

Engaged Research in the Study of Religions

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ABSTRACT

The author contends that there is a need for public engagement in research in the study of religion, drawing on his own experiences of engagement, involving the Information Network Focus on Religious Movements, relations with the media, acting as an expert witness in litigation, and participation in events which are sponsored and financed by religious organisations. Scholars frequently feel the need to “pay back” the communities they study on account of their cooperation and provision of data. This can be done by ensuring that publication is fair and accurate, while at the same time being vigilant that undue involvement and acceptance of hospitality does not prevent the maintenance of critical distance in one’s writing. Responding to individual enquiries about one’s work is also discussed. It is concluded that there is a need to consider whether one’s work is for one’s own benefit, or for the wider community outside academia, and that the aims of the study of religion need to be defined to reflect scholarly engagement with societal issues.

KEYWORDS

Engaged Research; Information Network Focus on Religious Movements; New Religious Movements; Religion and Media; Religion and Law; Religious Publishing

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Introduction¹

The distinction that is sometimes made between “pure” and “applied” research might suggest that the former is superior, with its possible contrast “impure” suggesting tarnish or inferiority. However, if “pure” research means investigation that lacks value outside the ivory tower of academia, then it can justly be questioned whether its pursuit is worthwhile. In recent times the notion of “engaged research” has gained attention, and in what follows I aim to explore several ways in which research in the study of religions, and in particular the study of new religious movements (NRMs), which has been my main area of specialism, can become “engaged”. Engaged research is not necessarily campaigning, or involving participants, but research which is of benefit to the public. In what follows, I refer substantially to my own work on NRMs, but my observations can be applied to the study of religion more widely.

Being substantially personal reflection rather than a more conventional and solidly argued piece of academic writing, it may be helpful at the outset to declare my own position within academic life. Many years ago I studied philosophy before training in a Church of Scotland theological college – study which involved the traditional subjects of Old and New Testaments (including their ancient languages), Ecclesiastical History, and Systematic Theology. How much of this was of practical value is debatable. My studies in philosophy were at a time when Ludwig Wittgenstein was highly influential, and much time was spent in linguistic analysis. Studies in Divinity (as it was called) had more application to our career intentions, although I have still to meet church attendees who are keen to know about Habakkuk and Zechariah, the disputes between Augustine and Pelagius, or even many of the issues that led to the Protestant Reformation. The study of NRMs, in which I later came to specialise, was totally neglected in our curricula, despite the fact that Mormons and Jehovah’s Witnesses were coming round the doors of our congregants, and some knowledge about their beliefs and practices, as well as advice about how to respond to them, would arguably have been of greater value.

¹ The material which follows is based on a presentation given at the British Association for the Study of Religions at the Open University in 2022, and the ensuing advocates the need for greater engagement in research on our subject, demonstrating the various arenas in which this can take place. Shortly before the BASR annual conference, the author presented a paper on a similar subject, which was written up for publication. Care has therefore been taken to avoid undue repetition, and the material has been updated in the light of subsequent occurrences and reflection. In the spirit of advocating engaged research, I have avoided using obscure and unduly erudite vocabulary, which is found only too often in academic writing, and the material is in part autobiographical and anecdotal; but I have found this necessary to make the relevant points. My own research specialism has been Jehovah’s Witnesses, which inevitably feature in the ensuing discussion, but elsewhere I have avoided identifying certain other religious groups, as well as individuals: while I believe my comments on them are fair, I would not wish to embarrass others, or to have to defend my material outside an academic environment.

A consequence of the neglect of NRMs as academic subjects until very recent times has caused interested members of the public to consult the writings of their opponents within the evangelical Christian countercult and the more secular anticult movement (ACM). Media coverage, the public's other source of information, is usually negative, and tends to come to the fore principally when that has been some catastrophe like Johnstown, Waco or Heaven's Gate. The academic entry into the field of "cults", as they are popularly called, has been regarded with some suspicion, partly because their findings are often at variance with popular perceptions, and possibly because academics often write in obscure jargon (Pinker, 2014). One former chairman of FAIR (Family Action Information and Rescue, now renamed the Family Survival Trust), which is probably the best-known UK organisation that is opposed to "cults", once described academics as "an inordinately complacent and self-satisfied lot of mystagogues" (McCann, 1984: 16).

