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To Study Religion and Media, We Need to Teach Religion and Media: Economic Realities, Challenges, and Future Directions

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To Study Religion and Media, We Need to Teach Religion and Media

Economic Realities, Challenges, and Future Directions

Abstract

Universities in the United Kingdom, and also in the United States, Austria, and Germany, are facing increased financial pressures. This has already led to the closure of religious studies departments and courses. Course closures impact not only the study choices of students but also the opportunities for the faculty to study religion and media. In this essay, written from a UK perspective, I argue that healthy recruitment into religious studies and related degrees is a necessary foundation for consideration of future directions in the study of religion and media. Given precarious funding, it is essential to consider the value that the study of religion offers the tax-paying public and how scholars in the study of religion can demonstrate how religion shapes socio-cultural and political transformations. I argue that scholars of religion and media can do much to renew public interest in the study of religion.

Keywords

Recruitment, Funding, Future Directions, Skills, Religion and Media

Biography

Alexander Darius Ornella, Dr. theol., is Senior Lecturer in Religion at the University of Hull. His research interests include technology and religion, sports and religion, and religion and visual practices. Currently he is exploring how the use of police robots might impact faith communities. He is also working on a project that explores the links between sex work and religion.

Introduction

To speculate about future directions in the study of religion and media is itself almost a religious practice, akin to divination in antiquity. Given the financial challenges many universities in countries such as the United

Kingdom, the United States, Germany, and Austria (to name just a few) are facing, any such divination needs to consider the institutional and budgetary context of the study of religion and media, that is, adequate student numbers as foundation for the funding of both teaching and research.

The study of religion and media faces a double burden of precariousness. The first burden comes from the institutional reality of how and where “religion and media” is taught. At least at an undergraduate level, the study of religion and media is often limited to select courses within a religious studies, theology, or social sciences degree. Such embeddedness means that the future of the study of religion and media is linked to the future of the courses, disciplines, or departments it sits in. The second burden is shared with many other non-STEM (science, technology, engineering, mathematics) courses or courses that do not have a clear vocational trajectory. Such courses are at the mercy of ever-changing governmental policies, expectations about career paths and the “value for money” that a degree offers, and last but not least, often-questionable university senior administrator decisions. This second burden might hit the study of religion and media especially hard: why should a university spend its already scarce resources to fund the teaching and the study of religion and media?

To speculate about future directions in the study of religion and media, then, means first and foremost to reflect on the question *why?* Why study religion at all? Anyone who attempts to answer this question will need to venture beyond personal interests and the stubborn pervasiveness of religion in contemporary societies. In addition, they will need to keep at least two different audiences and their concerns and agendas in mind. Understandably, students will be looking for convincing reasons to justify their financial and time commitment. University managers will want to be convinced that a continued investment in the study of religion will reap a financial return, will come with a high financial “contribution to center”, and will increase their institution’s student market share. In other words: perceptions of growth are slowly becoming almost exclusive drivers in university administrators’ decisions about which courses to cut and which areas to label “growth areas” and funnel university resources to.

This essay is to a large extent based on my own experience of the higher education landscape in the United Kingdom and the discussions around sustainability when the study of religion was wound down at my own

institution over ten years ago, as well as similar discussions at UK universities that are currently facing course closures. The UK higher education sector is under immense pressure that affects a range of disciplines, including the study of religion, humanities, and social sciences, and at some institutions even “safe” STEM subjects. At the time of writing, around 70 universities in the United Kingdom have announced voluntary and/or compulsory redundancies, with some universities having (or wanting) to save up to £100 million over the next couple of years.¹ The University of Kent’s theology and religious studies provision is one of the latest victims of these pressures.²

While the perspective of this article is grounded in my experiences in England, the recruitment challenges I will discuss in more detail in the next section reflect broader issues the study of religion faces across and beyond Europe. Those issues are linked to the value, or lack of value, both the tax-paying public and academia itself see in the study of religion. Samuel L. Perry addresses the challenging position the study of religion finds itself in:

There is a curiously persistent mismatch between religion’s relevance in human social life and its place in the academy. And that situation is worsening. Today, religious studies departments are fighting for their lives. Social science advisors practically (and sometimes explicitly) forbid their graduate students from studying religion for fear that it will make their employment prospects even dimmer than they already are.³

