

Report on the workshop: *The Study of Religion in Atlantic Canada: Diverse Disciplines, Theories, Methods, and Contexts*

To: *The Religion and Diversity Project*

Date: 11 July 2012

By: Cathy Holtmann

A committee consisting of Cathy Holtmann and Nancy Nason-Clark of the University of New Brunswick, Paul Bowlby of Saint Mary's University, Rubina Ramji of Cape Breton University, and Sam Reimer of Crandall University applied for and was awarded \$3000.00 for a one day workshop from *The Religion and Diversity Project* executive committee in November 2011. The committee secured additional funding from the University of New Brunswick, Saint Mary's University, Cape Breton University and the Atlantic Metropolis Center. The workshop was intended to provide an opportunity for students with research related to religion to present and discuss their work and to begin the formation of a network of scholars of religion in the region. Both of these intentions would provide the committee members with an overview of the research that was being done on religious diversity in Atlantic Canada.

The Call for Papers was emailed out in early December 2011 to faculty and staff at seven universities with departments that offered graduate programs and to faculty and staff at seven universities with departments that offered undergraduate programs in the region. A total of thirteen different universities were contacted. When the deadline for submissions had passed at the end of January 2012 we had received thirteen abstracts. Eleven were from graduate students, one from someone who had just completed his doctoral degree and was teaching in a Religious Studies department, and one from an undergraduate student. The abstracts were reviewed by Sam Reimer and Joe Velaidum from the Religious Studies Department and Center for Christianity and Culture at the University of Prince Edward Island. All of the abstracts were accepted for presentation and comments from the reviewers were sent back to participants. Presenters were from the disciplines of Religious Studies, Sociology, and History.

The workshop schedule was drafted after Alec Soucy from the Religious Studies Department at Saint Mary's University agreed to give the keynote address and was finalized as presenters confirmed their participation. A webpage for the workshop (<http://bit.ly/z0B1Ub>) was constructed so that organizers and participants could have easy access to information that was updated regularly. A poster for the workshop was designed and printed. The schedule, poster, the abstract for the keynote address, and the abstracts for all presentations can be found on the webpage. Copies of the poster file were emailed to contacts at universities throughout the region.

Twelve presenters, the keynote speaker, the committee members, seven professors, and one graduate student registered for the workshop for a total of twenty-three participants from ten different universities. The workshop opened on the evening of Wednesday 23 May at Saint Mary's University and prior to the keynote address participants were welcomed by Dr. Kevin Vessey, Associate Vice President Research at Saint Mary's University and by Dr. Terry Murphy, Chair of the Board of Directors of the Atlantic Metropolis Center. Professor Soucy's talk raised many issues about the contemporary study of religion in Canada and transnationally and was

framed by his research on Vietnamese Buddhists in Canada and Vietnam. He argued that religion is better understood as a process rather than a product and that Canadian scholars need a better understanding of religion in the homelands of Canadian immigrants. Religious innovations are taking place in multiple sites and identifying the power relations in localized contexts that influence these changes is important. The keynote was followed by a question period and the discussion continued informally during a reception.

Thursday 24 May began with two presentations by committee members, the first being an overview and history of the scholarly study of religion in Atlantic Canada. Paul Bowlby noted that many of the Religious Studies departments in universities throughout the region arose out of theology programs established in faith-based institutions. Christianity was the primary focus of scholarship for many years due to existing staff in these departments. This slowly changed with new hires. With substantial immigration to the region in the last decade, there has been an increase in religious diversity and faculty are often called upon to comment on debates concerning religion and public policy. Using her own experiences as a starting point, Ruby Ramji then spoke about the variety of opportunities for networking in Canada, the US and internationally for scholars of religion. This was followed by three paper sessions with lunch and/or coffee breaks between each session.

Sessions were chaired by faculty participants. Each student had fifteen minutes to present her/his research followed by questions. The range of papers presented provided a glimpse into some of the research being done on religion in Atlantic Canada and elsewhere. Three papers were historical in nature, providing essential background on Protestant and English and French/Acadian Catholic relations which have characterized religion in the region until very recently. Another paper explored the relationship between the changes to the provincial education system and religion in Newfoundland and Labrador. One paper compared research results from Atlantic studies on domestic violence and churches with emerging data from Protestant and Catholic women who have recently immigrated to New Brunswick, most of whom come from Asia. Two papers focused on Muslim women, one an empirical study of university students in Halifax and the other a presentation of a bilingual data base on media articles concerning the ban on the burqa in France. Research on Hinduism included a textual analysis of social outsiders in the Mahābhārata and a study of Hindu widows in St. John's. The area of new religious movements was covered by a paper on hip hop and the Five Percenters. Two theoretically-oriented papers rounded out the program with one student attempting to compare secularism in Egypt and Quebec and another exploring the potential of Bernard Lonergan's theological insights for national and global conflict resolution.

The long day of scholarly interaction came to a close with a discussion led by Cathy Holtmann on plans for the future. There was tremendous enthusiasm for making the workshop an annual event and four graduate students from three universities volunteered to be part of the organizing committee for 2013. A suggested focus for next year was religious identities, spaces and places. We spoke about including more faculty participants through the organization of a session with a focus on teaching methods. With the experience of planning the inaugural workshop behind us, we intend to seek funding and begin advertising the workshop earlier so that we can broaden the base of participation in order to make it even more multidisciplinary. Students indicated their preference for the creation of a Facebook Group for continuing communication.

Sixteen evaluation forms were completed all of which were largely positive (values of 4 or 5 out of 5). Three forms provided neutral values (3 out of 5) in regards to the helpfulness of the keynote address for their own research. Two forms had neutral values rating the facilities, meals and accommodations. One form indicated a neutral value for the opportunity to fully present a paper and receive constructive feedback. The written comments were all positive with the opportunity for networking and learning about the research being done in the region being praised. Several students wrote that they valued the opportunity to publically present their research and receive encouragement from the workshop participants.

Following the completion of evaluation forms, participants made their way to the Elephant Eye, a local restaurant, for an evening of good food and relaxation.

Each participant paid a \$25.00 registration fee for the workshop. All funds raised were used to cover the costs of food and beverages served at Saint Mary's University. Additionally, the keynote speaker was given an honorarium and those who presented papers had the costs for residence accommodations and travel covered. A complete financial statement will be available once all travel reimbursements have been distributed.