Religious Studies & the Imagined Boundaries of the Humanities

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Religious studies, as taught in American higher education, is in many ways a quintessential instance of the boundlessness of the humanities, since elements of religious traditions and practices are pervasive in literature, history, art, political science, philosophy, law, music, and so on. At the same time, questions about the definition of "religion," about what constitutes legitimate "religion" protected as such by "religious freedom," and about what privileges such "freedom" should entail affect many aspects of our lives as a nation, from the home to the workplace and to the public square. Informed and reasoned inquiry into religious traditions, texts, rituals, and practices is an essential component of civic life, on both individual and public levels. This is acutely the case in the present moment, even as religious studies faces significant challenges in the contemporary climate, both in higher education and our wider culture. We urge its protection and support into the future.

> The United States was built on a foundation of religious freedom and tolerance, a principle enshrined in the United States Constitution. Nevertheless, the previous administration enacted a number of Executive Orders and Presidential Proclamations that prevented certain individuals from entering the United States – first from primarily Muslim countries, and later, from largely African countries. Those actions are a stain on our national conscience and are inconsistent with our long history of welcoming people of all faiths and no faith at all.
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> — March 6, 2021, "Biden Has Overturned Trump's 'Muslim Travel Ban': Activists Say That's Not Enough" (Scott Simon, host, NPR)[1]

> In the last term alone, the court sided with Christian religious groups in three argued cases. The court ruled that state programs supporting private schools must include religious ones, that the Trump administration could allow employers with religious objections to deny contraception coverage to female workers and that employment discrimination laws do not apply to many teachers at religious schools.
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> — April 5, 2021, "An Extraordinary Winning Streak for Religion at the Supreme Court" (Adam Liptak, *The New York Times*)[2]

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> Jeremy Gray, State Representative in Alabama, has introduced a bill to allow the practice of yoga in public school gym classes, from which it has been banned since 1993. In response, "Yoga is a very big part of the Hindu religion, and if this bill passes then instructors will be able to come into classrooms as young as kindergarten and bring these children through guided imagery, which is a spiritual exercise," Becky Gerritson, director of the conservative Eagle Forum of Alabama told state senators.
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> — April 17, 2021, "Yoga Can Leave You Injured, Psychotic, and a Hindu, Christian Groups Claim" (Ed Pilkington, *The Guardian*)[3]

> Franklin Graham, Twitter: "I have even been asked if Jesus were physically walking on earth now, would He be an advocate for vaccines. My answer was that based on the parable of the Good Samaritan in the Bible, I would have to say – yes, I think Jesus Christ would advocate for people using vaccines and medicines to treat suffering and save lives." [...] CORRECTION: AN EARLIER VERSION OF THIS STORY MISQUOTED FRANKLIN GRAHAM'S BELIEF ON WHETHER JESUS WOULD HAVE TAKEN THE COVID VACCINE. GRAHAM POSTED ON FACEBOOK THAT JESUS, BECAUSE "HE IS GOD," WOULD NOT HAVE NEEDED THE VACCINE.
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> — April 17, 2021 (updated April 19, 2021, caps in original), "Franklin Graham Believes Jesus Would Support COVID Vaccine. He's Still Catching Grief" (Joe Marusak, *The Charlotte Observer*)[4]

American public life is filled with religion. The four instances cited above, within a span of six weeks last year, evince this, and these are hardly unusual, as the history since then has more than confirmed, sometimes in dramatic ways. Questions about the definition of "religion," about what constitutes legitimate "religion" protected as such by "religious freedom," and about what privileges such "freedom" should entail affect many aspects of our lives as a nation, from the home to the workplace and to the public square. Citizenship, immigration, education, health care, reproductive rights, international relations, free speech, employment, taxes: religion – and heated discourse about religion – impact us all. One must understand religion in order to comprehend the current politics and policies shaping America as a nation.