I argue that any speculation about future directions in the study of religion and media needs to have as its foundation a solid understanding of the study of religion’s two-fold precariousness, the biases the study of religion faces from the public and within academia, and the recruitment challenges faced by the subjects and departments that are home to the study of religion and media, i. e. religious studies, theology, humanities, or social sciences. The viability of research around religion and media very much depends on the viability of the study of religion more broadly as well as the viability of those disciplines that feature classes or courses related to religion and media. An-

1 Sandiford 2023; Mitchell 2024; UCU Queen Mary 2024.

2 University of Kent 2024.

3 Perry 2024, xv.

ecdotally, the Vice-Chancellor of one of the UK universities that announced compulsory redundancies in June 2024 stated bluntly at an all-faculty meeting that the only thing that will save universities is bums on seats, because research is mostly a loss-making business.

The success of any attempts to reinvigorate interest in the study of religion and drive up student numbers to enable research will ultimately depend on how compelling the answer is to the questions of what students can learn about society that they cannot learn elsewhere, and how that knowledge translates into clear career paths and practical and actional knowledge.

I argue that as scholars of religion and media (and readers of JRFM) collectively we have the resources, knowledge, and expertise to take back control over contemporary narratives of the decline and irrelevance of the study of religion. Rather than presenting a single answer to this complex question, this article aims to initiate a conversation on how the study of religion and media can demonstrate its value for money and justify its continued funding.

Before proceeding to the next section, I should clarify who I consider to be scholars of religion and media. I do not see the study of religion and media as the exclusive territory of – or a subfield restricted to – “religious studies”. I know many scholars in religion and media whose background is in theology, sociology, cultural studies, gender studies, or media and communication studies. This clarification matters, because rather than presume there is competition between “home” disciplines (and there often is such competition, much to everyone’s detriment!), we must recognize that the study of religion and media – and thus ultimately the study of religion – is enriched by its interdisciplinarity.

“Follow the Money”: Recruitment Challenges

While the study of religion and media is not exclusively dependent on the financial health of religious studies (or theology for that matter), I focus on recruitment numbers for religious studies and theology, as these are probably its main financial homes. Mapping recruitment patterns for religious studies relies on publicly available data that might be inaccurate. In the United Kingdom, for example, a report by the British Association for the Study of Religions highlighted that inconsistencies when coding for religious

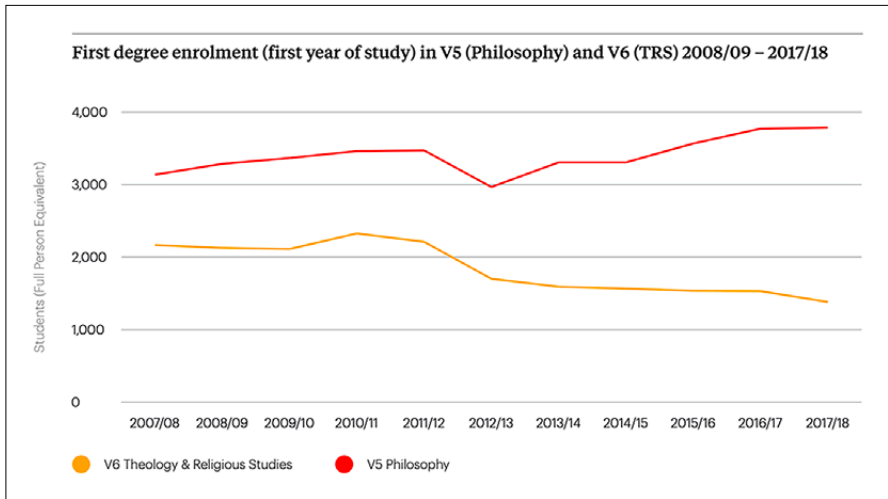


Fig. 1: First year students in philosophy and theology and religious studies in the UK.

studies courses sometimes skewed numbers between religious studies and theology. Tracking major/minor combinations involving religious studies can be equally challenging.⁴

The raising of tuition fees in England to £9,000 in 2012 had a major negative impact on the UK-wide statistics of student numbers enrolling in a course in V6 (theology and religious studies; fig. 1). A British Academy report attributed the dip mostly to a decrease in recruitment in England and stated that in Scotland, where Scottish students did not pay tuition fees, enrollment remained largely stable.⁵ To date, intake numbers in Scotland remain small but stable, with overall numbers in 2022/23 similar to 2019/20 (fig. 2). Due to the relatively small cohort in Scotland and the fact that students from England, Wales, and Northern Ireland do pay tuition fees in Scotland – meaning tuition fees are not an incentive for these students to relocate for a religious studies programme – I will not continue to separate Scottish and English numbers in the remainder of this essay.

