

**Academic Programs Committee Resolution on  
Religious Studies PhD Proposal  
Date, 2025**

I. Introduction

Subcommittee A of the Academic Programs Committee reviewed the proposal to consider the Department of Religious Studies's proposal to launch a new Ph.D. program. At the first meeting, held on 25 January 2025, Kavin Rowe (Vice Dean of Students) visited on behalf of the Divinity School, while Leo Ching (Dean of the Humanities), Gary Bennett (Dean of Arts & Sciences), and David Morgan (Chair of Religious Studies) visited on behalf of Trinity and the department sponsoring the proposal. APC was unable to agree on the terms of a resolution at the first meeting and thus a follow-up meeting was held on 12 February 2025, at which no guests were present.

APC had access to extensive supporting documentation. Religious Studies provided its proposal, which is attached as Appendix A. The Executive Committee of the Graduate School provided its report, which is attached as Appendix B. The Divinity School provided a 2023 group letter, signed by a number of faculty members from the Graduate Program on Religion (GPR), about the Religious Studies Proposal. This is attached as Appendix C. At our follow-up meeting, we also received a second memo from David Morgan, and were read memos from Kavin Rowe and Edgardo Cólón-Emeric (Dean of the Divinity School). All were considered by APC, along with the original documentation, in their deliberation.

**I: Summary of APC Discussion**

APC had a robust discussion of the proposal and concluded that the proposal has many strengths:

- The proposal itself is thoughtful. It provides a convincing academic rationale for the new program, and a coherent pathway for students through that program.
- The departmental process was impressive, involving a great deal of research into competing programs and curricular design.
- The department's argument for intellectual autonomy is a strong one. Most departments in Arts & Sciences have autonomy in graduate education, as do many Religious Studies departments across the country. Presently, Religious Studies can only enroll PhD students through the Graduate Program in Religion (GPR), which is joint with Divinity.

However, APC members also had significant concerns. Most of these concerns were not directly about the Religious Studies proposal, which was the matter directly before us, but about how the success of that proposal would affect the landscape of graduate education at Duke more broadly.

- The proposed Religious Studies Ph.D. program would be quite small. The proposal makes an admirable case against intellectual silos, but there was a fear that, in practice,

students in this small program would be isolated from the larger world of the academic study of religion at Duke.

- The impact on the GPR is unclear. The proposal calls for the GPR to enter a period of “abatement” and to be “walked down,” until current students graduate. Presumably, Religious Studies faculty would eventually leave the GPR, which would cease receiving support from Trinity, and its bylaws would be reformed to allow Divinity to run the program on its own, likely under a new name. There is, however, no plan in place for this transition, nor is it clear that such a thing is financially feasible, nor how the two Ph.D. programs would differentiate themselves from each other, given the substantial overlap in expertise and methodology in some subfields.
- There are mixed views on whether the abatement or reform of GPR would have negative consequences for Duke’s national and even global standing in the academic study of religion, whether it would pose risks in faculty retention and recruitment for the Divinity School, and whether it would affect student interest in pursuing graduate studies at Duke. The GPR has a long history and a storied reputation, and there is a risk in renaming, redescribing, or sunseting it.
- There was consensus within APC that the GPR, for a number of reasons, is not functioning well at present and has not done so for several years. However, it is not clear the extent to which the GPR has attempted to find points of agreement on the future of the program or to redress serious issues of financing and equity. The 2023 letter, signed by more than 20 members of the GPR, calls for a collaborative process to reform the program. If there has been a meeting about these issues more broadly, a plan for reform, or a vote on such a plan, APC has not been apprised of them. Furthermore, it appears that the views of Divinity leadership on this topic do not match those of at least some Divinity faculty, and this disjunction may cause problems for the GPR as it plots a path forwards.

## **II: Resolution**

APC endorses the Religious Studies proposal to launch a PhD program, which will provide significant benefits to the department and to Trinity College. We suggest that Religious Studies develop bylaws for the new program that address, among other topics, the affiliation process and responsibilities of member faculty, including any from Divinity. At the same time, the committee remains seriously concerned about the negative consequences for Duke’s global reputation in this field, and for the Divinity faculty who are members of the Graduate Program in Religion. We encourage the Provost’s office to work with the Department of Religious Studies, the Divinity School, and the Graduate Program in Religion to create a cohesive plan for the future of the graduate study of religion at Duke.

## **III: Vote**

Of the voting APC members who attended the discussion, 5 voted in favor of this resolution, 2 against, 0 abstentions