

Appendix V  
Summary from the External Review  
Of the Department in Fall 2004

October 18, 2004  
External Review  
Syracuse Department of Religion

Reviewers:

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The department is to be commended for navigating a period of great transition in the wake of retirements and the unexpected death of a well-respected colleague. Under the leadership of Dr. Richard Pilgrim the department has added new faculty at both senior and junior levels, developed a great deal of collegiality and excitement amongst its members, established itself as a key contributor within the university, especially within the College of Arts and Science and the Maxwell School, and has begun to consider ways to plan the next state of the department's life. These accomplishments are significant and provide a strong foundation for crafting an identity and enhancing academic reputation.

- Addition of new faculty. In recent years, the addition of Gustav Niebuhr, a well-known religious journalist, and John Caputo, a distinguished philosopher of religion and philosophical theologian, has added stature to the department. Previous hires Ken Frieden, Joanne Waghorne, Tazim Kassam, Philip Arnold, and Jim Watts are well-recognized and well-respected names in American Academy of Religion and the Society of Biblical Literature, the two largest international academic guilds for scholars who study religion. Junior hires Gail Hamner, Marcia Robinson, and Zach Braiterman are impressive. These relatively new members of the department have joined respected faculty members Patricia Miller, Ann Gold, Ernest Wallwork, and Dick Pilgrim. Taken as a group, the faculty has good potential for academic achievement and for improving the reputation of the department. However, with some important exceptions, scholarship production is moderate considering the high esteem within the profession with which individual members and the department as whole enjoy. Scholarly productivity needs to be supported and monitored.
- Collegiality and excitement. Every faculty member in the department identified the excellent collegiality within the department as a great strength. Faculty members from other departments also noted the collegiality of this department. The collegiality is expressed in working together on programs, supporting the graduate program, engaging in a process of new definition, and providing intellectual support for each other's works. Junior colleagues all noted that they feel tremendous support, and two spoke about the importance of the formal mentoring process. For some years the Syracuse department was reputed to be a contentious one, so strong collegiality is important in developing a set of informal networks to support the intellectual and programmatic conversations.

- Contributing to the university. The department and its faculty members have become important contributors within the university, especially within the College of Arts and Sciences and the Maxwell School. Faculty within and outside the department identified as a key strength the engagement of religion faculty members with others across the university. Faculty members from outside the department spoke of their respect for the religion faculty, their work on university and dissertation committees, and their participation in intellectual conversations. Religion faculty members explained that this was a clear “agenda” item for them four years ago and that they have worked hard to make sure their department is well-respected in the university. The Religion and Society Program, which exists outside the department but is staffed by many department members, was one attempt to make sure that the religion department serves the needs of undergraduates in the university. The program also found a structured way to address one of the vice-chancellor’s interests in interdisciplinary teaching and research. The recent proposal for a humanities center at Syracuse lists numerous religion department members as potential participants in groups such as the Public Memory Project, Cultural Politics Research Group, and Native American Studies: Indigenous Cultures and Citizenship. Faculty members from outside the department ranked as extremely high the ability of religion faculty to perform difficult, complex interdisciplinary work.
- Crafting a new intellectual vision. Crafting a new intellectual vision for the department is important for a variety of reasons. The department has changed its identity fairly dramatically in the last twenty years as the study of religion has changed and as the department’s faculty membership has changed. Syracuse was once a good (though not excellent) graduate program of “radical” or cutting edge theology, largely Christian with some Jewish representation, that existed in contrast to theological schools with more traditional approaches to theology. The divide between confessional/academic or even subjective/objective is largely gone in the study of religion. The areas of expertise of the department faculty at Syracuse are no longer limited to Christianity and Judaism but now include South Asian Hinduism, Native American, Muslim, and Buddhism as well as “border crossing” or immigrant religion patterns. Once Syracuse specialized in “texts,” and now a focus on text is balanced with a focus on performance, arts, history, and institutions.

In sum, the department has been successful at managing a major transition in the makeup of the department faculty and addressing the need to position itself within the university. Dr. Richard Pilgrim, who has served as chair for four years, should be congratulated for his leadership that brought in new persons, transformed the academic profile from one dominated by Christian theology to one representing cross-cultural studies, and shaped a collegial intellectual community amongst the faculty. In the judgment of the reviewers, this department has no major problems that need to be addressed save the funding of graduate students. Rather, the challenge for the department is to seize its current opportunities and construct imaginatively a new identity and definition for the department that includes both undergraduate and graduate programs.