

Humanities and Religious Studies: Reflection on the Future

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Humanities and Religious Studies: Reflection on the Future

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Abstract

Keywords

Introduction

The closing of one's professional career brings opportunity for reflection and at times a nostalgic wish that things could be as they once were. This is where I am at present. Not counting my time as a student, I have spent 44 years in university life, thirty years of which was as a university administrator, including twenty years as a University President at four different Canadian universities. Throughout, however, I tried to maintain a respectable level of academic activity, having at one time or another, been a member of Departments of English and Departments of Religious Studies. If nothing else, this combination of administration and academics has provided me with a singular perspective on how our universities have changed over the course of my career. So it was that in a conversation with Catherine Caufield, the current Editor of *Religious Studies and Theology*, the possibility was raised of contributing an essay in which I reflect in a very personal way about the challenges of the Humanities, and about how Religious Studies can make a contribution to this conversation.

I begin with reference to two articles, each appearing in *The Chronicle Review of Higher Education*, one focusing on Philosophy, the other on publication in literary studies, and both having a broader application to the Humanities generally. Briggie and Frodemen in "A New Philosophy for the 21st Century" bemoan the inward turning of Philosophy as an academic discipline. Philosophy, they write, has become "subject [...] [to] powerful cultural trends that include a distrust of the public realm, a utilitarian habit of mind where only what is countable actually counts, and a widespread assumption that 'values' are mere preferences to be tabulated rather than critically assessed and debated" (Briggie 2011, B10). Philosophers, they argue, have only themselves to blame, as philosophers talk to one another about problems of their own making, and only rarely venture into the domain of public discourse.

In the article, "The Research Bust," Mark Baurerlien concludes that most recent literary scholarship has little value outside of what it brings to the individual faculty member's curriculum

vitae. Referencing the past four decades of “mountainous” publication, Bauerlien concludes that literary studies have reached a saturation point, the cascade of research having exhausted most of the subfields and overwhelmed the capacity of individuals to absorb the output (Bauerlein 2011). No discipline is exempt but the numbers for English literature are staggering: 80 items of scholarship published on George Eliot each year, 5,000 articles on Melville since 1960, 2,007 articles on Emily Dickinson in the last three decades.

Both these articles speak for themselves, implying as they do that the Humanities, safely ensconced in universities and seemingly immune to external pressures, have little interest in the broader issues confronting society. Maskell and Robinson are typical in their withering criticism of “the extreme specialization that now characterizes the organization of knowledge in the university, the proliferation of subjects and fields and the accompanying insistence that only someone expert in a field can speak authoritatively on its subject” (Maskell 2001, 164). In very recent times, a plethora of essays have appeared suggesting that the end times are here for the Humanities; or, as Justin Stover bluntly states, “The humanities are not just dying — they are almost dead” (Stover 2017).

The reasons are everywhere to be seen and are often repeated.¹ The imperatives of tenure and promotion have encouraged increased specialization and a focus on volume and early publication, and previous little of what is written has any application to undergraduate teaching. Declining enrolments in the Humanities disciplines² suggest that they are neither appealing nor interesting to typical undergraduate students. The tsunami of student interest in disciplines which appear to prepare a student for a job reduce the Humanities disciplines to an interesting anachronism. Ken Coates, Canada Research Chair in Regional Innovation at the University of

¹ Typical examples include Ken Coates. Bill Morrison, *Dream Factories: Why Universities Won't Solve the Youth Jobs Crisis* (Toronto: TAP Books, 2016); Ian D. Clark, David Trick, Richard Van Loon, *Academic Reform: Policy Options for Improving the Quality and Cost-Effectiveness of Undergraduate Education in Ontario* (Montreal and Kingston: Queen's Policy Studies Series (McGill-Queen's University Press, 2011); Datna Catropa, Margaret Andrews, “Bemoaning the Corporatization of Higher Education, <https://www.insidehighered.com>; Ronald W. Cox, Class, “The Corporatization of Higher Education”, *Class, Race and Corporate Power*, <http://digitalcommons.fici.edu>; Ellen Schrecker, *The Lost Soul of Higher Education: Corporatization, the Assault on Academic Freedom, and the End of the American University* (New York: The New Press, 2010), Henry Girouz, *Neoliberalism's War on Higher Education* ((Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2014); Richard Arum, Jasipa Roksa, *Academically Adrift: Learning on College Campuses* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2011).

