

Director's Address

Across the 2022–2023 academic year, we in Religious Studies are celebrating the seventy-fifth anniversary of the Faculty, and now School, at McGill. At the same time, we also celebrate fifty years of the journal thereof; *Arc*. In this latter context, the editors have invited me to record a Director's Address, to consider the significance of this confluence of anniversaries and celebrations.

Arc itself helps me to do so. The thirtieth anniversary of the Faculty of Religious Studies occasioned the publication of a special issue with a series of reflections from past Deans on the character, history, and future trajectory of the Faculty,¹ as well as H. Keith Markell's well-known volume *The Faculty of Religious Studies, McGill University; 1948-78*.²

The fortieth anniversary issue of *Arc*, in particular, has helped me to best understand the significance of this academic year for the School, and *Arc*'s own fiftieth anniversary.³ Both will be readily available to all very soon, as our enterprising editors, Elyse MacLeod and Amanda Rosini, digitize the entire range of *Arc*'s publications. In the interim, I would like to note some of our predecessors' reflections, in order to suggest their current relevance, and even importance, for our understanding of our own anniversary celebrations. In this as in so many other cases at the SRS, our

1. See *Arc* 6, no. 1 (Autumn 1978).

2. See H. Keith Markell, *The Faculty of Religious Studies, McGill University: 1948–1978* (Montreal: Faculty of Religious Studies, McGill university, 1978), https://www.mcgill.ca/religiousstudies/files/religiousstudies/markell_history_of_frs.pdf.

3. See *Arc* 16, no. 1–2 (Autumn 1988). Unless otherwise noted, all quotations that follow come from this issue.

historical past serves as an excellent guide to our present, and to our possible futures. The fortieth anniversary issue began with Dean Donna Runnalls – who became the first female Dean in McGill’s history, in 1986 – reflecting on her own predecessor’s contribution to the thirtieth anniversary issue. Dean Joseph C. McLelland (1975–85), in “From Divinity to Religious Studies,”⁴ suggested that the Faculty had “come of age.” It had developed “from its beginnings as a B.D. program for the ordinands of two affiliated theological colleges to a five-program complex.” Runnalls noted that “ten years later the activities of the Faculty are a continuation of that configuration with the B.Th. remaining stable,” while “the B.A. and the graduate programs [are] becoming increasingly popular.” Gratefully, the BTh program remains stable still, while the BA program and our graduate programs have continued to grow.

Other salient continuities obtain. Professor Gregory Baum wrote that “what is most characteristic of the McGill Faculty of Religious Studies is its pluralism,” and not only in its range of programs; “at the Faculty, we use a plurality of methodologies. We have professors and students who understand themselves as Christian theologians and who therefore engage in research and reflection guided by a particular faith perspective. And we have professors and students who are engaged in Religious Studies in a more detached manner and who use one or several methodologies to arrive at a scholarly understanding of the phenomenon of religion and the place of religion in human history.” He further wrote that “what I hope for the future of the Faculty is that this pluralism remains intact.”

Intact indeed! Our constitutive hybridity remains a character and a strength – amongst our peer programs, even the largest and historically most important institutions typically attempt religious

4. See *Arc* 6, no. 1 (Autumn 1978): 2–3.

and theological studies through distinct, even distant, units. Professor Baum continued; “a pluralism of this kind in a relatively small academic unit is manageable only if there is mutual respect, tolerance of alternative views, and the spirit of friendship.” I am grateful that this spirit continues to characterize us, and to sustain our pluralism. Douglas John Hall’s appreciation of the unit in 1988 thus remains relevant; “I remain [...] very grateful for many things that cannot be taken for granted in the modern university, such as civility, courtesy, mutual respect and support amongst colleagues, and a concerted effort to sustain academic excellence.” Such institutions, he adds, “without disparaging what they have been and are, ask what they might still become.” I am grateful to be a part of an institution that is actively engaged in exercising its futural imagination, and in becoming what it intends.

In the latter context, Professor Baum hoped for a change; “it is my hope that the Religious Studies Faculty of the future will be able to engage in a more extended dialogue and cooperation with members of other departments.” As we reflect on our position and priorities in this, our seventy-fifth year, we can see that our new institutional setting in the Faculty of Arts, and our several cross-appointed colleagues – Professors Fiasse with Philosophy, Kaell with Anthropology, Lai with East Asian Studies, and Wendt with History and Classics, for example – have realized this, Professor Baum’s hope.

