
The Experiment

The Experiment features innovative and creative forays that promise to test the conventions of the field. Whether moving nimbly between subfields and disciplines or offering meta-reflections on business-as-usual, these essays give pause in moments bearing new or further consideration. In this special double issue, we have two collaborative pieces that promise to give you something to talk about. The first takes on the field's reticence to grapple with the *raison d'être* of doctoral education in light of a disappearing tenure-track. The second posits a road map for studying scholarly values in the academic study of religion broadly defined so that cooler, or at least more informed heads, may prevail in future debates.

Religious Studies Beyond the Discipline: A Manifesto on Earning and Awarding a Ph.D.¹

Andrew Ali Aghapour, Shannon Trospen Schorey, Thomas J. Whitley, Vaia Touna,
and Russell T. McCutcheon

<https://doi.org/10.1558/bsor.26013>

Relying on the collaborative input from doctoral graduates in the study of religion who have gone on to successful careers outside of academia, this essay offers a critique of the field for not adapting far quicker to the changing economic conditions of higher education over recent decades but also provides a variety of practical suggestions for how programs in our field can make tactical and substantive changes to better prepare graduate students for a far wider variety of professional futures, inasmuch as we all know that few, at least for the foreseeable future, will ever be hired as tenure-track faculty members.

On Saturday, March 12, 2022, the second remote panel of the annual Method & Theory in the Study of Religion section at the southeast regional conference of the American Academy of Religion featured an open discussion with Andrew Ali Aghapour, Shannon Trospen Schorey, and Thomas J. Whitley. As described in the conference program:

This panel and discussion focus on the relevance of the skills gained in Religious Studies classes—skills that prepare students for a wider variety of futures than may not at first be apparent to both them and their professors. The panelists—all holding recent Ph.D.s in the study of religion—will discuss their experience creating successful professional futures for themselves, with an eye toward making practical recommendations that Departments of Religious Studies can adopt to better serve their B.A., M.A., and Ph.D. students.

Because so few people sometimes attend such sessions, despite the fact that, at least in this case, the issues being addressed impact *the entire profession*, the panelists and organizers decided that the message of the panel was well worth amplifying by collaborating on a follow-up publication.² What follows, then, is both a brief rationale for such a manifesto and a series of practical recommendations aimed at various members of the field. Some of these recommendations can be easily implemented or have an immediate effect while others require long term commitment, careful monitoring, and the commitment of continuing resources. Our proposals are designed to help students, faculty, and administrators address longstanding trends in the Humanities that, in our estimation, greatly constrain the field, both now and for the foreseeable future. For instance, earning the highest research degree in the Humanities continues, for the most part, to be conceived as a way of credentialing those seeking employment as a tenure-track faculty member, but this is an assumption that we find to be far too limiting given worrisome trends in higher ed; it overlooks the many other benefits that holding such a graduate degree in the Humanities can offer, if only we were all more intentional and entrepreneurial about training graduate students.

Concerning the recommendations that follow: while these may be read as mere suggestions or perhaps strong guidance, they are in fact intended as necessary

directives and even imperatives—thus our characterization of this document as a manifesto: a public declaration of something more than evident to the authors; for, in our estimation, the time is now long past when graduate programs in the field might merely consider implementing such proposals. Instead, continuing on well-trod curricular paths without reassessing the overall *purpose* and then also the *process* of earning a Humanities research degree in the early twenty-first century strikes the authors as irresponsible and reckless. Especially, if we consider the accumulated debt on the part of students and, as will be described below, the various stressors that have adversely impacted academia's job market over past decades. The intention behind this document is therefore to start a national conversation between students and faculty, spanning Departments and perhaps even national boundaries, to the benefit of the entire field.

But with the study of religion specifically in mind, our hope is also to inspire members of the field to reconsider how they carry out their work and thereby train their students. Starting with the suggestion that religion and any of its sub-components (i.e., those things commonly known as religious traditions, myths, rituals, texts, organizations, etc.), is no longer seen as uniquely meaningful, we would argue that the non-field specific methods necessary for novel and interesting work in our field (e.g., description, comparison, analysis, etc.) can also be applied in innumerable career settings, most of which are distant from both the university and what the study of religion has long been assumed to be about. For despite the days of seeing the culmination of our training to lie in pastoral or divinity training being long behind us, assumptions about religion's special nature remain prominent enough that few in our field seem able to think creatively about how our degree programs can be reconfigured in such trying times, to ensure not only that all of our students can find satisfying careers for themselves but that the field continues to offer classes and degree programs to interested students and to find a new relevance beyond the academy. Our hope, in writing this manifesto, is to help lead the field in just that direction.

