

In an effort to explore the full range of career opportunities for those trained in religious studies, *Religious Studies News*, in conjunction with the AAR's Job Placement Task Force, has initiated a new, regularly appearing column exploring religious studies careers outside of academia. In coming issues, columns will share first-person accounts of possibilities and challenges for scholars of religion beyond faculty roles. If you have pursued such a career path and would like to share your story, or if you know of someone who has done so, please contact the chair of the Job Placement Task Force, Tim Renick, at tim_renick@aar.org. This e-mail address is being protected from spambots. You need JavaScript enabled to view it .

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In the middle of research for a new book, I stumbled on a small, half-century old monograph in the GTU stacks, *The Visigoths in the Time of Ulfila*, by E. A. Thompson. It had not been checked out in years. Ultimately, Bishop Ulfila did not make the book, but last March, I traveled to Uppsala, Sweden, to see the manuscript of his ancient translation of the New Testament from Greek into Goth.

The vast world of religion scholarship ranges from the dedicated scholars whose knowledge only few will ever explore and those whose work is essential reading in their field. Despite the poor job prospects for holders of doctorates in religion, many talented people still want to pursue the degree, even at great personal cost. This love of the scholarly enterprise is an important social good, but doctoral training needs to change to sustain that social good.

A small number of universities and theological schools train the vast proportion of religion scholars. Faculties at those institutions mentor students into junior models of themselves. They train them for careers at schools with resources such as good libraries, generous sabbatical policies, minimal teaching loads, and highly vetted students. Yet, only a few scholars will ever have the opportunity to hold tenured positions at elite institutions, and the institutions and faculties who confer doctorates know that the availability of such jobs is worse than poor. A doctorate in religion should not be a high-stakes gamble or an exercise in wishful thinking.

The few elite institutions exploit this surplus of talent by hiring newly minted PhD graduates into non-tenure track positions, knowing they will take such positions because they want that institution's imprimatur on their CVs. While a very rare few junior scholars are subsequently moved into tenured positions, the rest are jettisoned into the job search mill at the end of a few years, sometimes with a body of professional work that exceeds that of a senior colleague.

We should question the ethics of a system that asks years of people's lives and, from many, the accrual of serious debt while training them for nonexistent jobs. One recent graduate of an elite institution, still searching for work, described the current system to me as something like a Ponzi scheme. This assessment has some merit, though it ignores the value to the student of a doctoral degree beyond a job. Yet, we all know there are far too many graduates and far too few full-time teaching positions in higher education, of any sort, and most students in doctoral programs want jobs after they graduate.

A doctoral degree incurs obligations for all concerned. Institutions must provide the best education they can and help students finish. They also owe it to the success and thriving of their alumni/ae to help them prepare for greater professional nimbleness and flexibility. A junior scholar is obligated to those who make a degree possible — the builders and funders of an

educational institution, teachers and mentors, family and friends, and communities that sustain the behaviors and institutions called “religious.” The scholar’s obligations can be met in a variety of ways.

A choice not to pursue a tenured position at an elite institution is neither an admission of failure nor a second choice. It is also not a waste of the years and dollars invested in a PhD. It is worth remembering that one outstanding graduate of Harvard Law School eschewed the high-achieving career path, became a community organizer, and was eventually elected President of the United States. Career paths outside the towers of academe and its tenured tracks honor a scholar’s social obligations through other means, a different set of values, or a different vocational call.

Doctoral programs should consider field education programs that offer internships and training for a variety of careers. While most MDiv programs offer internships both inside and outside local church ministry, PhD professional training is far narrower, confined to teaching or research assistantships and occasional publishing or editing opportunities, which support the institution’s faculty.

Graduate students should have ways to gain experience and training beyond the academy. Foundations need knowledgeable program officers. Non-profit organizations need able leaders with sophisticated minds, people with community organizing skills, and program developers who know how to implement ideas. Publishers need editors. Colleges, universities, and theological schools need administrators and directors of programs. Some private secondary schools need teachers, especially those who have some disciplinary flexibility and are qualified to teach in more than one area.

With some luck, talent, skill, and a high tolerance for risk, some scholars support themselves as freelance writers, consultants, and lecturers. Clear ideas presented in well-written work can reach far more people and offer more social good than the often labored, dense in-house books and essays of the scholarly production machines. Accessible work runs counter to current doctoral training, but it is a skill that doctoral programs could encourage and teach — and it might make for more readable and publishable dissertations.

The wider public sorely needs scholars who are committed to the essential and haunting religious questions of life and to the fascinating human behavior called religious, scholars who want to reach that wider public, and scholars who implement their degrees in diverse

professional ways. The religion academy benefits from scholars who reach beyond its fortified towers and resident clones, and it should return that benefit in the professional training it offers its students.