

UNIVERSITY of PENNSYLVANIA

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Department of Religious Thought

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Dear Walter:

You'll remember that the last time we talked (on the telephone) we were both rather shaken by the mentality and attitudes of the religion graduate students we encountered on that retreat. I was probably bothered more by it than you were since I'm the one that's contemplating leaving Penn to join that faculty and my greatest problem has been whether I would find that department--its faculty and its students--congenial. I don't want to have to fight either students or colleagues over the fundamental questions of the subject-matter of religious studies or over standards. I'm willing to argue about methodology, to be sure, since there is no standard paradigm, but it would bother me if a majority of both faculty and students rejected classical modes of scholarship and argument.

At any rate, what I'd like to know is whether you have had a further thoughts and experience that would cause you to modify the impressions you shared with me?

One of the central problems that bothers me is that all of the more well-known figures there--Smith, Vahanian, Miller-- do what I regard as rather eccentric scholarship. Then, since the younger members of the department are less impressive intellectually, they tend to go along with a type of eccentricism. As a consequence, I don't think--from this vantage point--that Syracuse offers a solid graduate degree in any subject-matter. I was rather badly shaken (just between you and me) when I discovered that the next choice after me for this job was Michael Novak. Now I think Mike is an extremely lively person but he has no scholarly reputation at all. If they were to get still another person who was not grounded in the scholarly disciplines (and who reads languages, for example), the program would be even more thin than it now is. So far as I can see, there is no basic philosophy of religion or historical study or theology going on there. Am I correct in this?

Well, I need what advice you can give me very badly. I'm not at all happy at Penn, but I don't want to jump from one frying pan into another at this stage in my career.

Are you going to be at the AAR?

Sincerely,

Vau