Hendrix College  
Department of Religion  
Assessment of Student Achievement

I. The Aims and Methods of the Department of Religion

The Department of Religion understands its mission and purposes in the context of Hendrix College’s commitment to excellence in offering opportunities for a liberal education at the undergraduate level. This implies an openness to a wide array of religious options and a concern for human religiousness in the variety of its historic and contemporary manifestations. The mission of this Department, accordingly, is not to establish the superiority of one religious perspectives over its rivals. Indeed, it is not too much to say that those who teach in this Department do begin with the assumption that religion as such is always benign in its effect on persons and societies. We do not seek to vindicate religion against its critics or to persuade students that they ought to be supportive of institutional religion in general ---much less some particular denomination. We are keenly aware of the ambiguity of religion; we are sensitive to the pathologies that are sometimes associated with religious movements. We are interested in viewing religion in a way that is sensitive to both the positive and the negative ways in which religion impacts the human project.

The tasks in which this department is engaged, therefore, are educational rather than evangelistic: we seek to foster an understanding of a wide range of religious phenomena rather than a conversion to some particular theological perspective. In the words of M. Francis Christie, a former dean and Distinguished Professor at Hendrix College, “This is the Department of Religion, not the Religious Department.” Our approach is phenomenological: the goal of our teaching is to understand the phenomena emergent from a wide variety of religious traditions, which we seek to understand empathetically (from the inside) rather than judgmentally (for the sake of promoting some sectarian agenda). If that were not the case, there would be a serious discrepancy between the mission of the College and the mission of the Department.

There is, of course, a certain kind of conversion that we seek to encourage in our students. The conversion that we have in mind, however, is a shift from indifference about religious questions to a serious concern and lively curiosity about the dimensions of human
experience that find expression in religious phenomena. What we seek is not a conversion to some particular pattern of answers but rather to a sense of the importance of the questions. What we offer our students is not a normative ideology but a wide range of experiences with various traditions, in the confidence that this will enable them to develop the academic skills that make possible a sensitive, informed grappling with religion as a dimension of what it means to be human.

II. The Mission of the Department of Religion as Related to the Statement of Purpose of Hendrix College

The College’s mission involves “the cultivation of whole persons.” Given the pervasiveness of religious understandings and motivations in human experience (both historically and in the contemporary situation), especially in light of the importance of religion in the lives of many of our students and in the world that Hendrix is preparing them to engage in creative ways, it is hardly imaginable that the holistic mission of this College could be achieved if its curriculum offered no place for a sustained exploration of the varieties of religious phenomena.

Hendrix College seeks “the cultivation of whole persons through the transmission of knowledge.” The courses offered by the Department of Religion provide opportunities for acquiring knowledge of vast reaches of human experience bearing on the development of personal qualities that the College affirms as important to its mission. Virtually every course involves the transmission of enormous bodies of information about aspects of the religious traditions, both in their historic development and in their present situation. We are not preoccupied with the mere accumulation of facts, however. Students are encouraged to examine the information that is presented critically, comparatively, analytically, in ways that clearly enhance “the refinement of intellect.” By the same token, the study of religions makes a consideration of values---and the conflicts of values---unavoidable. Since most religions include an ethical component, one can hardly take religion seriously without “a concern for worthy values.” Both positively and negatively, religions provide models worth emulating and vivid examples of mistakes to avoid. Sometimes, for instance, religion has served as the source of both a vision of emancipation and a divine sanction for slavery. In a similar way,
whether it is viewed historically or in the current situation, religion clearly provides resources for both the oppression and the empowerment of women. Any attempt to understand the relation between religion and human freedom requires students and teachers alike to grapple with both poles of that profoundly ambiguous reality. This is what the members of this Department seek to do, not just in one course devoted to themes of religion and justice but at suitable points in virtually all of the courses that we teach. Any serious study of the kinds of texts and issues that are central to our courses will provide abundant raw materials for “the development of character” and opportunities for our students to prepare themselves “for lives of service and fulfillment in their communities and the world.”

The purposes of the College include an investigation of “the richly diverse cultural, intellectual, and linguistic traditions shaping the contemporary world.” Our courses in Judaism (Religion 2160) and Islam (Religion 2170) offer opportunities for gaining insight into the cultural background of some of the most persistent dilemmas of contemporary geopolitics; the Israeli/Palestinian impasse and the resurgence of Islam can hardly be grasped apart from the perspectives fostered in these two courses. At the same time, the increasing importance of the countries of Asia in global politics and economics makes it imperative that Hendrix students find opportunities to gain some degree of familiarity with the great Asian traditions. Not only our courses in Buddhism (Religion 3110) and Hinduism (Religion 3120) but significant portions of other courses, especially Religion in a Global Context (Religion 1100), provide opportunities to gain an in-depth appreciation for the Asian religions. Another instance of the contemporary relevance of the work of this Department is provided by the course in Eastern Orthodoxy (Religion 3310). In light of the intimate relation between Russian religion and Russian politics, both in the past and in the present, the study of Orthodoxy at Hendrix provides one place for seeking a deepened understanding of the matrix from which Russia’s contributions to the contemporary world have emerged.

