If you ask anyone on campus or in Knoxville, whose memory goes back a few decades, about the links between intellectual freedom and the department of Religious Studies, they are likely to bring up the name of Charles Reynolds and the controversial visit of President Nixon to the Billy Graham crusade in Neyland Stadium in 1970.

Dr. Reynolds (1938 – 2017) helped to organize what was intended as a peaceful and silent protest against Nixon’s escalation of the war in SE Asia, a bold move for a first year tenure-track Assistant Professor.

He was later arrested and charged. As a point of principle (his field was religious ethics), he appealed the $20 fine (the minimum mandated by State law), for having been convicted of “willfully disturbing or disquieting any assemblage of persons met for religious worship … by noise, profane discourse, rude or indecent behavior, or any other acts,” all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court (which, on January 21, 1974, declined to hear his case). Whether the meeting was political and/or religious has remained a teachable moment. In an interview in the Knoxville Sentinel on his becoming department head in 1980 [March 8] (a position he went on to hold for 21 years), Reynolds claimed that the reason he was not fired for being a “troublemaker” was a “tribute to academic freedom.”
Academic freedom was at the core of the founding of the Department of Religious Studies in 1965. It replaced the Tennessee School of Religion, a cooperative venture between UTK and local clergy that had been established by area churches in the 1930s. The new department was instituted to ensure that scholars with advanced academic degrees taught all UT courses in religion, as well as a broader range of courses that would "make the study of religion important and worthy of a place in the liberal education of college men and women" ["Senate Committee Report" 1965 in "Philosophy and Policies on Religious Studies at the University of Tennessee from 1966 to the Present," 1984, memo from the head Charles Reynolds to Dean Landon]. As noted by Charles Reynolds in a later memo, the goal of these policies and procedures was to "ensure the academic quality of the study of religion and to insure that such study would be conducted in an objective, constitutionally appropriate manner."

Founding head, Professor Ralph Norman, now Emeritus, in a recent email to me on these matters, argues that the governing premise of teaching about religion/religions as opposed to promoting or espousing it/them--along with the principle of freedom of thought and inquiry so central to the nature of the university--precedes anything in the Constitution by many centuries, if not millennia. "Inquiry into religion, its history and its place in human affairs, should have been considered an essential part of our intellectual "commons" long before state-supported universities joined other so-called secular universities in recognizing and supporting such inquiry in the middle of the last century." He further claims that: "the point to be made about free inquiry concerning religion in a state-supported or secular university is that you really do have to think about it." In other words, "educated people in a democracy are not really educated if they are religiously illiterate, which means they must know something about the history out of which they now find themselves doing their thinking and practicing but also and just as important, about what kinds of carryings-on are meant by the term "religion" anyway --- what was meant in Philadelphia in 1789 and what people in Peoria in 2017 seem to mean."

Despite the well-publicized reasons for launching an independent department, there is a record of requests into the 1980s from area Bible colleges wanting academic credit for their courses [Knoxville Journal September 25, 1984]. Provost George Wheeler turned down one request from the Church of Christ stating “It is not the practice of religious studies (at UT) to have courses like this that are sectarian in nature.” This led Charles Reynolds to write a lengthy piece in the Knoxville Journal some two weeks later, “How Bible study fits within UT religious studies” [Knoxville Journal October 12, 1984]. He sought to rebut the “mistaken view [of many readers of the paper] that the department of religious studies is against Bible study” citing the courses led by nationally renowned scholars at UT and underscoring that the Bible had to be taught in ways that were educationally and constitutionally proper within a state university. The same non-confessional presuppositions were also true for the teaching of other religions. Incidentally, there is an excellent Historical Vignette prepared by the University Historian that provides important context for the religious and secular discourses that preceded and swirled around the formation of our department.
For instance, concerns that the original charter of 1794 (which included an instruction to the board of trustees to “take effectual care that students of all denominations may and shall be admitted to the equal advantages of a liberal education”) was being undermined by excessive Protestant, particularly Presbyterian, influence in its founding phase. However, by the 1920s, fears were being raised by southern fundamentalists that the university was a “godless institution” and this is what led in part to the creation in 1928 of the Tennessee School of Religion referred to earlier “to give religion its proper educational place in a state school of higher education.”

I have spent my time focusing on the earlier, formative period of our department given its salience for this symposium. But, as might be expected, the contemporary period has brought some fresh challenges our way, particularly in terms of contentious identity politics and ambivalence toward diversity. The latter affects us acutely as understanding religious diversity is at the heart of all that we do, notably in our staple world religions classes. We have had to become more alert to the multiple ways, local and global, overt and covert, that Islamophobia and accusations of anti-Semitism, for example, may impact our teaching, research, and mentoring of students. While this can have a chilling or cooling effect for faculty and students, it has had the benefit of leading to improved communications with local religious communities.

In sum, the Department of Religious Studies is more than willing and able to do what it takes to promote and defend the comparative, critical, cross-cultural and historical study of religion at UT!