

TERTIARY ACADEMIA OF RELIGION IN SOUTH AFRICA - SOME STATISTICAL PERSPECTIVES

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to present a quantified overview of the academic teaching of religion at South African universities. It is shown that religion, in particular the subject known as Biblical Studies, is highly popular. At the same time diverse approaches, both formally and materially can be observed and it would appear that adjustments will be necessary in some cases.

Introduction

It is often said, and rightly so, that religion is an enormously influential cultural factor in South Africa. At least prima facie this is borne out by the fact that the academic study of religion can be pursued at any South African university and, as we shall see, usually attracts large student numbers.

Like everything else in South Africa the sense and meaning of the academic pursuance of religion has come under scrutiny. Indeed it is likely to continue for some time to come. The reasons are manifold and need not detain us now. This article attempts to contribute to the debate by focusing on some statistical aspects which might be of use in determining the overall position and possible trends.

The data presented here was accumulated during the period March to August 1994 in person, through correspondence and from official Yearbooks. Although one strives for the greatest possible measure of objectivity the residue of intuitive observations made through personal contacts will be evident.

The definition of tertiary academia of religion employed in this article is by no means sophisticated. Neither religion nor the academic discourse on this matter is as easily defined as is sometimes assumed. In the eyes of the public in general and thus for the purposes of this article, however, those academic enterprises conducted in departments and faculties of Theology, Biblical Studies, Religious Studies/Religion, Hindu Studies, Islamic Studies, Science of Religion and various permutations or combinations of such names is deemed tertiary academia of religion. For want of a better description it shall be called 'academia religionis'.¹

1. The only other article in this field that I know of is by now dated and dealt only with Biblical Studies (Malan 1988).

Let us now proceed to look at some statistical aspects of academia religionis in South Africa at present. We will deal consecutively with institutional variations, courses, teaching staff, students and will conclude with a few general observations.

1. Institutional diversity

There is quite a marked diversity in the way academia religionis is institutionalised at South African universities. Reasons given included the following:

1. the history of the inception and development of the specific departments and faculties (and the universities of which they are a part of);
2. methodological and theoretical differences between historically 'Afrikaner' and 'English' universities;
3. the relations between the past apartheid state and the particular university;
4. the role of organised religion (mainly Christian) in the formation of universities, faculties and departments and in the state policy on education; and
5. the often cited 'religious' nature of South African society at large and the specific community ideally assumed by the particular department or faculty. As a result names of departments and subjects, curricula and institutional positions differ greatly.

In an attempt to systematise in such a way that reasonable comparisons may be drawn in this article, faculties of Theology are separated from other groupings of departments, the latter under the headings of Biblical Studies, Religious Studies and Other. Nominally the dividing line between the former and the latter is that - at least traditionally - Theology is the province of the churches and normally aims at training for professional careers in this respect. The others are deemed essentially "formative" in scope and character and are not directly linked to any profession.

In particular it is necessary to highlight the position of Biblical Studies and to distinguish it from New Testament, Old Testament and Systematic Theology. Biblical Studies has undoubtedly succeeded in establishing itself as an independent subject. This is evident the 'public' of it attracts in South Africa which is markedly different from the traditionally assumed 'public' of New Testament, Old Testament and Systematic Theology. Thus even though the core ingredients of Biblical Studies may not differ qualitatively from the other three subjects the mix, application and ethos of Biblical Studies constitutes a subject in its own right.

Recent revamping of curriculums at many universities has widened the gap between Biblical Studies and the traditional parallel subjects further. Courses now offered under the flag of biblical Studies include: comparative religion, sociology of religion and social science approaches to Christianity. Whether the name is still applicable is of course a moot question. Not surprisingly many departments are now opting for dual names such as Biblical and Religious Studies - signalling the prevailing uncertainty about the direction which academia religionis will take in schools in future.

Table 1 below lists the number of faculties and departments. It shows that 19 universities in South Africa maintain some or other department or faculty (or both) of academia religionis. In comparing one should note that Unisa is a correspondence

university and that the Biblical Studies taught at Vista functions only to upgrade teacher qualifications and is always part of a teacher's diploma. The Sub-Department of Biblical Studies there is part of the Further Training Campus employing Distance Tuition.

