

The Department for the Study of Religion Anti-Racism, Decolonization, and Equity Action Plan: DRAFT for consultation

Revised: October 7, 2020

The DSR is committed to being an academic hub of research, teaching, and community engagement in which all are supported to flourish as scholars, teachers, students, and staff. Sparked by graduate and undergraduate student calls for action and by faculty-led initiatives, the DSR is working to better articulate and enact our commitments to equity, diversity, and anti-racism. To do so, we need to be aware of how our discipline emerged within Christian-inflected European and North American academic communities in which the concept of religion was profoundly shaped by nineteenth-century missionary colonialism and “scientific” racism. Early scholars of religion often served as missionaries and colonial officials or drew upon colonial and missionary writing for evidence for their theories. The project of Christian missions and European colonial thought harmed Indigenous, Black, Muslim, Jewish, South Asian, LGBTQ+, and many other peoples, by eroding their sovereignty and/or justifying violence against them. Declarations of white and/or Christian supremacy were not obscured in the writings of many of the founders of our field—they were right there on the page, out in the open.

As movements such as [Black Lives Matter](#) and [Land Back](#) have shown, all universities need to become better aware of how systemic racism, religious discrimination, and police and colonial violence continue to shape the wider culture in which we live in Canada, Turtle Island, and beyond. In the DSR, we need to become more aware of how systemic racism affects faculty, students, staff, and the communities that we study in differential ways, and then work to address it. We are a diverse department by some measures: gender identity, racialization, sexual orientation, religious affiliation (including no religious affiliation), age, class, ability, and citizenship. As we take steps to inquire into and account for the significance of racism, colonialism, and religious discrimination in the past and present of our field, the DSR is fortunate to be home to such a diversity of experience and perspective. As a community, we have been called repeatedly over the past decade (and more) to take actions to advance racial equity in the DSR. We must now work to create a space in which we can listen to each other, paying careful attention to members who have lived with direct experience of colonialism, racism, and religious discrimination, both within our department and beyond.

The study of religion is fundamentally concerned with questions of how human beings organize themselves in relation to each other, the natural world, and cosmologies of spirits and gods. Based on both “tradition” and “innovation”, religions do the work of organization through protocols and rituals, bodily practices, networks of kinship and affiliation, material culture and scriptures, and systems of governance and economic redistribution. Power is central to the organizing work of religion, as can be seen in conflicts between and within religious groups over issues such as gendered norms, heresy, land and property rights, and how to engage with state

power. Within the university, including the DSR, power also structures relationships among people along complex, intersectional lines of affiliation and difference: e.g. between faculty and students, white people and BIPOC, cis and non-binary/trans people, and those of diverse gendered and religious identities. This document outlines an action plan for how to address and navigate these power relations. We acknowledge that questions of power will never go away, but insist that there are structural, interpersonal, and governance measures that can enable a more equitable and productive climate of collegiality, research, and teaching in the DSR.

A group of graduate students and faculty in the DSR has offered a starting point for addressing questions of racial equity in the department (see appendix below), and the following action plan draws substantially from their calls to action. Graduate students are critical to the work of building an academic community oriented by practices and principles of equity and justice. As researchers and teachers, graduate students have an important vantage point on the changing state of the field and on undergraduate student experience across all three campuses of the University of Toronto.

This action plan is also critical for our goal of revitalizing our undergraduate programs. Students come to the study of religion classroom often because they have profound questions about their own religious upbringing or the role of religion in the broader world: How does religion contribute to ideals of the “good life” or to ideas about the creation and sustenance of the world? What do specific religions say about economic inequality or the use of violence, and how do religions enact inequality and violence? Why is religion such an important factor in debates about sexuality and in norms about gendered bodies? As the DSR works to reinvigorate its undergraduate programs, better connecting these student interests to historicized awareness of the significance of racism, colonialism, and misogyny in the development of the study of religion—and of the very concept of religion itself—will enable more engaging and relevant teaching.

For those who want to learn more about how and why the study of religion, and the DSR in particular, must address the history and present of racism, religious discrimination, and colonialism in our field and community, a list of related university-based statements can be found below. The Teach-Ins stemming from [Scholar Strike](#) (US)—initiated by religious studies scholar [Anthea Butler](#)—and [Scholar Strike Canada](#) also include powerful resources relating to the study of religion. The rest of this statement offers concrete actions, both small and large-scale, that DSR faculty, staff, and students, with the help of alumni, community partners, and friends, will undertake over the next five years.

