The Department of Religious Studies at the University of Alberta: An account of a restructuring process, 1993–1994

EVA NEUMAIER-DARGYAY

1. History of the department

The Department of Religious Studies was founded in the 1960s with the intent to investigate religions from a comparative vantage point. The first few professors of religious studies appointed to the University of Alberta were hired from the University of Chicago, the Sorbonne, and similar institutions; soon others were to join them. The curriculum expanded; enrolment numbers increased. However, a few years after its inception, the department suffered from a clash of personalities. At a time when other departments developed graduate programmes and increased their faculty, the Department of Religious Studies was stymied by these tensions. As a consequence, the department gained a negative image on campus and did not participate in graduate work. Nevertheless, later on a few more new faculty members were hired. By the late 1980s professors from outside the discipline and the department were appointed as department Chairs to mitigate the tensions and hostilities. The department began its long road toward recovery.

In July 1991, I was hired from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill to serve as department Chair with the mandate to continue rebuilding the department and to develop plans for a graduate programme in religious studies. One of the foci of the proposed graduate programme would be the area of Women and Religion. As well, it was promised that vacant positions would be filled, and that, perhaps, further positions might become available. Subsequent submissions to the administration to these effects were made by the department but the proposals, although applauded, were never implemented. Plans for a graduate programme were soon shelved.

2. The unfolding of a financial crisis and the call for restructuring

The possibilities of severe budgetary cuts cast their shadows on the university administration by the year 1992–1993. Various administrative councils sup-
ported the idea of “vertical cuts” over global shrinking. In plain language this meant that the administration would identify units that were considered either “non-central” or “weak” and therefore potential candidates for elimination. From the inception of these discussions it was clear that religious studies could be easily targeted as being academically not as central as, for example, English or Physics. In addition to the criteria of academic “centrality”, the question arose whether the lack of a graduate programme and a large number of faculty could be construed as constituting “weakness”. In anticipation of these possibilities, a profile of the department was developed that addressed student/instructor ratio, enrolment numbers, and scholarly performance and achievements of the faculty over the last five years. The showing of religious studies was very strong. In the student/instructor ratio it ranked fifth from the top among twenty-two units of the Faculty of Arts; the academic quality of the faculty members had consistently been rated among the very best by the Faculty Evaluation Committee, and enrolment figures had been on a persistent upward trend over many years. Regardless of these achievements, however, the fears of being targeted for dissolution soon proved well-founded.

In May 1993, the Dean of Arts presented a plan to create a Division of Interdisciplinary Studies that would be comprised of programmes in religious studies, Canadian Studies, and some courses in Science, Technology, and Society. An ad-hoc graduate programme of a M.A. in Interdisciplinary Studies would provide a collective forum for graduate work. The rationale given was that these units were “too small” to survive on their own, and that the number of budget lines had to be reduced (i.e., “this Faculty is over-administrated”). Among the faculty members of the Faculty of Arts, and among the department Chairs, a strong opposition to this plan began to crystallize. One of the main reasons was that interdisciplinarity cannot and should not become just another discipline, and that interdisciplinary research does happen already throughout the Faculty. It should be left up to individual contacts and initiatives rather than being administrated like so many other disciplines. Investigations into similar attempts by other North American institutions revealed that none would be successful within the parameters of the University of Alberta. As a consequence, substitute ideas were scrutinized. The Dean was willing to consider alternative plans of restructuring on the condition that they were academically sound and met the budgetary concerns.

The fact that academic centrality, or lack of it, and size of departments were used as criteria to identify units deemed to be unable to survive in the climate of coming financial restrictions prompted many more departments to feel threatened in their autonomy. Colleagues began to ask whether, for example, the study of German language and literature is more “central” than the study of religious manifestations; what are the terms of reference to define this centrality, and are these terms of an intellectual, economic or political