

Robert P. Jones, Public Religion Research Institute



*Robert P. Jones is the founding CEO of Public Religion Research Institute (PRRI), a nonprofit, nonpartisan research and education organization specializing in work at the intersection of religion, values, and public life. He is a member of the national steering committee for the AAR's Religion and Politics Section and is an active member of the Society of Christian Ethics and the American Association of Public Opinion Research. Jones holds a PhD in religion from Emory University and a MDiv from Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary. Before founding PRRI, Jones worked as a research fellow at several think-tanks in Washington, D.C., and served as assistant professor of religious studies at Missouri State University. He is the author two academic books, *Progressive and Religious: How Christian, Jewish, Muslim, and Buddhist Leaders are Moving Beyond Partisan Politics and Transforming American Public Life* (Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2008) and *Liberalism's Troubled Search for Equality: Religion and Cultural Bias in the Oregon Physician-Assisted Suicide Debates* (University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), and numerous peer-review articles on religion and public policy.*

It's a safe bet that most of us who are living the title of this feature, "beyond academe," did not envision this path when we entered graduate school. Most of us have found ourselves outside that ever-shrinking pool of tenure-track teaching positions due to the vagaries of the brutal job market or the result of that truism that "life intervenes." In my own case, the latter — the combination of a divorce, the needs of a new partner who was also an academic, and my own desire to put my work more on the ground — pushed me to find a way to continue to do the academic work I valued beyond the confines of the university setting. Although there are certainly things I miss about academe (such as the certainty of a paycheck!), I've found my professional life as an independent scholar has given me rewarding opportunities and is in many ways more satisfying than my work as a university professor.



Lesson One: To survive outside the academic market, independent scholars must become entrepreneurs.

I've learned that being nimble, flexible, strategic, and even opportunistic has allowed me (mostly) to piece together the space for advancing my academic work. For example, during a conversation that began about one project, a funder expressed interest in contributing to a different project. Because the project was time-sensitive and fit our mission — in this case to better understand the new alliances among religious groups in support of [comprehensive immigration reform](#) — we shifted our immediate grant proposal for this project, and postponed our original request until this project was completed. The challenge along the way has been to hold onto continuity in my research agenda while taking advantage of available work that would make a real contribution, sometimes in unexpected ways, as well as help pay the rent.

Lesson two: To develop professionally outside the university setting, independent scholars must make serious investments in creating their own networks.

In the academy, you are handed both a natural audience (colleagues and students) and a regular paycheck. In the independent scholar world, you have to generate both. I've found that the level of professional networking required to ensure I have an audience for our work and the next project in the queue is surprisingly demanding — building a mailing list; cultivating social media connections on [Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#) ; developing a presence as a blogger on [Religion Dispatches](#)

,
[Newsweek/Washington Posts](#)
's "On Faith,"

and

[Huffington Post](#)

; and making a serious time investment in numerous lunches, coffees, and phone calls with potential allies, client organizations, and funders. I've found that professional networking occupies at least one third of my professional time. (As this paragraph attests, I also try never to pass up an opportunity for building these networks!)

Where does the time to do this come from? For me, mapping the task of "networking" onto the "teaching" portion of my academic responsibilities has been a good "beyond academe" formula. This substitution makes sense for two reasons. First, as much as I enjoy teaching, it quickly became clear to me that the often-exploitive adjunct teaching system (low compensation in

return for being always overworked and too often stigmatized as a permanent underclass) weren't ultimately going to serve me well. Instead, I've found that scratching the teaching itch with the occasional guest lecture is satisfying enough. Second, both teaching and networking are about relationships, and I've found the conversations with this new professional network have kept me learning in many of the same ways I had previously through interactions with students.

Lesson three: To maintain a scholarly community in the absence of a department of colleagues, independent scholars should invest in academic guild organizations.

Just as I found substituting networking for teaching was a good "beyond academe" strategy, I've also found that rethinking the arena of "service" is important. Most of what passes for service in the traditional academic review is participation in departmental, college, and university committees. Freed from these requirements, independent scholars can concentrate their service investment in national guild organizations, which can both build community and serve as an important outlet for scholarly work.

I've made an investment in three arenas. At the American Academy of Religion, I serve on the national steering committee for the Religion and Politics Section, and I frequently present papers there and in the Religion in Social Sciences Section. At the Society of Christian Ethics, I'm one of the few researchers who bring quantitative research to the conference. And at the American Association for Public Opinion Research, where I am a relative newcomer, I'm becoming part of the conversation among a subset of researchers working at the intersection of religion and public policy. In each case, the trick has been to find the subset of people who share my research interests (not always in the expected places) and to make a concerted effort to be a consistent presence in those groups.

Lesson four: To produce scholarship without an academic calendar, independent scholars must plan creatively.

One of the biggest challenges of leaving the academic institutional setting is the loss of dedicated summer research time where no other duties intrude. In one sense, relieved of teaching duties, there is plenty of research time in the independent scholar world, but the typical end products of that research are designed for journalists and policy makers rather than reviewers for academic journals. With the right planning (and legal contracts), these projects can contain the foundations of solid academic research, but the work of transforming them into academic presentations and journal articles often has to be done on one's own time — a real challenge in an environment where time is money. I often find this work simply has to be done around the edges of things, but in one case, I managed to block out eight precious weeks of

time to finish a major project — my book, [Progressive and Religious](#) . Creating this space took six months of advanced planning to wind down current projects and discipline to schedule new ones around this block of time; it also frankly took a bit of luck and a willingness to work hard across Thanksgiving, Christmas, and New Year’s holidays. While this was challenging both financially and logistically, it was the only way I ever completed the book.

I certainly don’t intend the above “lessons learned” to be overly formulaic. At critical junctures, I’ve also been the beneficiary of both good luck and the good will of others. But the actions above have helped me take advantage of open doors when opportunity presented itself. At least so far, I can say that I’ve built a meaningful and fulfilling scholarly life, and I’ve also found an additional perk — that I’m in good company with an increasing cohort of independent scholars who are carving out satisfying careers beyond academe.

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