Preamble

The challenges now facing newly minted Ph.D.s in the Humanities who are seeking full-time, let alone tenure-track, employment in academia are profoundly

obvious to anyone with even just a passing familiarity with disillusioned academics posting sobering anecdotes about the current job market to various social media sites. What is sometimes not as evident, however, is that this is a challenge for the future of the entire field, if not the profession of being a university professor itself, rather than something that is simply isolated to a delimited set of individuals who now happen to have the unfortunate task of looking for work in academia; to rephrase, individualizing what in our estimation is a structural issue is a misrecognition that will only perpetuate the problem, as if having just one more peer review article listed on a C.V. would have made an applicant a contender. But sadly, this is precisely what has happened over the preceding few decades; for the bottom began falling out of viable academic careers in the Humanities long before many who are now confronting its challenges were born and, again in our estimation, little has so far been done in our field to address it *in a systematic and effective manner*.

Now, in observing the longevity of the problem it certainly must be noted that the extent to which the so-called academic jobs crisis has increased since, for example, the 2008 worldwide financial collapse, let alone in the wake of COVID-19 protocol's more recent and sometimes dire effects on government budgets and thus university funding (what some now refer to as the COVID-recession), has heightened the problem dramatically.³ However, despite what undoubtedly now feels to some as a change in kind and not just extent, the longstanding nature of this problem means that virtually no one now working in academia can plead ignorance to the challenges currently facing those who are hoping to become full-time members of the field.⁴ For we cannot forget that those faculty who have just reached, or are nearing, retirement came of age as young scholars in the mid-to late-1980s, when the once hoped-for retirement of the academic generation that had hastily been hired to teach the waves of post-World War II baby boomers (who began entering the university from the mid-1960s onward) failed to materialize, thereby giving the lie to the late-1980s and early-1990s tales of plentiful academic jobs to come. Unfortunately, what did come during this period was a steady decline in government budgets⁵ and changing university priorities. Administrators during this period made the rational (at least in economic terms) decision to reduce instructional costs by staffing much of the university with far less expensive limited term

full-time, part-time, and adjunct teachers, or those now collectively known as contingent faculty (i.e., the variety of faculty whose appointments are not on the tenure-track).⁶ It is therefore almost impossible to imagine many who are now working in academia as being oblivious to this trend, one that has disproportionately impacted those academic disciplines often grouped together as the Humanities, in distinction from the so-called Social Sciences as well as the disciplines that comprise the Natural Sciences.⁷ As a result of decades of cuts and reallocations of resources the smooth career path once assumed to govern the lives of students entering the field (i.e., earning a B.A. then an M.A., entering a Ph.D. and within four to five years applying for and gaining employment in a tenure-track faculty line) ceased to be a credible presumption some time ago. In fact, it has become increasingly common for many who have earned the highest degree in the field to have little choice but to work in perpetually insecure contingent positions in academia, sometimes simultaneously at multiple colleges, or (again, exercising a rational choice of their own) to leave the university entirely for what are, by and large, self-invented positions in other sectors of the economy (sometimes referred to as alt-ac careers)⁸—positions and thus careers almost completely unanticipated by (and therefore usually uncelebrated by) their doctoral programs. The pressures requiring our doctoral students to shift their career plans have by now made this “alternate” career path the norm in many cases, which makes our field’s lack of collective action to address it all the more damning.

This means that, notably in the Humanities and especially in the study of religion, faculty who long ago gained the seniority necessary to now administer Departments, along with their undergraduate and graduate programs, cannot plead that any of this is news to them. But, as already suggested, there has been little, if any, structural changes in the way that our profession trains its graduate students and our reason for doing so. To phrase it another way, providing teaching experience, implementing C.V. writing workshops, mentoring cover-letter writing, or instituting mock academic job interviews—innovations that are now pretty routine in some, but not all, of our field’s graduate programs—are, despite the fanfare which sometimes accompanies them, entirely inadequate developments that function as responses to problems facing the field decades ago. They are insufficient today because they fail to address the realities facing early career scholars