Amidst the challenges and prospects of each academic year, the importance of the origin of Religious Studies at McGill can be forgotten. Anthony Capon reminded us that “apart from one experimental programme in Ceylon (now Sri Lanka), the cooperative effort which led to the formation in 1912 of the Joint Board of Theological Colleges Affiliated with McGill University is the oldest

example of ecumenical theological education in the world.” Its development is as important. We can too easily forget the example of our predecessors, including those who not only navigated, but shaped, the field of Religious Studies, such as W. C. Smith, the Birks Professor of Comparative Religion and founding Director of the Institute of Islamic Studies, and those who led within it, at McGill and institutions such as Harvard’s Center for the Study of World Religions, like R. H. L. Slater.

Stanley Frost, for his part, supposed that, intellectually, “scholars of the distinction of R. B. Y. Scott and George Caird put its academic standing beyond cavil,” while institutionally, “James Sutherland Thomson, brought from the presidency of the University of Saskatchewan to become Dean in 1948, gave it immediate prestige.” These early generations “began to diffuse McGill’s reputation in matters of religion far beyond the boundaries of Canada.” This international prominence was amplified by subsequent generations. We have every reason to celebrate Gregory Baum and Douglas J. Hall in the development of twentieth century Ethics and Theology, and Raymond Klibansky and Joseph McLelland in Philosophy of Religion. There is every reason to celebrate the legacy of R. B. Y. Scott in Hebrew Bible, James Caird and N. T. Wright in New Testament Studies, and Richard Hayes in Indian Religions and Buddhist Studies, to name only a very few.

As a result of their impact and influence, Dean George Johnston (1970–75) was right to suggest that “McGill’s place in scholarship” is “pretty distinguished and should be made better known.” On this basis, he speculated possible futures: “the numbers of students in our Arts courses will continue to increase, with a few ups and downs between 1988 and 2038,” while “numbers in theology will be pretty static.” This, he warned, “unless there is a wonderful new recruitment programme for [...] people from the Third World,”

an international reach that has occurred, to the benefit of our B.Th. and S.T.M. programs, and “unless there is a revival of Union talks among the great denominations of Canada,” which has not occurred. He also speculated that “interdisciplinary courses and/or Centres will increase and FRS will be a part of them,” as we were with our Centre for Research on Religion and may again be soon. Johnston also predicted that “before long the Birks Building will need to have a companion (named for some future benefactor) to provide staff offices.” He wished that he “could foresee the millionaire who will put up the cash to make that possible.” Indeed, Johnston supposed that “money to meet all our needs will remain rather inadequate until 1998 or thereabouts, but I have hope that during the twenty-first century we will be recognized as *the* place to study,” and that “the necessary money will be forthcoming.” He even predicted the era; “if any readers of *ARC* have a few millions to spare, send them now so that I won't have to dream any longer, so that the Runnalls era will go down in history and be famous!”

Johnston's prophecy was imprecise with respect to time, but benefactors' recognition of the quality of our teaching and research has indeed led to important philanthropic advances. The Barbara and Patrick Keenan Chair of Interfaith Studies (given by a former student of W. C. Smith in recognition of the impact and quality of his teaching), the Ray L. Hart Bequest (given by a former Chair, Director, and Dean of Theology at Boston University as well as Executive Director of the American Academy of Religion), and the Robert L. Stevenson Chair for Religion and Literature (given by the Molson Foundation and Molson family members in honour of Professor Robert Stevenson, the first ever alumnus to join the ranks of the faculty of FRS when he was appointed in 1966 in Comparative Religion) are the most prominent. For each, Johnston's conviction, that “McGill's place in scholarship is distinguished and should be

better-known,” was in fact the motive for transformative philanthropy.

In this context, it is relevant that Monroe Peaston wrote that “in 1970 we became the Faculty of Religious Studies, and two years later, in keeping with that revision, Divinity Hall became the William and Henry Birks Building.” In this way, Peaston supposed, “we were able to preserve to posterity the name of a Montreal family whose interest, concern and munificence have conferred on the Faculty incalculable benefits.” They still do. H. Jonathan Birks remains an indefatigable champion of our character and mission, and an energetic contributor to our advancement. The Birks family continues to provide important financial contributions to the School – the recent Birks Forum for Religion and Public Policy and Birks Doctoral Fellowship perpetuate the tradition of giving, first evident in the Birks Building, Chapel, and Reading Room, the Birks Professorship of Comparative Religion, and the Birks Lectures. At the same time, Jonathan provides support and counsel to the unit as, for example, the Advisory Board Chair and the Chair of our Transition Team. We can predict that the confidence of these members of our extended School community, and these, their endowments and investments, will help to secure our vitality across the next seventy-five years.