Action Plan and Timeline

1. Form a DSR Committee on Anti-Racism, Decolonization, and Equity (ADE) that reports to the Chair.

- **Membership:** 3 Faculty, 3 Grad Students, 2 Undergraduates, and 1 Staff; Co-chairs will be one faculty and one PhD student; plus DSR executive as ex-officio members.
 - **Mandate:** To provide guidance and assess annually the progress of ongoing implementation of this action plan; to assist in developing programming on race and religion throughout the DSR; to be a resource for DSR faculty, students, and staff who experience racism in the DSR or University, ensuring that conflicts or grievances are directed to and addressed by the appropriate resources in the department or university; to offer support to DSR members through informal or formal consultation.
 - **Implementation:** DSR Chair will recruit faculty co-chair and grad student co-chair (with GSA and grad student input) (Fall 2020); for 2020-21: committee members will be appointed by Chair; ADE committee will discuss future processes for committee membership.
 - **Progress:** Amira Mittermaier and Sadaf Ahmed will be co-chairs for 2020-21; committee membership in process.
2. Consider introducing a faculty administrative position of Anti-Racism & Equity Officer who could work as a liaison with EDI and Anti-Racism initiatives in the rest of the university.
- **Implementation:** The ADE committee will consider this question at its meetings, in order to ensure that this role, if initiated, appropriately connects with the work of the ADE and is appropriately supported.
3. Departmental Climate Assessment and Antiracism Training:
- Discuss within ADE and the wider department what would be appropriate measures for tracking diversity in terms of gender identity, racialization, sexual orientation, religious affiliation (including no religious affiliation), age, class, ability, and citizenship in the DSR, in order to plan more effective policies to support faculty, students, and staff in our department. **Implementation:** The Chair and DSR Manager, with ADE input and help from Dean's Office, VPFAL, and TIDE.
 - Discuss how best to implement an annual anonymous survey to gauge how the members of the DSR experience racial and gendered equity/inequity. **Implementation:** The ADE will discuss this and consult with Chair and DSR Manager, with help from Dean's Office and VPFAL.
 - The DSR will make available regular antiracism, decolonization, and equity training for all faculty and graduate students and will strive to build a community in which everyone participates in this training. In keeping with wider U of T norms, this training will be mandatory for all those who serve on search, tenure, and promotion committees, on graduate admissions and fellowship committees, and who take on administrative roles in the DSR. The Chair and DGS will also consider how to implement training for those serving on graduate committees.

Implementation: Chair and DSR Manager with help from Office of Indigenous Initiatives; U of T Anti-Racism and Cultural Diversity Office.

- Add a section on the Annual Activity Report to enable faculty to note their participation in ADE-related initiatives. **Implementation:** Chair and Chair's Assistant, spring 2021.
- Engage the [Toronto Initiative for Diversity & Excellence](#) for appropriate resources/processes, including within U of T and externally. **Implementation:** Chair enrolled the DSR with TIDE in early August 2020; TIDE representatives will give a seminar in Fall 2020.
- Discussion within the ADE, and eventually the wider DSR, of a Community Values Statement including faculty, student, and staff perspectives. **Implementation (2020-21):** beginning with ADE Committee.

4. Prioritize Intersectional Diversity in Faculty Hiring

- Actively seek out opportunities to hire Black and Indigenous faculty through targeted hires, in collaboration with other units and the Faculty Appointments Committee, which meets in the Winter term. **Implementation:** Chair, with the advice of faculty and students regarding possibilities (beginning immediately).
- Encourage DSR Faculty and graduate students to recommend candidates or self-nominate for the [Provost's Postdoctoral Fellowship Program](#) (beginning immediately). **Implementation:** Chair and entire department.
- As stated above, require active engagement with unconscious bias training and anti-racist hiring processes for every search committee and tenure or promotion committee (2020-21).
- Build connections with Black and Indigenous faculty in other units whose work connects with the study of religion; invite them to become cross-appointed where appropriate. **Implementation:** Chair with advice of faculty and grad students (already in process).