who have *few if any* academic jobs to which they can even apply. This makes it all the more troubling to realize that, despite a very few notable exemptions, the M.A. degree’s curriculum and requirements are still generally seen as preparatory for applying to a doctoral program and the curriculum and requirements for the doctorate still largely presume eventual work as an advanced researcher employed as a faculty member.⁹ For a variety of reasons—such as the many current faculty members who have succumbed to the career’s many inducements and perks—there has been little thinking outside of the box when it comes to redesigning both undergraduate and graduate curricula from the ground up, along with rethinking the rationale for earning our field’s highest research degree, in the context of a radically changed economy and thus university. For, as already suggested, despite the manner in which society of the late-twentieth and early-twenty-first centuries has changed—like it or not—graduate education in our field still functions much as it has for over one hundred years, i.e., identifying an ever more focused and therefore arcane research specialty and investigating it for an extended period of time, for the benefit of an invariably small group of like-interested specialists. But how the definitional, descriptive, comparative, interpretive, and explanatory skills regularly taught and used in our programs might impact fields that have little to do with the data of the Religious Studies classroom (what some recently named as applied religious studies) has been largely unexplored.¹⁰

While faculty inaction in these trying circumstances has, in our view, certainly contributed to the problems now facing early career scholars—anecdotes of graduate students still arriving on the job market with little to no preparation from their doctoral advisors are too numerous to mention here, as are the doctoral supervisors who apparently continue to see anything occupying a grad student’s time (e.g., publishing peer review essays, writing books reviews, networking and presenting at conferences, gaining teaching experience, etc.) as an unworthy distraction from writing a so-called “field changing dissertation”—we would be remiss not to acknowledge that current faculty members are themselves often working in undesirable situations of their own, *created by the very same factors that have so constrained the job market in recent decades*: from ever-increasing teaching and service expectations placed upon them to escalating expectations from administrators for more annual research, publishing, and citation productivity. It therefore seems unlikely that

many of these faculty—people understandably intent to put their own traditional training to good use in largely traditional graduate programs—see any incentive to posing some of the tough questions about why someone might wish to earn a graduate degree in the study of religion, despite the fact that the onetime linkage between that credential and secure and rewarding full-time work in higher education has turned out to be more mythic than actual.¹¹ Instead, their time is likely best used, or so they may reason, in devising ways to lighten their own teaching duties so as to publish more, something still seen by many as their ticket toward their individual career progress. That their own continued relevance and even the future of their departments (thereby impacting their own future employment as faculty) might be linked to finally posing difficult structural questions about graduate education, and entertaining how to rethink their degree programs and even departments as a whole, may therefore be lost on them, what with their short term focus and creative energy so often devoted mostly to the many daily tasks that frequently accompany faculty in the modern university.¹² But even those faculty who may make honest efforts towards such changes often have little choice but to do so on an individual level, with their creative endeavors sometimes running against obstacles which are beyond their control—from the inertia of colleagues and departments to the expectations of university administrators and credentialing associations.

And so it is with all of this in mind that we return to the 2022 regional AAR session that bore the name of this paper's main title, as well as the following succinct list of directives from those who are best placed to offer them, i.e., recent alums of U.S. doctoral programs who, thanks to their own creativity, energy, and networking, are succeeding elsewhere but who retain enough affinity with the programs that trained them as scholars to prompt them each to reach back to assist us all to move forward in novel and effective ways. The goal, then, is to help stimulate students and faculty (i) to recognize, without illusions, the actual conditions in which they today work and (ii) to organize around a series of practical, if incremental, changes that can have a consequential effect—changes that may involve reconsidering the reasons for embarking on graduate education in the field, what one does during such training, and what can be done with such degrees after graduation. So, the key is to rethink M.A. and Ph.D. programs in the Humanities based on the changes and

demands of our current state of affairs, amplifying to the extent possible not just the content of our work but also the many skills that we all know a degree in the Humanities can offer; we need to be more intentional about conveying those skills and integrating their applicability into the structure of graduate programs.

While we do not delude ourselves into thinking that any such list of suggestions will ever be definitive or even constructive in all settings, coming as the following list largely does from a group of doctoral graduates who have successfully built diverse careers for themselves outside of academia—often despite a lack of mentoring toward such an end—we have confidence that those entering or already enrolled in graduate programs as well as those who are contributing to and administering them will benefit from the hard won experience that animates each of these suggestions (which are organized around their intended audience). And should, as we hope, this list as a whole, and the rationale that drives it, prompt larger and ongoing conversations across the field, concerning how the study of religion can survive or perhaps even thrive in higher ed's current conditions, then all the better. For while it may appear as mere semantics to some, framing our present setting as a crisis, as we at times have done in the above, may itself be part of the problem.¹³ Perhaps it is instead an opportunity to do something entirely new with the sometimes taken-for-granted or even overlooked, unrecognized and unrewarded skills that we've all along been learning in our classes, teaching to our students, and relying upon in our lives.