Understanding religion as a culture-shaping force in society is the goal of the humanistic discipline of religious studies. It aims to cultivate essential intellectual competencies – especially independent critical thinking – in and for American citizens. Religiously diverse American society currently (and historically) has been ill-equipped to navigate and to appreciate its own religious diversity. Indeed,

emergency rooms, kindergarten classrooms, and funeral parlors (in addition to homes, schools, communities, the national sphere, and media) are some of the places where this is lived out on a daily basis, and often with very little resources, knowledge, or skills. To function in civil life as part of a society made up of persons with complex and varied religious identities, histories, and commitments, we need to know more about each other. A 2019 Pew survey found among those surveyed that eight-in-ten had more basic knowledge of simple elements of the Christian tradition (such as that Easter commemorates the resurrection of Jesus, not the crucifixion, last supper, or ascension), but

> just three-in-ten U.S. adults know that the Jewish Sabbath begins on Friday, one-quarter know that Rosh Hashana is the Jewish New Year, and one-in-eight can correctly identify the religion of Maimonides (an influential Jewish scholar in the Middle Ages). Roughly one-in-five Americans (18%) know that the "truth of suffering" is among Buddhism's four "noble truths," and just 15% correctly identify the Vedas as a Hindu text.[5]

Beyond such basic knowledge about non-Christian religious traditions – as well as the much more fine-grained knowledge that the Pew survey did not even try to test – what authority do religions, religious texts and artifacts, or persons claiming to speak from or to their religious community have (or should they have) in the public sphere? The question is vital, contested, and perduring. Indeed, the same 2019 Pew survey found that

> when asked what the U.S. Constitution says about religion as it relates to federal officeholders, just one-quarter (27%) correctly answer that it says "no religious test" shall be a qualification for holding office; 15% incorrectly believe the Constitution requires federal officeholders to affirm that all men are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, 12% think the Constitution requires elected officials to be sworn in using the Bible, 13% think the Constitution is silent on this issue, and 31% say they are not sure.

It is hard to imagine the full impact that such uncertainty on a fundamental point of "religious liberty" might have on decisions made or attitudes held either by the electorate or by elected officials. The legislative branch (state and national) and the Supreme Court of the United States (as noted above) are continually faced with issues that are framed as matters of "religious freedom": decisions involving employment, marriage, health care, education, pandemic restrictions on assembly for worship, and so on. One cannot adjudicate such issues, on either a legal or cultural level, without a citizenry that has better knowledge, better skills, and a better sense of their own history about what constitutes religion(s) and the freedoms religions or their adherents demand or deserve.

Religious studies as a discipline taught in undergraduate curricula at two- and four-year colleges and universities and in a wide range of graduate programs (master's, doctoral) educates a broad diversity of students in such knowledge and skills.

First and foremost, these prepare them to be thoughtful and informed citizens and, second, enable them to bring those competencies to all manner of professions in society, spanning education, law, medicine, the arts, business, diplomacy, public policy, journalism, and technology (to name just some). Because of the complex history of legislation about the teaching of religion in public K–12 schools, and local and national anxieties about how this may or should be done, many American children do not have the opportunity to learn about world religions, or American religious history specifically, until their college years. For many college students, religious studies courses are the first time they are introduced to religions free of the framing of polemic or proselytization, of stereotyping or of sanctimony. Hence, departments of religious studies in higher education play a vital and unique role in preparing students for participation in American civic life.

Like other fields in the humanities, the academic study of religion is facing a crisis that has been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. And yet, to understand today's situation, it is necessary to consider important trends that have developed over the past two decades. On the eve of the Great Recession in October 2008, a white paper commissioned by the professional association of scholars of religion, the American Academy of Religion, documented significant growth in the academic study of religion in the wake of 9/11:

> The number of religious studies majors increased by 22 percent in the past decade (to an estimated 47,000 students), with like percentage increases in the number of total courses offered, course enrollments, and faculty positions in the field. The number of religious studies majors at public institutions has grown even more rapidly, by 40 percent during the same period, signifying a sea-change in the field.[6]

This study also pointed to the establishment of new degree programs or departments of religious studies at public universities around the United States during this same period. Not surprisingly, there was a corresponding shift away from the traditional emphasis on the Bible and Christianity to other religious traditions such as Hinduism and Buddhism. Above all, after 9/11, colleges and universities scrambled to fill faculty lines in order to offer courses on Islam. Our national tragedy dramatically highlighted the importance of the academic study of religion. "Suddenly, the arguments we had been making for years about the importance of understanding world religious traditions were being made by others: not merely by former Secretaries of State and magazine editors, not merely by the general public, but by college deans, provosts, and presidents."[7] The barriers between academia's ivory tower and public discourse crumbled as the media sought out specialists on Islam.

