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Why the World Needs Religious Studies

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The first time I went to the American Academy of Religion conference it really got my hopes up. This was the fall of 2006 and, with only a summer in between, I'd just finished college and begun my first year of a PhD program in religious studies. The AAR was at the enormous new Washington, DC convention center. Fittingly, one of the plenary speakers was Madeleine Albright, the former secretary of state who had just written a book about why religion is so important.

What I remember her saying, which stuck with me and probably a lot of the other graduate students in the hall, were things like this: "Our diplomats need to be trained to know the religions of the countries where they're going." And: "I think the Secretary of State needs to have religion advisors." I hadn't really thought of it that way before, but it made great sense, especially with someone like Albright saying it. Religion is everywhere. It *does* matter. The ongoing sectarian violence in occupied Iraq had turned the headlines into daily reminders about the consequences of not taking religion seriously—to say nothing of politics in DC back then. Yes—sounds like a job for a religion scholar.

Suddenly, committing the next however-many years to getting my degree in this stuff switched from the leap-of-faith category to eminently reasonable. Sure, maybe I'd end up a scholar. But I could also be a diplomat. Or the director of an NGO. Or a bartender. Or an astronaut.

Fast-forward a few years—the AAR, 2010. Grad school hasn't really panned out. (It wasn't you, PhD, it was me.) By this point I've become a journalist, but still go to the conference to connect with friends and keep up with the field. Things have changed, though. The economy crashed, and the bottom fell out of the academic job market. Quite independently, a handful of scholars—established ones, tenured ones, reputed ones, etc.—tell me the same story in the hallways. They confess to feeling remorse about training graduate students. There are so many bright young people, but so few jobs. (The AAR reports 193 positions filled in 2005-2006, compared to 49 in 2008-2009.) They sound kind of despondent.

To me, though, this sounds like an opportunity. Maybe it's a chance to finally throw religious studies a coming-out party. I've learned quickly how little the world (by which I mean, from here on out, the world that isn't academia) knows about what religious studies even is, and how much the world needs what religious studies does. Now, hearing these professors talking like this, it occurs to me that religious studies needs the world, too. At the very least, the world has a bigger job market.

A Great Idea

May the field forgive me for offering a bit of very crude historical psychoanalysis and master-narrativizing to catch everyone up on where we stand. Academic, non-sectarian religious studies in the United States can be more or less traced to the Supreme Court's 1963 *Abington Township v. Schempp* decision, which carved out a distinction between teaching *about* religion, which is okay, and the teaching *of* religion, which violates the First Amendment's Establishment Clause. Catechists had to shuffle out of public classrooms, and suddenly there was space for a new kind of teacher/scholar who would talk *about* but not *of*. It would have to be a space in which all people, of any background or creed, could participate as equals.

This was a very significant turn—I would venture, a Great Idea. It's supposed to be impossible, by traditional accounts, to talk about religion with any kind of objectivity or pluralism or mutual respect. You're either with me or against me. But, there it was: the highest court in the land was saying that, yes, this can be done, and it should be.

And so religious studies came to pass, in part thanks to the leadership of the University of Chicago's Divinity School, as well as lots of liberal Protestant crypto-theologians who managed to wear their secular hats convincingly enough to pass Constitutional muster. Over the years since, religious studies has been a mightily shifting enterprise. The Chicago School's various commitments, for instance, have mainly given way to a melee of other options. In a typical department today, expect to find anthropologists, linguists, philosophers, historians, sociologists, psychologists, and more. This makes for exciting conversations, for sure, but it also helps breed a habit of insecurity.

The Great Idea of religious studies has come under threat on two fronts—from without and within. From without, it's victim to the various budget cuts and legitimation crises that plague the humanities and social sciences generally in the modern research university. Exacerbating these is a common suspicion among scholars outside the field that religion in any form should've long since been excised from the curriculum. To make matters worse, the field faces critics from within: well-meaning but destabilizing attempts by religion scholars to rethink and reinvent the whole enterprise from the ground up, even to the point of unsettling its foundations. (Timothy Fitzgerald's *The Ideology of Religious Studies* and Russell McCutcheon's *The Discipline of Religion* come to mind.) These are important exercises, but they exact a cost. When religion scholars forget how much the world outside the academy needs them, they can be prone to theorize their own field into oblivion.

The result is a permanent posture of defense. (“Nothing true can be said about God from the posture of defense,” says a character in one of Marilynne Robinson's novels.) To justify its place in the university, religious studies often errs on the side of more-academic-than-thou, always wary of being perceived as some kind of front-group for a sectarian cause out there in the world. Writing for the general public is tacitly discouraged. Non-academic professions are looked down upon. It's a young field, and it often seems to act like it has something to prove.

Here, I stand with Madeleine Albright: the world can't afford to wait for religious studies to grow

up. It has come of age. It's time to be more confident about what the field has to offer. I've come to think that it imparts skills more valuable than most of those who teach and learn them even know.

Uncritical Thinking

When you choose the religious studies major in college, and someone asks "What are you going to do with that?" the standard response is meant to dispense with the question quickly and easily. It's often something like, "Well, I'm learning *critical thinking*."

Insufficient.

It took me only about five seconds out of graduate school to start realizing how uncritical a lot of the "critical thinking" I'd been learning could be, and how shot through it was with dogmas. As an aspiring journalist who hadn't taken a journalism class since sixth grade, I had to think harder, and more precisely, about what a bachelor's and master's in religious studies had actually taught me. Fortunately, I concluded it was a lot. Let me try to sketch out some examples I've come up with. Most actually fall under the umbrella of "critical thinking," though I promise to be more specific than that. Some of them are things you'd find in other fields in the humanities or area studies, but the combination is, I think, quite unique to the study of religion.