Theses

Generalities

1. If the medium is the message, then in an ever-increasing digital and market-based world our traditional Humanities message is becoming increasingly irrelevant.
2. We therefore have to make the change that we want to see become part of the system. That is, change at a single department or program-level is not sufficient. Changes must be scalable and widely applied and so we need to institutionalize our reimagining of the humanities doctoral degree among deans, provosts, presidents, state university systems, professional associations, and conferences, let alone among the general public, government, and the so-called private sector.

3. It is up to us to explain to a variety of constituencies why what we do matters and to do so in ways that those outside our field in particular and academia in general can understand. Therefore, universities, graduate schools, departments, and programs must invest time, money, and bureaucratic goodwill into modeling and fostering high quality public scholarship that is integrated into the heart of graduate training. This means preparing faculty and graduate students to effectively communicate to the broader public through the media and proactively working to connect media outlets with relevant researchers.

4. Just as nothing must be taught (Smith 1991, 187), no tradition associated with graduate education must be continued; this applies chiefly to producing the monograph-length dissertation as a culminating work. It is long past time for terminal research projects that mix media, outputs, and intended audiences. For the once standard focus on writing seminar papers, comprehensive or general exams, and a dissertation all prioritize single authorship at the expense of co-authorship, editing, public writing, curation, media production, design, public humanities, and community work—skills that are increasingly important even within the university. Departments should therefore aim to replace at least one-third of graduate student output with more diverse and transferable forms of intellectual work. In doing so we should think creatively, along the lines of pop-up public art installations or writing action item memos for elected officials, integrating collaborative projects with local businesses into graduate programs and training students to work with big data in ways that are transferable to innumerable other fields, as just a few examples.

5. Freelancing and so-called alternative careers are no longer the exception, but the norm (indicating the limited relevance of the onetime popular “alt-ac” terminology). Training graduate students in grant writing, media production, consulting, and other transferable skills is now essential for the professional success of students and the survival of the discipline.

6. Simply put, Humanities graduate (and perhaps even undergraduate) programs must adapt or die—even if only to maintain the modicum of relevance required to stave off department closures.

Specifics: Faculty

1. Acknowledge and share the accomplishments of all of your alums, regardless of the careers they create

for themselves (i.e., not just those few who land tenure track jobs). This can be done in a variety of ways and at a variety of sites:

1.A. Create alumni awards that recognize the wide array of professional successes among your alums, to celebrate the outstanding work of those working in all post-doctoral settings. Acknowledge alumni who have sustained engagement with the program, such as those you invite back to participate in career workshops or roundtables. Such events highlight the ways alumni use their skills in a variety of careers and contexts, lending substance and thus credibility to what might otherwise may seem like marketing and rebranding claims on the part of the department.

1.B. Bringing alumni back to talk at an awards event or careers event bolsters the network of contemporary students who are able to ask particulars about what other sorts of work careers involve, how the alumni moved into that field or industry, how the alumni uses their training and skill sets, and how an interested student may do the same. These events also place interested students in the alumni’s own social networks, enhancing the students’ visibility.

1.C. Create and highlight alumni profiles on the Department’s website; in fact, instead of writing lengthy essays about how degrees translate, consider instead listing recent alumni job titles and provide alumni profiles for recent graduates, in other words, show don’t tell. Place this list alongside (or combined with) tenure track placement information, to help acknowledge that these are not alt-ac jobs but legitimate professions and careers that your program’s graduate training has helped to make possible for onetime students.

1.D. Invite alumni to be in contact with the Department once a year to further cultivate a larger sense of community, to the benefit of both the alums and the current students (instill in the current students an eventual responsibility they have to those who will one day follow them in your program). What are they doing now? Where are they working? Consider an alumni reunion outside of an annual conference (inasmuch as professional conferences in the field are likely not rallying points for many of your alums).

2. Bring alums in non-academic jobs back to the program in structured and official ways beyond one-time career events, to serve as mentors, capstone project supervisors, and perhaps even full-time faculty. In doing so, and in recognition of the constraints already on those faculty who may already wish to be part of the

solution, departments can enhance their ability to proactively link the skills that are acquired in the program to life and careers beyond the tenure-track. In other words, let those who have become experts in how to apply religious studies beyond the discipline help to shape the future of the discipline.