At the same time as tuition fees were raised and university recruitment significantly declined in England, pupils’ interest in religion in secondary education in England/Wales/Northern Ireland continued to grow. The num-

4 Robertson/Tuckett/Schmidt 2021, 13.

5 British Academy 2019, 15.

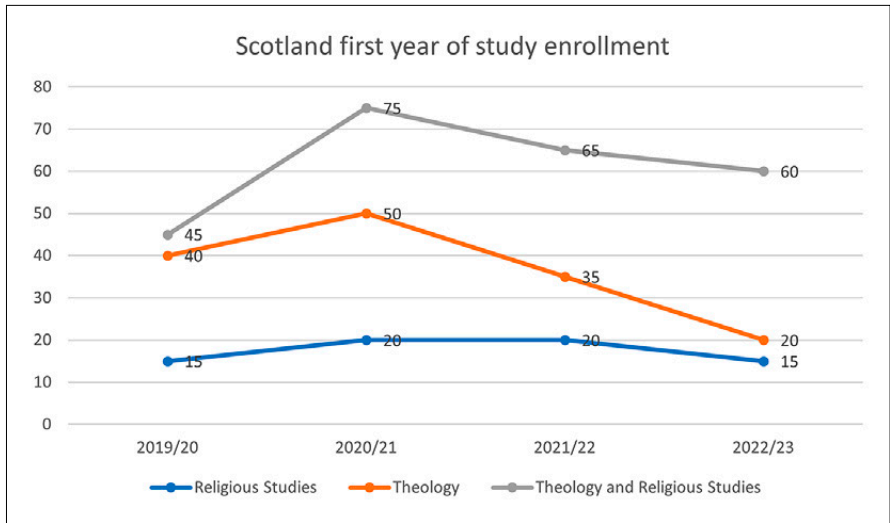


Fig. 2: First year students for religious studies and theology programmes in Scotland.

ber of pupils taking religious studies at General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE)⁶ and A-Level⁷ saw a steady increase until 2016 but then started to drop off significantly in 2018 (fig. 3). The increase in numbers up until 2016 contributed to a popular narrative that religious studies enjoys a growing interest which universities simply failed to harness.⁸ Not only did the spike in A-Levels in religious studies in England not translate into increased student numbers at university level, but in light of the dramatic drop in the study of religion at secondary school since 2017/18, it is clear that religious studies has proved not to be the feeder subject universities had hoped for.⁹

Tracking recruitment patterns and generating reliable and comparable data is also complicated by the realities of the institutional “home” of religious studies degrees and their entanglement with other degree programs.¹⁰ In some universities, religious studies is offered *alongside, with* and *in* the same department as theology programs. In other universities, religious

6 Taken in the United Kingdom (excl. Scotland) at the age of 16.

7 Taken in the United Kingdom (excl. Scotland) at the age of 18. A-Level qualifications are used by universities as an entry qualification.

