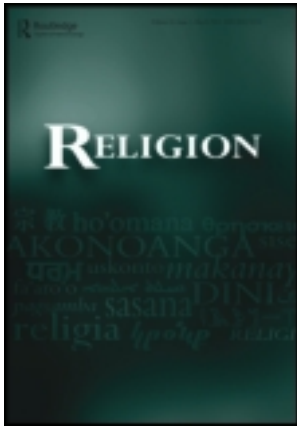


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What (kind of) good is Religious Studies?

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ABSTRACT In highlighting common themes among the articles from the panel, this essay focuses especially on two related movements in higher education: an apparently global emphasis on education as preparation for employment and the application of administrative models derived from business to universities and colleges. In critically interrogating both movements, it suggests that there need not always be a high degree of correlation between what a person studies at university and his or her later occupation, and further, that a managerial administrative vision tends to neglect the ‘positive externalities’ that derive from subjects that do not lead directly to employment for a large number of students. Thus, the results of both movements are disadvantageous not only for the study of religions but also for society at large.

KEY WORDS crisis in the humanities; higher education; commercialization of education; Religious Studies

‘If we are concerned with the freedom to live long and live well, our focus has to be directly on life and death, and not just on wealth and economic opulence.’
Amartya Sen (2005: 9)

Many years ago I attended a ceremony which recognized honor students at my children’s middle school (fifth to eighth grade). During the ceremony, a school official read out statements from the students that included their future plans. The statements quickly turned into a litany: ‘I want to go to college so that I can get a good job.’ Apparently no one – relatives, teachers, guidance counselors, friends, anyone – had acquainted these academically gifted students with any reasons for education beyond the pecuniary, whether the sheer joy of learning, the broadening of horizons, the enrichment of life beyond the drudgery of earning a living, the development of cognitive, analytical, and emotional skills indispensable in a democratic society (or in gainful employment), or what have you. For them education was entirely instrumental, its instrumentality was entirely economic, and the economic range was imaginatively restricted: everyone envisioned life as an employee; no one aspired to be an entrepreneur. In the minds of these students, education was job training, nothing more.¹

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¹In fairness, I should note that these students were studying in a school district the majority of whose graduates still do not go to college, and where many of those who do go do not graduate. In 2010 only 33% of graduating seniors enrolled in a four-year college or university; another 17% enrolled in

The essays collected here provide a glimpse of some of the challenges facing the study of religions at the beginning of the 21st century. There are notable geographical omissions: the United States, China, South Asia, South America, Australia, New Zealand/Aotearoa, and much of Africa. Nevertheless, some common themes emerge, and they are easily recognizable elsewhere, too. One such theme is the difference that internationalization, globalization, and migration make. In this regard, David Thurffjell highlights nicely the manner in which changing demographics have stimulated the development of a new ‘discourse platform’ for introducing students to the study of religions. I want to concentrate here, however, on another theme that is even more prominent in the essays. I do not have a good name for it. We might call it the economization or commodification or neo-liberalization or marketization or capitalization or commercialization or bureaucratization or businessization or managerialization – and in many countries, such as India, the privatization² – of higher education. One consequence is the view of higher education that the middle-schoolers in my town expressed that evening: higher education is, or should be, preparation for employment. Other consequences include the envisioning of educational fields as goods to be bought and sold, a de-emphasis on research in favor of teaching, a push for quantifiable and calculable results, and the design of institution-wide curricula on free-market principles. In this climate one is inevitably driven to ask what good Religious Studies is – or perhaps more aptly, what kind of good it is, why ‘suppliers’ (educational institutions) should carry it, and why ‘consumers’ (not simply students, but society at large) should buy it.