3. Recognize graduate training as a job and compensate it accordingly. This may mean admitting fewer students in favor of offering a sustainable living wage to those who are admitted, aiming to compensate students relative to or competitive with related entry level professional jobs in teaching, administration, and research. In other words, do not rely on students to supplement their income with loans; loans do not make a doctoral wage livable, given the extended pause in savings, retirement investments, etc., while one is enrolled in graduate school.

4. Address the language problem so widespread in academia, i.e., this is a problem of categorization, with which many scholars of religion are now more than familiar. For example, such terms as “training” or “student” can denote an apprenticeship model that is baked into the whole system and which is no longer credible or viable. Graduate students are currently categorized as “staff” or “student” inconsistently and when it’s institutionally convenient (e.g., when it comes time to consider benefits or wage increases). While changing job titles may seem superficial, it has material effects. Determining a new nomenclature will provoke faculty to rethink what it is that students are doing; for if the tenure track Religious Studies job market will only hold a small fraction of your alumni, then what are your current students actually training to do? How else can you categorize their work, especially if so many of them work in careers outside the academy?

5. In making changes to your curriculum, don’t over pivot into the logics of the market. Yes, graduate school provides lots of skills that can translate readily and impressively into corporate and nonprofit sectors (see “build a portfolio” above), but if we convert humanities graduate school into “job training” (for some idealized but otherwise undefined future position) then what makes graduate school such a desirable experience for many succumbs to the logics of capital markets. In the best scenario, graduate school is time spent reading, thinking, writing—it is a good life; it does not have to be training for a specific set of next steps if it is a fairly compensated job that helps graduate students to build skills and portfolios for the next step in their

career. Very few jobs outside of the academy have such clear lines of career promotion—i.e., there is a treadmill model within the university system wherein one is presumed to advance from graduate school to the tenure track, and from the ranks of assistant to associate, full, and, eventually, the status of emeritus. But this is now a possibility for precious few, and part of the problem the field now faces is one of trying to reimagine the first steps of this treadmill. Reinventing the research degree as job training merely reinscribes the problem; for, outside of academia, a person might take a job for a few years, gain skills, learn more about their strengths, motivations, etc., and move to a rather different job to take on new challenges once they have built a set of experiences and portfolio of work. How can a research degree prepare a student for this sort of professional life?

6. Invest far more in ongoing professional development. Some programs have already begun hosting workshops for professional skills like C.V., grant, and application writing, along with interviewing, peer teaching assessment, etc. But all of these initiatives are part of a model that presumes the doctoral degree is preparation for a career as a professor. Departments should therefore add additional skills that readily translate outside of the academy, such as creating resumes and professional websites for each student, identifying extracurricular courses that are easy additions to graduate training and which enhance so-called stretch skills.

7. Revise courses so that they culminate in the creation of public portfolios. This entails complementing traditional assignments, like journal publications, essays, etc., with public-facing materials that will help grad students to build professional portfolios of their own. Such new assignments can involve reading notes, blogs, quantitative research findings, etc., that are easily made public and can be included as professional samples that demonstrate skills beyond the usual content expertise which we have long assessed via essays, comprehensive exams, and dissertations.

8. Revise letters of recommendation so that students can use them outside of the traditional tenure track job market. This will require faculty to convert parts of what are more than likely their standard recommendation letters, knowing that parts may be used publicly, such as blurbs that can be posted on LinkedIn, professional websites, etc.

9. Encourage students to become involved in summer internships (on and off-campus) and freelance

work—opportunities and professional relationships that the Department itself should invest time in establishing (i.e., creating a service role among the faculty for the Director of Internships). Internships, if paid, and such freelance work can boost grads pay, enhance networking, and provide practical experience between academic school years. This, of course, will require supervisors and programs to adjust summer research expectations accordingly. Encourage students to take on paid, professional freelance work early to build their portfolios and work with grad students to understand when something can count in both “buckets”—e.g., writing a journal article, editing or indexing for a senior scholar, designing syllabi for a department are all things that can and should bolster a freelance portfolio, exemplifying specific and tangible skills.

10. Address gatekeeping in the profession and a sometimes common lack of imagination among faculty members and students alike who may fail to understand how the game of academia has changed. The ecology and hierarchy of graduate school places inordinate pressure on students to align with their mentors’ interests, choices, and values. If mentors do not believe in success outside of the tenure track, or work to make it possible, this problem (and stigma) will remain.