5. DSR undergraduate curriculum renewal:

- In undergraduate curriculum renewal, center issues of anti-racism and Indigenous sovereignty guided by the following principles and actions:
 - i. Faculty and student awareness of how research and teaching in Canadian universities requires knowledge of Indigenous history and presence and engagement with treaty relations with Indigenous nations.
 - ii. Faculty and student awareness of how the critical analysis of race and colonialism is a necessary theoretical infrastructure for understanding the history of the discipline and its practice today.
- Annual (at least) meetings of the Undergraduate Curriculum Committee with the ADE Committee, to discuss promising practices for curriculum renewal. **Implementation:** Associate Chair and committee members (Fall 2020 and onward).

- Encourage anti-racist awareness and self-reflection in syllabus design and teaching through pedagogy luncheons and providing resources to faculty; e.g. promote readings, podcasts, interviews etc. with scholars who self-identify as Black, Indigenous, people of colour, women, and non-binary. **Implementation:** Associate Chair, faculty, and course instructors.
- Outreach to prospective undergrad students on the DSR website, in classes, and elsewhere should ensure welcoming and inclusive messaging and relationship-building with students of colour. **Implementation:** Associate Chair, Department Manager, and Communications Officer, together with faculty, courses instructors, and TAs (beginning immediately).
- Active support of the Undergraduate Student Association. **Implementation:** Associate Chair and Undergraduate Administrator, with faculty advisors (Fall 2020 and onwards).
- In coordination with curriculum renewal and the revitalization of RPS, develop an experiential and community-engaged learning plan with a focus on engaging with diverse GTA communities and Indigenous nations. **Implementation:** Chair and Associate Chair, RPS Committee, with help of Experiential Learning and Outreach Office and Indigenous Teaching and Learning Liaison (Fall 2020 and onward).

6. DSR graduate program:

- In graduate curriculum renewal, center issues of anti-racism and Indigenous sovereignty guided by the following principles and actions:
 - i. Faculty and student awareness of how research and teaching in Canadian universities requires knowledge of and engagement with treaty relations with Indigenous nations. **Implementation:** DGS and entire department (Ongoing).
 - ii. Faculty and student awareness of how the critical analysis of race and colonialism is a necessary theoretical infrastructure for understanding the history of the discipline and its practice today. **Implementation:** DGS and entire department (Ongoing).
- Bi-annual meetings among faculty teaching Method and Theory courses at the MA and PhD level to ensure integration of intersectional analysis of race, gender identity, class, sexuality, and ability as key categories in the study of religion. **Implementation:** DGS and relevant faculty (Fall 2020 and onward).
- Encourage anti-racist awareness and self-reflection in syllabus design and teaching through pedagogy luncheons and providing resources to faculty; e.g. promote readings, podcasts, interviews etc. with scholars who self-identify as Black, Indigenous, people of colour, women, and non-binary. **Implementation:** DGS and faculty in area groupings (beginning Fall 2020).
- In keeping with the DSR decision to reduce the size of the graduate student cohort, work to provide more support to existing and incoming students, through such measures as:

- i. faculty research funding collective pool
- ii. establishing 2 scholarships for incoming BIPOC students.

Implementation: Chair, DGS, and staff, with assistance of A&S staff (In process and ongoing).

- Ensuring that Professionalization Seminars address issues of systemic racism and sexism in academia (in publishing, on the job market, etc.) and equip students with helpful tools and best practices. **Implementation:** Professionalization Committee (Fall 2020 and onward).
- Annual (at least) meetings of the Graduate Curriculum Committee and the ADE Committee to discuss promising practices for curriculum renewal. **Implementation:** DGS and Curriculum Committee (Fall 2020 and onward).
- Develop guidelines for faculty and DSR outreach to prospective grad students on the DSR website and elsewhere to ensure welcoming and inclusive messaging and relationship-building with students of colour. **Implementation:** DGS, Communications Officer, and Department Manager (Fall 2020 and onward).
- Considering the example of other departments such as [Geography & Planning](#), encourage prospective students to address this DSR Action Plan in their application statement. **Implementation:** DGS and Grad Administrator (Fall 2020)
- Active and sustained support from the DSR of the DSR GSA, including bi-monthly meetings and further discussion of how to engage graduate students in DSR planning. **Implementation:** Chair, DGS, with GSA (Fall 2020 and onward).
- Regularly re-consider ways that grad students find research opportunities, e.g. develop a job board for advertising DSR and external research opportunities. **Implementation:** DGS, Graduate Administrator, and Communications Officer, with help from wider University staff (beginning Fall 2020 and onward).