The term "engaged research" is often associated with Ernest L. Boyer (1928-1995), an American scholar who was at one time President of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching. In his article "The Scholarship of Engagement" (1996), published posthumously, he argues that academia has seen a decline in engaged research. He cites the academy's past contribution to the war effort, space exploration, and automobile design as ways in which academia was formally engaged in projects that were of obvious benefit. This contrasts with the situation at the time at which he was writing, in which he claims that academic work is becoming less relevant. This, he believes, is partly due to the independence of universities, who are not obliged to engage in projects that have public benefit, and the fact that academic publication has become associated with an inaccessible written style, which is difficult for the average lay person to penetrate. It is this trend, he argues, which needs to be reversed.

Inform

The 2022 BASR Conference was co-hosted by Inform, and in my own case involvement with Inform has been an important form of engagement. Inform is registered as an educational UK charity, whose stated objectives are:

to advance public knowledge and understanding by the promotion of study and research into religions and those movements concerned with the exploration of spiritual life or philosophies including, but without prejudice to the generality of the foregoing, cults, alternative and non-conventional religions, sects, human potential movements and new age movements, and the dissemination of the useful results of such study and research to the public. (EQ Foundation, 2023).

The acronym “Inform” stands for Information Network Focus On Religious Movements, and was founded by Eileen Barker in 1988 at the London School of Economics. Barker had already made her reputation through her landmark study *The Making of a Moonie: Choice or Brainwashing?*, published in 1984, in which she effectively refuted the popular perception that those who joined the Unification Church (UC) were brainwashed into joining, rather than converts through free choice. Her conclusions, predictably, were unpopular in anticult circles, where academic study has tended to be disparaged or ignored. Barker believed that there ought to be some alternative to the ACM, providing objective and balanced information about new religions, and hence she set up Inform.

Inform is not a counselling organisation, but has access to a network of experts, both in academic and caring professions, and although there is no “N” in its acronym, its focus tends to be on new expressions of religion and spirituality, although it will provide inquirers with information on any form of spirituality, old or new, on which it holds data. It was initially funded by the Home Office, with a small contribution from the Church of England, but these sources of income have ceased, and it is largely dependent on a number of projects that it undertakes. Its focus tends to have shifted from the so-called “cults” which received media publicity between the 1960s and 1980s, partly because of changes in funding, and also because evangelisation by NRMs has diminished, causing them to have less publicity and hence less public attention. Events in the 21st-century have prompted a new focus on radicalisation within extremist Islamic groups, and religio-spiritual groups, such as QAnon and the Sanctuary Church (a breakaway group from the Unification Movement), which has supported Donald Trump, influencing events such as the storming of the Capitol on 6 January 2020.

Inform staff have authored or commissioned various reports and information packages and, until the recent Covid pandemic, organised various training seminars for official bodies, as well as two public seminars each year. During the pandemic, its activities were conducted online, and at the time of writing (early 2023) there are prospects of a greater return to normal.

Media

Inform also deals with media enquiries, which are either fielded by its office bearers, or passed on to scholars with the relevant expertise. Media involvement is another way in which, as academics, we can engage the public with our research. However, although media publicity might seem to be an excellent way of making our work public, considerable care needs to be taken. During my early career I learnt the hard

way when a journalist from a local newspaper sought to interview me about my work. A few days later, I was shocked to read his article, which implied that I endorsed the Unification Church's activities. I should have been suspicious of his lack of clear agenda in his interview request; he was fishing for remarks that he could sensationalise. I later discovered that some members of a local anticult group had contacted him and suggested the interview, with the aim of discrediting academic work on NRMs. Having subsequently gained much more experience, I was considerably more reluctant to agree to an interview with a prominent YouTube opponent of Jehovah's Witnesses. When I asked what kinds of question he was likely to ask, and whether the interview was a one-to-one dialogue or a panel discussion, I was swiftly informed that there would be a delay, since he had to rebuild his studio! I never heard from him again.