Some of the contributors to the panel explicitly lament this transformation of higher education. Ulrich Berner notes, somewhat in the mode of transcendental deduction, that the stress on employability ‘obviously must have serious consequences, amounting to a crisis, for any Religious Studies program.’ Michael Stausberg writes with some sarcasm, ‘All program descriptions now have to contain information, as far-fetched as that may appear in many cases, about potential occupational areas or vocational patterns.’ He also observes that the Bologna process has meant the virtual disappearance of Religious Studies from the first-cycle or bachelor’s level curriculum in some European universities. (Berner notes, however, that in Bayreuth, students often study religions at the first cycle and then move on to other fields.) Oyeronke Olademo finds in Nigeria an inverse correlation between a concern with employability and enrollment in Religious Studies programs. These laments, with which I am largely sympathetic, can and should be read in the context of a more general crisis of the humanities in contemporary higher education.

The theme of the panel, however, was not simply ‘crisis’ but ‘crisis and creativity’. Creativity is certainly in evidence, too. The most attention-grabbing instance, at least the one that grabbed my attention the most, is the program in Religious Management and Cultural Studies at Edo State University, Ekpoma, Nigeria. Two Nigerians – not Olademo – have told me that the word ‘management’ in the title is simply a ruse, and the program is, in reality, simply a program in

two-year college programs. Perhaps a necessary pragmatism underlay the students’ linkage of college education and desirable future employment.

²Under international pressure; see, e.g., Anand (2010).

Religious Studies. If that is the case, I cannot imagine how it can succeed in the long run, but perhaps my information is wrong, my imagination limited, or both. Other creative endeavors would include the (limited) preparation for teaching in tertiary education that Michel Desjardins envisions, the quite interesting interdisciplinary and cooperative courses that Ulrich Berner details (although he admits that they may not address issues of employability), and Stausberg's account of the different ways different European countries have interpreted the Bologna project. For their part, Willi Braun, Frances Landy, and Susumu Shimazono provide hope that the survival of the study of religions can be de-coupled from that of traditional academic units in Religious Studies. As a whole, the essays make for stimulating reading and advance many ideas worth exploring. One finds equally good ideas elsewhere, too, such as those expressed by the panelists – Rosalind Hackett, Vasudha Narayanan, and Christine Gudorf – and the audience at a forum on 'Making the Case for the Importance of Religion' at the 2010 annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion (session A30–300).

I do, however, miss something in the essays. What I miss is attention to important, broader issues, philosophical in a loose sense of the word, that arise from the contemporary global transformation of higher education.³ (If memory serves me correctly, the AAR forum did not address these issues, either.) The issues I have in mind concern, on the narrower end of the spectrum, what kind of education serves the ends of employability and, on the broader end, what the aims of higher education are and should be.

To be quite frank: as a scholar, I favor learning for its own sake; as a parent, and one who has been paying for higher education almost continuously since 1997, with an end finally in sight (15 February 2013), I realize how unrealistic it is to insist that university students, their parents, or whoever else is helping to pay the bills, have no concern about the prospects for gainful employment after graduation. But there is good news here, too. On one level, the problem that Religious Studies faces is not an emphasis on employability. It is rather an unimaginative and obtuse approach to the issue.

The emphasis in higher education on employability, which is apparently world-wide in scope, seems to be driven by a narrow managerial mentality. Engineers should study engineering, accountants should study accounting, doctors and nurses should study medical practice, and financial wizards should study markets. Who should study religions? An analogous mentality begins to surface, but only begins, in Michel Desjardins's suggestion that graduate programs need to train future teachers to teach. This mentality rests upon a fundamental error. It presupposes that there is always a high degree of correlation between what one learns in higher education and what one does on the job. This is not the case. Some jobs require the acquisition of a high percentage of non-transferable 'hard skills.' That is, they require that a large percentage of higher education be spent on formal occupational training. Such fields include medicine, law, and engineering—although at least in the United States there is some recognition that education in the Arts and Humanities, including the study of religions, can be helpful for people entering these fields, too. Other jobs require the acquisition of a larger percentage of highly transferable 'soft skills' and a knowledge base that

³I would be remiss not to mention the gender imbalance of the panelists, too.

has both breadth and depth. Most of the specific skills that are needed can be learned on the job, indeed, are probably best learned there.