7. Public events for faculty, students, and staff:

- Foregrounding public scholarship on our website featuring Black, Indigenous, and other BIPOC scholars.
- Prioritizing diversity in public events by actively seeking to avoid “manels” and/or events featuring only non-BIPOC people.
- Develop a community outreach plan, in coordination with the revitalization of Religion in the Public Sphere. Develop this initiative as a space to address questions of equity, decolonization, and anti-racism, including by finding more resources to support grad and postdoc fellowships, community events in GTA and beyond; and Indigenous and international relationships. **Implementation:** Chair and RPS Committee, with help of A&S staff (Fall 2020 and ongoing).

8. Build a stronger culture of recognizing excellence in research, teaching and community engagement in the DSR, including annual prizes or recognition for an undergraduate, graduate student, and a faculty member committed to anti-racist, equity, decolonization, and inclusion work, and featuring their work on DSR and wider university websites. **Implementation:** DSR Executive, Department Manager,

Communications Officer, with the active input of all DSR faculty and students, and the help of A&S and U of T Communications (Fall 2020 and ongoing).

9. Advancement and Alumni Outreach
 - Prioritize initiatives focused on addressing anti-racist, decolonizing, and equity-promotion in Advancement plans. **Implementation:** Chair and DSR faculty, with help of A&S staff. (Fall 2020 and ongoing)
 - Develop strategic plan for reaching out to Alumni with a focus how they grapple with these issues in their work. **Implementation:** Chair and Alumni Committee Chair, Department Manager, with help of faculty and students. (Fall 2020 and ongoing)
10. Governance processes & documents: Re-examine and write new governance documents to ensure transparency, share knowledge, and clarify procedure, aligned with overall principles of this document. **Implementation:** DSR executive and Department Manager (In process and ongoing).
11. Consider the importance of supporting language instruction and the accessibility of testing in multiple languages for graduate language exams, including Indigenous languages, as an aspect of equity and decolonization. **Implementation:** DGS and Languages Committee.

Inspirations for this statement include:

1. [Answering the Call. Wecheehetowin](https://indigenous.utoronto.ca/initiatives-protocols/) : U of T's response to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, Final Report 2015. See: <https://indigenous.utoronto.ca/initiatives-protocols/>
2. Arts & Science TRC Response, 2017. See: <https://www.artsci.utoronto.ca/about/strategic-overview/indigenous-learning-knowledge/report-indigenous-teaching-learning>
3. American Academy of Religion Statement on Racism and George Floyd Murder: <https://aarweb.org/AARMBR/About-AAR-/Board-of-Directors-/Board-Statements-/AAR-Statement-on-Racism-and-George-Floyd-Murder.aspx>
4. Statement from Black Presidents and Deans, Schools and Departments of Theology and Religion, <https://www.meadville.edu/ml-commons/details/statement-from-black-presidents-and-deans-schools-and-departments-of-theology-and-religion/>
5. Johns Hopkins University Resolution on Black Lives, 2020: <https://history.jhu.edu/2020/07/08/history-department-resolution-on-black-lives/>

Appendix 1: From the Racial Equity Working Group

Racial Equity Action Plan Department for the Study of Religion University of Toronto

In June 2020, a group of graduate students and faculty came together to form the Department for the Study of Religion (DSR) Racial Equity Working Group. Our express goal was to formulate a set of recommendations that would provide the DSR direction in the ongoing effort to address departmental, institutional, structural, and discipline-specific inequities borne out of entrenched processes of racialization. These processes specifically and adversely impact DSR members who are racialized as Black, Indigenous, and People of Colour.

