

YORK 
Religious Studies



Program Statement on Suspension of Admissions

As many of you will have heard, the administration at York University has suspended admissions to the Religious Studies program. We are devastated by this decision. Suspending admissions has been used in the past to bypass collegial governance in order to close programs.

Religious Studies has been the target of multiple austerity measures over the past year. The number of Religious Studies courses has been dramatically cut and our contingent faculty will not be offered teaching in 2025-26. Historically, we have mounted our main traditions courses as General Education, introducing more than 2000 students per year to critical reflection on religion. However, the Dean has cut the Humanities General Education offerings by 75% for next year. While the administration's messaging is that this action will not impact current majors completing their degree or result in faculty layoffs, we struggle to see how students will be able to effectively navigate degree completion in this climate with so many courses cut.

The administration has justified the suspension of admissions with a claim that small programs are a financial drain on the university. However, they have not replied to the Ontario Auditor General's Report (Dec 2023) request for a detailed accounting of program costs. Our own program self-study report found that our costs are low relative to other programs. On a per major basis, our teaching to majors costs less than half as much as in departments like English and History and is comparable to the Social Science department. More than this, the administration has not acknowledged the value of Religious Studies courses for non-majors, who fill our courses as electives, and its support of other programs – such as Education students seeking qualifications to teach World Religions in the Ontario curriculum.

To highlight only a few of our contributions:

- Our course "Islamophobia and Anti-Semitism" has garnered international acclaim, with Jewish and Muslim former students describing its transformational impact on their relationship to each other and their understanding of global issues.
- Our course "Gendering Islam" provides a space where Muslim students of all sexual orientations and gender identities are able to explore the history of identity and belonging and the varieties of Islamic teachings on gender.
- Courses on Sikhi offer the only space on campus to explore the historical, cultural, and religious formations of the Sikh tradition. York is the only university in Canada to offer a 9-credit course in the area of Sikh Studies.
- Courses on Buddhism seek to understand the intersections of religious identity and violence. And courses on Christianity and Judaism have prepared students for graduate work that has led to academic positions and religious professions.

- Our core courses in theories and methods in the study of religion have consistently attracted non-majors because they teach students how to think critically about the many facets of religion in society.

The number of majors is in no way indicative of student interest or demand. York students want to think critically about religion and its impact on politics and our collective futures. They want to learn something meaningful about religion during their undergraduate careers, irrespective of the career paths they seek. Moreover, for many of York's diverse students, religion remains an integral part of their identities and histories, and the Religious Studies program offers them a vital space in which to deepen their knowledge, feel themselves represented, interrogate their assumptions, and learn to engage with diverse others.

Religious Studies courses are consistently full and have had to turn hundreds of students every year. Strong enrollments demonstrate that students are hungry for critical consideration of religion but are reticent of majoring in Religious Studies in these uncertain times. In 2023 we taught on fifth of all humanities General Education, educating 2676 students. In the same year, more than 400 students chose Religious Studies courses for their 3rd or 4th year electives, coming from majors as diverse as Psychology, Kinesiology, Political Science, Biology, Administrative Studies, History and English.

Suspending admissions will lead to the destruction of these opportunities in an academic financial climate where only degree granting programs have any protection against austerity cuts.

We greatly appreciate the solidarity demonstrated by other programs at York, especially the Humanities Department, and the support of our union, YUFA, and other unions across campus. Support from our former students, friends and colleagues at other institutions has been vital.

We hope that this letter has given you some sense of the dire situation caused by the actions of the administration. If you would like to respond to the York decision, letters of protest or support can be addressed to J.J. McMurtry Dean of Liberal Arts & Professional Studies, Maggie Quirt Associate Dean Programs, President Rhonda Lenton, and the York Board of Governors. A full list of email addresses appears below.

Sincerely,
Religious Studies Program Faculty Members

Dean J. J. McMurty	deanlaps@yorku.ca
Associate Dean Maggie Quirt	adprog@yorku.ca
President Rhonda L. Lenton	president@yorku.ca
York Board of Governors	emacrae@yorku.ca
Provost David Peters	provost@yorku.ca
Senior Policy Advisor Lisa Phillips	lphilipps@osgoode.yorku.ca
Alicia Turner, Program Coordinator	turnera@yorku.ca
Elicia Clements, Chair Humanities	humachr@yorku.ca
York University Faculty Association	yufa@yorku.ca