

Workshop Report: Religious Diversity in Atlantic Canada: Building Collaborative Research Capacity for the Present and the Future.

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The 2012 workshop on the study of religion in Atlantic Canada was intended to begin the formation of a network of scholars of religion in the region. Religion and Diversity team members as well as faculty with religion research programs from Halifax and Sydney, Nova Scotia, Fredericton and Moncton, New Brunswick and St. John's, Newfoundland kept in contact throughout the following year both electronically and at conferences and meetings within Canada and abroad. Graduate students who took part in the first workshop also maintained contact. Pam Andrews, a graduate student from Memorial University of Newfoundland set up a Facebook group in November which currently has twenty-four members. Trevor Murphy, a graduate student at Saint Mary's University writes about how the regional networking that began with the 2012 workshop has helped his research:

Pamela Andrews and I continued the academic conversations that began at Saint Mary's into our personal lives. Mostly through email and social media, Pamela and I remained connected. Leading up to both The Study of Religion in Atlantic Canada 2013 workshop series and Congress 2013 in Victoria, BC, Pamela informed me of another conference in Victoria called "South of Heaven: Religion and Heavy Metal." Having an interest in the topic, I submitted a paper to this symposium and was invited to present a work titled "Man That You Fear: Marilyn Manson's Antichrist Superstar as Social Prophet." My participation in this symposium was not only facilitated, but coordinated by Pamela, as she knew the organizers and provided me with a great reference. Our initial connection at The Study of Religion in Atlantic Canada thus directly impacted my academic opportunities and allowed me to be part of another burgeoning unique symposium.

The second workshop on the study of religion in Atlantic Canada was designed to bring together faculty and students in the region in order to share their experiences of collaborative and multidisciplinary research on religion as well as the results of this research. The theme of collaboration was broadly defined – this could be research collaboration with other scholars of religion, it could be inter-disciplinary collaboration between scholars which included religion and it could also be research collaboration with various members of religious groups or with a variety of community groups among which religious groups have a role. The objective of the workshop was to showcase on-going research and explore how networking among scholars of religion in the Atlantic provinces can be enhanced.

The organizing committee consisted of Paul Bowlby, Nancy Nason-Clark, Sam Reimer, Rubi Ramji and Cathy Holtmann. Paul was able to pay Trevor Murphy through a research assistantship to help with the on-site planning and execution of the workshop. Funding for the workshop was procured from the Religion and Diversity Project, Saint Mary's University, the University of New Brunswick, and the University of Prince Edward Island Centre for

Christianity and Culture. Funds covered the cost of travel and accommodations for student presenters, faculty panel accommodations, keynote honorarium, all food and drink provided during the workshop and the closing banquet.

The Call for Papers was issued on December 18th, 2012. Trevor created a website for the workshop which went live in January 2013. By the end of February, fifteen abstracts from students were received and vetted by Sam Reimer (Crandall University) and Joe Velaidum (University of PEI). Twelve papers were accepted for presentation during the workshop. Two faculty panels were organized, one on multidisciplinary research capacity and one on teaching about religious diversity, with Paul and Cathy inviting faculty from universities in Atlantic Canada to take part. Christopher Austin, a professor from Dalhousie University who had participated in the 2012 workshop as well as Religion and Diversity Project team members Christopher Helland, David Michels and Nancy Nason-Clark agreed to convene the student paper sessions.

Trevor issued a press release prior to the workshop which resulted in a CBC Halifax Information Morning interview with the keynote speaker, Nancy Nason-Clark (see <http://atlanticreligiousdiversity.com/> for a link to the interview). Twenty-seven people registered and took part in the workshop, fifteen students and twelve faculty members. Participants came from religious studies, sociology, and history departments as well as a law school and divinity college. The workshop began on Tuesday with a “get to know you” barbecue lunch during which participants could meet one another, renew acquaintances established last year and enjoy a rare sunny day during a cool, wet spring. The afternoon began with the panel on multidisciplinary research capacity in the Atlantic region and included presentations by Patricia Dold from the Department of Religious Studies at Memorial University of Newfoundland, Stephen McMullin from the Faculty of Theology at Acadian University and Alec Soucy from the Religious Studies Department at Saint Mary’s University. The second panel focused on experiences of teaching about religious diversity and included Thom Parkhill from the Religious Studies Department at St. Thomas University, as well as Mary Hale and Anne Marie Dalton from the Department of Religious Studies at Saint Mary’s University. Each presentation was followed by questions and discussion.

The evening began with greetings from the president of Saint Mary’s University, Dr. Colin Dodds. The keynote address was entitled “Working Collaboratively to Explore the Impact of Religion in Atlantic Canada: The Case of Violence in Families of Faith” and delivered by Nancy Nason-Clark. The presentation on Nancy’s extensive research and experiences of collaborating with churches and secular organizations in a community response to the issue of domestic violence was well received and followed by questions and discussion. The evening came to a close with a reception.

Wednesday’s schedule consisted entirely of student paper presentations. Four graduate students who had presented their research proposals during last year’s workshop returned to share their results. One graduate student presented the results of some of her doctoral research. Three students were new to the workshop, one of whom was an undergraduate who spoke about his proposed honours research and the other two presented the results of their masters’ research. Topics included contemporary Acadian identity, the Five Percenters and Islam, everyday

negotiations of Muslims in St. John's Newfoundland, Hindu Aghori asceticism, domestic violence among Christian and Muslim immigrant women in the Maritimes, an analysis of violence in the *Mahabharata*, Hindu widows in Newfoundland and historic Jewish religious nationalism. The afternoon was drawn to a close with a brief discussion about next steps for the workshop. The faculty present expressed their desire that more of their colleagues from throughout the region take part in future workshops. A suggestion for seeking funding through the AAR was made and Christopher Austin agreed to follow up on this. Participants made their way to The Blue Olive restaurant for the closing banquet and celebrated the success of the workshop.

Eighty per cent of the participants completed the evaluation forms which were generally very positive. On a scale of one to five, participants rated the advertisement of the workshop and the call for papers with an average of 4.6. They gave the organization of the two-day workshop an average of 4.7. Facilities, accommodations and meals got the lowest average score with only 4.3 and the keynote address got an average rating of 4.6. The highest rating 4.9 was given for having the opportunity to present a paper and receive feedback. The evaluation form also included written comments asking participants to name the highlights of the workshop as well as areas for improvement. The keynote address was a highlight for eight of the participants while several others wrote about how important it was for them to meet and speak with others who share their interest in research and teaching about religion. In terms of improving the workshop, several evaluations suggested that students get more coaching in order to strengthen their presentations: "how to make the best of the time available; how to be clear about a key theme; how to move from descriptive to analytical." Others indicated that Tuesday's schedule was problematic in that the break between the last panel and the keynote was too short and that there were few places on campus to get dinner.

The Religion and Diversity Project has had a significant academic impact in the Atlantic region by sponsoring the two graduate workshops held at Saint Mary's University. We have drawn participants and attendees from multiple academic disciplines across the region and created both a lively interest and engagement among faculty researching religious diversity. At the conclusion to the workshop several scholars were discussing how to find new sources of funding and whether or not it would be economically viable to hold a similar or expanded workshop at Memorial University of Newfoundland or another regional university. It was important to see students engaging with faculty on their thesis topics and students who had not participated talking about how they would do so next time the opportunity arose. The objective of the workshop was to build scholarly networks across the region among faculty and students. Thanks to the grants from the Religion and Diversity Project along with support from several other universities, that networking has expanded dramatically.