A lot of these are techniques for working through deeply controversial, divisive problems. Walking around the AAR each year, I feel like I'm seeing Isaiah's vision about wolves and lambs coming true—aside from the considerable academic bickering, of course. I love it. There are people in collars and saffron robes and turbans among the tweedy professors. It's full of rational and fascinating discussions about the loftiest subjects that anyone can think of, but with no suicide bombers, no ordeals by fire. Again, this isn't supposed to be possible, but it is. The world needs more of it.

The first thing I'd say that makes this possible is what we sometimes call by a Greek word with a curious provenance: *epoché*. It translates as "suspension," and in this case it means a selective suspension of judgment about certain truth claims. Essentially, when religion scholars look at traditions they might be inclined to disagree with, they don't obsess about that disagreement. It's usually not what's most interesting about the tradition anyway. Put aside the obvious disagreement for a moment—for instance, about the existence or nature of a God—and you'll start noticing a whole lot of other things about what you're studying: things held in common, or even differences that can be of mutual benefit.

As a journalist, I've found that *epoché* is rule number one for reporting among people different from you. Lawyers often have to do something similar. It's a basic part of how business works. For much of history, traders, rather than scholars, have led the way to discovering foreign cultures. Christians and Muslims were trading with each other during the Crusades, and Marco Polo made it to China centuries before Matteo Ricci, the Jesuit missionary. Traders have to know how to temporarily avoid inconvenient subjects long enough to get what they're looking for. They learn to be careful around the sensitivities of others. Scholars of religion learn to do the same thing.

Both, it could be said, are *on the lookout for value*. Business tends to look for financial value, and religion scholars tend to look for social value, but it's a pretty similar task in either case. Both have to wonder, *What's in it for whom?* You have to look past what someone might want you to think is important to notice what lies beneath. I think of a reporter I know who covers religious sex abuse scandals for a major newspaper, but who cut his teeth covering the mob—different costumes, a different idiom, but a lot of the same self-preservation techniques.

The search for various kinds of capital is one instance of a more general rule. The Chicago Div School's Jonathan Z. Smith once wrote a book whose title references Alfred Korzybski's dictum that "the map is not the territory." I'd consider this a vital lesson of my religious studies education: don't mistake the names and categories we assign to things for the things themselves. Christians, one quickly learns, are different from Muslims, until you notice that some Christians have more in common with Muslims than with fellow Christians. I gather that this is the same kind of thinking done in a good management consulting firm—seeing through a company's old maps and pointing the way toward a new one.

Consulting firms would be well served by another ingrained habit of religious studies: plasticity. The academic buzzword for this is "interdisciplinarity." It's not an uncommon thing to hear a religion grad student say she's planning to learn sociology, or economics, or Tibetan over the weekend. As a field with no single disciplinary method, religious studies depends on people who can use lots of methods at once, or switch quickly among them. So also does a bustling, information-driven, globalizing world.

And then there are stories. This is an especially easy connection to make for a journalist. Chicago-style religious studies got its start as the comparative study of stories, or mythologies, and a lot of the field has remained that way since. One learns in religious studies how stories shape human reality by examining how the subtle differences in telling them matter. Stories hold together communities (and organizations and companies). Storytellers are the ones who define priorities and motivate people to join the cause. The story of Odysseus and his gods united the Greeks, and the story of Steve Jobs' own odyssey unites Apple employees—while also helping make every product launch into a media blitz. Storytelling is how marketing works, and it's part of the essence of leadership, in any context.

Lastly, and most obviously, you learn a lot in religious studies about the content of religions themselves. This is way more useful than one might think. The most obvious application is the one that makes some people in the field most queasy: going to work, clerically or otherwise, for an actual religious institution. This can take an enormous variety of quite interesting forms, though, from social work, teaching, and community organizing to public relations, publishing, and lobbying. These sometimes-benighted Organized Religions can only benefit from people who know something about other religions, not just their own. But this kind of knowledge has uses beyond religions themselves. It is, incidentally, what Madeleine Albright was hoping to have in her embassies—and for good reason. To say that religion is shaping the world around us has only become a cliché because it's true.

No matter what you “do with it,” really, the study of religion forces you to learn about geopolitics, languages, literatures, sciences, and histories. It’s no shoddy path to cultural literacy. In my own work, actually, religion has often been a gateway more than a destination; it has been an entry point for learning about, and working on, all kinds of other things.

An added bonus, especially given the present business climate, is that religious studies raises questions of ethics: the foundations, the content, and the commensurability of various ethical systems. It’s an invitation to a meaningful life, and an examined life, and an ethical one. That, truth be told, is why I’m bothering to write this essay in the first place—I actually think having more religious studies people in high places would make the world better.

Taking Over the World

Allow me to end by offering a few recommendations for the field that gave me so much. Above all, I think it’s time that religious studies does more to prep its students and faculty for a more direct engagement with what I’ve been calling “the world.” The field is ready for it.

On the faculty side, I think this means encouraging and rewarding teachers who gain experience working outside the academy, in other industries and professions where they can use some aspects of their training. Then, when they come back to the university, they’ll be much better equipped to advise students on a broader range of options than just teaching. (This, of course, should never be to the exclusion of those who really do nothing better than study forgotten texts in dead languages or conjure esoteric theories. Supporting these types, I hope against hope, will always be among the university’s chief responsibilities. Here, I’m mainly talking about the rest of us.)

As far as students go, they need to practice noticing and talking about the skills and habits they’re getting in religious studies. They’ll have to articulate these things to their parents and prospective employers. I bet they can do it better than I have. When they do, they’ll be a lot more ready to take over the world, and that will be a good thing.

This essay is based on a talk given to Brown University undergraduate religious studies majors at the invitation of their department.

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