

Op-ed: The Task of Religious Studies

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Introduction

In my paper “The Idea of Social Science and the Study of Religion” at the 2018 BASR/ISASR conference in Belfast¹, I made the following statement regarding higher education in the university setting:

For students, higher education is about promoting critical faculties which will make them questioning, and potentially disruptive, members of society. Not only will they know how to do so, but students will be able to decide if they should reform society.

This claim was somewhat incidental to the actual argument of the paper and had not been thought out in any real detail when it was included. This was made clear in discussion afterwards when a fellow agreed in *principle* with the position but did not see how it could be implemented in *practice*. And at the time I had to agree. But having had time to think about it since the conference, I believe I may now be able to supply an answer to how we can supply higher education in the sense described above. More importantly, we can do so in a way which may actually resolve some of the broader issues that Religious Studies, as a discipline, currently faces.

In a memorandum to the members of the *Verein für Sozialpolitik* that was circulated in 1913 and then later expanded to a full essay in 1917 for the journal *Logos* as “The Meaning of ‘Value Freedom’ in the Sociological and Economic Sciences”, Max Weber lays out the pedagogical challenge of whether the university lecturer should, or should not, espouse value judgements in the lecture hall. To keep the present reflection concise, I will not address this aspect of the essay but instead focus on a comment Weber makes in the early stages of the essay:

what the student should above all learn from their professor
in the *lecture hall* is: (1) the ability to content themselves with

¹ The 2018 conference in Belfast was hosted jointly by the BASR and the Irish Society for the Academic Study of Religion (ISASR).

simply carrying out a given task; (2) to face facts – including (indeed: above all) those that are uncomfortable for them personally – and to distinguish between stating [such facts] and taking an evaluative stand with regard to them; (3) to rate their own person less highly than task [before them]; and, consequently, to suppress the desire to parade, unbidden, their personal tastes or other feelings. (Weber 2012, 307)²

To contextualise the third point: Weber, as a German, had grown up in a university system which had been heavily influenced by the views of Schleiermacher on education as *Bildung* (self-formation) (Gregory 2012, 348-349). By his own time, this had become an emphasis on “personality”:

It has been claimed that “personality” is, and should be, a “unity” in the sense that it would, so to speak, be lost if it did not manifest itself on every [possible] occasion; but this simply *is not true*. In any *profession*, the *task* as such has its claims and must be performed in accordance with its own inherent laws. And it is *not true* that a strong personality reveals itself by first looking, on every occasion, for its own unique, completely “personal touch”. Instead, one would wish that, in particular, that generation which is now reaching adulthood will again, more than anything else, get accustomed to the idea that “being a personality” is not something that one can set as a deliberate goal, and that there is only one way in which one can (perhaps!) become [a personality]: by committing oneself unreservedly to a “cause”, whatever [that cause] and the “claims of the day” entailed by it may look like in the individual case. (Weber 2012, 307)

I quote Weber here in full, because I believe his words still hold relevance today even though they were written one hundred years ago.³ But the further reason for quoting Weber at length is because of the emphasis to which he gives to the *task* of the lecturer. This, I believe, opens up a somewhat embarrassing question: What is the *task* of Religious Studies?

I say “embarrassing” because from my experience of it, the field or discipline lacks a unifying response on this score. Indeed, on one level, that it is not always obvious whether we should be speaking of a “field” or “discipline” is indicative of the point! This, in part, is because Religious Studies has always straddled the institutional divide between the Social Sciences and the Humanities; Samuel Preus (1987) and Eric Sharpe (1988) have detailed some of the chaos that has ensued as a result of this. And in 1996 Charlotte Allen described Religious Studies as “a shapeless beast, half social science, half humanistic discipline, lumbering through the academy with no clear

² All quotes from Weber have been amended to be gender neutral. Unless otherwise stated, square brackets are those which appear in Bruum and Whimster’s translation (in 2012: xxxi-xxxii).