² The literature is voluminous. See, for example, Benjamin Schmidt, “The Humanities Are in Crisis,” *The Atlantic*, Aug. 23, 2018, theatlantic.com/ideas/archives/2018/08/the-humanities-face-a-crisis-of-confidence/567565; and Alex Berezow, “Humanities Enrolment is In Free Fall,” American Council on Science and Health, July 31, 2018, asch.org/news/2018/07/31/humanities-enrollment-free-fall-13243.

Saskatchewan references the 45% in Arts enrolments in the Atlantic provinces to argue for a 30% reduction in Arts enrolments at Canadian universities, and concludes that the B.A. is now very little more than a “default degree” (Coates 2016). While there might be some recent slight decline in enrolment in Graduate Programs in the Humanities (Usher 2015), there are still far more programs than needed preparing students for careers that do not exist, and the cynical observer might conclude that this growth is tied directly to how faculty prefer to teach graduate students rather than undergraduate ones.

But the situation goes beyond the Humanities, and reflects a growing concern about our universities generally. We cannot pick up a newspaper or a magazine today without being told that universities are in crisis, that they have lost their way, that they have become self-serving and unresponsive to the needs of the society that supports them (Arum *et al.* 2011). Provincial governments in Canada express frustration at what universities do and how they spend money, complaining that they exhibit little sense of accountability. Increasingly, governments intrude into university affairs, in everything from academic priorities to executive compensation. There is widespread concern about declining standards, and about students who graduate from university little better prepared than when they began.

This, however, is not new, and it is just an expression of a concern that is long standing. Over the years, many have commented on the purported malaise confronting universities. Thirty years ago, Alan Bloom, in his book, *The Closing of the American Mind*, gloomily wrote that the university possesses “no vision . . . of what an educated human being is” (Bloom 1987, 337). Along similar lines, Theodore Roszak concludes that academic life has largely become a self-serving enterprise in large measure irrelevant to issues of social responsibility, moral growth, and critical awareness; he dismisses the modern university as nothing “better than the handmaiden of official society: the social club of ruling elites, the training school of what functionaries the status quo required” (Roszak 1967, 4). Bill Readings claims that the University “no longer participates in the historical project of humanity,” what he calls the “historical project of culture,” and he anxiously asks whether this constitutes “the twilight of the University’s critical and social functions” (Readings 1996, 11–13).

It is not difficult, some might say, to connect this decline of the modern university with the decline of the Humanities. But in this there is a conundrum. Bloom, Roszak, and Readings wrote some time ago giving the impression that the university’s demise was imminent and the

Humanities with it. This places in interesting context Stover's remark that the Humanities are "almost most dead." The fact remains that the Humanities are not dead, even if they seem always to be in a state of imminent collapse. Is this, then, the way of things, a continuous questioning of the value of the Humanities, and a constant worry about their relevance. Or in the words of my students, when they observe, "your course is too difficult – you make us think; you are interested in our own ideas." "Where, they ask, "are the right answers," "what is the point" and perhaps most important, "what is on the final examination?" There is little patience for subtlety in a time when everything is reduced to what can be reasonably included in a PowerPoint presentation.

The response to all this handwringing is straightforward. It is not that all is lost and that there is no future for the Humanities. There remains a pervasive and strongly held belief that a university without the Humanities is not a university. Yes, we continue to live with the juggernaut of the Humboldtian university as an engine of economic growth, a creator of knowledge, and one committed to research and innovation. We can't escape it nor should we, and universities must be at the forefront of knowledge generation and innovation, must serve as agents of social transformation, and, dare one say, must support economic development. But, as we have moved to an age driven by technology, artificial intelligence, and DNA manipulation, with all its attendant moral and social problems, we need the Humanities more than ever before.