11. Public scholarship and social media have become a proportionally large part of academic and so-called alt-academic work. The curriculum for graduate training must reflect that. This should include training not only in how to participate in or manage these discourses, but also focus on their history, their power structures, and the ethical complexities entailed in this form of public discourse—all topics on which many Religious Studies graduate students are already working, though admittedly in different historical periods, regions, and media.

Specifics: Students

1. Learn to identify and communicate the basic and desirable skills that you bring to projects, which means learning how to translate your routine scholarly work for people that are well outside of the academy and who may therefore not take this work for granted. For instance, saying that one has experience teaching, researching, and writing can be broken down into the more basic elements or components of each, such as: “identify and accomplish incremental goals,”

“navigate and align interests of multiple stakeholders, to find collaborative solutions to problems,” “lead and motivate team members in the service of specific tasks,” “train and evaluate team members in existing processes and best practices,” “survey, summarize, and synthesize large data sets,” or “convey findings succinctly to wide audiences in a variety of formats.”

2. It’s never too early to begin to build portfolios that are exemplary of each of your diverse skills. Just as a C.V. is not necessarily the same as a resume (and knowing the difference is itself a key item), lists of publications you have written, conferences you have attended or courses you have taught are not the same as discrete examples of the work that you have accomplished. To help accomplish this, Departments should prioritize the production of tangible, public-facing work that credits individual students for specific roles. Masters-level work, especially, should help students produce freelance portfolios and practice working with teams.

3. It’s also never too early to begin to build networks—within the field, yes, but also beyond the field, and especially outside of academia. You may rely on such relationships, and the knowledge gained by working within or moving across fields and professions, far more than you had originally anticipated, whether eventually working in a university or not. Graduate students will be more likely to succeed if they cultivate broad professional networks beyond the university.

4. Practice translating your essays, book reviews, courses, etc., into a form that appeals to, or is more accessible to a broad, public audience (the so-called Public Humanities). Use the material on which you are already working to create blogs, write for local papers, etc.—i.e., see each of these as ways to expand your networks and to practice writing for and thereby working with a wide readership.

5. Identify what are now sometimes referred to as “stretch skills” (skills that are outside of your current competencies) that pair with your ongoing classes and research, i.e., what can you learn each year that does not overburden your time and energy but which complements your career choices—whatever you end up doing. Traditionally, some academics saw their writing as a vehicle for wider careers in publishing (e.g., enhancing such skills as copyediting or indexing) but today those stretch skills could just as easily involve acquiring the computing and research design skills common throughout what is now known as the Digital Humanities.

6. Talk with freelancers, alumni, and other community members to understand what kinds of work are possible with the skills that you bring to the table. This can help you to understand how to talk to others about your skills and also what to charge for the kinds of services that you can offer, should freelancing (while a student or as a career later) be in your future.

7. Collaborate and share materials openly and generously with your cohort and networks. Send one another opportunities, edit one another's work (bonus: put that in your freelance portfolio), and continue to ask questions. Celebrate your peers' success.

Afterword: The Bonfire of the Humanities

When a wood cabin catches fire in the winter, it is reasonable to assume that its inhabitants will first try to put it out with snow or whatever is at hand. If that fails, they will quickly try to move their belongings to safety and continue to try to extinguish the blaze. However, if the fire keeps burning still, there may come a point when all that is left to do is to enjoy the fire for its remaining warmth and perhaps cook something in the embers. As scholars of rites and feasts, we may be uniquely equipped to find excess in such disciplinary destruction, able to transform chaos into fleeting joy. But we are hopeful that proactive members of our field, along with those working across the fields commonly collected as the Humanities, can intervene well before it comes to this. But such intervention first requires us to smell the smoke and then to realize not just that our house is on fire but that it has been burning for quite some time.

Acknowledgements

Our thanks to Jacob Barrett and Erica Bennett, graduate students in the study of religion at the University of North Carolina and the University of Alabama, respectively, for their assistance proofing and commenting on an earlier draft of this essay.

About the Authors

Andrew Ali Aghapour (Ph.D. University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill) is the managing editor of *Religion for Breakfast*; he is also a comedian and artistic producer.

Shannon Trosper Schorey (Ph.D. University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill) is a writer, editor, and scholar in the tech industry; as Principal Communications Specialist, her work at Red Hat focuses on emerging and cloud technologies.

Thomas Whitely (Ph.D. Florida State University) worked in university administration before transitioning to politics and local government; from 2018-2022 he served as the Chief of Staff for John Dailey, the mayor of Tallahassee, Florida, and he is currently the Director of Strategic Innovation for the City of Tallahassee.