Talk shows with multiple participants rarely allow invited academics to have a fair hearing. Some years ago I was invited to take part in a television debate about NRMs. The programme was set up to maximise hostility rather than seek any measure of consensus or identification of the various participants' points of difference. An Orthodox Jewish rabbi was placed next to a representative of Jews for Jesus, and a couple of NRM leaders were placed opposite the director of an anticult organisation. The topic under discussion was "What is the difference between a religion and a cult?" – a question that should have been challenged, on the ground that it is somewhat akin to asking, "What is the difference between a human and a weirdo?" The opening comment on the "religion versus cult" issue was solicited from a female scholar, had made previous television appearances on ancient Jewish history, not in NRMs, yet she took up the question with alacrity, without challenging its appropriateness. When discussing media appearances recently with another female colleague, it transpired that she gets more requests from the media than I do, having been told on several occasions that they particularly welcome "a woman's voice". Possibly this predilection took precedence over subject expertise, since such programmes are designed for entertainment rather than serious debate. I would not accept an invitation of this kind on any future occasion.

One might think that journalists from quality papers could be relied on to give fair coverage of controversial religious groups. Although occasionally scholars, including myself, have occasionally received invitations to write entire articles for newspapers and popular publications, at other times academics can find that their expertise is not used as they would hope. Recently a quality newspaper interviewed me and another colleague about Jehovah's Witnesses, with a view, we were told, to featuring in a podcast examining their organisational structure. We each spent over an hour with this journalist, but when the programme was aired, only thirty seconds of my colleague's interview were broadcast, and none of mine. Contrary to what we were told, the podcast was devoted to unsympathetic coverage on sexual abuse within the

Watch Tower organisation. The small academic input no doubt served to give the programme an air of credibility, without introducing more detailed and balanced comment that would have been appropriate to the discussion. Such practices by journalists raise the question of whether as academics we should continue to comply with such requests, in the hope that at least on some occasions our comments might be used more substantially, or whether we simply decline. I chose the latter course of action when I received a somewhat extraordinary email from a researcher who describes herself as a behavioural scientist and journalist, claiming to write a book about how people's desire for certainty "can make us more vulnerable to the gurus and snake-oil salespeople of the world, ... [and] make us more likely to get sucked into cults, or even cult-like environments, with leaders who promise they have the answers and quash questioning and dissent ... and our proclivity to be seduced by them. (Email, 5 February 2023). I felt there was little hope of persuading her to give serious coverage is the question of why people join NRMs and declined the invitation to be interviewed.

Being an expert witness

One might expect to receive a fairer hearing in a court of law, and there have been a number of occasions where I have been invited to act as an expert witness in legal controversies involving NRMs. It may not be inappropriate at this juncture to mention remuneration: at least legal work can be rewarded with realistic rates of pay. Only too often academics will offer their services in other areas free of charge. We do not expect to be paid to write for academic journals, and indeed open access arrangements now often require the scholar to pay the publisher. Only a very small handful of academics can earn their living simply from royalties; pound for hour, the remuneration is far less than the minimum wage. We do it, partly because we hope it may enhance career advancement, or because we feel we have a mission to disseminate accurate information and promote good discussion. Legal work is different, and anyone acting as an expert witness can expect considerably more than visiting lecturer rates. Sometimes a legal firm or government body will define hourly or daily rates, while on other occasions the onus is on the witness to name the fee, and if one does not know what to suggest, there are various websites that will offer guidance on appropriate fees for this work.

Whether or not one should undertake work as an expert witness is controversial, and I have known colleagues who consistently decline such involvement. Eileen Barker (2001) argues that, although the expert has control over the material in the report, barristers can cross-examine witnesses selectively, thus denying the expert the opportunity to present all the information they might consider to be relevant. Although one might think that one's expertise could have been used to better advantage in court, the solicitors' and barristers' proficiency lies in knowing how best

to present the evidence, while the expert witness's task is to "tell it as it is", without taking sides, and without straying beyond one's expertise. Although I have not always agreed with the outcome, it has not been my goal to administer justice, and at least I have prevented someone less knowledgeable or experienced to have been asked to provide evidence of lesser accuracy. There is a risk, particularly as members of the ACM increasingly gain academic credentials, that courts turn to the self-styled "cult expert" for information that may well be sub-standard.

