

DUKE UNIVERSITY

DEPARTMENT OF RELIGION

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August 22, 2013

Srinivas Aravamudan
Dean of Humanities
Trinity College of Arts and Sciences

Dear Srinivas:

The members of the Department of Religion have unanimously determined that they wish to change the name of the department from the "Department of Religion" to the "Department of Religious Studies." The change comes at the end of a long series of discussions and reflections on the history of the department and its mission at Duke and of the challenges that face us in the next decades in view of the developments in the university and the field of religious studies. I would like to provide here an overview of the rationale for the proposed change. I submit with this letter a history of the department composed by one of our graduate students at the request of the chair and a brief summary of it.

Religions have long been studied by Western academics, having emerged as a discrete field of scholarly attention in Europe, especially England, in the course of the nineteenth century. But the process of creating departments for the study of religions has been slower, largely owing to the dominance of Christian divinity schools, seminaries, and theological faculties in European and American academic institutions. "Religion" served as nomenclature because it often meant in practice Christianity (and Judaism insofar as it was part of the Bible) taught with a view to the truth of biblical revelation and the cultural superiority of Christianity and its civilization over all others. As the accompanying history of the Department of Religion at Duke shows, the long process of an independent department has slowly produced one increasingly attuned to the study of religions as cultural and social phenomena that merit critical and historical study as an integral part of the humanities.

The growth of this scholarly sensibility has not come at the expense of opportunities to specialize in Christian theology, ministry, pastoral counseling, and Christian worship at Duke since the Divinity School has remained an exceptionally strong institution that has partnered happily with the Department of Religion to

form the Graduate Program of Religion (GPR). The two units—Divinity and Religion—have collaborated robustly for decades and continue to do so, comprising a doctoral program that is one of the top-rated in the United States. Indeed, three years ago the National Research Council ranked the GPR as the best doctoral program in the nation.

Nevertheless, the mission of the Department of Religion is distinct from the purpose of the Divinity School. In the twenty-first century, Religious Studies as a field and the study of religions at Duke have reshaped themselves in parity with the cultural diversity, international scope, and social challenges that characterize the lives of our students and their families. Within the context of the study of the humanities, Religious Studies is keenly interdisciplinary, situating itself along intersecting boundaries with the study of fields as varied as health, media, science, politics, and the arts. The department's members do not understand religions as pristine and fixed domains, but as part the shifting terrains of everyday life, political discourse and debate, and social conflict.

Changing the name of the department will formally acknowledge the continuity of the department's pedagogy, curricula, and mission with the role of the humanities at Duke and with the larger field of Religious Studies in the United States today. Naming is a conservative practice, and this case is no different. Nearly all of our competitor institutions denominate their departments "Religious Studies."* It also keeps the department on par with other units in the humanities at Duke, such as the Department of Romance Studies, the Department of Classical Studies, and the Department of Art, Art History, and Visual Studies. What we are asking is simply that our name be made to catch up with what we in fact already teach and research.

Sincerely,



David Morgan
Professor and Chair

* Prominent departments of Religious Studies with doctoral programs include: Brown University, Columbia, Indiana University, Northwestern University, Southern Methodist University, Rice University, Stanford University, University of California-Santa Barbara, University of Florida, University of Iowa, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, University of Pennsylvania, University of Texas at Austin, University of Virginia, Yale University (distinct from Yale Divinity School). In addition to Duke, the only leading departments with doctoral programs that continue to designate themselves "Department of Religion" are Princeton, Boston University, Syracuse, and Emory. Harvard has a "Committee on the Study of Religion" (not to be confused with Harvard Divinity School) and University of Chicago a non-sectarian "Divinity School."

Summary of the History of the Department of Religion at Duke University

When Duke University was created in the 1920s, the “School of Religion” was established as the first professional school at the university and was expressly endowed by James B. Duke, who charged it with the special task of educating Methodist ministers. The School of Religion was intended by James Duke to be distinguished from the undergraduate Department of Religion, whose purpose was the moral formation and (Christian) religious education of undergraduates. The School of Religion was to focus its efforts on ministerial preparation and the advanced study of the Bible. In 1941, the School of Religion was renamed “Divinity School.” During the 1940s Masters (MA) and Doctoral degrees (PhD) were developed in three areas: biblical studies, studies in church history, and studies in Christian thought. These degrees were offered in the Graduate School though they consisted of courses taught by members of the Divinity School.

In 1965 the members of the Department of Religion completed an eight-year self-study on the role of the study of religion at Duke and course requirements for undergraduates. The study signaled the Department’s intention to expand curriculum in areas beyond the traditional Protestant theological focus: Christianity and Culture, Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, and Judaic Studies. The thrust of the self-study was to situate the Department soundly within the humanities. Since the second half of the 1950s, faculty in the Department of Religion had become active in the teaching of graduate study of religion at Duke. The self-study called for increasing the level of participation.

By 1970, the Department classified its course offerings in an even broader manner than before: biblical studies, studies in Christian life and thought, history of religions, religion and the social sciences, and religion and the humanities. Non-clerical scholars with strengths in religion and literature and Jewish faculty were hired in the second half of the 1960s. By the 1990s faculty specially trained in the academic study of such fields as Islam, Taoism, Hinduism, and Buddhism joined the tenure-track ranks of the Department. Since then hiring in a variety of non-traditional areas has continued, including faculty engaged in the study of folklore, comparative religions, poetry, gender, critical theory, media, and material culture.