8 Religious Education Council 2021; Benoit/Hutchings 2023, 319.

9 Ofsted 2024.

10 Robertson/Tuckett/Schmidt 2021, 1-2; British Academy 2019.

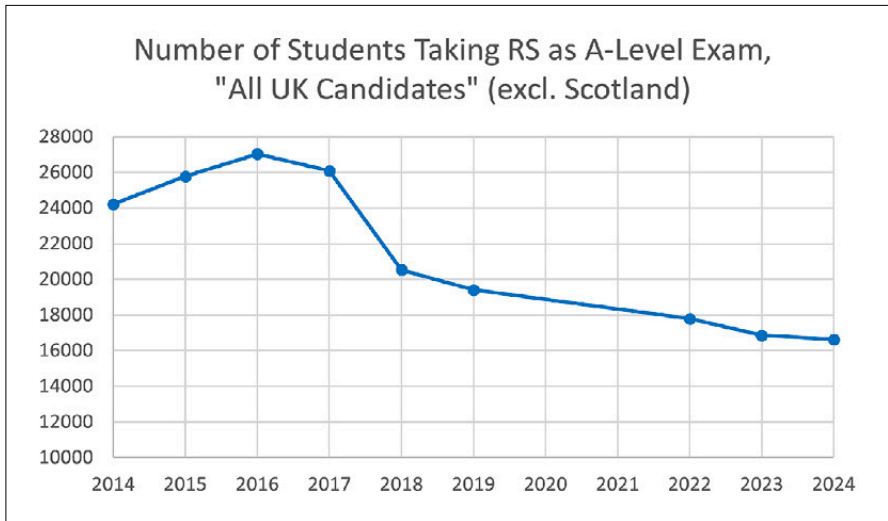


Fig. 3: Religious Studies A-Level exams, 2014–2024 (UK excluding Scotland).

studies sits under the umbrella of philosophy, humanities, or social sciences. Yet other institutions, for example in Germany, feature two flavors of religious studies in the same university: one in the religious studies department within a faculty of theology and another in a faculty of humanities or social sciences.

Degree program coding is also complicated by how degrees in theology and degrees in the study of religion are advertised. For example, the University of Oxford markets their theology and religion degree as a program that combines the study of theology and the study of religion.¹¹ The complexity and diversity of the “home” of religious studies and its entanglement with theology is important. While the drop in student numbers in the combined V6 theology and religious studies category seems driven by a noticeable decrease in theology entrants, religious studies did not seem to be able to convert this drop into an increase in religious studies entrants. In fact, in 2022/23, theology entrants saw a slight uptick again (from 490 to 510) while religious studies entrants dropped (from 275 to 210; fig. 4).

However, while religious studies and theology numbers declined, philosophy entrants have remained largely stable (fig. 4). Maybe religious studies can learn something from philosophy, and perhaps even benefit from a

11 University of Oxford 2024.

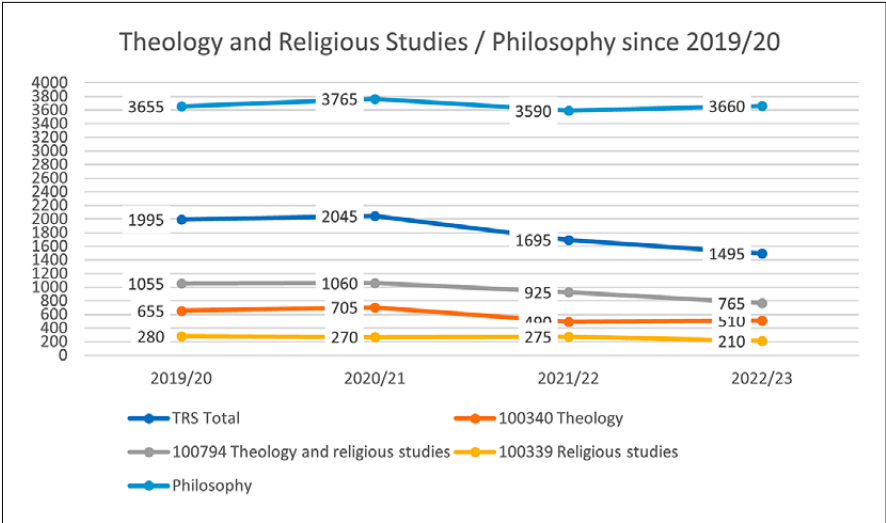


Fig. 4: Total number of first year students on a philosophy or TRS degree program across the United Kingdom.

renewed engagement with philosophy.¹² For the purposes of this article, the relatively stable numbers in philosophy matter because the ways in which philosophy, religious studies, and theology degrees are advertised by universities overlap: marketing material for all three degrees revolves around questions about the meaning of life, opportunities to explore and understand different worldviews, or the skills to think critically and challenge one’s own biases. As religious studies draws on a range of disciplines, this commonality is not surprising, but it is not helpful for finding and communicating a unique selling point (USP) that sets religious studies programs apart from other degree programs. In a competitive recruitment environment in which university marketing people look for flashy USPs, the idea that religious studies students leave the university with a similar skillset to philosophy or sociology graduates, i.e. the ability to understand diverse worldviews and a range of analytical skills, might not be sufficient to persuade students to study religions and to justify the existence of religious studies degrees at universities.

