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During my initial years in academia, I often felt alone in my struggles to establish a toe-hold for religious studies on my campus. I thought that I was toiling in isolation — engaging issues that were the product of a history unique to my institution. What subsequent years have revealed to me is that I was anything but alone within our discipline. In a very real sense, teaching religious studies entails, by its very nature, a difficult and challenging dimension not affiliated with the teaching of, for example, history, biology, or English. Of those fields, no one — faculty, student, or administrator — asks why the field exists. No one imagines a modern university without these endeavors. The discipline of religious studies has never been so blessed. The field faces — and in some senses is defined by — an existential challenge: *Why religious studies?*

Some of the challenges come from without. As clearly evidenced by a recent multiyear, Teagle Foundation-funded AAR study of the religious studies major that I led, many of us face pockets of faculty at our home institutions who, believing religion to be an antiquated holdover of premodern ways of thought, fiercely oppose devoting university resources to studying an allegedly dying and false phenomenon (see articles by the Teagle Working Group and the AAR). Others of us face colleagues who see the addition of religious studies courses as opening the door to proselytizing in the classroom. (The Texas state system is just now reintroducing religious studies programs following faculty backlash after decades of reliance on “Bible chairs” — clergypersons paid for by Christian denominations — who were, until the practice was declared unconstitutional in the 1980s, employed to teach courses on religion.) Still others see the discipline as a luxury. Amid the current economic crisis, a number of schools are looking to trim or to discontinue religious studies programs, with well-established departments at institutions such as the University of Florida and Arizona State University in

peril. While the public rationales for these budgetary decisions are never as blunt as the attacks of some of our less tactful colleagues, a familiar question nonetheless is implicit in each administrative proposal to trim a program: *Why religious studies?*

Other challenges come from within the discipline. D. G. Hart, a professor of church history, has argued that religious studies tries to portray itself as an academic field of critical inquiry but that its existence and methods are inextricably tied to the field’s origins in Protestant campus ministries during the first part of the twentieth century. “As much as religious studies strives to sever ties to communities of faith, it cannot do so without self-immolation,” he writes (Hart, 10). Duke’s Stanley Hauerwas argues that “the creation of religious studies departments can be understood as the ongoing development of universities to provide legitimating knowledge for state power” (63–64). For Hauerwas, the discipline falsely attempts to unite inherently unrelated phenomena under the artificial construct of “religion” and, in the name of maintaining neutrality, abdicates responsibility for teaching students what is genuinely true about God’s ways.

While in what follows I will not explicitly attempt to refute the criticisms of either secular critics of religious studies or of scholars of religion such as Hart and Hauerwas, I would like to suggest some alternate answers to the question of *Why religious studies?* Moreover I will argue that, rather than feel embarrassed or disoriented by the field’s inability to conclusively answer the central question of its existence, those of us who teach in religious studies might better embrace the existential question as an integral aspect of our classroom pedagogy.

Students care about the study of religion.

One of several interesting findings in Barbara Walvoord’s 2008 study of undergraduates in introductory religion courses was that college students genuinely care about spiritual issues and want to pursue matters of personal religious development. A 2005 study of 112,000 students by the Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) at UCLA came to a similar conclusion: “Today’s college students have very high levels of spiritual interest and involvement, many are actively engaged in a spiritual quest and in exploring meaning and purpose in life. They are also very engaged and involved in religion, reporting considerable commitment to their religious beliefs and practices” (www.gseis.ucla.edu/heri/spirituality.html ; see also Walvoord, 11).

While both Walvoord and the HERI study found that college-age students are often frustrated by a lack of opportunities to explore spiritual matters in college classrooms (56 percent of students said that their professors had never presented the opportunity to discuss the meaning of life, according to HERI), the very deficiency can be seen as a pedagogical opportunity for those of us who teach in the field of religious studies (see Astin, et al.).

In light of such findings and faced with the challenge of creating an introductory world religions course for the core curriculum at Georgia State University, my department elected to structure the course around a set of fundamental questions asked by most college-age students: Where do we come from? Why do we live and die? Why is there suffering? Is violence justifiable? For each question, we selected primary sources from various world religions that offer provocative insights representative of the traditions in question. The goal was not to script the students' answers to these basic questions of meaning (although we were certainly cognizant of the ways that the material chosen inherently shapes the discussion), but rather to provide a structured setting — assisted not only by an instructor, but by readings, writing assignments, and classmates — in which students might pursue their own thinking on the issues. The resulting course most assuredly does not address Hauerwas's concerns about our discipline, but it does engage genuinely important issues not explored by any other offerings in the general curriculum. Indeed, efforts to fit explicit explorations of diverse religious perspectives on life's central questions into other core courses in the college curriculum — history, sociology, even the increasingly secular field of philosophy — can seem strained and ad hoc. In religious studies, it comes naturally.

