

Statement of Purpose
Department for the Study of Religion, University of Toronto

I am applying for the Ph.D. program in the Department for the Study of Religion at the University of Toronto. My goal after earning my doctorate is to obtain a research and teaching position at a research-intensive university. Having completed graduate degrees in both Comparative Religion and American Studies, I am prepared to continue my research at the doctoral level and develop my scholarship on the anthropology of evangelical Christianity. I have engaged at length with points of contact between the fields of religious studies, American studies, and anthropology and plan to find a scholarly home among them, contributing to these fields both during and after my graduate studies.

My interest in anthropological approaches to the study of religion first developed after participating in an interdisciplinary research roundtable, funded by the Humanities Center at Western Michigan University, designed to develop the concept of "lived religion." The work that I completed for that roundtable, which focused on the role of print and new media in the dissemination of Scientology outside of the United States, won a research competition involving both MA and PhD students from several fields. On top of presenting and publishing that research, I graduated from my MA program in Religious Studies with distinction. While my time at Western Michigan University offered a historical foundation for thinking about religion across the Americas, my MA program in the Department of American Studies at the University of Wyoming exposed me to the wide range of theoretical and methodological tools in the field of cultural studies, providing an informed perspective on the relationships among discourse, materiality, visuality, and performance. A number of the seminars that comprised an interdisciplinary curriculum encouraged me to reimagine my interest in U.S. religion within larger cultural contexts. First, a seminar in folklore attuned me to the significance of the informal circulation of religious practices. Second, seminars on visual studies, material culture, and affect theory collectively directed my attention to cultural forms at work outside of the linguistic realm, cultivating an understanding of the virtues and shortcomings of theories and methodologies being developed currently across disciplines, including turns to post-humanism, materiality, and affect. Third, a seminar tracing the history of documentary and ethnographic modes of writing (from travelogues, to early anthropological monographs, to experimental ethnography) gave me an appreciation for the tensions and contradictions of fieldwork. Broadly, coursework in American Studies developed my interest in ethnographically grounded studies of religion, bringing to the fore concepts of the everyday and the sensory in my research.

My thesis project, an ethnographic account of three evangelical Protestant street preaching troupes in Boulder and Denver, Colorado, brought together these interests. This work drew on insights from theories of performance and urban space to make sense of ways that street preachers repurpose the urban built environment as a space of debate and circulation, as well as how these spaces are contested by publics. With that project, I made a descriptively dense contribution to an understanding of the conflict between fundamentalist and liberal articulations of "religion," as well as how these articulations take root and operate within concrete spaces. That work also made a methodological contribution by addressing, at length, how traditional problems of self-reflexivity in field methodologies take different—yet recognizable—forms while engaging with privileged, dominant, and fundamentalist communities.

Under the guidance of the faculty at the University of Toronto, I plan to pursue these interests along two broad trajectories, one empirical and one theoretical. First, I intend to develop

my interest in the constitution and contestation of religious-political movements by continuing my thesis's ethnographic engagement with evangelical street preachers. I also plan to extend this engagement in my dissertation by examining evangelical outreach in broader contexts, including national and international missions. Second, following in the footsteps of scholars such as Ann Pellegrini and Donovan Schaefer, I am interested in the wide range of recent research on affect as a tool for rereading the history—and reimagining the future—of phenomenology in religious studies. Toward this end, for example, I am currently developing an article that offers a close reading of Quentin Smith's *The Felt Meanings of the World: A Metaphysics of Feeling*, a largely (and unjustifiably) ignored work of 20th-century phenomenology that analyses extensively the concepts of "feeling," "affect," and "mood." Projects like this allow me to engage contemporary discussions on public feeling and political emotion, informed by scholars such as Sara Ahmed, Ann Cvetkovich, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, and Lauren Berlant. While at first glance these interests appear distinct from my empirical research, evangelical Christianity provides a rich text for thinking through affect as a means for articulating religion as a viscerally felt phenomenon.

With these interests in mind, the professors in the Department for the Study of Religion are particularly well suited to inform my current work and orient me toward future research avenues. I am excited at the prospect of working with Dr. Pamela Klassen, whose geographic interest in North America and disciplinary interest in the anthropology of religion and secularism align neatly with my research. I first encountered Dr. Klassen's work at the "Religion, Health, and the Body in North America" conference at Western Michigan University, a conference organized by my advisor, Dr. Brian Wilson. Following a graduate seminar titled "Religion and Alternative Medicine," this conference piqued my interest in the institutionalization of alternative medicine and inspired research examining notions of health and the body in transnational Scientology reform movements. Dr. Kevin O'Neill's and Dr. Simon Coleman's extensive engagement with ethnography offers my research a nuanced methodological orientation that is difficult to find in a field often characterized by textual analysis. Additionally, both Dr. O'Neill's and Dr. Coleman's expertise in transnational evangelicalism provide an empirical ground for my interest in evangelical performance in public space, including cities, universities, and other sites of mobility. More broadly, I hope to learn from and contribute to the faculty's ongoing engagement with the anthropology of Christianity, both through the department itself and through the Religion in the Public Sphere Initiative.

While I have studied a number of languages in formal contexts, including German, Greek, and Japanese, I currently have a basic reading and writing knowledge of Spanish and German and plan to develop my knowledge of these languages throughout my time at University of Toronto.

Finally, having taken a graduate seminar on theories and methods of pedagogy, I believe that the ability to translate research into effective teaching is both an important and underdeveloped skill. My teaching experience is extensive: I have been an instructor of record for four courses in the field of religious studies, and my teaching received an award from Western Michigan University. I have also been a teaching assistant for upper division courses on Islam, New Religious Movements, Apocalypse, and American Religious History. Those experiences highlight my ability to develop independent courses, as well as to work in a team with faculty and other teaching assistants. My pedagogical experience makes me a competitive addition to the department not only as a researcher and active member of the scholarly community, but also as a teacher. I am confident in my ability to transfer my dedication to

teaching and the skills that I have developed to teaching courses for undergraduates at the University of Toronto.

In closing, I would be honored to join the PhD program in the Department for the Study of Religion at the University of Toronto. I am prepared to enter the program with dedication to research, teaching, and service, contributing to a community of rigorous and dedicated scholars. Thank you to members of the selection committee for your time and consideration.