

March 19, 2025

Dear Dean McMurtry and Associate Dean Programs Quirt,

It is with deep sadness and profound disappointment that we write to you concerning the recent announcement to suspend admissions to several programs at York University, including the Religious Studies Program. We strongly oppose this decision, not only due to the importance of the study of religion in a Liberal Arts education, but also due to the administrative and financial concerns raised by Program faculty. Since these concerns have already been brought to your attention, we wish to raise our pedagogical and intellectual objections to your administration's decision.

In 2015, then Secretary of State for the United States, John Kerry wrote,

One of the most interesting challenges we face in global diplomacy today is the need to fully understand and engage the great impact that a wide range of religious traditions have on foreign affairs. I often say that if I headed back to college today, I would major in comparative religions rather than political science. That is because religious actors and institutions are playing an influential role in every region of the world and on nearly every issue central to U.S. foreign policy.

He continued, "On matters as diverse as how to drive economic growth, rein in corruption, combat terrorism, mitigate conflict, advance women's rights and promote public health, religious beliefs shape the views of publics and change-makers near and far."

In this moment in history when basic democratic norms are being subverted and longstanding alliances strained to the point of breaking, we can ill afford to abandon areas of study that shed light on what is happening in the United States, Russia, Ukraine, Palestine, and Israel, to name a few cases. For institutions of higher education to eliminate avenues of research and study is not only limiting the possibilities for students to pursue meaningful educational experiences but also handicaps the ability of current and future generations of young people to understand this moment and ponder how we may proceed from here. York's decision is not only an abandonment of the principles of what a full education is, but an attack on programs - like Religious Studies - that offer opportunities for insight into current events and the very skillsets that are sorely needed to address them.

In our increasingly pluralistic society, it is imperative that we strive to understand worldviews other than our own. Every day we encounter people in our communities who are religiously and culturally different from ourselves. Learning to think about how we are both similar to and different from our neighbors is an important part of being a good citizen in a diverse society. If only Christians understand Christianity; only Hindus understand Hinduism; or

only Muslims understand Islam, we are condemned to a world of misunderstanding and intolerance. A well-rounded undergraduate education is incomplete without a deep understanding of others' perspectives and outlooks, and this is one of the central contributions of a program such as Religious Studies.

York University spokesperson Yanni Dagonas said in an email to CBC that the pause on these 18 programs, including religious studies, is intended to help the university "achieve financial sustainability in light of unexpected policy directions at the provincial and federal levels affecting higher education." We are deeply troubled by this move and we must condemn this decision in the strongest terms. We understand, certainly, the financial strain that institutions are facing. We are sensitive to the economic realities Canada is facing. Nevertheless, fiduciary responsibilities are not the institution's only responsibilities. York University's welcome page states, "Amazing things happen when diverse communities work together to solve significant global challenges." The question then is whether that is mere marketing, or a vision for the university that will receive support?

We strongly support members of the Religious Studies Program in their call demanding the reversal of suspending admission to Religious Studies and other programs. We have full confidence in the faculty, staff, and students who currently work to make this program a thriving space for education within your school. More broadly, we hope to call your administration's attention to the importance of the array of humanities disciplines that are currently seeing their survival threatened. These perspectives are vital to any institution of higher education.

Sincerely,



On behalf of the Executive Board of the American Academy of Religion Eastern International Region

Chris Miller, Chief Regional Officer
Postdoctoral Fellow | Jackman Humanities Institute, University of Toronto

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