Engagement with NRMs: conferences and sponsorship

My discussion thus far has focused on how we engage with those outside the religious and spiritual groups that we study. However, in the study of religion, particularly if we employ fieldwork in our methodology, we inevitably engage with the religious communities themselves. One particularly controversial area relates to sponsorship from NRMs. From the late 1970s until the early 1990s the Unification Movement sponsored a large number of seminars and conferences to which academics and religious leaders were invited, free of charge and with accommodation, travel and other expenses paid. This level of hospitality raises a number of issues, not least of which relates to the organisation's sources of finance. When I attended my first such seminar in 1984 in Athens, numerous participants were concerned that a proportion of Unification Church funding was raised by mobile fundraising teams, consisting of young new converts who spent long hours selling flowers and candles to members of the public. At times this was done deceptively: when asked who they were, many were reluctant to say that there were Unification Church members, but claimed to represent an ecumenical body. (While it is true that founder-leader Sun Myung Moon wanted all churches, and indeed all religions, to unite, the unity he sought was one in which all would recognise his messianic role.) Other sources of UC funding were Moon's investments: while some were reasonably acceptable, like the *Washington Times* and the New Yorker Hotel, a substantial amount of income came from the T'ongil Engineering Factory, which manufactures munitions. In 1984, Moon has just been given a prison sentence for tax evasion, and some critics maintained that several his followers had falsified financial documents in order to enable him to escape conviction.

Quite apart from ethical issues, accepting benefits from religious organisations raises issues about objectivity. The presence of scholars at such events can enhance the reputation of controversial movements, and the researcher might feel an obligation to present an unduly favourable account of an organisation, either out of gratitude, or out of desire to receive further favours. In the case of the Unification Movement, invitations were often repeated, and participants could have the benefit of visiting parts of the world that might not otherwise have been able to afford. (However, the organisers of these conferences were aware of potential abuses: invitees were

assessed, and those who skipped sessions were quickly dropped from their conference circuit.) One particular problem arises when there is an expectation that participants write about the controversial organisation, and on occasions contributors have thought it appropriate either to endorse Unificationist theology, or to help to develop it. By their nature, NRMs are in an early stage of development; in the early 1980s when I initially made my acquaintance with the Unification Movement, there were numerous young graduates in leadership roles who were undertaking postgraduate study, and who subsequently obtained PhDs. Some NRMs – principally the Unification Church, the Hare Krishna movement, the Daesoon Jinrihoe, and to a lesser extent the Soka Gakkai – have sought to inaugurate a tradition of scholarship, and attending their academic conferences can serve to build the theology. Doing this militates against the more usual academic convention that in studying religious communities the researcher takes care to disturb the phenomenon as little as possible. Getting too close to a religious organisation can give some justification to the frequent anticult criticism that scholars have become “cult apologists”.

There is a further consideration about participation in such events. Participants are frequently, and understandably, encouraged to focus on the sponsoring religious organisation, which unduly privileges the sponsoring body, eclipsing similar, sometimes rival, movements. In the case of Daesoon Jinrihoe, which has begun to host a series of academic seminars in South Korea, the succession of their founder Park Wundang (1918-1996) is disputed, there being a number of claimed successors to Kang Jeung-san (1871-1909), who is regarded as the incarnation of the Supreme God by around 100 other spiritual groups (Jorgensen, 2018: 360-381). Daesoon Jinrihoe is certainly the largest of these, but its sponsorship of academic events attracts scholars to itself, at the expense of these rival organisations, which may well be of equal scholarly interest.

However, there can be positive arguments in favour of attending sponsored events of this kind. One can argue that sponsored seminars and conferences are part of the phenomenon of the religion that one is studying, and certainly if one’s research focus is on that organisation, it is important to explore as many of its facets as possible. New acquaintances made at such events can sometimes become gate-openers to other areas of the religion under study, and such events can enable the researcher to become part of a wider network. Further, research monies are scarce; departmental budgets will often scarcely stretch to a brief national conference, and it is notoriously difficult and time-consuming to attract funding from secular grant-awarding bodies.

