

Report on the Religious Studies Program

Philip Barlow and Ravi M. Gupta

Below is a brief report on the state of the Religious Studies Program and what we have accomplished in the past year. None of this would have been possible without the creative ideas and consistent support of our Department Head, Tammy Proctor, our Dean, Joe Ward, and our colleagues in the Religious Studies Program.

Here is what we accomplished during the 2016-17 academic year:

1. Growing Student Enrollments

Enrollment in Religious Studies courses continues to rise. In 2016, we taught many hundreds of students from all corners of the university, both on-campus and on-line. The numbers of majors and minors has also grown in the past year. We were able to offer two student scholarships and send two majors to the Wheatley Institute's workshop on Religion and International Affairs. Finding the capacity to better support our students through funding more scholarships is a priority for us.

2. New Faculty Positions

These strong enrollments and quality of teaching led to a new permanent, tenure-track position in Religious Studies—a major step in the Program's development. We hired Dr. Dominic Sur to teach World Religions and Buddhism, thanks to generous support from our Department Head, Dean, and Provost. We also hired a postdoctoral fellow in Mormon History to replace Philip Barlow while he is on leave, another postdoctoral fellow in Biblical Studies, and an online instructor in Religion and Politics.

3. Graduate Recruitment and Placement

Our faculty continue to attract skilled graduate students to pursue a master's degree in religious history, especially in the areas of Mormonism, Hinduism, and Buddhism. Last year, we enrolled graduate students from Virginia, Washington DC, Utah, and England. Upon completing their degrees, our undergraduate and graduate students earn places at prestigious universities and employers. Last year, one of our students went on to pursue a PhD in Classics at the University of California Berkeley, a second is studying for his doctoral degree as a Thomas Jefferson Fellow at the University of Virginia, while another is helping found the Smithsonian's National Women's History Museum in Washington.

4. Fundraising Initiatives

This past year we met with considerable success in our fundraising initiatives, due to the efforts of the Arrington Development Council, working closely with the College of Humanities and Social Sciences. The Council raised over \$2 million (with over \$1.6 million now in hand) to secure the future of the Leonard J. Arrington Chair in Mormon History, the annual Arrington Lecture, and student support for Mormon studies at Utah State. The LDS Church has gifted \$1 million, David and Rachel Weidman donated \$500,000, and an anonymous donor has pledged a matching donation of \$500,000 (for a total of \$1 million), of which \$100,000 has already been raised.

5. New Courses

The number of courses being offered for Religious Studies credit continued their upward march. Our faculty created several new courses, including Women in Buddhism, Modern Islamic Thought, Gods and Goddesses of India, Religion and Politics in South Asia, and Ancient Views of Hades and the Afterlife.

6. Programming and Events

The Religious Studies Program was able to organize or support several well-subscribed events, including 1) a panel discussion on the relationship between faith and scholarship; 2) a conference on Joseph Smith and translation to occur on March 16; 3) a lecture on the west African Ebola crisis, and 4) a student social around the theme of religion and food. The Religious Studies Program is also closely involved in the annual Arrington Lecture, the Yoga Studies Program, and the USU Interfaith Initiative.

Goals for the New Academic Year

Looking forward to 2017-18, we would like to focus energies on the following goals:

- Strengthen teaching capacity in areas where we have demand but no long term stability, such as Judaism, Christianity, Biblical Studies, and Native American Religions.
- Continue to build our fundraising initiatives, including resources for student scholarships and graduate fellowships.
- Increase recruitment of majors and graduate students from within Utah and nationally.