³ Though, along with the gender neutral language, his claims might be more relevant if we replaced “personality” with “celebrity”.

methodology or *raison d'être*" (Allen 1996). A sentiment repeated more recently by Paul-Francois Tremlett: "The study is a field of enquiry that lacks any clear or singular definition of its object or a specific procedure, method or set of assumptions by which the study of religions might claim for itself the (dubious) status of a 'discipline'" (Tremlett 2008, viii). In *The Idea of Social Science and Proper Phenomenology* (2018), I traced this lack of "identity" in Religious Studies to a failure to properly consider the problems of intersubjectivity and philosophical anthropology. In sum, the nature of this crisis is that: "*The crisis of social science [and Religious Studies] lies in the very interest of studying ['man']⁴ when no unifying concept of ['man'] can be given.*"

However, the crisis described in *The Idea of Social Science* really only refers to one aspect of being a modern academic: the scholar or *researcher*. In asking "What is the *task* of Religious Studies?" I actually mean something closer to the pedagogical issue that Weber was concerned with. This relies upon a distinct that Weber drew in another pedagogical paper, "Science as a Profession and Vocation"⁵ (2012, 337-338): "Every young person who feels that they have a vocation to be [an academic]⁶ must realize that the task awaiting them has a dual aspect. They must have qualifications not only as a scholar, but also as a teacher; and the two are by no means identical. One can be quite an outstanding scholar and an absolutely awful teacher." The modern academic is divided between these two roles: the *researcher* and the *teacher*. Such a sharp distinction is becoming all the more apparent in the REF-environment of British academia. On the one hand, the government funding body and the way in which it is giving out funding, indicates that the primary function of the academic is *research* thereby making *teaching* the secondary concern. Yet, now that universities are capable of charging students £9,000+ per year for their higher education, from the latter's perspective at the least, *teaching* is the primary concern thereby making *research* secondary.

The tensions created by these diverging concerns—despite constant calls for "research-led teaching"—are now widespread. In fact, we are in situation similar to what Weber described of the American system in 1917:

In their early years, the [junior] lecturer is absolutely overloaded, precisely because they are [*under*]paid [to *teach*]. In a department of German studies, for example, the full professor may give a three-hour lecture [every week] on Goethe – that is all [so that they have time for *research*]; while the young "assistant", who has twelve hours of teaching every week, will consider themselves fortunate if, in addition to drumming German language into the students' heads, they are assigned the task of lecturing on poets of (at most) Uhland's calibre. (2012, 336)⁷

⁴ For speed of exposition I have used the more readily understandable term which in the book is replaced with the more acceptable phenomenological terms "*wer*" (see also Tuckett 2015).

⁵ While published in 1919, it is often incorrectly assumed that the original lecture was delivered that same year; in fact it was delivered in 1917.

⁶ Weber uses the term "scholar" here, I have changed this to make the formal distinct more clear.

⁷ Alterations mine.

With REF seeming to be the dominant factor in the direction departments take—we need only think here of Liverpool University’s policy, for example, that academics produce a 3* piece of work every eighteen months—the emphasis has become that senior academics—those presumably best qualified to produce high ranking *research*—be given the time to do so. As such, the necessity of *teaching* falls to the junior academics. In principle, there is nothing wrong with this system: at the start of their academic career, the academic is more *teacher* and as they progress and advance, they become more *researcher*. This, however, relies upon the measure of *security* that Weber saw in the American system that, once employed, the academic was effectively secure, if only meagrely paid, at their institution for life (2012, 335). This aspect, however, has not translated into the current British system.⁸ Instead, the junior academic in Britain suffers the same fate as the German academics of Weber’s day: “The question is whether all [academics] of proven worth should, as a matter of principle, be given the right to teach, or whether the ‘teaching needs’ should be taken into account – in other words: whether the [junior academics] already in place should have a monopoly on teaching. This a painful dilemma ... In most cases, the second option is preferred [by departments]” (2012, 336).⁹

These “teaching needs” are reflected in our current system by an ever-increasing emphasis on casualization. Now, I am not raising this point simply to highlight the plight of junior or hinter academics.¹⁰ The problem with casualization of *teaching*, is how it then impacts on the general structure of higher education *for* students. More precisely, once teaching is casualized and students are confronted with a “revolving door” of *teachers* it becomes harder for scholars to establish what the *task* of Religious Studies is. Indeed, it is hard on the departments themselves because while they can ask for a specialist in Buddhism, say, this does not mean that one specialist after the next will teach the same things in the same way. And it is in this respect that I suggest Religious Studies is in a precarious position. To frame the question a little more specifically: “What is it that *teaching* Religious Studies aims to achieve?”