Paying back

Sponsorship and hospitality sometimes come at a price. Even if our research does not involve financial assistance from religious communities, NRMs frequently provide support by giving up their time, sometimes supplying resources, and serving as gate-openers for our research. There is a power relationship that is created by engaging with communities: the NRM has the power to provide or decline our access, while as scholars we have the power to decide how to portray them in what we write. In the past some religious organisations have been reluctant to engage with researchers, for two main reasons: they have sometimes been suspicious that our portrayals may be no better than those of the countercult and anticult critics to which they are accustomed; they may also take the view that their main function is the spiritual development of their communities, rather than serving as sources of information to researchers. In recent times NRMs have become much more amenable to scholarly investigation, and indeed now often have a presence at academic conferences.

While NRMs now usually welcome scholarly access, the researcher is aware that this privilege can be withdrawn, and thus there is a temptation to present an organisation in a favourable light in order to enable one's research to continue. In at least one instance a scholar has been denied further access for not presenting the organisation sufficiently positively, although such instances are rare (Palmer, 2004: 11-12). In order to ensure that one's account of a religious community is at least accurate, one might consider inviting representatives of the organisation to read preliminary drafts of one's material. In my own work with Jehovah's Witnesses, such an arrangement has worked well, and it has always been on the understanding that, as the author, I am the final arbiter of what appears in print, and writing in dialogue has proved beneficial. This policy, unfortunately, has not worked well with other religious communities; in assembling an anthology on new religions, one organisation exercised undue editorial interference, and denied permission to use the material because my co-editor and I had included a chapter which presented the case on behalf of the anticult movement. Their material had to be omitted, since the power relationship in this instance was not in our favour: they owned the copyright.

At times engagement with NRMs can involve more than an expectation to fair and accurate portrayal. There have been occasions where a religious community has perceived itself to be a victim of persecution or injustice, and has sought my support. Whether one should comply depends of course on the merits of their request, and what kind of assistance is sought. This has taken the form of request to write to politicians, or to write a statement of support which might be used in the literature or website. I have been happy to do this on behalf of the Jehovah's Witnesses' situation in Russia, where they have been the victims of severe persecution, involving rates on their premises and course, arrests, and confiscation of property, and my comments – together with those of numerous other scholars – appear on their webpages (Jehovah's Witnesses, 2016). On another occasion the Church of

Scientology requested me to write to Google, complaining that its algorithms were unfairly determined, causing web users to alight on webpages that were critical and derogatory, rather than their own material. I declined to support them, on the grounds that I do not know how Google's algorithms work, and cannot determine whether they are satisfactory or otherwise.

Where one draws the line in relationship with one's informants has no agreed answer. Some researchers prefer to keep their informants at arm's length, making contact only for professional purposes. Some are happy to allow relationships at times to develop into friendships, and some researchers recognise that NRM members, like the rest of us, can have personal needs and problems. I have personally found no difficulty in drawing on a network of tradespeople among Jehovah's Witnesses to undertake work on our home. Not only are they honest and efficient, but interacting with them in normal human situations has proved a good way of experiencing part of their lifestyle, and acquiring new information about the Watch Tower organisation. The key consideration, of course, is whether one can continue to maintain critical distance.

There have also been times when a prolonged association with informants has developed into friendships, and over time I have witnessed their passage through an NRM, and sometimes their exit, when they have become disillusioned and decided to leave. Exiting an NRM often requires support. If members have been working full-time, they need to find employment outside the organisation, and I have been called upon on occasion to write references for them and offer advice on how they might compile their CV. Often skills acquired within an NRM can be transferable outside the community, such as managing people, dealing with finance, administration, writing, and public speaking; they have not necessarily wasted their years inside the community.