TABLE 1)
Numbers of faculties and departments

Faculties of Theology ²	12
Departments of Theology in Faculties of Arts and Humanities ³	1
Departments of Biblical Studies ⁴ in Faculties of Theology	3
Departments of Biblical Studies in Faculties of Arts and Humanities	5
Departments of Religious Studies in Faculties of Arts and Humanities ⁵	6
Other departments of academia religionis in Faculties of Arts and Humanities	2

With regard to non-Christian academia it is significant that departments of Jewish Studies are absent at all universities. One explanation might be that any such needs are already being fulfilled by other departments such as Semitic Languages. Departments of Hindu Studies and Islamic Studies only exist at the University of Durban-Westville. In some departments of Religious Studies, however, lecturers in Hinduism and Islam have been appointed.

Another noticeable feature is the lack in institutional facilitation of the study of African Traditional Religion (ATR) for its own sake. At one university it is rated as 'one of Africa's three religions' but accorded roughly a fifth of staff, course and research allocations. At three other universities only introductory courses in ATR are taught. Apart from that, if at all, ATR is studied as part of Missiology or a mixed bag of non-Christian religions. It is quite conceivable that anthropologists deal more with African Traditional Religion than academics in academia religionis.

2. Degrees, Diplomas and Certificates offered

The B.A. degree is offered at all universities in South Africa and, with the exception of Vista and UniBop, Biblical Studies may be offered as major at all of them. Other possible B.A. majors in the field of academia religionis are Religious

2. The term 'Theology' institutionally denotes Christian Theology at South African universities. I will therefore use it in that way and indicate where Islamic Theology, etc. is referred to.
3. No distinction is made between Faculties of Arts, Humanities or Social Sciences.
4. No distinction is made between a Department of Biblical Studies, a Department of Biblical and Religious Studies, a Department of Biblical Studies and Religion, a Department of Biblical Studies and Theology or variations on these themes. In all such cases Biblical Studies is the main focus. In some cases it might have made sense to group Religious Studies with Biblical Studies but either the ethos is different or the change from 'pure' Biblical Studies to some mix with Religious Studies is not such that Religious Studies has become the main focus. One has an obvious problem with terminology here because neither 'Biblical Studies' nor 'Religious Studies' has an unequivocal meaning.
5. No distinction is made between a Department of Religious Studies or Religion and a Department of Science of Religion.

Studies/Religion, Islamic Studies, Jewish Studies, Hindu Studies and Christian Studies. From 1995 onwards a number of universities will introduce B.A. degrees with Theology as (at least one) major. This seems to be a trend in the direction of opening up what used to be fairly "closed" faculties of Theology.

The B.Th. or B.Theol. as first degrees are now being offered at eleven universities and only a very small number still retain the B.Th. and/or B.D. as a second degree (following on a B.A. degree). The number of universities requiring a total of six or seven years of study before the first full theology degree is awarded is therefore steadily diminishing and at least two such models were discarded at the end of 1994. Giving students immediate and full access to theology is the order of the day.

Another significant aspect is the number of Certificates and Diplomas awarded in Christian Theology. Seven such Diplomas or Certificates are now being offered. The purpose of such Diplomas or Certificates is generally either to improve the accessibility of theology to students without Matriculation Exemption or to enable universities to accredit the work done at non-university tertiary institutions.

Only one university does not offer postgraduate study up to doctoral level. Honours degrees are generally being offered. The majority of universities also offer either M.A. or M.Th. degrees. Even so it would appear that postgraduate students in religion prefer to study at eight universities only.

There does not seem to be a direct relation between undergraduate and postgraduate student numbers. Some universities have relatively few undergraduates but relatively large numbers of postgraduate students. Other universities are practically swamped by undergraduates but have very few postgraduate students. How much this is due to lack of bursaries, inadequate staff numbers or other factors could not be ascertained.