More than this, we live in a world where we simply do not know where the "truth" lies; simply put, we do not know who to believe. In this context, there has never been a more important time for the Humanities, confronting as they must the confusion and misinformation of a connected world. The Humanities are the single place in the modern university where there is an antidote to incidental change. Language, which has for centuries been linear, is being replaced by the intuitive process of imaging and the creation of new forms of communication. Sven Birkerts could not be more explicit than when he observes that as a culture, "we have turned from depth [...] and are adapting ourselves to the ersatz of a vast lateral interconnectedness . . . that we are pledging instead to a faith in the web" (1994, 228). The result is that "we are leaderless and subject to terrors, masked as the freedom, of an absolutely relativities" (Birkerts 1994, 228). We are losing, some would say, our sense of the past, of how we got here. The bedrock of our humanity is being lost, and we do not have to look far for evidence. If the record is to be purged by the delete button, we will live in a world defined by the present, unaware of past mistakes and accomplishments. Surely

there has never been a time when the phrase “learning from our mistakes” or perhaps better, “learning from our achievements” is so important.

We cannot go backward. That the university is about practical education and wealth creation is not going to change. We know what students and their parents want – a good job – and we cannot blame them for gravitating towards disciplines where a job seems the natural outcome. We cannot, moreover, ignore that our universities are creatures of public policy notwithstanding their oft touted assumption of independence. So how, then, does one find a place where the Humanities and more applied disciplines coexist in the university? Simon Wortham in his book, *Rethinking the University, Leverage and Deconstruction* (1999) offers a possibility when he references Derridas’ metaphor of “walking on two feet” as presenting the “potentially paralyzing problem” of today’s universities (Wortham 1999, 11). Derridas' point is that walking is an awkward exercise in which balance is only achieved by pushing off on one foot or the other. According to Wortham, the image does not “create the impression of confident progress, concerted and coordinated movement forwards through concord or compromise.” The other is that it “presents a comic picture of awkwardly self-conscious perambulation” (Wortham 1999, 11).

Derridas' image gives us particular insight into the Humanities. In the standoff between the Humanities and the professional, scientific and technical disciplines, each constitutes one foot. The point is that the university in all its diversity is an awkward instrument that never seems to move forward. But move forward it does, as each foot leverages off the other in a process of continuous and evolving debate and dialogue. As odd an image as this is, it provides an interesting perspective by which we might assess the relationship between the Humanities and the rest of the university, each constituting as it does one foot. Without one or the other of its parts, the university would be paralyzed with little to confront or address. Harold Shapiro, former President of the University of Michigan and Princeton University, notes that Newman got it wrong in segregating out the liberal arts from the professional disciplines. He prefers instead Alfred North Whitehead’s view of the university: “The justification for a university is that it preserves the connection between knowledge and the zest for life [i.e., via the necessary movement of questions, ideas, and scholarship between professional schools and the center of research and teaching in the arts and sciences]” (Shapiro 2005, 115). In this regard, he insists, North American universities have been shaped by rival beliefs, and here he quotes W.E.B. Dubois, who observes that “education [...] [is] that organ of fine adjustment between real life and the knowledge of life” (Shapiro 2005, 115). It

is not therefore enough to bemoan the demise of the Humanities because the result would simply be the demise of the university as we know it. The Humanities survive because the alternative is unthinkable.

