On September 22, 1993, every faculty member of the School of Arts and Sciences of the University of Pennsylvania found in his or her department mailbox a letter from Dean Rosemary Stevens announcing a series of “firm recommendations” for the administrative restructuring of the School. This plan called for the closing of three departments: American Civilization, Regional Science, and Religious Studies. The faculty of the affected departments had been apprised of these decisions only a few days previous to this announcement, with barely enough time to inform staff and students before the decision was made public.

The story that ensued, nine months of debate and soul-searching about the future of the study of religion at Penn, and the role of a Department of Religious Studies in that future, has only been concluded for a week as I write this essay. From my point of view, it has been successfully concluded, since the final decision announced to the Trustees on June 10, 1994, was to strengthen the department rather than to close it. The happy ending does not, of course, diminish the pain caused by the threat of seeing our discipline vanish through decentralization and dispersion among the fields taught at Penn, but neither does it mean that we have wasted the time and effort spent in arguing for the cogency and independence of the study of religion as a field in its own right. Reflecting on these nine months of discussion and study about the nature of religion as an academic discipline, a friend remarked to me: “You’ve given birth to a department!” So now, the question is, what kind of monster have we spawned? And what should we be helping it grow up to be? What should the study of religion be at a secular, pragmatic, and professionally oriented institution like ours? Through our bitter experience, we are perhaps admirably suited to speculate on these questions. To address them I would like to begin with a history of the study of religion at Penn; then turn to the issue of what went wrong; and, finally, summarize what we have learned about the political strengths and weaknesses of our field, and the necessary strategies for survival.
I. The study of religion at the University of Pennsylvania

Although, as is well-known, Penn is the only one of the American universities of colonial foundation which was never church-related, religion has always been a part of its curriculum. The place of religion in the curriculum at Penn is far more venerable than an "official history" of my department might suggest. It goes right to the core of the myths on which this school is founded, right back to Benjamin Franklin, our official, if somewhat mythical, founder. Franklin's name is seen all over the university, but far less attention is given to the role played in the founding of this institution by another major figure of eighteenth-century America, the Presbyterian minister and famous hellfire preacher George Whitefield.

Whitefield's preaching in Philadelphia in 1739–1740 (the latter is the official date of the founding of Penn) was a cause for some scandal. An enormous success in his first preaching tour of November, 1739, Whitefield found upon his return to Philadelphia in April of 1740 that public opinion had turned against him, perhaps fuelled by jealous pastors of local churches (Cheyney 1940: 17–23). For example, in his second visit Whitefield was met on the street by the rector of Christ Church, where he had preached the previous autumn, and was informed that he was no longer welcome in that venue. In the next few years, Whitefield was banned from many Episcopal, and even some Presbyterian, pulpits and became, as his friend Benjamin Franklin called him, "a preacher in the fields".

Franklin's friendship became an essential element in Whitefield's ability to continue to evangelize the colony of Pennsylvania. Through the Franklin/Whitefield friendship there came about the organization of an institution which became the University of Pennsylvania. Whitefield had a long-standing interest in charity schools, a movement of public education in which he had participated in England and Wales during his years as a student at Oxford. Franklin, although from an obviously diverse background, and with obviously different religious views, shared this concern and interest. Therefore, two objects, a free school and a place for Whitefield to preach, came together, and in 1740 the entity that became this university began to take shape. A newspaper advertisement for July of that year contains the following notice:

With this view it hath been thought proper to erect a large Building for a Charity School for the instruction of Poor Children gratis in useful Literature and the Knowledge of the Christian Religion; and also for a House of Public Worship, the Houses in this place being insufficient to contain the great numbers who convene on such Occasions; and it being impracticable to meet in the open air at all times of the year, because of the inclemency of the weather ... the Building is actually begun ... and the Foundation laid. (Cheyney 1940: 23)