3. Teaching staff

3.1 Institutional spread

For reasons readily known it is difficult, if not impossible, to provide an entirely accurate figure regarding staff numbers. In the second quarter of 1994 there were 256 teaching staff members employed on a full-time basis (this includes contract, provisional and permanent appointments). If the figure is to be adjusted to reflect current levels, it would probably have to be upwardly adjusted because a number of appointments and advertisements have been made since and only a few downward indicators were noticed. Nevertheless for our purposes the figure of 256 is sufficient.

Figure 1 provides a breakdown of how the above 256 were situated institutionally.⁶

It is clear that almost two thirds of staff held appointments in faculties of Theology. The impact of this on staff to student ratios and curriculum development will be dealt with later when we look at student numbers and spread. At the moment

6. The legend for the diagrams:
F: Faculties; D: Departments; FA: Faculties of Arts (or Social Science/Humanities); FTh: Faculties of Theology; BS: Biblical Studies; RS: Religious Studies.

we must draw the conclusion that by and large academia religionis in South Africa is dominated by *Christianity* and methodologically dealt with by means of a *theological* approach.

3.2 Gender composition

Figure 2 shows the gender position.

Altogether only 14 women hold teaching positions. This constitutes 5% of all staff. As for stratification, just one is head of her Department. No dean is female.

3.3 Racial composition

Figure 3 shows the racial spread of staff.

Not unexpectedly it portrays an overall situation reflecting the historical distribution of power, privilege and learning in the apartheid era and before.

Turning away from the overall situation to particular universities the picture, however, becomes more complex and far less uniform. In fact it is impossible to discern any overall trend at all - except that realities or perceptions of flux is evident everywhere and that the pressures to "indigenise" are felt most strongly in faculties of Theology. The latter is not surprising in view of the relatively more skewed racial spread in this area.

3.4 General remarks

Two aspects concerning staff still ought to be mentioned.

The number of expatriates permanently teaching in South Africa is not high and concentrated at the traditionally English speaking universities with predominantly white student populations. Such staff predominantly come from either the United Kingdom or the United States. Compare this with the Boleswa universities (Botswana, Lesotho and Swaziland). There expatriate staff, mostly from other African countries, abound and sometimes make up more than half of a department or faculty.

Secondly, a matter which has proved impossible to quantify and which warrants further research, must be noted here. It is the university background of staff. From superficial data in this respect it would seem that some three universities have provided the majority of staff to the others. On the other hand, and particularly at the aforementioned three universities, a large number of degrees were received by staff at universities outside South Africa.

4. Students

4.1 Institutional spread

Data on student numbers provide absorbing material for analysis and comparison. However, one has to be extremely careful not to distort the figures as Biblical Studies, Religious Studies/Religion and those categorised under 'Other' at pre-graduate level take up only between 20% and 50% of the student's time, whereas Theology claims up to 100%. The latter is the case in the final three years in those instances where

theological training comprises six years. The majority, though, of theology degrees stretch over four (and increasingly three) years and incorporates non-theological subjects.

In order to statistically account for the above the total student numbers for Biblical Studies, Religious Studies/Religion and 'Others' in the third and second years has been divided by 2 and in the first year by 4. This provides one with a weighted picture of the institutional student spread. Of course an exact weighting can only be achieved on the basis of (the most unlikely event of obtaining) Sanso figures but for the purposes of this article the weighted figures calculated as explained above will be more than adequate and should not deviate substantially from calculations derived from Sanso data.

Figure 4 shows weighted student proportions.

The next two graphs (Figures 5 and 6) show proportions for first-year students and final-year students⁷.

4.2 The gender composition of students

The gender composition of the student body is fairly much as to be expected. Male/female ratios in Biblical Studies and Religious Studies/Religion are always between 50/50 to 40/60. This of course contrasts significantly with the gender spread of teaching staff.

Among students of Theology the male/female ratio ranges between 100/0 and 90/10. This is more in line with the gender spread of the teaching staff but obviously heavily out of step with contemporary cultural developments.

4.3 The racial composition of students

There seems to be a rapid confirmation of the demographics of South Africa in the racial composition of students. This affects mostly the historically white (and mostly Afrikaans) universities where black students in Biblical Studies and Religious Studies/Religion now make up between 25% and 60% of the student body. At historically black universities there is no sign of an influx of white students though. Taken together this means that students in Biblical Studies and Religious Studies/Religion now are by a large majority black.