This may seem like a simple question—perhaps so self-evident as to not even bother asking at all. But there are two counterpoints to such a retort. First, as I am fond of telling students: simple questions require difficult answers. Second, as was recently impressed upon me over my contribution to an edited volume, for which I did not particularly think my contribution was very novel—as one of the other editors asked: “Isn’t everyone saying this already?”—it was pointed out by another colleague that while everyone might be *saying* it, no one was *writing* it. Indeed, the more everyone says or knows “it” the less likely it seems someone is to write “it” down.

So, to my mind, the question “What is the *task* of Religious Studies” or “What is it that *teaching* Religious Studies aims to achieve?” is one of pre-eminent importance in need of *writing down* even if we already “know” the answer. Because—and this the important sleight of hand in this argument—there is a subtle difference between saying “we know it” and saying “everyone knows it”. More often than not when we say “everyone knows it” what this actually amounts to is that actually only *we*, the in-group, “know it” and *we*

⁸ And is being lost in the American system.

⁹ Alterations mine.

¹⁰ Any academic who has had their PhD for three years and not yet secured a full-time post (teaching or research) and instead subsists on temporary contracts with universities.

simply assume that *they*, the out-group(s) that completes “everyone”, “know it” too. And this is why *writing it down* becomes so important: it ensures *they* do “know it” too.

And that we are in a situation where *they* don’t “know it” is more than apparent if we face facts that nowhere can we speak of flourishing departments of Religious Studies in the UK. Let us be frank with ourselves about this: the yearly BASR conference is more likely to bring news of yet another department under threat of closure or (more insidiously) “reorganisation” than it is of expansion. We continue to face budget cuts which are, predominantly, putting a strain on *teaching* as the REF makes those (fewer and fewer) with “secured” positions more focused on *research*. Indeed, one of the pleas made at this year’s AGM was to make sure that when colleagues submit research for the REF that they actually put it in the Theology and Religious Studies unit! How can that be indicative of a flourishing discipline if we can’t even get those supposed to be affiliated with to *admit* to their affiliation?

But despite all the horror stories that everyone can bring to mind about the current state of Religious Studies, none of this is indicative of a general lack of interest by the general public in the topic of “religion”. Quite the opposite, really. As Stephen Gregg (2017) has ably demonstrated, part of the problem here is that we are “a group whose medium of articulation is not easily grasped by other sectors of the population; a group who is marginal or submissive to the dominant power group” (quoting Hardman). To frame this in my own terms let me turn on Weber’s distinction of the academic as having a dual aspect of *researcher* and *teacher*. He noted that just because they might be good as the one does not mean they are not awful as the other. And, to mean no offence to the majority of my colleagues, the problem faced by us is that the post-modern academic¹¹ rather holds the dual aspect of *academic* and *manager*. And, from my personal view, regardless of our calibre as *academics*, the majority of us are awful *managers*. What I mean by this is not that such academics cannot run their departments or organise good courses;¹² rather, as *managers* what I mean is that Religious Studies has a “public image” problem. The *manager* does not simply manage a team, they *justify* to *them* the existence of that team. We as a discipline struggle to “sell” our discipline, such that the (actual) university managers or administrators – *them* in this initial phase, though it goes broader than this – see no real “value” in what we do (and so budgets shrink). If this seems too obscure, then consider the current catchword of university education— “employability”. University education is far removed from the vision of Schleiermacher and the notion of self-cultivation. No doubt he would be appalled by the number of students we have arriving who, in increasing numbers, are already suffering from stress and any number of existential anxieties. Students arrive at university already under pressure to find a job in a market which cannot accommodate the number of graduates being churned out. As such, from the *manager’s* perspective the broader *them* includes these highly concerned students such that to ask the question “What is the *task* of Religious Studies?” is to really ask “What sort of employment will a degree in Religious Studies get the student?”