Vaia Touna (Ph.D. University of Edmonton) is Associate Professor in the Department of Religious Studies at the University of Alabama and co-Chair of the method & theory section of the American Academy of Religion's southeast region.

Russell T. McCutcheon (Ph.D. University of Toronto) is University Research Professor and Chair of the Department of Religious Studies at the University of Alabama and co-Chair of the method & theory section of the American Academy of Religion's southeast region.

Notes

- [1] The following essay anchors a forthcoming Equinox volume, *Religious Studies Beyond the Discipline: On Earning and Awarding a Humanities Ph.D.*, which will include, among other chapters, invited replies from Amy Defibaugh (American Academy of Religion), Barbara Rossetti Ambros and Randall Styers (University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill), David Frankfurter (Department of Religion, Boston University), Martin Kavka (Department of Religious Studies, Florida State University), and Richard A. Rosengarten (University of Chicago Divinity School).
- [2] We are grateful to the students and faculty—several of whom were from Florida State's program (long noted for providing many of its doctoral students with abundant undergraduate teaching experience)—who attended and also participated in the panel's wide-ranging discussion.
- [3] On February 17, 2021, the nonpartisan Center on Budget and Policy Priorities observed that between 2008 and 2019 (once it had adjusted for inflation over the decade): U.S. higher ed funding from governments had already decreased by \$3.4 billion; thirty seven states cut per-student funding, six of those states by 30 percent (the average cut was \$1,033 [or 11%] per student); tuition at public four-year colleges went up by \$2,576 (35%; in ten states it increased by more than 50%) and at community colleges it increased by \$1,098 (37%). To put a finer edge on this, these

numbers all predate the effects of the COVID-inspired recession (see <https://www.cbpp.org/research/state-budget-and-tax/states-can-choose-better-path-for-higher-education-funding-in-covid> [accessed March 15, 2022]) (Jackson and Saenz 2021).

- [4] Among the early examples that seems to have gone largely unheeded in the field were the essays from over twenty years ago collected together as “Late Capitalism Arrives on Campus: Making and Remaking the Study of Religion,” published in *Bulletin of the Council of Societies for the Study of Religion* 26/1 (1997). For another example from this era, see also Russell T. McCutcheon, “‘We’re All in this Together’: Some Resources for Thinking about Academic Labor,” *Bulletin of the Council of Societies for the Study of Religion* 27/3 (1998): 70–73. (McCutcheon 1998, 70–73).
- [5] Which have resulted in far more of the costs for their education continually being passed along to students and their families via regular tuition increases over the past decades.
- [6] According to a 2018 study from the American Association of University Professors, “at all US institutions combined, the percentage of instructional positions that is off the tenure track amounted to 73 percent in 2016.” As the report goes on to note: “For the most part, these are insecure, unsupported positions with little job security and few protections for academic freedom” (see Overall Trends at <https://www.aaup.org/sites/default/files/10112018%20Data%20Snapshot%20Tenure.pdf> [accessed March 15, 2022]).
- [7] Of course, there are those in fields largely unaffected by these financial conditions who seem blissfully unaware, as evidenced most recently by a viral tweet, from a geneticist, praising academic work and lamenting the number of colleagues opting to leave for industry. That the thread was tone deaf to the plight of Humanities scholars was made profoundly evident in its many responses. For the original tweet see: <https://twitter.com/DrDanielleDick/status/1502288826479398912> (first posted on March 11, 2022) (Dick 2022).
- [8] As will become clear, we resist this designation, inasmuch as it still represents careers in academia as the norm and others as “alternatives”; instead, as recommended below, we advise redesigning graduate education as preparing its students for a very wide breadth of careers, only one of which involves seeking positions as faculty members.
- [9] Without belaboring the point, the Department in which two of the authors work, at the University of Alabama, is one such exception to the rule, inasmuch as it offers an M.A. degree focused on, among other things, digital humanities skills that intentionally prepares its students for a wide variety of professional futures, both within and outside of academia. And we would be remiss not to also mention the M.A. in Religious Studies at Georgia State and its working relationship with their local Wellstar Health Systems as well as such things as their certificate in nonprofit management and concentration on religion and aging. Concerning the last, see the podcast: <https://www.religiousstudiesproject.com/podcast/applied-religious-studies-at-georgia-state-university/> (posted December 16, 2019). (Bassett and McConeghy 2019). The AAR’s Applied Religious Studies Committee is also worth noting, though as yet we see no practical effect across the nation from the various “conversations” sponsored by this committee.
- [10] It should be noted that there are debates around just what “applied religious studies” entails. Given the manner in which the object of study in our field is often taken as self-evident (and thus left largely undefined), the data of the field has sometimes been assumed to have obvious relevance beyond a narrower or more traditional view of the study of religion; this can entail an approach to “application” that assumes the scholar of religion to bring a needed perspective to some seemingly non-religious topic or field, given their expertise in studying such things as myths, scriptures, or symbols, etc. A different approach is to emphasize the methods rather than the content, thereby seeing the wider contribution of the scholar of religion to rest on their skills *despite* the historic situation, people, or texts and actions where they happen to have honed them during their studies. In such cases, applied religious studies can result in work in domains or careers that would sensibly strike many as having nothing at all to do with religion. Which of these two approaches is adopted will, to be sure, impact the extent to which the field’s training can be applied.
- [11] Case in point, consider reactions to the 2021 streaming series, “The Chair,” in which it was frequently observed that its Department of English was represented as having no adjuncts or graduate students generating the bulk of the credit hour production that largely justifies the existence of such a department today. Instead, the series—as progressive as it was celebrated by some as being (what with having a female Chair who was also a member of a racial minority)—portrayed an outmoded version of a university Department (i.e., comprised of tenure-track or tweeded tenured professors) that was more akin to memories of the 1950s than the practical realities of the twenty-first century.
- [12] The amount of mundane report writing, compliance trainings, grant writing, meetings, as well as professional, university, college, department, and even community service can, for many, be completely overwhelming—all of which is then compounded by the effort to responsibly prepare for classes, engage students outside of class time, while also devoting

