

Appendix III

Department Snapshot 1984 (from the external review of the Department of 1984; cf. fn. #23)

The Present Situation of the Department

The department that took shape at SU from the mid-sixties to the mid-seventies has enjoyed a special reputation in the field. This was a period of ferment in religious studies generally, with the creation of new programs at state universities and the fundamental reshaping of older programs at private colleges and universities across the country. It is scarcely too much to say that a new academic field has been in the making during the past twenty-five years, an inter-disciplinary, cross-cultural study of religion adapted to the secular university and distinct from the models based on the Protestant theological seminar that had been dominant earlier. Far from uniform the efforts to develop this new field have been diverse and remain so to this day. It has been an arduous but exciting challenge for those engaged in it, and the program developed at SU during the decade mentioned was certainly among the boldest. A circle of gifted and experimental-minded younger scholars plus such established figures as Stanley Hopper and Huston Smith with reputations for intellectual independence and ambitious range, firmly established this department in the avant garde of a generally dynamic field. It has been able to attract distinguished visitors, who not only contributed to its luster but found stimulating peers among its regular faculty. Steering clear of well-worn paths, this faculty was (and remains) impressively productive and highly visible professionally, in demand on other campuses and vocal in meetings of the American Academy of Religion. The selection of its current chairman as executive director of the Academy is only the most recent instance of this department's leadership in the field.

Not that other departments directly followed its lead programmatically, or really could have: the very fact that SU's program was so largely built around the well-nigh unique interests, styles, and personalities of its central figures made it literally inimitable. Precisely the same fact has made the program developed in those days impossible to institutionalize at SU itself, i.e. to establish in a form that could survive the departure of those around whom it took shape. By now, furthermore, most of those central figures have in act retired or moved on. Of the most highly visible leaders who established the style and agenda of the department only David Miller remains at SU. Hence the rather critical position in which the department finds itself in 1984. Its members are able to look back with justifiable pride to its recent past as a kind of golden age – with the well-known, indeed legendary difficulties about what to do after a golden age! With at least three new appointments to make, the department is being put to a difficult test in this respect, but is also being given an enviable opportunity to rebuild.

The department as presently constituted has some substantial assets in meeting this test and this opportunity. Its faculty is still generally a good one, including some able and productive younger scholars. Morale is generally high among its graduate students, surprisingly so given the uncertain prospects for professional employment that face graduate students everywhere. The department appears to enjoy solid support from the SU administration, and the respect of colleagues in other departments.