



NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE
Humanities

Dear Colleague:

Thank you for your interest in the National Endowment for the Humanities Summer Institute for College and University Teachers on “Problems in the Study of Religion.” This three-week institute will be held in Charlottesville, Virginia, between May 31 and June 17, 2016. The institute’s website may be found at <https://studyofreligionseminar.wordpress.com>.

We wish to invite your application to participate in this exciting project with us, the two directors. We are active teaching and research scholars from very different areas of specialization who had a common concern about and enthusiasm for grappling with these questions. Chuck Mathewes is an ethicist who focuses on Christianity, comparative ethics, and the role of religion in contemporary public life, and Kurtis Schaeffer is a historian of religion who specializes in Buddhism and Tibetan religion. Together we were Editor and Book Review Editor of the leading journal in the field of religious studies, *The Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, and we both share an abiding concern for promoting intellectually rigorous teaching and scholarship about religion.

We are looking forward to exploring the topic with a group of college and university teachers, and several graduate students, with varying perspectives and from the many disciplines that have a stake in understanding religion, for the purpose of coming to terms with the manifold changes in the study of religion that have occurred over the past two decades.

Overview

Today it is clear that questions around religion have become increasingly compelling, increasingly complex, and increasingly unavoidable. The main imaginative energies shaping our world today—ordering people’s lives and informing our conflicts—are often religious in origin. Scholars across the humanities have increasingly turned to religious themes, issues, and concepts as provoking questions and lines of inquiry of real and abiding import. But many of the scholars compelled or attracted to issues associated with religion are not acquainted with recent—and tremendously exciting and innovative—historical, analytic, and conceptual work on religion. Hence, while many scholars recognize the importance of studying religion, they lack the best tools available for doing so.

Our Institute aims to help rectify this problem. Building on the success of our 2011 NEH Seminar and our 2014 NEH Institute, this Institute will introduce scholars, within religious studies and without, to the enormously productive re-thinking of the idea of “religion” that has happened in recent years, in order to strengthen and sharpen

the research and teaching of those interested in developing a richer and more nuanced understanding of the strengths and weaknesses possessed by the category of “religion.”

Expectations

We aim to engage a broad spectrum of the most searching and ambitious attempts to think through the shape, nature, and point of the academic study of religion. The primary activity of the institute will be close reading and discussion of important contemporary scholarship on the history, current hot spots, and teaching about religion, complemented both by conversations with noted experts and by pedagogy workshops driven largely by our participants’ research and teaching aims. While the contemporary *status quaestionis* of the study of religion will be the main focus of reading and discussion, we will also give repeated and serious attention to the history of these issues, for our current prospects and problems in this area of inquiry are quite clearly “path-dependent” upon the previous history of such scholarship.”

Furthermore, we aim to leave substantial space for participants to pursue their own individual projects, in consultation with their colleagues in the institute (not least the directors) as well as using the substantial resources of UVA.

What follows is a brief introduction to the institute schedule and to the University of Virginia, the institute’s host institution. A longer discussion of the intellectual scope of the institute can be found at its website. The separate links in the website will direct you to the application, the schedule, information about the directors and invited speakers, and information about the University and the region:

<https://studyofreligionseminar.wordpress.com>.

Schedule

The institute will meet formally from 9:00 a.m. until 12:00 p.m. on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays. On Tuesday and Thursday afternoons, from 3:00 p.m. to 5:00 p.m., we will have sessions in the form of pedagogy workshops and discussion sections with several visiting scholars. The rest of the time will be spent using UVA’s considerable resources in pursuing participants’ individual research projects, and in informal conversations with other participants including the directors. Several research “field trips” to sites of direct concern and interest to the institute, such as the Jefferson Foundation research library at Monticello, will also be available for participants.

The institute will be non-prescriptive and thoroughly participatory. As institute directors, we do not view our roles as “teachers” and you as “students” in an asymmetrical instructional context; rather, we see our responsibility as serving as catalysts and facilitators, joining with you as colleagues engaged in common inquiry on matters that all of us meet head-on in our teaching and research. We will use the readings as a way to open up areas of mutual interest and concern, and to help us get a grip on the range of approaches, and their strengths and challenges, for the scholarly study of religion.

We expect that you will use this institute as a means to further your own thinking and to enrich your classroom teaching. We also expect every member to briefly present his or her work and its relation to the concerns of the institute. We will fix the schedule of presentations on the first day. You will also have the chance to work on your own research in a collaborative setting, taking advantage of feedback from your peers and

consultation with the directors. In short, the success of the institute will depend on your contribution to our collective enterprise.

Week one of the institute is devoted to recent historiography on the rise of the category of religion, and on attempts to think about the problematic status of religious belief itself, in early modern and modern Europe and North America. *Week two* of the institute moves from histories of the problem of religion to current debates about religion, focusing on the questions of “secularism” and secularization, science and rationality, and gender and politics. *Week three* explores widely differing perspectives on teaching about religion today, engaging prominent scholars who emphasize the critical tasks of the scholar, others who emphasize the plausibility of scholars speaking from on particular tradition’s standpoint, and others who seek some other way of engaging in the study and teaching of religion.

Accommodations

Participants in the institute will receive a \$2,700 stipend for the three weeks, meant to subvent the cost of the institute itself. While at UVA, most institute participants will be housed in single occupancy rooms located on the University’s Central Grounds and adjacent to library facilities, the bookstore, dining areas, and institute meeting facilities. (Those participants who want housing for partners or family as well, do not fear—we can help you secure such housing also.) Dining will be provided on grounds as well. Participants will be accorded “visiting scholar” status while at UVA, ensuring them full access to the University of Virginia’s world-class library system and the UVA campus-wide wireless network. The University libraries have over 5 million books, over 50,000 journal and newspaper subscriptions, 16 million manuscripts and archival documents, an extensive collection of microforms, a large and diverse teaching image collection, an audio collection of 70,000 CDs and LPs, and a sizable video collection spanning genres and nationalities, housed in 15 libraries or available online.

Application

Application information is posted on the website. The most important part of the application, of course, is the essay. It should explain why you want to participate in this institute, your relevant academic information, your qualifications to participate in and contribute to our common inquiry, what you hope to accomplish, and how your participation will relate to your teaching.

Your completed application should be postmarked **no later than March 1, 2016**, and should be addressed as follows:

NEH Summer Institute on “Problems in the Study of Religion”
c/o Charles Mathewes
Department of Religious Studies
1540 Jefferson Park Avenue
PO Box 400126
Charlottesville, VA 22904-4126

Please contact us with any inquiries about the institute. We look forward to seeing you in Charlottesville!

Best wishes,

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University of Virginia. E-mail: ctm9d@virignia.edu

Kurtis R. Schaeffer, Professor, Department of Religious Studies, University of Virginia.
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