



Teaching Religion in a Changing Public University

Sandi L. Gravett

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Reviewed By
Eugene V. Gallagher
Connecticut College

Taking advantage of a variety of survey data and adopting an historical perspective on the development of religious studies programs wherever possible, Gravett examines the institutional contexts in which the study of religion in American higher education has developed, different kinds of syllabi in their curricular contexts, issues raised by the advent of online and hybrid forms of teaching, forms of structural and curricular diversity, and changing models of

higher education. Although she focuses on teaching religion in public universities, Gravett also draws on examples from various other institutions. In fact, the diversity of examples she provides is one of the strengths of the book; it provides a compelling account of the practice of the study of religion in the first part of the twenty-first century.

Although she issues appropriate cautions about the precision and reliability of survey data, Gravett paints a picture of a general decline in the number of students pursuing the study of religion across a range of institutions. She traces some of that decline to the mounting call, particularly by politicians, for state (and other) institutions to prepare their students for immediate employment. Rather than simply decrying that situation, she proposes some specific suggestions. She challenges religious studies faculties, for example, “to rethink the classroom and map traditional learning goals and objectives into new instructional initiatives relevant to learners as well as useful and comprehensible to evaluators and other publics” (136). Responding to the justifications for the academic study of religion that frequently make observations that religion is a significant part of human life that shapes many different endeavors from politics to health care to the arts, Gravett urges religious studies to engage vigorously with their local, national, and international communities. In her view, that does not mean abandoning traditional scholarly pursuits, but taking more seriously how those interests can be brought to bear on contemporary interests.

Over the entire book lies the shadow of the incessant need to justify the very existence of programs in religious studies through a variety of administratively devised “metrics,” particularly the generation of student credit hours and the number of majors graduated each year. Gravett has sensible things to say about programs working to fit what they do into their institutions’ missions, about how online teaching can become an opportunity for creative re-thinking of both pedagogy and course content, and about how programs can contribute in multiple ways to campus discussions and actions concerning diversity.

This book should claim the attention of anyone involved in teaching about religion in higher education. It offers a helpful synthesis of various data, multiple interesting brief characterizations of different programs in the study of religion, and analyses and suggestions that even if they provoke disagreement remain valuable to think with. Its easy availability makes it all the more useful.