When looking at Theology admission of black students to theological courses on campuses which were predominantly white in the past proceeds at a markedly slower pace. Black enrollment here vary from 0% to 80% but is generally below 50%. A number of faculties of Theology still do not have more than a handful, if any, black students. With one exception, the same just in reverse, applies to those faculties which have always had only black students.

7. In the case of final year students in Theology there is a certain unevenness because their courses last anything from three to six years and those lasting six years take a first degree after three years. Only those fully completing a course in theology as it is recognised by their university (even if it means that they already have another degree with components of theology) have been counted for the graph.

4.4 Observations

Probably the most significant feature of the above is that Biblical Studies students make up three quarters of the student population in the area of academia religionis in South Africa. By far the majority of them are black and those historically white universities who have in recent years registered large increases in student numbers in Biblical Studies can only attribute this to growing numbers of black students.

The question as to the popularity of Biblical Studies among black students drew a wide and sometimes conflicting range of answers. They range from accentuating the formative value of Biblical Studies (thus providing a normative foundation to youth who in essence is trying to negotiate one of the world's most ambitious histories of transformation) to allegations of substandard curricula at schools (thus allowing an abnormal number of pupils to matriculate who then hope the same would apply at university).

Whatever the case may be it is in the immediate interest of all concerned to do intensive research into the grounds for the popularity of Biblical Studies. If for no other reason the need for reconstruction and development in this country requires that. Not that it is thereby suggested that Biblical or Religious Studies do not or can not contribute to the RDP. In fact just the very opposite is the case! But as things stand now, there is a strong case to be made that the potential of the subject is not properly realised.

To restate the above concern let us move on to the last aspect of our statistical overview.

5. Lecturer-student ratios

Table 2 presents unadjusted lecturer to student ratios at pre-graduate level only. No data on post-graduate numbers was available but it can be assumed that such data would not have a marked impact on the *ratios* below.

Theology	1:8
Biblical Studies	1:70
Religious Studies	1:26
Other	1:6

As has been argued already adjustments have to be made in order to be able to draw valid conclusions from any comparisons between Theology and the other subjects. For this reason the adjusted student numbers (*as in Figures 4, 5 and 6*) are used as basis for the calculations. A complicating factor, though, is the number of lecturers in Theology who teach Biblical Studies. To adjust for this the number of lecturers in Biblical Studies is taken to be 50% of the staff of those Faculties or Departments of Theology where no Department of Biblical Studies exists. Finally Unisa has been removed from the picture totally. Because Unisa is a correspondence university, the equation does not really work the same way as in other universities.

The ratios adjusted as explained above are given in *Table 3*.

Theology	1:10
Biblical Studies	1:44
Religious Studies	1:26
Other	1:6

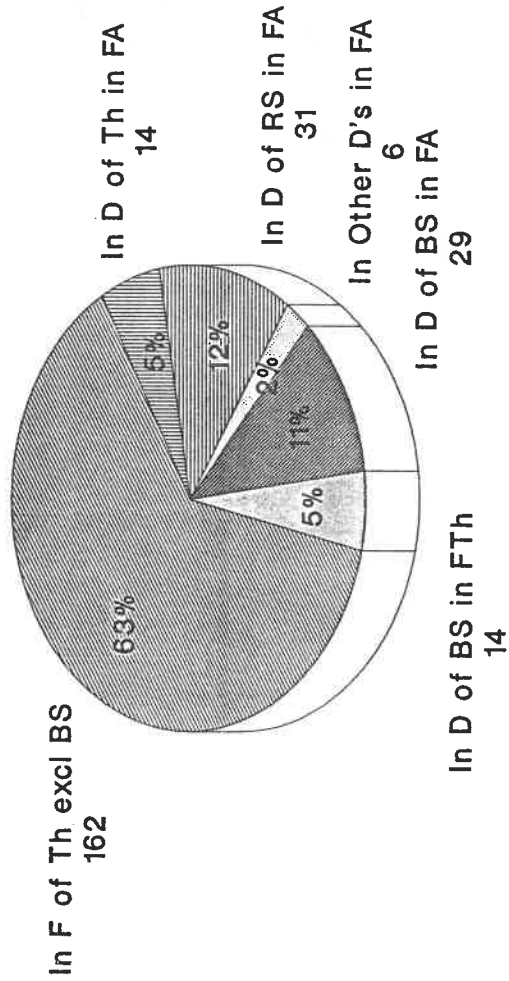
It is clear from the foregoing that Biblical Studies suffers from a disproportionate staff allocation. It is probably fair to state that Religious Studies is slightly on the advantaged side but there is no doubt that Theology is in an over privileged position. As for the other departments one has to accept that their student sources are naturally limited in South Africa.