One field of the latter type is, I think, teaching in higher education. I do not actually disagree with Desjardins's suggestions. Graduate programs probably do well to see that their students receive some teaching experience, but teaching situations vary considerably, and what graduate programs really need to impart is superior competence within the field, so that their graduates can then call upon that competence creatively in reaction to the demands of specific pedagogical situations. Another field that requires a lower percentage of 'hard skills' is, I think, business. It is not at all clear that a degree in economics is necessary to success in business; people who study engineering at MIT, for example, do just fine running businesses. The expectation that businesspeople concentrate in economics would seem to be less a matter of providing essential skills and more a matter of indoctrination into a certain mentality. That is especially true when studying economics means receiving an unvaried diet of neo-liberalism. In this case, a preference for candidates who have degrees in business or economics is something like a test for religious orthodoxy.

The difficulty of overcoming an entrenched orthodoxy is, unfortunately, something scholars of Religious Studies know about. Nevertheless, it would seem that we, like other humanists, need to do more than provide, in Stausberg's words, the requested 'information ... about potential occupational areas or vocational patterns.' We need to engage in a more general interrogation of the notion of employability. The target audience for this argument is not limited to university administrators and potential students but also includes anyone who makes hiring decisions. In principle it ought to be possible to make a case that training in the humanities, including the study of religions, is an asset to a potential employer, and to do so in a less cynical manner than simply inserting the word 'management' into the title of one's program.

On the broader end of the spectrum, one might ask whether higher education is not one area, and certainly not the only one, where the unfettered operation of market forces yields suboptimal utility. In the 1 May 2010, issue of *Economic and Political Weekly*, Saumen Chattopadhyay published a vigorous critique, without entirely discounting the neo-liberal position, of the Foreign Educational Institutions Bill, which would privatize and internationalize higher education in India and in the process managerialize and commercialize it. Some of his case is context-specific, such as the identification of elitism in arguments about providing opportunities at home for students who currently elect to study abroad (2010: 16). Other points are more universalizable. For example, Chattopadhyay (2010: 17) argues that there is a distinct qualitative difference 'between a factory and an institution,' in this case, an educational institution. He adds that the treatment of education as a marketable, tradable commodity ignores certain of its distinctive characteristics, specifically, the indirect social benefits that accrue to society as a result of education, benefits which in the language of economics are known as 'positive externalities.' As he also points out, 'failure to distinguish between market demand and social need is ... a type of market failure,' and it is becoming generally recognized that when markets fail, intervention is helpful. Chattopadhyay's specific worries are that privatization and the establishment of 'elite' institutions by foreign education providers, operating in India beyond the reach of regulation and driven by a concern to make what amounts to a profit, will mean that students from poorer

backgrounds, of whom India has a considerable number, will lose out (cf. Altbach 2010). The general claim can, however, be extended. As patronizing as it may sound, one might ask whether it is really credible that a curriculum dictated largely by responding to people in their late teens and twenties pursuing their private economic interests will produce all of the social goods that society may and should gain from higher education. Of course, the Indian public sector has never shown itself to be particularly interested in Religious Studies or any 'positive externality' that might result from it, either – according to some (e.g., Nussbaum 2007) much to its detriment.

Like Chattopadhyay, Martha Nussbaum's (2010) manifesto for the humanities derides the commercialization of education. Her terminology and analysis is less economic than his, and she shows little to no concern for the private/public divide and what it might mean to the less privileged strata of society – perhaps understandably, since many of her heroes in American education have founded, administered, or taught at private institutions. She does, however, succinctly identify one benefit that human societies derive from Religious Studies. She writes (2010: 83), 'Equally crucial to the success of democracies in our world' – Nussbaum limits her attention to democracies – 'is the understanding of the world's many religious traditions. There is no area (except, perhaps, sexuality) where people are more likely to form demeaning stereotypes of the other that impede mutual respect and productive discussion.' Preparation for democratic citizenship is, of course, only one benefit among many that apologists for Religious Studies might hold up. To it we might add, for example, the kind of self-reflection that Thurfjell's discourse platform emphasizes, which has applications well beyond citizenship, and an emphasis on Religious Studies as intrinsically de-provincializing.

