

In my previous post I began to address the question of what we look for when students apply to enter into our PhD program. To make sense of what I have to say about that, I need to give yet more background into what our program *is*. In my previous post I started discussing how programs of religious studies in secular colleges and universities began to appear after WWII.

My department has always claimed to be the first full-fledged Department of Religious Studies in any state university in the country. I'm not sure that's true - I've heard that Virginia and one or two other schools make the same claim. Maybe someone on the blog knows for sure. What is certain is that our department started in 1946.

There had been talk of starting a "School of Religion" at UNC in the 1920s. I don't know what that would have looked like - possibly a professional school training people in religion? I'm not sure. The plans didn't go anywhere, since they were knocked off the chart by the Depression and then WWII. But after WWII, a very wealthy tobacco-man, James A. Gray, president of R. J. Reynolds, endowed a faculty position in Biblical Studies for the university. This James A. Gray chair was designed to teach undergraduates the basics of the Bible.

The chair was held for something like 25 years by a famous professor named Bernard Boyd, up to his death in 1975. People still talk about "Bunny" Boyd. He was an extremely charismatic and influential figure on campus, an ordained Presbyterian minister, and the first in the state - possibly in the nation? - to have a television show devoted to explaining and interpreting the Bible.

When I was hired at UNC in 1988...

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