The white paper of 2008 painted a rosy picture of religious studies, noting that the field offers all the essential learning outcomes for American college students

identified by the American Association of Colleges and Universities: intercultural learning; engagement with big questions; critical thinking and writing; moral reasoning; and the application of all these skills to new global contexts and lived behaviors. But within ten years after the white paper was published, the academic study of religion had begun to face new challenges in the wake of the Great Recession and other factors. The American Academy of Arts and Sciences' Humanities Indicators (HI) documents that "From 2011 to 2014, the number of bachelor's degrees conferred in the academic study of religion fell 6.8% . . . the largest decline in 28 years of available data for the discipline."[8] Similarly, the HI found a "statistically significant" decline in the average number of juniors and seniors with declared majors in religion for the period from 2011–2012 to 2016–2017. The same source notes that in 2014, the proportion of bachelor's degrees in religion awarded by U.S. institutions of higher education was at the lowest point in a downward trajectory that began in 2006, even before the Great Recession. And from 2012–2017, the number of colleges and universities granting degrees in the academic study of religion fell by 3.2 percent.

Similarly, for academic year 2017–2018, the number of positions advertised through the AAR-SBL Employment Services remained at its lowest level since 2003, reaching a historic low of 403 postings, including nonacademic appointments such as administration, fellowships, librarians, K–12, nonprofit, and publishing.[9] Advertised faculty positions declined steadily from 2008 to 2017, although entry- and mid-level appointments increased modestly in 2018 and 2019. Advertisements for tenure-track positions reached a four-year high in 2019, marking the first consistent increase since 2008. The AAR-SBL Employment Services data for 2018–2019 also indicate trends in the academic study of religion, with advertised positions in early Judaism, Hebrew Bible, New Testament, racial/ethnic minority studies in religion, and gay and lesbian studies trending up over a ten-year average, while numbers in comparative religions and in introduction to religion declined.[10] (The data do not indicate to what extent free Internet services such as the Academic Jobs Wikis may have contributed to the decline in the number of positions advertised through the AAR-SBL Employment Services; in that case, the decrease in advertisements through the AAR-SBL Employment Services might not accurately reflect the number of positions available overall.) At the time of this writing, however, the impact of COVID-19 on the job market is beginning to be felt. The 2019–2020 AAR-SBL Employment Services report, which covers only the period up to June 2020, recorded a new historic low in the number of postings and a decline in the number of institutions advertising.[11] The current situation is most uncertain.

Despite decreasing numbers of religious studies majors declared, undergraduate degrees awarded, and degree-granting departments and programs remaining institutionally grounded, the average number of undergraduate minors and graduate students remained fairly steady through 2016–2017, according to HI data.[12]

The same source noted that religion departments offer a larger number of hybrid courses relative to other humanities disciplines. On the other hand, within the humanities, religion departments have the second-lowest share of female faculty (roughly 35 percent; only philosophy is lower). A significantly higher number of such faculty are in tenure-track rather than tenured positions, and a large number are in non-tenure-track positions.[13]

Its distinctive features make the academic study of religion institutionally more vulnerable than other fields in the humanities, which has been magnified in the wake of the 2008 Great Recession and the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic. Although the impact of the pandemic has not been fully assessed at the time of this writing (December 2021), it is evident that all the humanities including religious studies are at the edge of a precipice. As the *Bulletin of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences* notes,

> In 2008, just as the previous financial crisis hit colleges and universities, the number of undergraduate majors and students had been rising in most humanities disciplines for more than a decade. That trend put pressure on colleges to maintain continuity in faculty levels and departmental support through the financially lean years that followed. Unfortunately, as many colleges and universities face a fresh round of financially wrenching challenges as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, most humanities disciplines find themselves in a much weaker position – following declines in students and majors that extend back eight to ten years.[14]