More broadly, the quote from Amartya Sen that I have placed at the beginning of my comments reminds us that goals like employability and the acquisition of wealth are not ends in themselves but instrumental to the higher goal of living well. A long tradition in higher education sees the goal of the university to be not the acquisition of wealth, but the enrichment of life, as in the motto of that bastion of economic neo-liberalism, the University of Chicago, *crescat scientia, vita excolatur*, generally given a rather more wordy translation: 'Let knowledge grow from more to more; and so be human life enriched.'⁴ There is no reason to claim that with the shift from the elite to the mass university over the course of the 20th century, this goal has become outmoded. It is by now well known that human beings tend to overvalue proximate, visible benefits and undervalue remote, less easily imagined ones (Wilkinson 2008: 189–263). It should come as no surprise, then, when people are distracted from the ultimate goal of living well by the more proximate goal of making money, and it should be common sense to suggest that in such a situation, intervention in violation of free-market principles may be required.⁵ Rather than correcting for such inadequacies,

⁴<http://www.uchicago.edu/about/index.shtml>.

⁵It is, in fact, already common to intervene in free markets to offset the deleterious effects of agents who practice injudicious intertemporal discounting. These interventions prominently include governmental measures to encourage retirement savings, in the absence of which future retirees tend to save too little; see, e.g., Wilkinson (2008: 249–255). One might note that otherwise doctrinaire neo-liberal financial planners make a great deal of money as a result of such violations of free-market principles, and they generally whole-heartedly support them.

commercialized, commodified, managerialized, marketized ... systems of higher education simply accentuate them.

In closing, I want to come down from the heights of abstraction and cite only a single incident that, to my mind, goes some of the way to providing a practical justification for the study of religions.⁶ Recently a couple of my students visited a local Hindu temple. They got lost along the way and stopped in a convenience store to ask for directions. The man behind the counter told them that he did not know anything about a Hindu temple, but that there was an un-American-looking building behind a shopping center about a mile away. Then he asked them why they wanted to go there. When he learned it was for a class assignment, he expressed relief that they were not Hindus and did not want to become Hindus. 'Those people,' he said, 'bombed my country.'

To my mind, the real horror of this comment is not the misidentification of the religious convictions of the September 11 hijackers, or of the means that they employed, or even of the chauvinistic conception of America ('un-American,' 'my' country), although these features are bad enough. The real horror is this man's apparent inability to think with any semblance of subtlety about a religious community whose members are his neighbors, customers, business competitors, doctors – potentially even his employers, co-workers, and friends. To be sure, the academic study of religions is not a vaccine; it cannot eradicate ignorance about religions or bigoted attitudes toward people who practice them. It can, however, help. If in pursuing a narrowly economic instrumentality those responsible for structuring educational systems worldwide cannot see Religious Studies as a good worthy of supplying and being purchased, and if attitudes such as those expressed by the convenience-store clerk become even more widely entrenched in our globalizing contexts,⁷ one can perhaps be forgiven for wondering what kind of world our descendants will inhabit.

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⁶I owe this anecdote to Rachael Hurst. It can be taken as an illustration of the following broader point: 'The world's schools, colleges, and universities ... have an important and urgent task: to cultivate in students the ability to see themselves as members of a heterogeneous nation (for all modern nations are heterogeneous), and a still more heterogeneous world, and to understand something of the history and character of the diverse groups that inhabit it' (Nussbaum 2010: 80).

⁷Given the degree of popular resonance aroused in Germany recently by Sarrazin (2010), this possibility should not be underestimated.

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