

**Religion Department Retreat
Mary Maples Dunn Room, Pierce Hall
23 January 2008, 8:30 a.m.-1 p.m.**

The entire Religion Department met for a departmental retreat on 23 January 2008. Present were Profs. Lois Dubin, Peter Gregory, Jamie Hubbard, Joel Kaminsky, Suleiman Mourad, Andy Rotman, Vera Shevzov, and Carol Zaleski. The department used the opportunity provided by the retreat to make some major decisions and redefine departmental priorities.

I. Follow-up to Decennial Review: Future Personnel, Curricular Directions

The most important decisions had to do with redefining priorities with regard to staffing and curriculum. In its Decennial Review, the department had stressed equally the need to staff positions in New Testament and Religion(s) in the America(s). There is no question that the Religion Department has a responsibility to mount at least two courses a year on the New Testament or New Testament-related topics. This field is a critical building block in the structure of the Religion major, and it fills important needs for other departments as well (such as Art History, Classics, English, History, Medieval Studies, etc.). The Decennial Review's outside committee emphasized the college's need for excellent and sophisticated instruction in New Testament, a need subsequently reaffirmed by CAP. Since the department has pressed its case for a permanent New Testament position (full or shared) for several years now without success, we used the retreat to consider other ways of meeting this need. After thorough discussion, we came to the following resolution:

The ideal remains a permanent, even if part-time, position. The department would certainly be willing to pursue a shared Five-College position or a target-of-opportunity hire in this field.

In the absence of such a solution and in order to ensure regular and excellent teaching of New Testament by the department, Vera Shevzov stated that she would be willing to consider teaching the New Testament courses in the future. Before she could do so, however, she emphasized that she needs (1) to finish her current book project (and go through the promotion process), after which she would need (2) institutional support for relevant retooling in the highly developed and sophisticated field of New Testament Studies (including Biblical Greek). Only then would she assume responsibility for the New Testament side of our curriculum. This means that for the next few years we would need administration support to continue to hire advanced graduate students or scholars from other campuses to mount the New Testament courses for us. The department unanimously supported this plan and enthusiastically endorsed Vera for retraining.

Consequently, the department decided to turn its attention to the other long-standing need reiterated in the Decennial Review: Religion(s) in the America(s). Acutely aware that our current curriculum does not adequately address this area of the world, the department affirmed its desire to pursue opportunities of developing a shared position with another department (such as Sociology, Government, American Studies, or Anthropology). This position could be configured in a variety of ways, but whatever shape it takes, there is a strong consensus that it would need to provide (1) a strong disciplinary perspective (preferably with a social science sensibility) that would complement the theoretical orientations in the department, and (2) an emphasis on present-day issues of compelling concern for the education of active citizens (such as religion in the public sphere, in politics, in the media, etc.). However this position be configured, whether as American Religion(s), or Religion(s) in the Americas, or Religion and Society, or Religion and the Public Sphere, its focus on religion and the state would help students better understand how the political, the religious and the moral constitute and influence one another. The department unanimously supported this plan.

II. Development of Student Capacities within the Major

We also discussed our curriculum in light of the curricular expectations and requirements of Smith students as formulated in recent college documents. We all agreed that our diverse pedagogical methods help students develop the ability to think critically, to articulate ideas clearly, to work both independently and collaboratively, to cultivate a historical and comparative perspective on our subject matter, and to become informed global citizens. The one area in which we fall short is in using quantitative skills, a lacuna that could be addressed by a shared position with Sociology or some other department in the social sciences; the department believes that such an emphasis on contemporary religion, public policy, and the active use of quantitative skills and methods would serve the department and the college well.

We agreed to work with the library to further information literacy skills and to do more to develop our website, and we appointed two members to explore this further.

We noted that we are doing more with respect to engaging students with communities beyond Smith, especially with regard to fieldwork. Given some of the issues that arise with such engagement, especially in the context of ethnographic work, we hope to develop a set of guidelines for students with respect to this type of work in the future.

III. Student Research

We agreed that courses in the Religion Department routinely engage students in research and are geared toward developing research skills. We agree that it might be helpful to

articulate better, especially in our course syllabi, the particular skills that our courses address.

We enthusiastically agreed to develop a capstone course. Our current course for the major, REL 200 “Approaches to the Study of Religion,” would be aimed at newly-declared majors and sophomores while the capstone course generally would be taken in the senior year. (We envisage setting it at the 400-level if the college as a whole moves to instituting such a level.) Such a course would emphasize directed research and the process of scholarly production, be it in the form of an article, essay, or lengthier Honors Thesis. The course would provide students with a creative environment in which they could work both collaboratively and independently on their individual research projects.

IV. Collaboration beyond the Department

Finally, members of the department expressed considerable interest in contributing to the development of the Center for International Studies and Cross-Cultural Communication. We also envision ways in which our work, especially with regard to the broad topic of religion and the media, may be relevant to the Center for Community Collaboration. We also hope that current and future courses on religion and the environment will contribute to the tasks and goals of the proposed Center for the Environment, Ecological Design and Sustainability.

Respectfully submitted on behalf of the Religion Department,
Lois Dubin
Peter Gregory
Chairs of the Department, 2007-08