In the fall of 2010 the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life confirmed what most professors of religious studies already knew — the majority of Americans know woefully little about the key figures and teachings of the primary world religions. On average, respondents to this survey answered only half of the thirty-two questions correctly. Moreover, people did not demonstrate basic understanding of their own tradition. For example, 53% of Protestants could not name Martin Luther as the person who touched off the Protestant Reformation.

This information comes to light at a time when budget cuts in higher education begin to threaten instruction in many areas of the humanities, including religious studies. More and more, faculties are being asked to justify their use of scarce resources and to defend offering instruction in areas that do not, at least for most undergraduates, result in a clear path to employment. Such a challenge to our livelihoods, however, need not generate despair. Rather, religious studies faculties need to seize the opportunities to demonstrate their relevance to a variety of enterprises and to create new programming that responds to the needs of their communities.

Religion matters. It matters politically and militarily. It matters in navigating the challenges of our educational, health care, and social service systems. It matters in law enforcement. It matters in conducting business globally. A few examples make the point readily.

When I think back to the time immediately after September 11, 2001, I stayed busy educating community groups about Islam. These talks continued to be popular as the United States entered into war with Afghanistan and then Iraq. But what struck me most profoundly in the classroom came from young veteran students returning from their tours of duty. I heard over and over again about how much they would have appreciated knowing what I taught about the religious practices they encountered prior to deployment.

One of our opportunities as religious studies faculties, then, might be found in partnership with our military bases. I live in North Carolina where seven military installations and fourteen Coast Guard facilities give us the fourth largest active duty population in the country. Short, flexible (likely online) courses on religious customs and practices in a deployment zone would provide our service members with a basis for understanding what they will experience and for more effectively navigating the cultural divides. Such a foundation would also, ideally, open up the possibility of additional study on the history and basic tenets of a religion.

Other similar programs come to mind. The increasing religious diversity of our population demands that persons employed in public service understand the varied customs and norms of faith they encounter every day. Law enforcement, health care providers, social workers, and teachers must know the obligations of a faith on a person and its impact on how they relate to others, dress, worship, eat, understand sickness and death, or deal with family issues.

Business programs would also benefit from courses acquainting students with basic religious attitudes and their cultural impact. Awareness of the religious customs in a given area would allow for the development of appropriate and non-offensive marketing campaigns, improve human resource
services when hiring and staffing in a given locale, and generate better customer service to name only a few advantages.

Many faculty members object to such an applied approach to their subject. Indeed to accomplish such collaboration with other disciplines, standard methods of teaching about religious traditions must be rethought. Attention to the history of a tradition’s development and the nuances of its tenets give way to a greater emphasis on how people practice their faith and the impact of a tradition on culture and politics. At first blush, such an approach might appear antithetical to the problem of people not knowing or understanding various religious traditions. The Pew survey, after all, demonstrated a gap in basic information.

But this tactic reflects a larger change in how we define the purpose and function of education. Today, accessing facts occurs with a few keystrokes thanks to our search engines and apps. Pedagogy then, at least potentially, can be less concerned with relaying information and more focused on what that information means. That is not to say that foundations of what we think of as religion are unimportant or lack value to our students. Instead, it calls on us to contextualize that core knowledge in ways that demonstrate how it carries currency in the contemporary environment.

“Pure” research does not disappear. What much of the public thinks of as esoteric and useless, we know advances our conception of how religions develop, of how people imagine the interrelationship of their lives, the social environment, the world, and the cosmos, and of the best methods to think about religious studies as an academic discipline. It is only the ties between our research and our teaching that might be altered. More time spent in developing and delivering the kinds of practical courses described likely would reduce the opportunities to teach advanced upper level specialty or graduate classes— at least in the short term.

The return on such an investment, however, stands out as enormous in its potential. To bring what we do professionally into the world in ways that improve people's appreciation for difference and enhances cultural awareness certainly provides a laudable goal. To work more effectively with other disciplines corresponds with a vision of university education integrated in its conversations among specialists and connected to the complex relationships of disciplines in which our students live. Perhaps of greatest value, it moves beyond what the Pew Forum survey sought. Instead of merely asking people to memorize and recall, we would be asking our students to engage their world in a way that makes the details relevant and thus memorable.

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