In January 2021, Josh Patterson and Robert Townsend documented an alarmingly rapid decline of 31 percent in the number of bachelor's degrees awarded in religious studies in just five years, from 2013–2017.[15] These and other trends that became apparent in the wake of the Great Recession – including declining numbers of undergraduate majors and decreasing support for programs and departments (including funding for graduate students and faculty lines) – have accelerated in the wake of the COVID-19 crisis, leading to the wholesale elimination of departments and programs. For example, in July 2020, Illinois Wesleyan University discontinued its religion department. Around the same time, Carthage College eliminated its departments of classics and philosophy and great ideas. Shortly afterward, the University of Vermont announced the termination of an assortment of majors including geology, religion, Asian studies, and several language programs such as Greek, Latin, and German. Minors in many of these subject areas are also being cut, plus others in theater and Vermont studies. Master's programs to be cut include Greek and Latin, as well as the teaching of Latin, geology, and historic preservation. The recent national attention given to the closing of the classics department at Howard University – lamented by Cornel West and Jeremy Tate in a widely read *Washington Post* op-ed[16] – applies equally to the assimilation of religious studies faculty into other departments or area studies, which leads to a significant

loss in disciplinary focus and visibility. Such administrative actions in effect declare that independent and informed knowledge of the past is no longer as important as other areas of study. Religious studies is particularly vulnerable to this sort of erasure.

A relative newcomer as an academic discipline within U.S. higher education, the academic study of religion faces singular challenges among the humanities. The teaching of religion (as opposed to religious studies) was long restricted largely to seminaries and private institutions (often in divinity schools or schools of theology). Many scholars of religion and American religious history, including the American Academy of Religion Religious Literacy Guidelines, see the 1963 *Abington v. Schempp* Supreme Court decision as key to the development of religious studies.[17] They cite the words of Justice Thomas Clark in the majority:

> In addition, it might well be said that one's education is not complete without a study of comparative religion or the history of religion and its relationship to the advancement of civilization. It certainly may be said that the Bible is worthy of study for its literary and historic qualities. Nothing we have said here indicates that such study of the Bible or of religion, when presented objectively as part of a secular program of education, may not be effected consistently with the First Amendment.

And yet more recently, scholars like Sarah Imhoff and Winnifred Fallers Sullivan of Indiana University have usefully challenged whether the *Schempp* decision has functioned as a kind of mythic "creation story" for the field.[18] They note that before *Schempp*, 45 percent of public colleges and universities (such as the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, founded in the 1940s) already had religious studies departments (according to Imhoff, "*Schempp* wasn't a founding moment, but it did take place in the midst of a significant change"),[19] and that the *Schempp* decision was focused on K–12 rather than secondary education. Beyond such sociological facts, these scholars emphasize that reasoning such as Justice Clark's shows a priority for the (Christian) Bible that hardly counts as a neutral position in terms of what counts as religion to be studied in public school. In addition, this reasoning presumes a simpler line between what is religion and what is secular than the field of religious studies in reality navigates.[20] This debate, both about the past and the present, should continue, even as it is the responsibility of each department and generation of scholars to define and make the case for the field in the present cultural and historical moment.

Nonetheless, it remains the case that in the United States, the academic study of religion, unlike other fields in the humanities (such as history, English, and languages other than English), is not a regular part of the K–12 public school curriculum (contrast this reality with religious studies scholar Jane Webster and col-

leagues' piece on Denmark in the response to the white paper).[21] Because of their lack of familiarity with the field, many undergraduates are unlikely to consider a major in religious studies prior to enrolling in college. The lack of familiarity with the field means that much (if not most) of the U.S. public (including university administrators and faculty in other disciplines) do not understand that the academic study of religion should not be confused with the practice of or indoctrination in a particular religion. It is an analytical discipline, not devotional or confessional in its aims, and as such can be viewed with suspicion both by those who stand within religious traditions and practice, on the one hand, and by other academics, on the other. Religious studies must continually make the case for itself and its value among the humanistic disciplines.