There was never more a time, then, for the Humanities to be forceful in striking out in defining its role for the future, which goes beyond students taking a smattering of arts courses, usually in their first year. In a world which has lost its moral compass, and in which we seem to have lost our capacity to critically see ourselves, the Humanities must have a public voice that reminds us of what the best of humanity represents. Simply put, it must become publicly relevant. The Humanities must reach out, must become a dominant force rather than retreating into self-serving publication and inward turning conversation. The Humanities cannot simply vacate the field, leaving universities to be institutions largely concerned with skills and training; and many have been the calls for an increased voice for the Humanities in our Humanities. In a recent editorial in *The Washington Post*, Eric Schatzberg expresses worries about how technology has become a thing rather than a human endeavour. Quoting Steve Jobs, “technology is not enough,” he expresses dismay at how the Humanities are rarely taught in Engineering Programs, ignoring how “technologies are only when people consciously transfer the material world for human ends.”³ His point is clear: a focus on things without understanding their impact on people is a dangerous game. We must only look at our current environmental crisis to know how far wrong we have gone.

Moreover, there are some positive developments. While Jeffrey William bluntly notes what others have said, that the “Humanities [...] are dying,” he celebrates a “new kind of Humanities, including a wave of hybrid fields such as the digital Humanities, environmental Humanities, energy Humanities, global Humanities, urban Humanities, food Humanities, medical Humanities, legal Humanities, and public Humanities” (William 2019), which encourage conversation with other disciplines, including STEM and the professional disciplines. While we are sometimes quick to judge the current generation of students, they have a keen sense of moral and social responsibility, perhaps because they see a world on which an older generation has wreaked havoc. If anything, we should give them the tools to fix a broken world. This new application of the

³ Eric Schatzberg, “Want to fix the tech industry? Start with the humanities,” [washingtonpost.com/outlook/2019/06/10/want-to-fix-industry-start-with-humanities/](https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2019/06/10/want-to-fix-industry-start-with-humanities/). See also Gerald Greenberg, “Why we still need to study the humanities in a STEM world,” [washingtonpost.com/news-answer-sheet/wp/2017/10/18.-why-we-still-need-to-study-the-humanities-in-a-stem-world](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news-answer-sheet/wp/2017/10/18.-why-we-still-need-to-study-the-humanities-in-a-stem-world)

Humanities must not, however, be at the expense of what the Humanities traditionally do. We still need to read the great works of literature give attention to the richness of philosophy, and understand the great religious traditions that have shaped the world in which we live today. This is the bedrock on which everything else stands, and it is one that must be held dear in our universities.

Religious Studies has much to contribute to this conversation because as a discipline it has been concerned, if not consumed, since its inception with issues of purpose and definition, and of trying to find a place in the secular university. Initially Religious Studies began as a big tent that covered everything from phenomenology and theology to Biblical Studies and the Anthropology of Religion.⁴ Any course with the word “religion” was scooped up into new Religious Studies departments. In time, this very breadth presented a limitation, ignoring as it often did the nature of individual religious experience. The “objectivity” of the secular disciplines is not something that works in the study of religion simply because religion itself is deeply personal. To understand and appreciate a religion one must achieve a sympathetic understanding of something that stands outside one’s own beliefs and cultural context. Surely this is the goal of all the Humanities, and one which is so nobly represented in the study of religion.

In his essay, “‘Religion’ and ‘Religious Studies’: No Difference at All,” Jonathan Smith seems to get at the essence of this debate when he expresses doubt that “religious studies constitutes a “coherent disciplinary matrix in and of itself.” There is, he says, “no unique idiom or language of religious studies.” It is “at best, only a mongrel, polyglot jargon [...] typical of the present academy.” Quoting Stephen Toumlin, Smith concludes that religion is a “would-be discipline” (2013, 81). Given an “absence of corporate consciousness,” the student of religion is “engaged in matters of choice” (Smith 2013, 81) and so Religious Studies becomes pretty much what anyone wants it to be. At the same time, the world is a complicated place and it is silly to assume that it can be organized into what are arbitrary academic departments. For Religious Studies, the challenge is not to look at the parts but at the whole, even as one recognizes the frustration of never fully understanding or appreciating what others think and believe. Here we are reminded of what Walter Capps wrote years ago now. He speaks of a “growing recognition that religious traditions themselves are not static or monolithic phenomena, but find their constantly

⁴ Perhaps most clearly indicated in Daniel L. Pals, *Nine Theories of Religion* (1996; rpt. 1886 Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

changing and shifting identity in contact and relationship with each other” (Capps 1995, 330). In this context the academic study of religion must recognize that “accurate depictions and portrayals of any one of them can only be rendered via an acknowledgement of the multiplex ways in which tradition has been shaped” (Capps 1995, 339).

