

SYRACUSE UNIVERSITY

DEPARTMENT OF RELIGION

316 H. B. CROUSE HALL | SYRACUSE, NEW YORK 13210

315/423-3861

October 22, 1975

Professor Gerald J. Larson
Chairman, Department of Religious Studies
University of California
Santa Barbara, California 93106

Dear Gerry:

I very much appreciate your telephone call of the night before last as well as your letter of recent date. The prospect of bringing Ninian Smart to Santa Barbara is certainly intriguing, and I'm grateful that I was asked to offer an opinion.

I've been turning the matter over in my mind since your telephone conversation. My response may be somewhat unusual, for I'd like to save an evaluation of Ninian Smart for the final paragraphs of this letter, making a few observations on our program first. I take this to be an appropriate sequence. With one of such large and proven accomplishments as Ninian Smart, the question is never capability or personal qualifications but fittingness. My interest is in anticipating how well he could be expected to relate to our own cultivated sense of purpose, and to what extent he could be looked to to embellish, expand, deepen, enrich, and otherwise further such goals.

These weeks in Syracuse, I should add, have given me opportunity to reflect on our program in religious studies in a comparative manner from a relatively detached vantage point. Certain comparisons are apparent immediately. For example, undergraduate enrollments in courses in religion here number over 1500 each semester, consistently; this must be roughly equivalent to our own enrollment figures, I believe, because the total campus enrollment here is about 18,000 students. The significant difference occurs in graduate student enrollment. I am told that Syracuse receives about fifty applications from prospective graduate students each year. After rather close scrutiny--done only once a year--only seven or eight applicants are accepted, and, ordinarily, only half of these actually enroll. There are three new graduate students here this fall, for example, and only ten to a dozen who are taking courses--that is, first to third year graduate students. For these ten to twelve students there are between four and six graduate seminars each semester offered by a faculty in religion of approximately thirteen persons. Each faculty person, on the average, offers one seminar a year. In addition, the Syracuse program has a regular director of graduate studies in religion whose administrative responsibilities are calculated on a half-

Professor Gerald J. Larson
October 22, 1975
Page 2

time basis. He, in turn, has a full-time secretary who also serves as a kind of all-day liaison with the graduate students. It is clear that considerably more detailed attention to the specific needs and interests of graduate students can be given with these ratios. Then, too, the majority of graduate students receive substantial financial assistance, either through fellowships (three of which are of the full-tuition variety) or teaching assistantships, some of whom eventually offer undergraduate courses. My impression is that this is a much more workable situation than our own. It spells greater administrative efficiency, more sharply-focussed faculty time, less personal anguish, and a keener sense of belonging on the part of the students.

I've also been reflecting on the significant (or most apparent) *conceptual* differences between the two programs, that is, differences which go far beyond variations in size and numbers, etc. Here the most compelling difference is that Syracuse has tried to organize everything around a *fundamental motif*, which, in one form or another, turns out to be symbology (or analyses of symbols and symbolism) in literary, cultural, and historical terms. That, of course, wouldn't be my first choice of motifs, but it does provide a significant workable basis of coherence in addition to common focus as well as implicit principles of curricular regulation. The clarity of that organizing principle has forced me to ask about our functional equivalent, that is, if we have one, and this brings to mind all sorts of memories about or origins, the institution of the three track system, the collapsing of three tracks into a unified program with several dimensions, the Kitagawa-Spivey report, etc., etc. The best that I can do from here, right now, is to recall the almost countless conversations we have had about what makes the UCSB program in religious studies distinctive. And as I re-hear much of that--or, at least, those portions of the conversation I have chosen to remember--I find myself focussing on the assumption that all of us make that we are doing something significant and innovative, indeed, something in religious studies more in keeping with the most compelling current intellectual dictates than anything we know or have heard about anywhere else.

I take such aspirations seriously, and am unwilling to account for them in terms of typical California euphoria. But I recognize, too, that they are easily misinterpreted and can become avenues of criticism by those who view us from other perspectives, and, of course, are not party to the implicit covenant such goals require. We sense this each time we undergo outside evaluation, not only by Professors Kitagawa and Spivey, but also, earlier, by Ted Good at Stanford and then later by Claude Welch. (I add that I think we suffer the same in the extra-mural market when Institute-generated research proposals invite at least tacit confirmation of our corporate significance.) But apart from public-relations diffi-

Professor Gerald J. Larson
October 22, 1975
Page 3

culties, which I understand to be considerable, we are clearly vulnerable, as the Kitagawa-Spivey report discerns, because our large aspirations are not specific enough to be matched by identifiable resources.