The implications of the disproportion becomes evident in the following: As has already been pointed out Biblical Studies is offered by all universities. *Table 1*, however, showed that only 8 departments of Biblical Studies exist. For the rest the subject either falls under the jurisdiction of departments or faculties whose selfunderstanding not necessarily provide a climate conducive to the evolution of Biblical Studies (or whatever an appropriate name would be for a subject of this nature within the broader humaniora) commensurate with the evolution of society in general. The extent of this phenomenon is typified by the position at Unisa where of the 66 staff members in the faculty of Theology approximately half teach Biblical Studies at undergraduate level. However no formal appointments in Biblical Studies as such were ever made. Bearing in mind that Biblical Studies invariably is a subject in the faculty of Arts and Humanities this amounts to a considerable proportion of

appointees in Theology who in actual fact find their primary student base elsewhere. At other universities almost entire faculties of Theology are supported by "imported" students.

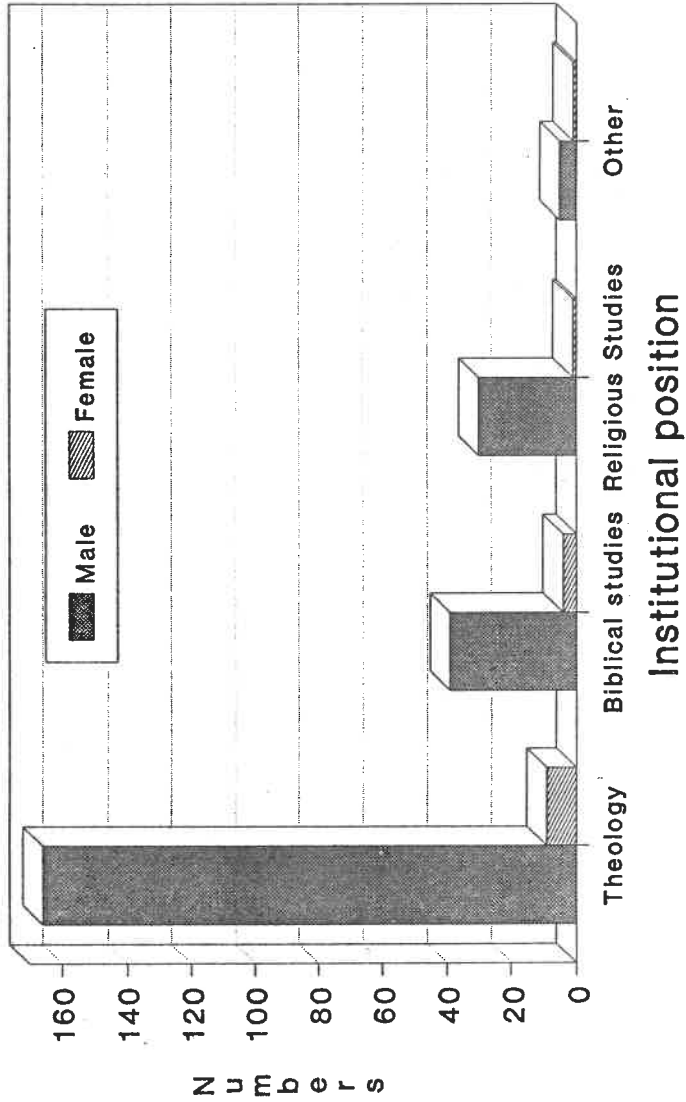
This is not the place to unravel the arguments for or against treating Biblical Studies as synonymous to theology (or Old and New Testament). What needs to be emphasised here and faced by all concerned is that Biblical Studies is for by far the majority of students the real point of entrance into academia religionis in South Africa. Why this is so, what it entails, on what theoretical basis such a subject should be developed, etc need to be freshly debated. But such a debate can not hope to be innovative and responsive to the needs of society at large as long as those debating - even if unconsciously - assume their primary academic setting to be different from their teaching task. In this way Biblical Studies will remain a mere derivative and certainly faces the prospect of being sidelined soon.