The American public has mixed and sometimes contradictory views of the humanities. The 2019 HI survey found that 97 percent of American adults had engaged in at least one form of humanities activity at some point in the previous year.[22] However, the range of engagement is limited mainly to consuming humanities-related audio and video content, researching humanities subjects online, and reading fiction and nonfiction books. The survey notes that although a substantial share of Americans has been hampered at work due to a deficiency in one or more humanities skills, many do not think they need humanities skills in the workplace.

The HI survey also found that Black and Hispanic Americans and younger Americans were more likely to be among those most engaged with the humanities. Among Black Americans, this is due largely to higher rates of religious text study. Significantly, more Blacks and Hispanics than members of other groups believe it is important to teach young people about differences in religious thought, whereas 23 percent of all American adults surveyed feel that the teaching of differences in religious thought should be delayed until high school. At the same time, the HI survey indicates that a majority of Americans believe the humanities "attract people who are somewhat elitist or pretentious," a perception that is strongest among Black and younger Americans.[23] This view is partly a result of the lack of universal access to higher education due to its high cost, creating a perception that it is the domain of elites. (The survey failed to ask if academics in STEM and other nonhumanities fields are also viewed as elitist or pretentious.) The perception of elitism is also fostered by a lack of diversity: university and college faculty, especially at the tenured level, are still mostly White men. As noted above, for example, religion departments have a lower proportion of female faculty than any other humanities department except philosophy, and women lag behind in the tenured ranks in most of the humanities.[24] Faculty of color are even more poorly represented. It is harder to make a case for the relevance of the humanities and to attract more undergraduates when the faculty look so different from the general population. And it is harder to

interest students in the humanities when they become more and more invisible, and are considered dispensable, in the modern university and in American culture. And yet the HI finding that 58 percent of Americans over the age of eighteen believe that "teaching differences in religious thought" is either important or very important shows that the academic study of religion has more than a light foothold of interest in the larger culture on which to build.[25] Tellingly, this agreement was significantly higher among women than men (64 versus 52 percent), even as the rate of agreement with this statement did not substantially shift according to household income. Further surveys may wish to address this question with more particularity (such as beyond "religious thought" to religious rituals, histories, sacred texts, and objects). It would be especially interesting to know if the kinds of questions in the Pew survey, which we referred to earlier, are what the citizenry think is involved in studying "differences in religious thought" or, in turn, what they most especially would like to learn about religion(s) global and local, contemporary and historic, and how that maps onto current curricula in religious studies departments.

The HI survey indicates a need to convey more clearly to the American public the value of a liberal arts education in general and the academic study of religion in particular. While religious studies is intertwined with the fate of the humanities in American higher education, it offers a specific set of learning outcomes and goals. Religious studies courses in our view are designed to cultivate both knowledge and skills, such as the following:

Knowledge

- Major world traditions such as Islam, Judaism, Buddhism, Hinduism, and Christianity are not singular entities but are all variously instantiated, both now and in the past (such as Islam in West Africa, Judaism in India, Roman Catholicism in the Philippines, or Buddhism in Japan). Beyond this are any number of religious practices (or practices deemed religious) that cut across or beyond these, such as yoga, ancestor worship, prayer, divination, totemism, dietary prescriptions, and rites for naming, marriage, healing, and care of the dead.
- A well-informed and detailed awareness of different historical traditions and their internal variety, including "Christianity" (in all its global and American diversities), but also, as much as possible, all the world's religious traditions, practices, texts, laws, rituals, and so on. Even if the academic study of religion has had to deal with the problematic legacy of its overly "Christianizing" historical roots in European missionary encounters with world religions, it would be a mistake to avoid Christianity as an object

of study, most especially in the American context, given this country's current religious demographics, historical roots, and influences.