time to one's own research and publication. That the demands of a personal life and family responsibilities have not even been mentioned should signal what are for many the shortcomings that are now associated with a career that was once widely assumed to be elite and desirable.

[13] We think here of Aaron Hughes's plenary address to the 2021 annual meeting of the North American Association for the Study of Religion, which challenged attendees to focus on the rhetoric of crisis itself (Hughes 2021).

References

Bassett, Molly. 2019. Interview by David McConeghy. "Applied Religious Studies at Georgia State University." December 16, 2019. In The Religious Studies Project. Podcast, MP3 audio, 37:50. <https://www.religiousstudiesproject.com/podcast/applied-religious-studies-at-georgia-state-university/>

Dick, Danielle [@DrDanielleDick]. 2022. "My feed is full of people leaving academia for industry. I'm not saying academia is perfect, but I love being a professor and think academia can be a wonderful career option. A thread on why." Twitter, March 11, 2022, 8:22 a.m. <https://twitter.com/DrDanielleDick/status/1502288826479398912>

Hughes, Aaron. 2021. "Crisis? What Crisis? The Study of Religion is Always in Crisis." Plenary address presented virtually at the North American Association for the Study of Religion, Nov 12–14, 2021.

Jackson, Victoria and Matt Saenz. 2021. States Can Choose Better Path for Higher Education Funding in COVID-19 Recession. Washington, DC: Center on Budget and Policy Priorities. <https://www.cbpp.org/research/state-budget-and-tax/states-can-choose-better-path-for-higher-education-funding-in-covid>

McCutcheon, Russell T. 1998. "'We're All in this Together': Some Resources for Thinking about Academic Labor." *Bulletin of the Council of Societies for the Study of Religion* 27.3: 70–73.

The Experiment: The Methodological Naturalism and Methodological Secularism Scale: Shedding New Light on Scholarship in Religion

F. LeRon Shults
University of Agder
leron.shults@uia.no

Wesley Wildman
Boston University
wwildman@bu.edu
<https://doi.org/10.1558/bsor.23700>

Scholars within and across fields such as the psychology of religion, sociology of religion, cognitive science of religion, religious studies, and theology often argue about the values and norms that ought to guide "academic" research in religion. Is it appropriate in the academy to explain religious phenomena by referring to supernatural forces (such as spirits or gods) as causal agents or to defend one's scholarly arguments by appealing to the holy texts accepted as authoritative within one's religious coalition? Debates surrounding such questions have remained intractable for

decades in part because they have been based on anecdotal personal experiences rather than clear empirical data. This article presents the Methodological Naturalism-Methodological Secularism scale, a new survey instrument capable of moving forward debates about scholarly values in the academic study of religion. This initial deployment of the MNMS scale in a population of religion scholars (N=284) clarifies extant commitments, challenges common caricatures, and reveals unfamiliar configurations of academic values.