¹¹ Following Ziman (2002) I am actually tempted to say “post-academy academic”.

¹² Although Weber outright states we have our share of them: ‘Do you [the junior academic] think that you can bear to see one mediocrity after the other getting ahead of you, year after year, without becoming embittered or a broken person?’ (Weber 2012, 338).

To understand the “public image”, or better yet, marketing problem that Religious Studies suffers in this respect, consider the following three university prospectuses and the employment opportunities these degrees in Religious Studies are supposed to offer.¹³

First, University A:

Religious studies is a vibrant interdisciplinary field of study focusing on religious beliefs and practices and their relationship with the wider world. Religious studies is concerned with the concepts and emotions which underpin religious belief and practice, and with their role and function in culture and society.

We look at practices as well as texts and consider a range of expressions of religion from popular culture to systematic ideas. We approach religion at both the individual and collective level and study traditions in comparative international context.

We study historical as well as contemporary material and are equally interested in the groups and individuals who practice religion as in the gods, deities, ancestors and spirits with whom they interact.

Religion has a long history and remains a powerful force in the contemporary world. Religious studies has the tools and skills to help you get to grips with this vital field of study.

And what employment comes of this?

Our graduates pursue a wide range of careers within a variety of settings, including the creative arts, non-governmental organisations, finance, teaching, management, administration, government, counselling and the voluntary sector.

But ask yourself the following: what about this example prospectus indicates that students will gain the “skills” to work in these sectors? As, from the *management* perspective, the matter does need to be framed in terms of the “skills” students are gaining from their higher education for said employment. The closest in the case of University A is indicated when the prospectus mentions that the degree programme studies the role and function of religious beliefs and practices in culture and society. Now, I am not disputing that doing so will aid these employment opportunities in practice. But in the “sound bite”—and actual managers and administrators will likely only bother with these—of the prospectus this is all bound up with a description of Religious Studies as concerned with studying what “religion” *is*. That is, to *them* the prospectus is *written* so that the *task* of Religious Studies is to teach students to *study* religions. Properly speaking, the prospectus indicates that it is teaching

¹³ Anonymised for the sake of dignity.

students to be scholars of religion, that the primary employment opportunity is “studying religions” as a *profession*.

Setting aside the fact that there are now already too many postgraduates for academic positions: “studying religions” as a *profession* is a very niche *profession*. A logical gap exists between how these degrees, which are purportedly, preparing students for one *profession* will actually make them employable in other *professions*. How, simply, does being trained to study religions professionally make one employable—what “skills” does it provide—in management or administration?¹⁴ What advantages does the graduate of Religious Studies have in gaining employment in this area over a graduate in Business Management (a degree offered by the same university)?

With this emphasis on “skills” now consider University B:

Understanding religion is vital to understand the world we live in. This degree allows you to explore a variety of approaches to religious traditions throughout time and across cultures – as well as their effects on public life.

Core modules will introduce you to the key themes and approaches in theology and the study of religion, as well as the importance of putting both into context. But this degree offers an impressive range of choice. You’ll choose from a wide variety of optional modules allowing you to study specific traditions from Christianity to South Asian religions, think about religion in modern Britain or Africa, philosophy of religion, sin, ethics or even sex and gender in a religious context.

Again, we see the same impetus in this prospectus: the *task* of Religious Studies is to teach students to *study* religions. With this in mind, now consider the employment opportunities such a degree purportedly offers:

A degree in Theology and Religious Studies will equip you with in-depth subject knowledge, but you’ll also develop valuable transferable skills that really stand out to employers. You’ll be a confident communicator who can present and defend your views clearly, either in writing or verbally. You’ll be comfortable working independently or in a team, and you’ll have strong organisational and research skills.