The fundamental problem, I believe, is that we have sought simultaneously to translate religious studies into a new mode and to do this comprehensively. We are not interested in translating a piece or section of religious studies into a new mode, even though our faculty resources are extremely limited, but in translating all of it, indeed, field by field. Given our limited resources, the translation cannot occur except through a massive condensation of fields, disciplines, sub-fields, and sub-disciplines into some nearly workable but still comprehensive whole. The problems we have created for ourselves by such high aspirations are innumerable. For one, though we claim commitment to translating religious studies into a new mode comprehensively, we are not able to abandon more traditional ways of going. Thus, because the campus itself doesn't offer such courses, we provide our own language instruction in Sanskrit, Coptic, Pali, etc., all of which seems to be necessary preparation for distinguished graduate work in fields which are not seriously affected by the translation we claim to be making. Similarly, while we claim devotion to the translation, we sense that our graduate students cannot begin to catch the spirit of the translation unless they first know something about the traditional fields and disciplines as they have been traditionally composed and taught. Thus, our comprehensive exams require detailed familiarity with the history of the Christian Church, for example, even though we offer no course work in this area and probably do not regard it as being directly involved in the translation. But the working assumption is accurate: translations cannot be effected unless one knows what is being translated. The result is a curious, confusing, conflictive but understandable transmitting of mixed signals. It has not become evident to the outside world (witness the reports of Kitagawa-Spivey, Good, and Welch, and our own anticipations of their inaccurate impressions) or even to ourselves that we have effected the translation toward which we aspire; and, in the meantime, we are treating "pre-translation subjects" in sporadic, disjointed, and piecemeal fashion. Seminars in these areas, for example, are not offered with any regularity, though admittedly, there is very impressive coverage at the undergraduate level.

The larger result is an implicit proliferation of programs. I use the work "implicit" deliberately because I'm referring to something additional to the undergraduate program, the M.A. program, the Ph.D. program, and the work of the Institute. Programs are proliferated, necessarily, because of the large assortment of requirements that are dictated by our true goals. We want to effect a translation, but, in the process of effecting that translation

Professor Gerald J. Larson
October 22, 1975
Page 4

rather than being in position to enjoy its effects or reap its rewards, we are also obliged to engage in recuperative, sustaining, remedial as well as transitional work, and, very frequently, in the company of graduate students who neither share the need for the translation or have any accurate sense of what has been there before. Thus, with very limited resources--all of the outside reviewers agree on this fact--we spend ourselves filling in background, charting creative breakthroughs (which register as "breakthroughs" only with respect to established backgrounds), doing remedial and transitional work simultaneously, without marked effectiveness at any point. We look to comprehensive examinations to effect a portion of our composite and mixed goals, the graduate (RS 200) seminar for another, the syllabus (which is still in process) for a large portion of the remainder, etc., hoping that these various strands will become orchestrated--as, indeed, they have been for outstanding graduate students like Steve Reno, Jerry Bradford, Louise Greene, Mike Oppenheim and whomever else has caught the glimpse of the totality, that is, a sense of the comprehensive vision--during the course of the perpetually extendable multiform and multiplex program. Then, to make matters more complicated, we add major side dimensions like "cross cultural studies in religious traditions" and "coordinated studies in religion and the humanities" or enticing flourishes like "psychohistory" since these are areas in which large and significant breakthroughs in knowledge are occurring. Such complications become inevitable, I believe, because we are trying to translate religious studies into a new key comprehensively.

Lest this begin to sound like "poor-mouthing," let me assure you that I remain committed to our goals and want to be proud of our achievements. My intentions here are strictly analytical, as background for offering a comment on the candidacy of Ninian Smart. I am trusting that there may be some value in perspectives conceived from afar, ones which cannot be modified by the wonderful amenities of Santa Barbara. But there would be no reason to share this unless there is some point.

First, I believe we should be more careful than even our strictest sensibilities have allowed before in admitting graduate students to our program. I think that we should not admit anyone about whom there is even the faintest doubt, and then we should take only those persons who have already exhibited a capacity to work with the faculty in effecting the translation to which I have referred earlier.

Second, I think we should begin exploring the possibility that the task to which we have set ourselves requires a different instrumentation than a graduate program in religious studies. In my view, our experience so far only shows that the goals cannot be effected at that level. I believe

Professor Gerald J. Larson
October 22, 1975
Page 5

they come closer to the objectives of an organized research unit--I trust that I'm saying this unselfishly--which treats a doctoral program more as laboratory accompaniment than as fundamental *raison d'etre*. My assumptions in this respect are based on our accumulated experience, to wit, that students are not able to effect, appreciate, or even understand the translation we seek to invoke unless they have sufficient background information, which, in our dispersed state, we are not very able to supply. In other words, I'm suggesting that the translation we talk about is something we as faculty must effect corporately, and not something we can yet curricularly program or expect graduate students to bring about.

Finally--you knew I'd come to it eventually--I think it would be ideal to have Ninian Smart as a colleague among us. The primary reason for this is that Ninian Smart's specialization is religious studies, and I take this also to be our principal subject. I think he could aid us immensely in this respect. Indeed, with only one or two exceptions, I can think of no one, either in this country or abroad, who is more capable or finely-attuned to this task. And in all other respects in which we judge such matters, I regard Ninian Smart as an exceptionally-fine candidate.

I have shared my point of view. Recognizing that it is critical, I trust that I have not been offensive. The dream continues to have vitality.

Sincerely,

Walter H. Capps

WHC:drs