Teaching Personnel (Fig. 1) Institutional positioning

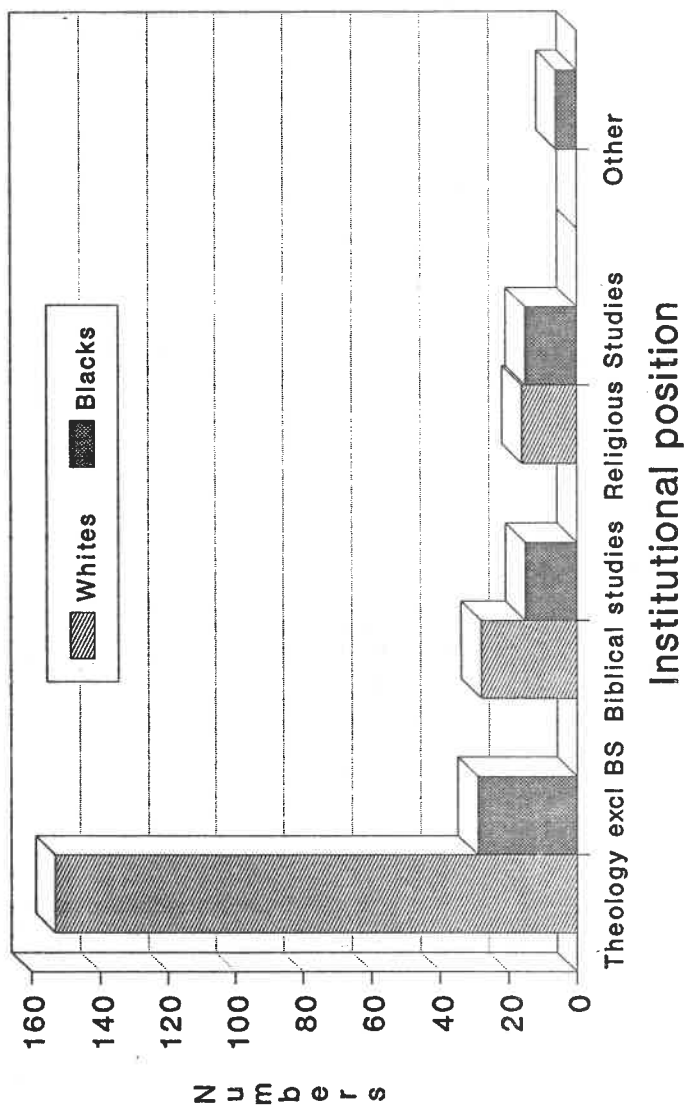


Full time, contract/permanent, current

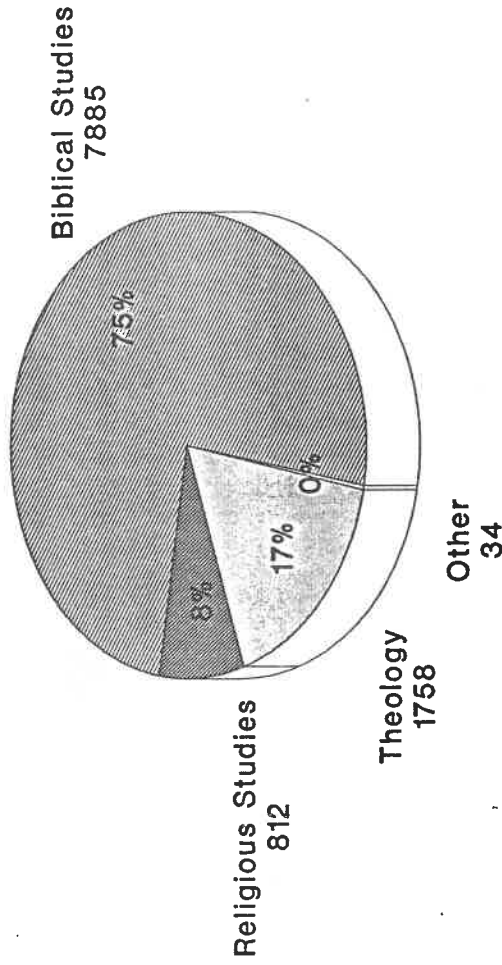
Teaching Personnel (Fig. 2)
Gender comparison