Graduates have gone on to succeed in a wide range of careers in management, politics, the civil service, journalism, the media, education and the charity sector. Others have gone on to postgraduate study in related disciplines.

Consider, the first paragraph in particular. The key selling point is that Religious Studies offers “transferable skills”. But, in the current jargon of *management* these indicate “soft skills”. And the problem with “soft skills” is that they are not tied to the particular discipline of Religious Studies. In fact, I suspect there very

¹⁴ Note the irony of this.

few degrees in which students do *not* get the opportunity to become confident communicators or independent workers.

Consider this from another perspective: imagine yourself as on the selection board for an academic post having to sift through various (hundreds of) cover letters. The fact that the candidates are confident communicators, can work independently, can work in teams, have good organisational skills, etc., will appear *universally* on every application.¹⁵ Lacking them would discount the candidate immediately, but having them does not make the candidate “stand out”. These are minimum requirements which, from the perspective of the selection board, will not help identify the candidate they should employ. Rather, what will distinguish the candidates is their *unique* selling points that make them “stand out” from other candidates. And these are to be located in that person’s “hard skills”. In the case of an academic position, these “hard skills” are their Area of Specialisation and their demonstrated “skill” in this area is evidenced by publication records and the like. But, what, at the undergraduate level is the “hard skill” being offered by the undergraduate degree in Religious Studies? The “hard skill” here is, again, *studying* religions, but this is only advantageous if the student intends to study religions as a *profession*.

Again, the question is how this “hard skill” will contribute to the other listed job opportunities. Consider “education” in this context as a common occurrence. For this, let us now turn to the prospectus of University C:

This BA programme enables students to become familiar with the specifics of religious traditions and to make comparisons between the beliefs and practices of different religions, particularly in the context of a world coming to terms with its cultural and religious diversity.

Our BA degree in Religious Studies is intended to stimulate curiosity about, and fascination for, the variety of religious cultures across the globe and to open up a greater awareness of plurality within religious traditions and within societies at large. This gives students a real insight into the human condition and the multiplicity of religious beliefs and practices in the world.

And the career prospects:

A BA in Religious Studies is a highly desirable qualification in terms of engaging in a multi-cultural, multi-faith society. It is a sought after degree by employers who want staff to engage with a diverse cultural environment. Consequently, many of our students find employment and build careers in social services, counselling, nursing, policing, fire and rescue services. A number of students move onto a PGCE in primary or secondary Religious Education. Other students seek to add to their BA by pursuing postgraduate studies that involve an aspect of religion from the world’s great traditions.

¹⁵ Even if the applicant is lying through their teeth about this.

But ask yourself—from the perspective of *them*—what does this degree programme in Religious Studies actually *do* to teach students to teach Religious Studies? I cannot comment on University C as I have never taught there. But having taught at two, very different, universities which feature teacher trainees in their cohorts and list “education” as a major employment opportunity, I can say with some assurance that none of the courses that were listed as “Religious Studies” were in any way actually constructed to help improve their teaching. Religious Studies was something students simply did *alongside* the courses that actually taught them how to teach. Indeed, this is something that University C indicates insofar as the PGCE is something they do *after* they get their degree in Religious Studies. This is not to disparage University C for this—that’s just how the British system works—my point rather is that the “hard skill” of Religious Studies does not to make better teachers *per se*.

There is a disparity in which the prospectus for Religious Studies degrees, in all three cases (and many more), indicates the *task* of Religious Studies to be *studying* religions and this in turn does not translate—from the perspective of *them* (administrators and students)—to the employment opportunities listed. So, what, then is the *task* of Religious Studies? Quite frankly: *the task of Religious Studies, in terms of teaching, cannot be to teach students to study religions*. Such a *task* is too narrow in scope for, and at odds with the demands of, post-modern academia. Really, it is only at the postgraduate level, and even then only at the level of the PhD, that we should entertain the possibility of *teaching* students to *study* religions (as they have decided that as the *profession* they wish to enter). If departments of Religious Studies wish to continue *existing*, we need to *manage* ourselves better: to formulate a *task* which *can* translate into those various employment opportunities listed in prospectuses. Or, at the least, present that *task* in such a way that *they* (administrators and students) understand how it provides “hard skills” that will make graduates stand out in the employment market.