Hendrix also seeks “to examine critically and understand the intellectual traditions woven into the history of Western thought.” Not only the two-term sequence in the history of Western Christianity (Religion 2300 and 2310) and the seminar in Reformation Theology (Religion 4350), but a wide variety of
Independent Studies and “Topics” courses (Religion 3800) that have been offered by this Department---“Religious Thought of the Renaissance,” “Augustine, Aquinas, and Luther,” or “Evil and the God of Love”---involve a serious probing of the options and dilemmas posed by the intellectual history of the West. Dr. Harris’s course on the History of Religion in America (Religion 1450) introduces students to the ideas that have shaped not only American religion but also the larger American intellectual traditions.

Virtually all the courses taught in this Department are in fact “writing intensive,” even when they are not officially designated as such. Our students do substantial amounts of writing, which is evaluated in terms of both style and substance. Accessibility to students that is a hallmark of the teaching style of members of this Department; we spend considerable time outside of the classroom, coaching students in developing “skill and effectiveness in the use of language, the analysis of information, and the communication of knowledge.” Most of our courses include requirements that structure the learning experience in such a way as to insure that our students will have significant opportunities to work on the development of these skills.

Although the Department works primarily within the methods and perspectives that are characteristic of the humanities, we are not insensitive to the importance of an interdisciplinary approach. Virtually all of our courses immerse students in “the contents and methods of the humanities,” and at points—especially in the courses taught by Professor McDaniel—the interrelations between the humanities and the natural and social sciences are probed in ways that demonstrate how these areas of inquiry can be mutually enriching.

The major in Religion permits Hendrix students to gain an in-depth grounding “in a specific field of study.” The success of our alumni in some of the finest graduate programs in the world—including Harvard, Yale, Columbia, Duke, Claremont—encourages us to believe that what we are doing in this Department equips our students for a future of life-long learning and creative involvement in the discipline of religious studies.

We are confident that the vitality of what goes on in our classrooms contributes to an “enduring intellectual curiosity and love of knowledge” in a large proportion of our students. Responses to
course-evaluations, along with comments by alumni long after they have completed their Hendrix years, give us reason to think that although curiosity and love of learning are not universal among our students, neither are they rare.

At several points the offerings of this Department address the College’s commitment to cultivating “aesthetic sensibilities and delight in beauty.” The religious significance of natural beauty is explored in Religion 3500 (Religion, Animals, and the Earth). The connection between religion and image in American art is an important theme of Religion 3420 (Religion in Contemporary American Culture). In a number of our courses, the extensive use of videos courses provides opportunities to develop a greater sensitivity to the interplay of images and ideas. Finally, the important place of icons in Graeco-Russian orthodoxy makes Religion 3310 to a very large extent an inquiry into ways in which religious and aesthetic sensitivities can be mutually enriching.

The “discernment of the social, spiritual, and ecological needs of our time” is certainly an objective of this Department. We are especially well served by the consciousness-raising on questions of gender and justice that has been among Dr. Harris’s contributions to the Department, not only formally in courses such as Women in Religion (Religion 2650), but more generally in the impact of a feminist perspective on the tone of thought and conversation in the Raney Building and throughout the faculty. Similarly, Dr. McDaniel is a nationally recognized expert on ecological theology; not only in the classroom (in courses such as Religion, Animals, and the Earth [Religion 3500], or in conversations with students and colleagues outside the classroom, or in his work with the SAGE group, but as a compelling voice in behalf of a heightened ecological consciousness across Arkansas and the nation, Dr. McDaniel helps to foster a realistic sense of what is at stake in the environmental crisis and encourage “a sense of responsibility for leadership and service in response” to the urgency of the global ecological crisis at the turn of the millennium.
III. Strategies for Assessing Student Achievement

The Department of Religion will:

--integrate course evaluations by students into the assessment of the outcomes of our teaching.

--assemble a cross-section of written assignments from each course and periodically ask experts from other institutions to help us evaluate them as evidence of what students have gained from our classes.

--compile a list of Religion Majors over the last five years and make an attempt to contact them; we will prepare a brief questionnaire through which they can inform us of the degree to which their work in this department prepared them for life after graduation.

--be more intentional about keeping on file unsolicited statements from recent graduates about the value of their work in Religion at Hendrix.

--collect the written work of seniors during the comprehensive examination and hold it as evidence concerning the degree to which they have learned what we have been trying to teach. As with item (b) above, we will occasionally ask experts from other institutions to help us evaluate them as evidence of student achievement.

--record (on audiotape or videotape) the oral portion of the comprehensive examination and submit these tapes to review by outside experts.