Teaching Personnel (Fig. 3)
'Racial' comparison

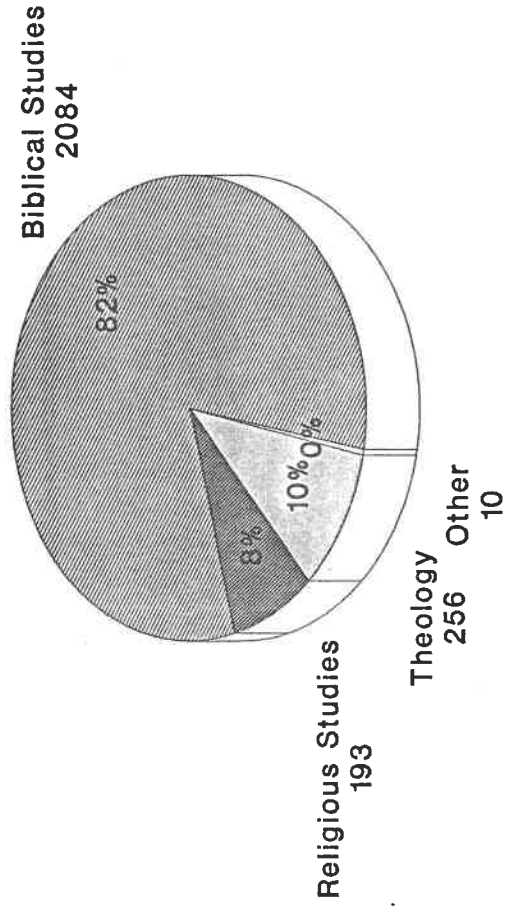


Student proportions (Fig.4) Weighted student proportions



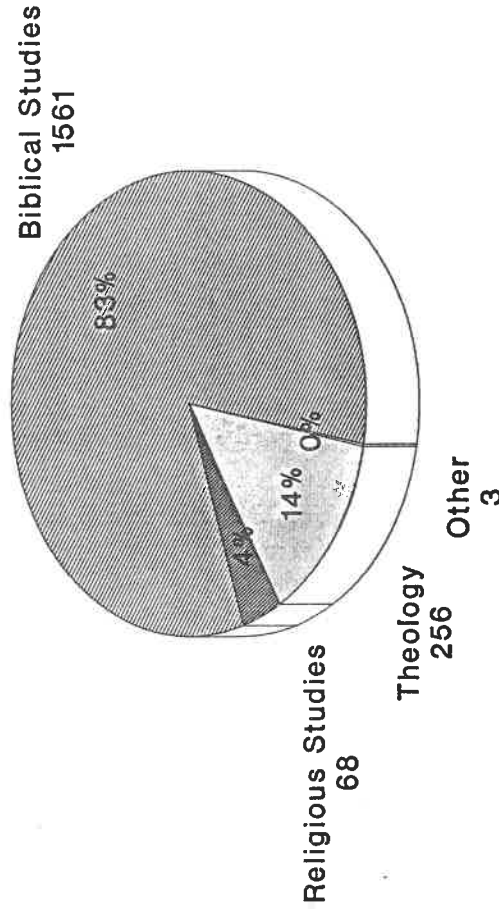
BS, RS and Other numbers divided by 2

Student proportions (Fig. 5)
Weighted first-year student proportions



BS, RS and Other numbers divided by 4

Student proportions (Fig. 6) Weighted final-year student proportions



BS, RS and Other numbers divided by 2

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