In this context I believe the Theory and Method subject area of Religious Studies plays, and needs to play, a vital role. Here I admit that a subtext of this reflection is a validation of the importance of Theory and Method for Religious Studies. However, on a certain level I believe that the title is no longer reflective of what actually takes place in this area and some further “rebranding” is required. Indeed, to focus on “method” all too easily indicates how we are caught up in a *task* which *teaches* students to *study* religions.¹⁶ To relay how Theory and Method can do this, I will begin with how I have begun to approach my *teaching* of Theory and Method.

I don’t do this to be condescending, I can’t even claim credit for the idea *per se*. Rather, I am doing this to show how Theory and Method *can* make explicit the *task* of Religious Studies to students so *they* can have a clear conception of what *their* degree will allow *them* to achieve once *they* graduate. Thus, at the very least, even if the reader disputes the content of the *task*, I hope they will see the value of Theory and Method for delineating that *task* whatever you decide it to be.

¹⁶ I have previously floated the title of “Philosophy of Religious Studies” in conversation. This then parallels similar subject areas like “Philosophy of Science” and “Philosophy of Social Science”. From a *management* point of view, this makes it easier for those outside the discipline to grasp what is being done in this area.

Even though I have spent the entirety of my hinter career thinking about Theory and Method and how to teach it, the crystallising moment on how to approach this subject area came about as a result of being offered an interview at Oxford. As part of the interview, I was to teach an introductory section of the course “The Nature of Religion” as their Theory and Method equivalent course. Provided with the instructions was a brief outline of the course in which were contained two questions; questions which I have now taken up as the guiding theme for how I approach teaching Theory and Method. As it is fed into my opening lecture, I introduce students to the topic in the following manner:

The title of this course is Thinking about Religion¹⁷ and it aims to show you how to take an informed view of the place of religion in the modern world. To do this, we need to answer two questions:

What is the nature of religion?

And, what is the place of religion today?

Now, over the duration of this course you are going to be introduced to some of the classical responses to these two questions which take shape as various theories of religion. Out of this are going to come other questions: questions of identity; questions of power.

My job in this is to clarify for you guys what each of these theorists thought the nature of religion is and how they came to think that. But everyone we are going to talk about are old. And white. And male. And middle to upper class. And European. And, mostly, dead.

So when they asked themselves “what is the place of religion today?” that “Today” has a specific date. They asked these questions in a specific situation and made a host of assumptions—often totally unaware they were doing so—that informed how these answered them.

We, you and me, no longer live in that situation and we no longer operate with those same assumptions. None of you are old, not all of you are white or male, or from the middle or upper class. Or from Europe. You, you have a different situation, different assumptions. So your job on this course will be to decide, for yourselves, whether you think what they thought the nature of religion is, is still relevant to your today.

Here, in a nutshell, is the *task* of Religious Studies: answering the question “what is the place of religion today?” Again, this may seem self-evident. Isn’t this exactly what the prospectuses above do? University A claims: “Religious

¹⁷ Honestly, I have yet to settle on an adequate title for this course—it changes depending on who I am marketing it to.

studies is concerned with the concepts and emotions which underpin religious belief and practice, and with their role and function in culture and society”; University B: “This degree allows you to explore a variety of approaches to religious traditions throughout time and across cultures – as well as their effects on public life”; and, University C: “This BA programme enables students to become familiar with the specifics of religious traditions and to make comparisons between the beliefs and practices of different religions, particularly in the context of a world coming to terms with its cultural and religious diversity”. The answer is both yes and no.