Dean Runnalls, in her contribution, also wished to identify “moments in our history which should point to the future as they reflect on the past.” I wished to reiterate this gesture in this context, as we reflect on our history and project possible futures. I would like to note from Dean McLelland’s contribution that the characteristic (and constructive) tensions of a constitutively hybrid unit, clear to its members thirty-five years ago, are still clear to us today. I would like to note from Professor Baum’s contribution that it is (only) a collegial

collaborative spirit that allows such a hybridity to continue and flourish. I would like to note, from Professor Johnston's contribution, the extraordinarily high level of scholarship that has been sustained across the history of our Faculty of Religious Studies and that continues today to characterize the life and purpose of the School of Religious Studies. It is this that establishes, or not, the impact and influence of our model – as Clifford Geertz taught us, a *model of* is a *model for* – on the fields of religious and theological studies nationally and internationally.

But Dean Runnalls situated this historical context in order to ask a futural question; “what will the next generation of faculty and students experience as the high points of their life in the Faculty?” As we each address that question to and for ourselves, we should acknowledge that recent accomplishments are many. These include a first-ever ten-year accreditation by the Association of Theological Schools. They include faculty renewal, with new appointments in, for example, Catholic Studies, a program of study that has enlarged our ecumenical horizon, Chinese Religions (Buddhism), and South Asian Religions. It is my hope that these anniversaries themselves, and our celebrations of them, will provide such high points.

We decided this past year not to confine celebrations to a single occasion, or to restrict the character of our celebratory activities to festivities. We decided that the best way to honour the legacy of excellence accomplished by our predecessors is to commit to a range of activities, in many though not all, of our defining areas of past and present commitment. In this way, we hoped to remember and reiterate the areas of excellence that have defined the School to date, and to advance our own, current, impactful scholarship in that context. These activities included the Numata Visiting Professorship and Lectureship in Buddhist Studies, the Wadsworth Lecture in Calvinism, the South Asian Religions Distinguished Lectureship, and

of course the Birks Lecture. The Birks Forum, the product of a relatively recent gift in the area of Religion and Public Policy, supported a large-scale conference and workshops on Indigeneity and Christianity in global contexts.

New activities have been sponsored. Two Lilly Foundation grant sponsored symposia on inter-faith encounter, a conference dedicated to Technology, Ecology, and Religion in North America, a Sanskrit and Tibetan Translation Workshop, and a joint McGill-Concordia conference in Biblical Studies were also offered at different points of the academic year. A Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC) sponsored conference in the philosophy of religion, the inaugural meeting of the Canadian Society for Philosophy of Religion, a second SSHRC-sponsored conference in the area of Church History, and the release of a thirty-hour series of video interviews on Hinduism with Professor Sharma, were also part of a full year of innovative programming. This Fall semester, the third of a trilogy of symposia on “Who is My Neighbour?,” organized by Professors Kirkpatrick and Sharma, will take up religious phobias that target the Hindu, Muslim, and Jewish communities. The year of celebrations will conclude with the School’s own homecoming event, which will coincide with the University’s homecoming events in October. In all of these ways, Professors Kirkpatrick and Sharma have led a year-long celebration of a legacy of accomplishments and commitments. *Arc* itself is a part of this celebration, as the SRS has committed to more extensive support for *Arc* than ever before.

It is good that we recount this history, in order that its claims upon us, as we consider the best possible ways forward, be felt. I am grateful to the editors of *Arc* for assisting us in that effort. In her reflection, Dean Runnalls asked; “Will the next ten years see as much change as the last ten?” I believe that we have endured more change

than ever before, in fact, during the past five years – from the unit's transition from Faculty to School, to the societally transformative event that was the pandemic. But we will encounter still more in the near future, as we become responsible for envisaging, and enacting, an expansion in our ranks.

Peaston concluded his remarks with his view that “a fortieth anniversary gives us as good an opportunity as any for saying that we are proud of what we are and of what we have achieved. We have every reason to look forward with confidence and hope.” So, too, I imagine, does a seventy-fifth anniversary of the School, particularly when seen in tandem with the fiftieth anniversary of *Arc*. The latter initiative and commitment allows us to chart the trajectory of Religious Studies at McGill, and intimate its influence on the field more generally. It allows us to see that the character and strengths of the unit in its fortieth year, with its attendant problems and prospects, remain those of its seventy-fifth year. I am grateful to participate in the life of the School in this important period of its history, as I am to the editors of *Arc* for the opportunity to address the reader on the occasion of this fortuitous confluence of celebrations.

Cordially,

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