Religious studies provisions are under pressure not only in England but also in some continental European countries. Germany, for example, has

12 Porcher 2024; De Jong 2024.

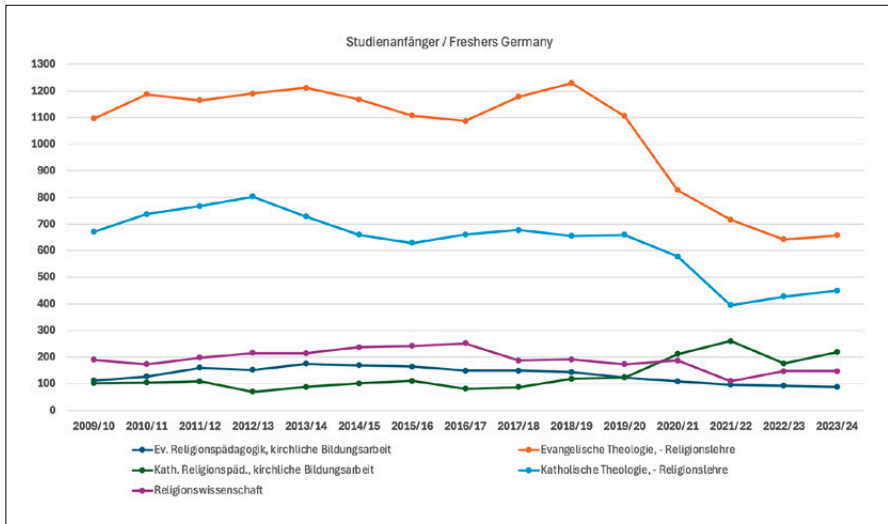


Fig. 5: Number of first year students on a religious studies or theology degree in Germany.

seen a similarly significant drop in theology entrants and a slight decrease in student numbers for religious studies degree programs (fig. 5).

At first sight, numbers for religious studies in Austria seem to go against the trend in the United Kingdom and in Germany (fig. 6). In Austria, religious studies has seen a recent increase in student numbers. However, the spike in religious studies might be linked to a relatively stable intake of students through the University of Vienna, whereas Salzburg’s BA program in religious studies is currently not being advertised on the university’s website.

If current recruitment trends continue, more programs and departments will be at risk of closure. Lower student numbers will mean fewer scholars in the field at fewer institutions, likely limited to “elite” universities. How, where, and by whom the study of religion will be taught impacts the study of religion and media. Given its interdisciplinarity, the study of religion and media is already fragmented, with scholars of religion and media dispersed across disciplines or departments, e. g. film and media studies, history, philosophy, politics, sociology, law, or an (often ill-defined) humanities department. One might argue that the study of religion and media is then in a better position to survive the culling of programs and departments and that the study of religion and media is then not necessarily dependent for its survival on a distinct religious studies department as its anchor. But such