Publication

The most obvious form of scholarly engagement is publishing. A normal expectation is that an academic should produce at least two articles per year, and we are assessed on their "impact", which is normally measured by the number of citations that are found. We are assessed in terms of academic publications, preferably in high-ranking journals, and books and popular publications are given lower ratings when it comes to research assessment exercises. To measure "impact" in this way is questionable. According to one estimate, 1.8 million articles each year are published in approximately 28,000 academic journals (Rose, 2014). Wikipedia (2023) provides a list of 4000 theological journals, but its list is not exhaustive, and does not include the study of religion, which is a separate area, adding substantially to that estimate. The likelihood of anyone finding one's publication by chance is therefore minimal,

although the use of electronic searching, using keywords, enables one's article to be found by someone who is doing a focused search. However, academic articles are not readily accessible by the public, even if they had an interest in what we write. Accessibility is limited to those who have membership of an academic library, and those who have access to institutional electronic bundles of scholarly journals, or can afford the high prices of academic publications, which means that one's readership is largely confined to our own community of lecturers and students. For any member of the general public to access a scholarly article there is usually a paywall, and the cost even of a single article is high: £40 is a typical amount, which is a major deterrent to anyone outside the academic community. A survey carried out in 2007 indicated that only 50 percent of journal articles are ever read by anyone apart from their authors, referees, and journal editors, and 90 percent are never cited. While there can be dispute about the precise accuracy of such statistics, the simple truth is that academics are barely engaging with each other, let alone a wider public. One could argue that what we are doing is to create a depository of knowledge, which others can draw on where necessary. This has proved to be the case in a few instances. For example, John Lofland's (1966) *Doomsday Cult* might have disappeared into oblivion if the Unification Church had not subsequently attracted public interest and media attention.

For the most part, however, there is a mismatch between academic publication and what the general public likes to read. At the time of writing, Amazon's top bestsellers in religious studies are listed as follows (Amazon Best Sellers 2023):

Jonathan Cahn, *The Return of the Gods*

C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*

Amir Tsarfati, *Has the Tribulation Begun?: Avoiding Confusion and Redeeming the Time in These Last Days*

Josh D. McDowell, *More Than a Carpenter*

The Complete 54-Book Apocrypha: 2022 Edition with the Deuterocanon, 1-3 Enoch, Giants, Jasher, Jubilees, Pseudepigrapha, & the Apostolic Fathers

Alexander Pagani, *The Secrets to Deliverance: Defeat the Toughest Cases of Demonic Bondage*

John Burke, *Imagine Heaven: Near-Death Experiences, God's Promises, and the Exhilarating Future That Awaits*

Lee Strobel, *The Case for Christ: A Journalist's Personal Investigation of the Evidence for Jesus*

Jon Ward *Testimony: Inside the Evangelical Movement That Failed a Generation*

Jeremiah J. Johnston, *Body of Proof: The 7 Best Reasons to Believe in the Resurrection of Jesus--and Why It Matters Today*

The 54-book Apocrypha is somewhat surprising, and I cannot offer any explanation as to why this appears on a best-sellers list. Apart from that, there are no academic titles. Although C. S. Lewis was an Oxford don, his speciality was English literature, and his religious writings, for which he is best known, have popular rather than academic merit. As for the others, most are aimed at popular Christian piety, while *The Return of the Gods* promotes the hypothesis that extra-terrestrials visited the planet Earth and influenced ancient civilisations. Burke's title reflects the popular interest in near-death experiences, but again is in no way academic.

Compare the above titles with the following list of "New and Recently Arrived Titles in Religious Studies" in a recent promotional email from ISD Distributor of Scholarly Books (Email 28 April 2023):

Lidewij E. van de Peut, *Persuading the Divine: On the Composition of Hittite Prayers* (Harrassowitz Verlag, 2022)

Ferdinand Christian Baur (edited by Peter C. Hodgson and translated by Robert F. Brown), *Christian Gnosis: Christian Religious Philosophy in Its Historical Development* (James Clarke & Co, 2023)

R. Darling Young and H. Karapetyan (eds.), *Evagrius Ponticus, Letters. Armenian Translation* (Peeters, 2022).

Bengt G. M. Sundkler, *Nathan Söderblom: His Life and Work* (James Clarke & Co, 2023)

Paul Helm (ed.), *Treatise on Grace and Other Posthumously Published Writings by Jonathan Edwards* (Lutterworth, 2022).