To understand why it is the latter we need to pay attention to the way in which I formulated the point in my script. This actually follows a point made by Weber in “Science as a Profession and Vocation”:

the most difficult pedagogical task of all is that of presenting scientific problems in such a way that an untrained but receptive mind can understand them and – this is the only important point for us – think about them in an independent manner. (2012, 338)

Later, this is broken down into two tasks. First:

The first task of any competent teacher is to teach their students to acknowledge *uncomfortable* facts – by which I mean facts that are uncomfortable for their partisan views; and for every partisan view – including my own – there are certain facts that are extremely uncomfortable. I believe that when an academic teacher compels their listeners to make a rule of this, this is more than just an intellectual achievement; I would even be immodest enough to call it a “moral achievement”, even though that may sound like using rather too much pathos to describe something that should simply go without saying. (2012, 347)

This is contained in “my job” insofar as it is my role to ensure that students understand a particular theory of religion, its inner workings, and how it came to be formulated so. As I say later in the same script:

Now, as a class rule, your religious affiliation or otherwise is something that is to be left at the door. To do well in this course does not depend on whether you are religious or not.

This is part of the image of the modern the study of religion: the academic study of religion is meant to be a neutral activity, it is not meant to either promote or discredit religion in general, or a particular religion. It may explain, it may understand, but the study of religion should be bound by the standards of scientific objectivity.

There are, of course, difficulties and challenges to this. But this idea of objectivity as neutrality is something that really only comes into play in Britain in the 1960s. It is a part of the

situation of our “today”. Some of the theorists we are going to discuss played a role in that. But only some—maybe two.

For the vast majority of the thinkers that we are going to discuss there was no such thing as “religious studies”. Or, if there was, it certainly did not mean the same thing that I have just described. For them, your religious affiliation does matter. It matters to them because these theories of religion will attempt one of two things: they will try to convince you not to be religious, as the theories in the first section of the course will attempt; or, they will try to convince you to be religious, as the theories in the second section of the course will attempt.

The way these theories are going to challenge you is to make you question who you are and, importantly, who you think you should be in the context of being European. Even, to go back to Scheler’s comment, if you are not a European.

To give a quick example: of those who will tell you to stop with religion, Freud will perhaps be the hardest to stomach. Freud will tell you to grow up. He will tell you that if you are religious you are infantile, neurotic, sick even. But even if you disagree, even if you find this deeply, personally problematic; in certain tacit but significant ways, elements of our British governmental structure are premised on an agreement with Freud’s theory of religion. And so, even if outside this classroom you decide to do something about that, inside if you are to do well you need to understand why this came about.

This then points to the second task of any competent teacher according to Weber:

In practice, it is possible to take this or that position with regard to the value problem at issue in each given case [e.g. the place of religion today]. *If* you [the student] take this or that position, then scientific experience tells us that you must apply such and such *means* in order to implement your position in practice. Now, these means may in themselves have such a character that you feel that you must refuse to employ them. Then, you simply have to choose between the end and the unavoidable means. Does the end “justify” those means, or not? The teacher can lay before you the necessity of [making] this choice; but they cannot do more than that, as long as they wish to remain a teacher and not to become a demagogue. Moreover, they can of course say to you: If you want [to achieve] this or that end, then you must accept such and such side effects that experience tells us will then occur. (2012, 349-350)

This for Weber is about achieving *clarity*: of making sure that if the student wishes to adopt a position they are fully aware of the consequences that would thereby entail. And, in the context of my Theory and Method course, once aware of these consequences we are then brought to “your (the student’s) job” of deciding whether these theories of religion are still relevant today. Primarily this about getting the student to think about these theories in an independent manner. This is not so much contained in the script of that first lecture but in the final assessment of the course:

Compare any two main theories of religion introduced in this module in terms of presuppositions, methods and conclusions for their relevance today.

That is, students are able to take a stance of their own choosing on the place of religion today by advocating a particular theory of religion as most reflective of that “place”.

What is crucial to understand here is that when I say the *task* of Religious Studies is answering the question “what is the place of religion today?” I am not saying that it is the *task* of the lecturer, as a *teacher*, to tell students what the place of religion is today—to supply a ready-made solution. This is exactly what University A does or, at least, presents itself as doing: “Religion has a long history and remains a powerful force in the contemporary world. Religious studies has the tools and skills to help you get to grips with this vital field of study.” This, in Weber’s words, would be demagogic activity. If the lecturer simply *supplies* their students with the place of religion today, they do not develop those students’ critical faculties. Rather, all they do is engage in a 3-4 year-long rhetoric in which “success” is measured by how well the student adopts the lecturer’s own partisan view. The contrarian student who persists in their own partisan view is doomed to failure, and the student who already agreed or the one who is convinced can do no more than repeat what the lecturer extols.

