

# University Religion Departments: Challenge to Theological Seminaries

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Phenomenal enrollments in religion courses are reported from across the country. State universities and private schools, complex multiversities and small colleges are experiencing the same shift. Religion departments—either newly installed or radically redesigned—are attracting students in amazing numbers. In the school year 1965-66 a rapid survey of colleges revealed that one of every ten students in state universities was enrolled in a religion course; in private schools the ratio rose to one in six. In universities where religion departments were established with known scholars, enrollments rose to over a thousand a year. At the University of Iowa nearly a thousand students were enrolled in the core course. Stanford, Princeton, the University of California, Western Michigan, and Pennsylvania State have been among the leaders in drawing together distinguished faculties and in fashioning departments that usually offer a full range of courses from underclass to graduate level.

Seminary administrators and faculties have greeted this sudden change with ambivalent reactions. While welcoming this new interest on the part of the rising generation, some seminaries sensed competition in the future. There will be a competition for the most able teachers in seminaries. Students will be faced with a viable alternative to enrollment in a seminary.

As a result, seminaries have been forced to ask fundamental questions about their role in the life of the churches and of the community in the future. Should the "study of religion" on the graduate level be centered increasingly in the universities rather than in the seminaries? What, then, will be the task of the seminary in the future—will it be restricted to the more narrow task of training full-time professional workers in the church? What will distinguish the

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different styles of the learning enterprise in the two situations? Should one expect a difference in method, content or context of scholarly inquiry in university in contrast to seminary?

While the very question of relationship can be phrased on a number of levels, perhaps the most useful suggests a distinction that sees the seminary as an agency of the church, and the religion department as an agency of the university. This approach grants a similarity of content, interest and method. It sees the distinction in the goal and purpose of teaching. The university study of religion would be quite dissociated from the practice of religion either in commitment or vocation. The university is not seen as the agency for providing "religious education." It is not to produce converts or nurture faith. In contrast, it remains the task of the religious community to supply agencies that will train men for service within the religious community. As Daisuke Kitagawa has reminded the church, it must beware of the temptation to exploit the university religion department by expecting it subtly to promote the cause of a particular religion or denominational confession. "The university qua university is neither to produce 'religious' men nor sacralize society or culture." Churches may define a chaplaincy task on the college campus, but this should not be met within the setting of the religion department. This is not meant to deny that a given instructor probably will indicate his own beliefs and commitments, although the critical open study of the phenomena of religion does not demand it.

What are the major issues confronting seminaries as a result of the growth of such university departments?

First, the demand is more insistent that seminary education in the future must be in vital contact with a university center. Those who would serve from within the religious community must be related to the culture and to the mainstreams of secular intellectual life. This requirement involves more than having a certain number of seminary faculty men who have been trained in another discipline. Such an arrangement served during a transitional period, but is becoming inadequate when measured against the excellence and specialization available in university centers.

The above demand does not imply an uncritical acceptance of the university as the font of all goodness, truth, and wisdom in the twentieth century, but it does see the university as the open marketplace of ideas, a place where ideas are generated, where presuppositions of the status quo are challenged. In these very years the university is increasingly becoming the symbol of free research, the quest for understanding beneath mere technical skills, for integrity in the search for truth.

Significant contact with the university implies more than proximity. This does not come easily. In his farewell address at the Divinity School of the University of Chicago, Bernard Loomer observed that the greatest failure of theological education which he had observed was the isolation of the seminary from the university, even though it was located in the center of a great university campus. Universities are suspicious of dogmatism, indoctrination and denominational propaganda masquerading under the guise of education. But as the University of California and Stanford have demonstrated, in the case of the Graduate Theological Union, they grant warm, fraternal and reciprocal arrangements to theological education when it proves its superior quality.

Second, the demand for a high quality of education within seminaries will intensify. Students coming from university religion departments to seminaries will probably bring a broad background in culture, religion, and the humanities. Having been exposed to the methodologies in several other disciplines, they will make increased demands for methodological rigor from their seminary instructors. More students will have had an intellectual exposure to other world religions. They will require greater depth of knowledge on the part of their seminary instructors as they attempt to relate their previous knowledge to the Christian faith and the confessional background of the seminary. The model of the seminary of the future must satisfy the standards of a first-rate graduate education.

Third, pressures from other sources will join those of the universities in making imperative a more ecumenical setting for seminary study. Budgetary problems, competition for students, and the increased difficulty in building a quality faculty and library give every indication that they will intensify. The small isolated seminary will face problems that will eventually become insurmountable. Already gaining support is the idea of clustering a number of seminaries which may retain their confessional loyalties, denominational affiliation, and concerns of ethos and formation. By coming together they would be able to share buildings, library holdings, specialists in more fields, stimulation through a larger aggregate of men within departments, and the cross fertilization of differing confessional heritages. Denominational loyalties could be preserved; greater clarification of one's positions, however, would result from daily contact with those of other denominational backgrounds. This should provide a superior training for men who will work in a pluralistic culture.

Fourth, seminaries should be challenged to their unique task of relating to the mission of the church. The church today is striving for a new understanding of itself and its relation to the entire world. This goal demands leadership which will aid the people of God in

understanding the mission of the church in the contemporary world. Yet much seminary training appears to be directed at making a man a conservationist not only of the Christian faith but of a whole body of concepts and symbols whose disintegration began a generation ago, making them totally antiquated. This problem poses a difficulty for the ministry quite unlike that of any other profession. In the ministry, unlike medicine, for example, we are dealing with the historic quality of "given" material which must be related to the contemporary world. Other professions have their historical continuities but, as Gustafson points out, they do not turn to ancient documents for authentication or for insight as clergy do. This tension will remain for seminaries. In its answer will lie one of the potentially significant contributions of seminaries.

In spite of the uneasiness one finds on seminary campuses today, many of us are convinced that we are standing on the edge of a great leap forward; a revolution in theological training has begun. University departments of religion are playing one significant role in this transformation. The moment for seminary response is upon us.