Thirty years ago, I wrote in an article published in this journal about how Religious Studies must balance “the intellectual rigor of the academic enterprise with a subjective sympathy allowing one to appreciate what makes a particular religion unique” (Atkinson 1989, 21). My intent was to demonstrate that the struggles of those who study religion are no different than those who study literature. I referenced at that time Susan Sontag, who searches in criticism for “the luminousness of thing in itself” (Sontag 1972, 656). She writes how “the project of interpretation is largely reaction, stifling. Like the fumes of the automobile and of heavy industry which befoul the urban atmosphere, the effusion of interpretation [...] poisons our sensibilities” (Sontag 1972, 656). The critic’s function is not to interpret a work of literature, but to remove impediments that stand in the way of the reader’s experience of it. There is no final assessment of a piece of literature as there is no single interpretation. So, even as Stanley Fish worries about “an infinite regress of unstable interpretation,” criticism provides a “reassuring sequence in which one set of obvious and indisputable facts gives way to another”? (Fish 1989, 196). In aspiring to understand religion, the thing perhaps most fundamental to defining our *humanitas*, Religious Studies must operate in the same way offering an avenue of adjustment and accommodation in its continual looking outward, understanding that just as religion has infinite possibilities, there is no absolute definition of Religious Studies. In so doing, it provides for the Humanities a model of adjustment to dramatically changing circumstances. The study of religion opens the door to the other, and in so doing offers a way of seeing and appreciating the multiple ways of looking at our world.

The simple fact is that the world needs new ways of confronting its problems, as increasingly we retreat into positions of self-interest. There is not, as my students want, a single answer. There is perhaps nothing more personal than religious belief and perhaps nothing that separates us more. Perhaps the best place to begin is by stating we must not throw the baby out with the bath water. What Religious Studies has achieved in its seventy years or so of history is not be cast aside. It began with a sense of openness and possibility, at the time a new contribution to academic discourse. This voice is one to which the Humanities should listen, and indeed for a time it did.

It is not inappropriate to reference Thomas Merton as one of those rare souls which captures exactly what we should be doing. He allows that “the function of the university is to help men and women save their souls, and in doing to, to save their society” (2013, 434). From what does Merton feel we need saving? – “From the hell of meaninglessness, of obsession, of complex artifice, of systematic lying, of criminal evasions and neglects, of self-destructive futilities.” And what does he mean by soul? – “the mature personality, the creative fruit of an authentic and lucid search, the ‘self’ that is found after other partial and exterior selves have been discarded as masks” (Merton 2013, 434). Merton speaks with enormous prescience about our current time, and it is it is a voice which our students need to hear. It is the voice which the Humanities provides, and this is especially so for the study of religion.

It is not so much that students need to remember the details of any one religion, but that they can appreciate the multiple perspectives and the self-questioning they bring. No one would deny that the challenges facing our world are unprecedented, and that it is the students currently in our universities that will need to find the solutions. Many might suggest that we got ourselves into the current mess because we forgot our humanity, or we forgot about what constitutes the best of our humanity. Suffice it so say that religion references those elements of human experience that bring us a sense of completion. It is striking is that other of the Humanities aspire to the same thing, and many are the poets who have seen themselves as prophets possessing a unique sense of spiritual awareness. Let us then remember this, and cease looking inward, asserting instead the proper role of the Humanities in the academy.