- That religious phenomena (texts, rituals, beliefs, values, forms of community life) can be analyzed by a range of publics in a way that is different from confessional approaches, on the one hand, or cultural condescension, on the other. This does not necessarily have to stand in an adversarial relationship to what religiously affiliated students bring to the conversation, but a more public space for genuine dialogue on the evidence without presuppositions is needed that does not privilege "insider status" (self- or other-proclaimed) as an epistemological necessity or advantage. That this kind of analysis of religion exists is itself a form of knowledge that students gain from coursework in the academic study of religion. Those who learn to do this in the classroom can facilitate that taking place in the public sphere.
- Actual and detailed information about what different traditions have taught and why, from what contexts they arose, how they have interacted with others, how they have issued and responded to critiques. This involves the appreciation that all religions are not alike, nor is the category "religion" self-evident, even as part of the work of the academic study of religion involves disciplined and controlled comparison among and between various traditions and practices.
- A sophisticated and textured understanding of some of the critical issues about religion in the modern world, such as religion and science (medicine, cosmology, technology), religion and race, religious ethics, religion and law, religion and gender and sexuality, religion and the environment, religion and the political order, religion and violence, and the meaning(s) of "secularism."
- A wider knowledge of the role of religion, past and present, in such varied aspects of society and culture as architecture, art, politics, family life, food, literature, music, and so on. A full study of all that comes under the umbrella of the humanities is impossible without taking into account the pervasive effects of religion.

Skills

- An ability to speak with like- and non-like-minded others about religious texts, rituals, and community forms and practices, based on a critical assessment of the evidence and the claims being made for it.
- An ability to contextualize historical claims that are made by religious actors or others who seek to speak in the name of a religious tradition or authority.
- The ability to analyze specific arguments that make appeals to religious authorities and see how they have been crafted, what acts of interpretive

choice are involved, to whom they are appealing, and how they might or might not be persuasive (and to whom).

- The ability to create and foster spaces for dialogue about how religion(s) function in the public sphere that goes beyond advocacy, polemic, praise, or disparagement.
- The ability to understand complex systems of thought (theological, philosophical, ethical) in terms of their own histories and their contemporary instantiations (such as "natural law," "just war," views of creation, providence, anthropology, and eschatology).
- The ability to interpret texts, including but not limited to "sacred" scriptures, and to think critically about the hermeneutical issues involved in how ancient sources make meaning or are applied by their interpreters to present contexts.
- An interdisciplinary commitment and curiosity, continually engaged in conversation across the humanistic disciplines and with the public sphere.

The study of religion crosses many disciplinary boundaries in the humanities, embedded and implicated as it is in literature, history, art, political science, philosophy, music, and so on. In many ways, it is a quintessential instance of the boundlessness of the humanities and their pervasive and complex place in human life in the past and present. One can – and we have here – made the case that informed and reasoned inquiry into religious traditions, texts, rituals, and practices is an essential component of civic life, on both individual and public levels. What would it mean to take that seriously into the future?

1. Continuing to emphasize in a range of public arenas (including the American Academy of Arts and Sciences) that literacy about religion is a key competence for citizens, and a requirement for dealing with many complex issues of law, medicine, politics, and culture, such as our opening excerpts – and so many others we could add each day – represent.[26]
2. Advocating for religious studies education in K–12 education that is multireligious, nondenominational, and taught by instructors with training in religious studies methodologies and materials.
3. Increasing public outreach and engagement, including with K–12 teachers, local humanities councils and community organizations, and community colleges, a shortcoming of departments of religious studies noted by the HI survey.[27]

4. Joining other humanities-driven initiatives in working against the movement of American higher education away from liberal arts learning and toward trade school and professional school training. The American Academy of Arts and Sciences, American Council of Learned Societies, Mellon Foundation, National Endowment for the Humanities, and other organizations and foundations should take a leadership role in these initiatives, and coordinate with the relevant local stakeholders (faculty, administrators, students, alumni, community leaders, and the public at large).
5. Strengthening academic departments of religious studies in a precarious climate in which they risk elimination or assimilation. In its impassioned statement, "The Academic Study of Religion is Crucial to Higher Education," of December 16, 2020, the Board of Directors of the American Academy of Religion put it very well: "We call on leaders in institutions of higher learning to take the long view; to recognize the deep values accorded to humanity and societies through the academic study of religion; to acknowledge the centrality of understandings of religion as global citizens grapple with the challenges of creating a better future for the world; to work within appropriate governance structures for the evaluation of, and support for, religious studies departments and curricula; and to work collaboratively to support the academic study of religion."[28]

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