

April 13, 2009

President Modesto Maidique
Florida International University
11200 SW 8th St
Miami FL 33199

Dear President Maidique:

At a time of economic crisis when all institutions are downsizing, one might think that the destruction of one academic department in a large public university might slip by unnoticed by the general public. But the department of religious studies at the Florida International University is no ordinary department. And the significance of losing such an important leader of the academic field of religious studies is so great, that it will be resisted by the full force of the entire professional body and by concerned observers of higher education across the country.

The American Academy of Religion, of which we are the current and immediate past presidents, is the largest professional association of scholars of religious studies in the world. With over 11,000 members—most of them professors in colleges and universities—it is larger than the professional associations of philosophy and anthropology, and only slightly smaller than the associations for sociology, political science, and history. When the AAR membership is added to those in its sister organization of scholars of biblical literature, the combined number of 20,000 constitutes the third largest body of professional scholars in the country (succeeded only by economics and modern languages). By sheer numbers of faculty and students, therefore, the field of religious studies is one of the most imposing in higher education.

It is understandable that religion occupies such an important role in higher education since it plays such a vital role in public and private life. Religion matters. It is the way that people around the world have expressed what matters most to them, including their social identities and aspirations. For this reason, the study of religion has become one of the main vehicles for informed reflection on human culture. The enormous impact of the events of September 11, 2001, brought home in a powerful way just how important a wide knowledge of religion is for understanding the changing globalized world. According to former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, America's ignorance about the world's religions "poses one of the greatest challenges to our public diplomacy." She shares our conviction that future citizens need to understand the controversies over religion that have shaped their culture, the living reality of the various religions that are practiced in their midst, and the history of the religious traditions currently influencing millions of people around the world. For these reasons, the study of religion in most institutions of higher learning has expanded rapidly in recent years.

Though the urgency of the study of religion is recent, religious ideas and values have been central to higher education from its beginning. In the last hundred years, the modern field of religious studies has evolved into objective analyses of the phenomena of religion from multifaceted and scientific points of view, helping to explain the customs, texts, arts, ideas, and social conflicts of religious communities around the world. Among its forebears are social theorists such as Max Weber and Emile Durkheim, textual scholars such as Max Muller and Julius Wellhausen, and philosophers such as Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel and Friedrich Schleiermacher. Because religious phenomena are complex, the methodologies for studying them have been wide-ranging and interdisciplinary, but the study of religion cannot be reduced to any one method or discipline. The field of religious studies has always required its own domain separate from other departments and disciplines. Scholars of religious studies—including Wilfred Cantwell Smith at Harvard, Mircea Eliade at Chicago, and Ninian Smart at the University of California—have provided intellectual frameworks for conceiving of religious studies as a discipline of its own.

As a practical matter, the study of religion can be done adequately only in its own academic home. Although professors in other departments such as sociology and political science have increasingly and of necessity become concerned with religious issues—just as they have with economic issues—the field of religion is marginalized in those disciplines and not treated in a holistic way. Like economics, only a religious studies department or a stand-alone program can provide the intellectual coherence, the academic leadership, and the administrative support that the undergraduate and graduate degree programs in the field require. For this reason, virtually all major universities, both private and public, have departments or stand-alone programs in religious studies, including our own institutions—Harvard, Princeton, Yale, and the University of California at Santa Barbara.

The department of religious studies at the Florida International University has provided a model of excellence for similar departments across the country. It has over eighty undergraduate majors, and dozens of graduate students who have been placed in excellent positions. Its faculty members have published over seventy books and hundreds of journal articles and book chapters, and they have brought thousands of dollars of grants and other external funds to the University. FIU's department has also developed graduate exchange programs with important universities in Ghana, Columbia, India, and Indonesia. Nationally it has set a standard for excellence that other departments strive to replicate.

While we understand the severity of the financial situation at the Florida International University—not unlike that of many universities around the country at this difficult moment in the nation's economic life—we are puzzled why the cuts have not been levied across the board, as most universities have done, rather than choose to destroy a single department in the humanities. More puzzling still is the choice of the department: one such as Florida International University's outstanding department of religious studies, which has brought a significant amount of national attention to the University and greatly enhanced its scholarly reputation.

Though we hesitate to intervene in another university's affairs, you should be aware that this proposed action affects the field of religious studies as a whole. For this reason, we four current and past presidents of the American Academy of Religion have taken the extraordinary step of

sending you this joint letter. We hope that it will not be too late, and that wise counsel will persuade the University to reverse a course of action that would be damaging not only to the department of religion and to the Florida International University, but to the academic study of religion nation-wide.

Sincerely,

Diana Eck
Harvard University
AAR President 2005-06

Jeffrey Stout
Princeton University
AAR President 2006-07

Emile Townes
Yale University
AAR President 2007-08

Mark Juergensmeyer
University of California, Santa Barbara
AAR President 2008-09

cc: Provost Ronald Berkman
Dean Kenneth Furton