Consumed as we are with the problems of the world, it is still necessary to return to the fundamentals if we stand any chance of fixing things. We do not have to dig too deeply to discover that much of what is happening in the world is rooted in religion, and that many of today’s conflicts grow from religious misunderstanding and intolerance. There are always multiple perspectives and the need for stepping into the other’s shoes. If nothing else, the academic study of religion allows one to do so, and to understand a diversity of belief and viewpoint. That Religious Studies might have something to say about the environment, about genetic modification, or about geopolitical violence goes without saying. Here one should be reminded of the excellent work done over the years by the Center for Religion and Society at the University of Victoria, committed as it is to “scholarly study of religion in relation to all aspects of human society, from law and politics to family and culture to history, the sciences and the arts” (Centre for the Studies in Religion and

Society 2020). Under the impressive leadership of Harold Coward, the Center has addressed such issues as population growth, family life, climate change, and health care, and in this regard should serve as a model for Religious Studies both inside and outside the classroom. This is an important model for the future, one that looks outward to the world rather than inward to the sometimes arcane interests of a discipline.

As with other of the Humanities, Religious Studies needs to look for forms of application in a real world, even as it remains true to what might sometimes seem as erudite and irrelevant scholarship. Like it or not, most people see teaching as the primary function of universities. While we place emphasis on scholarship as a way of maintaining the richness of what we do, our most important product is the students we graduate, for it is these students who will ultimately transform our world. The contributions Religious Studies makes must be based on the richness of religious experience, which must be reflected in how we discuss and write about religion, and, equally important, in how we teach our students.

To be human is to be limited and not to know. Religious Studies as an academic discipline allows us to confront the limitations and possibilities embedded in our beliefs. Bloom might warn us that every tradition is a colonizing one. We begin searching for answers; if we believe we find them, we automatically assume their currency. If anything, Religious Studies is an antidote to this (see Heys 2014). Years ago now, I said in an address to the Vedanta Congress that we might usefully use the term *moksa* to mean the freedom from the narrowness that characterizes so much of our universities today. This should be the aim for the Humanities as it finds voice in the university. Surely it is not too much to ask that as we produce the next generation of decision makers we take back the centre. We must not unwittingly set aside concern that the Humanities are in crisis. There is real evidence for concern, and the fact remains that conferences and discussion groups are not going to stem the flow. Rather it requires a board and sustained effort to right the ship and bring balance to what our universities do. In this we must look outward from our disciplines and drop the pretence that generates never ending discussion of who we are and what we do. This is the least we can expect.

Yes, there is considerable scepticism in our universities about the continuing value of the Humanities, and the forces of the conservative right loom as a major danger. But perhaps one might better ask what our universities would be like without the universities, devolving as they would to institutions, quite simply, without heart. Scholarship and creative work remain important

as critical elements of the scholarly enterprise, but we need to cast an eye backward to Theodore Roszak's essay, "On Academic Delinquency," where he excoriates "mindless specialization and irrelevant pedantry" (Roszak 1967, 36). It remains that one of the Humanities most important aims is to take the best of who we are as human beings and shape and transform it to the changing circumstances of the future.

More than anything else, this occurs in the classroom. The most important legacy universities have is not the research produced by its faculty members, but the graduates who will directly, we hope, impact on a world in serious need of help. This is what must be brought into our classrooms. So, then, it is profitable to remember what Robertson Davies wrote so long ago, that "whatever we do and whatever we find out, we must make our beginning from what we are, and surely the relevance and importance of the humanities in the present day is that they can make us better able to approach the great tasks that lie before us" (Davies 4).

Whatever we say about the Humanities we also say about the study of religion. No one questions the profound influence religion has exercised on every Humanities discipline. To understand religion and its influences on virtually every dimension of our cultural life is the least we can expect a university to provide. So, as my own career closes. I do not worry about the future, even as I admit that worry perhaps comes naturally to the Humanities. Who and what we are is not a thing, something frozen in time. We evolve and how we confront the world must also evolve. Change is inevitable, even as recognize that there remain certain inviolable values which draw us together as human beings. Despite differences among traditions this is what the study of religion provides, and for this we must be grateful. It is this message of openness, tolerance, and understanding that constitute the Humanities. I take heart in hoping that the thousands of students who have come through our classes leave with an appreciation of the richness of human experience, and a commitment to make tomorrow better than today.

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