studies research have also evolved, particularly in response to the digital age and the open-access movement. This development has made religious studies research more accessible to a wider audience, including scholars from developing countries and independent researchers. Since 2015, a significant indicator of the expansion of open access within the Atla Religion Database is that more than 60% of the newly included titles are open-access journals.

## Conclusion

The thematic changes in religious studies research over the past decade reflect a field that adapts to and influences the rapidly changing world. The expansion of interdisciplinary studies, the inclusion of under-represented perspectives, and the evolution of research practices demonstrate the field's commitment to relevance, inclusivity, and accessibility. Religious studies scholarship will continue to offer valuable insights into the complex interplay between religion, culture, and society. The ongoing challenge for scholars will be to navigate these changes while maintaining the rigor and depth that characterize academic inquiry.

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<sup>2</sup> "Gender Distribution of Degrees in Religion." American Academy of Arts & Sciences, 8 Feb. 2024, [www.amacad.org/humanities-indicators/higher-education/gender-distribution-degrees-religion](http://www.amacad.org/humanities-indicators/higher-education/gender-distribution-degrees-religion).