By the way, the course we added already is among the most highly demanded offerings in the university's core curriculum, which leads me to a second point...

Students who care about what they study tend to be better learners.

A study recently released by the National Board of Economic Research looks at the choices undergraduates make in selecting their courses and majors, and at the impacts that these choices have on their later professional lives (DeGiorgi, et al.). What the researchers found will not surprise any of us who work with students on a day-to-day basis: students often make poor choices. The study focused on two major influences on students' selection of classes and majors. One was the influence of peers — students who take an elective, for instance, primarily because their friends are taking the class or because a parent tells them to do so. The second was ability — students who take a class because they have an interest in and aptitude for the subject matter.

Not surprisingly, the researchers found that students very often take classes because of the influence of others. We've all dealt with the pre-med student who is convinced he's going to be a doctor like his dad even though he has never gotten higher than a “C-” in any science class, or the student who insists on following her friends into business classes but — small problem — she hates business. Such choices are clearly not a recipe for student success, and the

researchers found “clear evidence that peer-driven students perform worse than the ability-driven students in terms both of average and final grades” (DeGiorgi, et al.).

The researchers then followed the graduates into the work force for several years, finding that the students who selected jobs based on peer pressure earned 13 percent less than those who let interest and ability drive their career decisions. More importantly, the first group was also much more likely to feel mismatched and unhappy in its positions and to encounter difficulties in the workplace (e.g., poor job performance, layoffs). Combine Walvoord’s and HERI’s insights with these findings and one arrives at another important, if often underappreciated, rationale for the presence of religious studies on college campuses: religious studies contributes to the happiness and success of students. Students excel when they care about a subject, and many students care deeply about issues central to the field of religious studies.

Academic disciplines should constantly question the reason for their existence.

In the early stages of the Teagle project to study the religious studies major, I participated in an interesting exercise at a meeting of Teagle grant recipients from seven other disciplines. The Teagle Foundation Director, Robert Connor, asked each of us to prepare a report on the history of the efforts of a discipline other than our own to develop and to implement curricular innovation, common learning outcomes, assessment tools, and so forth. We surveyed not only the professional organizations’ websites but also conference proceedings, journal articles, and pedagogical resources.

Those around the table that day arrived at largely the same conclusion: most disciplines do not have a rich history of critical thought about these matters. Even disciplines guided by formal accrediting processes and boards often have little to say about the larger issues of what the field is trying to impart to students and what students should learn — beyond certain bodies of specific information — by pursuing the major. We may not often hear the question posed on college campuses, *Why chemistry?*, but this is not necessarily due to the fact that chemists have a unified, well-developed, and coherent answer to the question of their existence. Indeed, the most common complaint voiced by those who pursue issues of pedagogy within these other, established disciplines was that so many of their colleagues cared and thought so little about the topic.

In my experience, this has never been a problem for religious studies. Ours is a discipline that is constantly critical of what we do and why, and the result is that we tend to think a lot about pedagogy. In times of increased emphasis on assessment, this is a definite asset; as we all

know, to assess how well you are accomplishing a goal, you must first think about what you are trying to attain. But it also is an important part of what we can model and impart to our students in the classroom. Most of our colleagues across the academy say that they want their students to learn to be self critical, but many of them (and, admittedly, more than a few of us) proceed to spend the semester assuming the essential, even unquestioned, significance of their own enterprise. In few disciplines is self criticism on display as publicly and as frequently as in religious studies, and perhaps we should start to acknowledge this as one of the significant strengths of our field.

My home department’s BA and MA degree programs became markedly stronger when we started to require that students take a seminar course exploring competing theoretical understandings of the field. The students may experience some disorientation in encountering Robert Orsi and Stephen Prothero debate the role that the investigator’s value judgments should play in what he or she studies, or in reading Diana Eck, Jonathan Z. Smith, and Mark Taylor in succession, but the discussions are inevitably lively and the disorientation is productive. Students begin to see how their own perspectives and choices — and those of their teachers — shape the nature of what they study and how they perceive it. And when one thinks about it, isn’t this itself a rather potent response to the question *Why religious studies?*

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