Properly, speaking the *task* of lecturer is to *teach* students *how* to decide for themselves what the place of religion is today by *clarifying* the consequences of any particular position they intend to take. This is about taking the onus of the degree away from what the lecturer *supplies* to what the student *gains*. As *academics* we might be very good at the former, as *managers* we need improvement with the latter.

How, then, does this relate back to the central problem of making Religious Studies more marketable? What “hard skill” has been provided here? The “hard skill”, such as we have provided it, is the ability of the student to take a position on the place of religion today, fully aware of the consequences of that position. While this might not seem like a conventional “hard skill”—contrast the mechanical engineer—consider now how this applies to the future “employability” of said student if, as the prospectus suggests, they pursue a career in management. By drawing on their *informed* position of the place of religion today, this student now has a novel approach and view towards business management lacking in the student who simply took the degree in Business Management. We have, in the words of Weber, given the student a “cause” to commit themselves to unreservedly and it is this that represents their

“hard skill” that allows them to “stand out” in the job market. Far better than a candidate who *can* do something is the candidate who *wants* to do something. Now, I do not want all this to be taken to suggest that I do not think this is already nascent in the university prospectuses I have exemplified. But we must always keep in mind that simply because it is self-evident to *us* does not mean that it is self-evident to *them* (students or *management*). We need to make what is nascent extant. And to achieve this in each case only simple alterations are needed to radically change the programme offered:

University A: Religious studies is a vibrant interdisciplinary field of study focusing on religious beliefs and practices and their relationship with the wider world. In this programme, students will be able to make informed decisions about this relationship and its effects. We will do this by exploring the concepts and emotions which underpin religious belief and practice, and with their role and function in culture and society.

University B: Understanding religion is vital to understand the world we live in. This degree allows you to take an informed position on the role of religion in public life. It will do this by exploring a variety of approaches to religious traditions throughout time and across cultures.

University C: This BA programme enables students to become familiar with the specifics of religious traditions and to make comparisons between the beliefs and practices of different religions. In the context of a world coming to terms with its cultural and religious diversity, graduates of this programme will be in a position to play an important role in this development.

Of course, the challenge is in maintaining this stated aim throughout the student’s time at university. Here, again, I would reiterate the importance of Theory and Method courses for orienting and guiding students in this context. If introduced *early* in any Religious Studies curriculum, and providing some sort of sustained contribution throughout a degree programme, Theory and Method is the vital opportunity to relay to students what the *task* of Religious Studies is—to delimit its scope and range of problems. Indeed, I hope the point is framed “openly” enough that taking hold of this *task*, each scholar or department can articulate it in their own *way* to their own *ends*. Certainly, the way I have framed it shows the potential for fulfilling the “manifesto” of the Unseen University’s aims for higher education for students: promoting critical faculties which will make them questioning, and potentially disruptive, members of society. Not only will they know how to do so, but students will be able to decide if they should reform society.

Again, I will not necessarily make claims that every university should follow this manifesto as much as I think they should—this will be a separate argument for later. Far more important for the immediate continuation of Religious Studies as a discipline which *teaches* in post-modern academia is

that we get better at *management*. Students need a greater sense of *purpose* in their degree which will help *them* appreciate the employment opportunities that their degree will actually get them. We must think less of the *task* of Religious Studies as about what *we supply*, but as what *they gain*. Doing so will, in my opinion, remedy some of the precariousness that our discipline currently faces. Indeed, provided we are bold enough about this, we have the opportunity to be a flag-ship discipline for showing the merits of higher education in the Arts and Humanities, where many of our departments are placed, as currently facing most of the (budgetary) challenges of post-modern academia.

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