Recommendations:

1. Establishment of a Racial Equity Committee co-chaired by a faculty member and a graduate student. The committee will consist of at least four students: two who have achieved candidacy and two who have not. The committee will develop, implement, and oversee ongoing plans for addressing issues of racial equity in the department. Additionally, the committee will provide support to students who are subject to racializing dynamics, and will be equipped to offer a set of internal restorative processes to address them. The Department will make decisions about who participates on the Racial Equity Committee in conversation with the signatories of this document.
2. Mandatory and regular (annual or biennial) anti-racist training for all faculty, staff, and graduate students.
3. The department must commit to hiring two tenure-track Black faculty. These hires must be met with the appropriate financial, community, and research support to ensure retention. More broadly, the department must prioritize the hiring of Black and Indigenous faculty members in all future hires.
4. The department should hire a tenure-stream faculty whose work centers on race and religion and/or Black religious traditions.
5. The graduate program must prioritize diversity in our student body. To do so, the Department must establish the financial, academic, and social supports necessary for BIPOC students to thrive in the program. The selection process needs to account for barriers to admissions for Black and Indigenous students, and should establish a yearly award of \$5000 for incoming Black and Indigenous MA or PhD students. In the event that there are no incoming MA or PhD students that year, the award should go to an existing student. Additionally, the department website and the Graduate Student Handbook should

- clearly convey funding opportunities available to Black and Indigenous students at the university and beyond, as well as a regularly updated directory of services and supports.
6. The Department must commit to bringing greater transparency and equity to department-level graduate hiring practices and distribution of financial resources. In lieu of the “*Report on Matters Pertaining to Gender and Ethnicity in TA/CI Appointments in the Department for the Study of Religion, Based on Data Gathered from 2013 to 2019*,” a member of the Racial Equity Committee/graduate student observer—selected by the Racial Equity Committee and financially compensated by the DSR—must be present at meetings concerning graduate student hiring.
 7. In further commitment to bringing transparency and equity to hiring practices and distribution of financial resources, the department should hire an outside firm such as the [Canadian Centre for Diversity and Inclusion](#) (CCDI) during the 2020-2021 academic year to conduct an audit of hiring practices and allocation of resources. The results will be discussed in a faculty meeting with the Racial Equity Committee, and in a subsequent town hall open to the broader student body.
 8. The graduate curriculum, especially the MA and PhD Method and Theory courses, should incorporate colonialism and its modern formations of race as categories of analyses. The Method and Theory course should be restructured to highlight how race is not only central to the histories and epistemologies of religion as a field of study, but how it continues to implicitly and explicitly shape the very methods and epistemologies of adjacent academic disciplines. This means that the syllabi developed for the Method and Theory courses should not limit discussions of race to one week, nor should certain scholars or case studies be tokenized. Instead, the faculty member(s) responsible for teaching Method and Theory each year can address throughout the course how a given theme, area of study, or thinker is situated in historical genealogies of colonialism, race, and imperialism as is relevant and possible. Method and Theory instructors can collaborate with the Racial Equity Committee while developing a given year’s syllabus. The Committee will also be available on an ongoing basis to support faculty in the development of syllabi for other courses.
 9. Existing undergraduate courses should incorporate content that equips students to think about race, colonialism, and social justice as pertinent to the course. The Racial Equity Committee will be available to consult with all instructors and faculty on undergraduate curricula, and especially those whose area of teaching have not typically emphasized these issues as meaningful and urgent sites of analysis.
 10. The Undergraduate Curriculum Committee should consult with the Racial Equity Committee to develop new undergraduate courses that emphasize the relationship between religion and contemporary social issues, including race and social justice.
 11. The DSR should convene a yearly lecture series on race and religion. All DSR faculty, staff, and students (undergraduate and graduate) should be strongly encouraged to attend.
 12. The Professionalization Seminar series must address the systemic biases that racialized colleagues and students face in academia, specifically in relation to the job market and

hiring practices, departmental cultures, professional opportunities, and teaching. Where existing faculty are not able to adequately address these issues, the Department should invite guest speakers.

13. The DSR should commit to setting up a physical and digital library of religion and Critical Race Theory (CRT) as well as resources on the myriad ways the category of race operates in academia. This library should be in the department and accessible to students and faculty.
14. The DSR should develop a Community Values Agreement in collaboration with the Racial Equity Committee to ensure that shared departmental spaces are inclusive for all students, and that department norms do not exclude minoritized students.
15. In the drafting of a Community Values Agreement, the DSR will take into account the reality that spaces of higher education are often structured around the experiences of certain students, to the exclusion of others. The creation of more inclusive spaces requires that faculty and staff are aware of the needs of minoritized students and that they advocate for policies accordingly. The commitment to inclusive spaces should extend to department events. The DSR faculty, staff, and GSA executive members should commit to promoting and organizing a variety of inclusive community events, similar in spirit to the DSR's Tea @ 2, cafe study sessions.

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