One cannot help wondering what impact these writings are likely to have outside academic circles. No doubt such publications have merit, and their authors are able to defend the time and effort spent on researching their material, but they are unlikely to have public appeal. It is even unlikely that the material in these volumes would be filtered down through intermediate sources, such as Christian clergy in their sermons, or even lecturers in their typical teaching material.

While it might be argued that league tables of book sales can be manipulated, and varies over time, there can be no doubt that the sales of popular non-academic religious publications far exceed that of solid academic works, the former sometimes running into millions of copies sold, which would be the envy of most of us in academia. The obvious gap between academic writing and public interest should surely be a matter of concern, and it raises the question of whether as researchers we are pursuing our own interests and academic careers rather than using our research for public benefit. Other attempts to engage with the public have been through extramural classes or "lifelong learning", as is often the preferred term. The

Open University has done much valuable and innovative work in this area, making particularly in the provision of electronic sources that are publicly accessible free of charge. Unfortunately, more kudos is attached to teaching postgraduate work, with undergraduate studies coming second, and extramural work lacking prestige.

Engaging with individuals

One further form of public engagement deserves mention. From time to time I receive communications from individuals, mainly about my work on Jehovah's Witnesses. Apart from the media enquiries to which I have already referred, they fall into several categories. Some are requests for free copies of a book, claiming that their college library is in a developing country, where they lack the funds to purchase it. (Some people imagine authors sitting with piles of complimentary copies at their side.) Others are from eccentrics: one recent correspondent wanted to set up a Zoom meeting to explain how Jehovah's Witnesses were involved with the Ku Klux Klan. These correspondents (fortunately not too many) do not receive a reply. More encouraging are requests from students who are preparing some project on new religions: some request copies of articles, while others want to record a discussion, and I believe we have an obligation to assist with such enquiries. Sometimes Jehovah's Witnesses who have been unknown to me have got in touch, and such contacts have been fruitful. Some years ago a Witness wrote to me to point out what he called "musical coincidences" in their song books – musical lines that are replicated elsewhere, for example in popular songs. My subsequent correspondence with him revealed that he was an IT specialist, involved in designing translation programs from English to Chinese, and he has subsequently proved to be an invaluable resource for providing information about the Watch Tower Society's use of information technology. Another JW correspondent writes novels and, while the organisation is cautious about unofficial literature, such publications reveal another aspect of members' activities. Correspondence with ex-members tends to be unproductive, but there are occasional exceptions: one elderly ex-member has embarked on a major project on the biblical history and chronology; his work is not particularly original and is unlikely to impact on scholarly research, but it is a hobby that keeps him going and I believe should be encouraged, although I have to limit the time I am able to spend on it.

Conclusions

The recent wave of closures of religious studies departments indicates a lack of understanding of the value of the subject, and should cause us to be proactive in promoting the ways in which we engage with society. It should be a matter of concern that the first answer that is yielded by googling "What is the value of religious studies?" is the following:

“Religious Education provides opportunities to promote spiritual development through: Discussing and reflecting on key questions of meaning and truth such as the origins of the universe and of life, life after death, good and evil, beliefs about God and values such as justice, honesty, and truth.” (SchoolsWeb, 2022).

Engaged scholarship in the study of religion is not – or at least should not be – about personal spiritual development (whatever that means), but about demonstrating how religion is important in international affairs, in business, in community relations, in issues such as multiculturalism, immigration, understanding and combating terrorism, and a host of other practical topics. There is a need to consider the extent to which work has a significant bearing on these and other issues of societal importance. I believe we need to consider whether some of the areas we pursue are unduly abstruse and theoretical, and whether more energy should be channelled into contributing to understanding society. It is not altogether the fault of religious studies scholars, however. Part of the problem lies in the fact that the “impact” on which we are assessed is the extent to which we influence other inhabitants of the ivory tower. What I believe is needed is a clearer articulation of the function of our subject, combined with a method of assessing our work which somehow truly measures the extent to which we are undertaking engaged scholarship that has genuine public benefit. In the scope of this article, it is unrealistic to set out an agenda for this, but this must be the subject of continuing debate, coupled with engagement with the wider community.

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