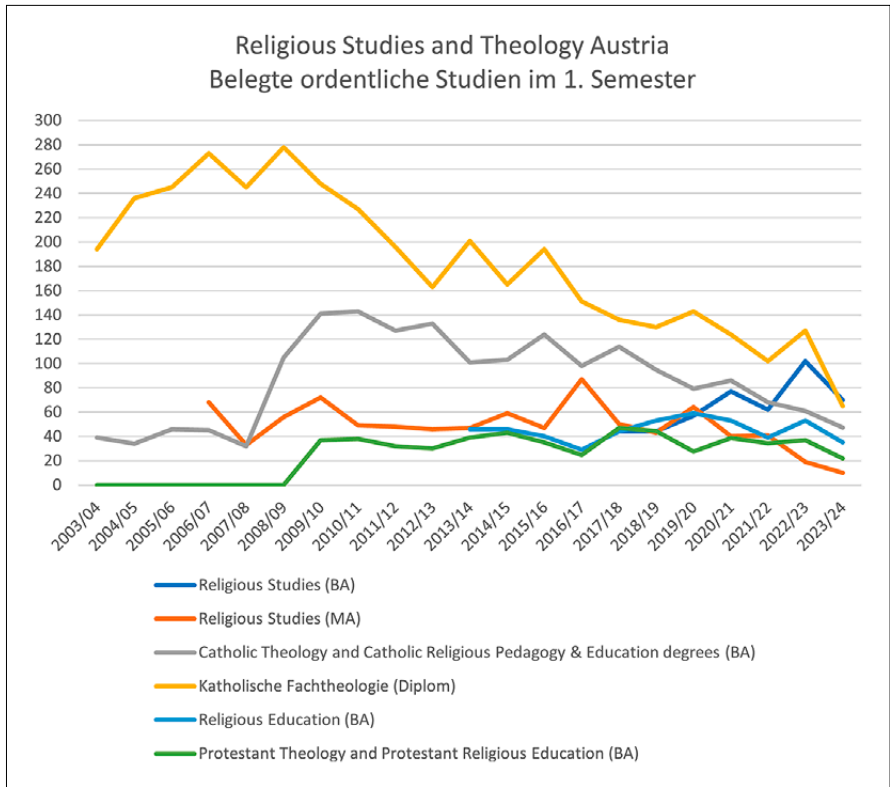


Fig. 6: Number of first year students on a religious studies or theology degree in Austria.

“embeddedness for survival” might not be survival at all. Samuel L. Perry argues that the study of religion continues to be marginalized in secular academia and consistently receives low interest and low relevance ratings.¹³ Without the visibility a distinct department – or subject group – brings (and the institutional currency attached to official structures), the study of religion and media may be at risk of even greater marginalization. This marginalization might not even be exclusively due to personal biases held by decision makers; it could be a product of the very perception of the lack of relevance Perry speaks of.

The perceived lack of relevance of the study of religion extends to how its insights are taken up by other disciplines, or as Adam J. Powell puts it, “The

13 Perry 2024, 131–139.

sociology of religion may have something to say to religious studies, but I am not sure what religious studies has to say to the sociology of religion.”¹⁴ Powell’s argument makes clear that scholars of religion and media cannot evade the question of what they have to say to scholars in other disciplines and, beyond academia, to the general public or policy and decision makers. Individual scholars are indeed engaged in public debates, such as Chris Deacy or Daria Pezzoli-Olgiati as cinema experts, or Robert M. Geraci who is heavily involved in the AI and ethics discourse. In current university funding models, however, student numbers are seen as directly indicative of the perception of what the field has to contribute to the wider society, and vice versa.

One of my former colleagues at the University of Hull, Dr. Bev Orton, often told students to “follow the money” when thinking about the “why” of social phenomena, social structures, or socio-political and cultural changes. A similar logic can be applied when reflecting on recruitment numbers and trends affecting religious studies:

- What are governments, taxpayers, and students willing to pay for in money and/or time?
- What is the value of studying religion?¹⁵
- Why is religious studies perceived as a low-value degree?
- Who has a vested interest in the disappearance of religious studies?
- Where is the money that is saved by closing religious studies programs spent?
- Does higher education need to reinvent itself, and to what extent can and should religious studies be a part of such reinvention?¹⁶
- Can the study of religion and media contribute to – or even spearhead – the reinvention of the study of religion more broadly?

Although the study of religion is under pressure at many institutions, the study of religion and media can provide a strong contribution to any attempts to make the study of religion more relevant and exciting again.

14 Powell 2016.

15 Berkwitz/Wallace 2020.

16 McClymond 2020, 107.

Potentials of the Study of Religion and Media

Whether we like it or not, today student recruitment is increasingly competitive, not only between universities but also within institutions. USPs are intended to persuade potential students to choose one institution over another, or one degree program (an area labelled for investment) over another. As admissions tutor in my School, I have been involved in many conversations about the USPs of my institution and our degree programs. As Michael Stausberg argues, scholars studying religion need to become better at marketing their interest in religion to prospective students:

We tend to think that religion (“religion”) [the controversial concept] is of interest per se, but probably we must make it more interesting than it really is. (Isn’t religion, or for that matter “religion,” often a tedious matter?) It is not by accident that some independent scholars, who live off the sale of their books, the ticket sales for their talks, or advertisements for their podcasts, do a better job in this business of how TO MAKE RELIGION INTERESTING AGAIN.¹⁷

I contend that the work of the field of religion and media can make unique contributions to these efforts by unveiling the hidden presence of religion in societies and by encouraging the shift beyond the Western paradigm in teaching and research.

The Hidden Visibility

Religion (broadly understood) occupies an ambiguous and very diverse position in Western societies. In the United States, religion is highly visible and omnipresent in public life and political debates. In a number of European countries, religion is deemed mostly irrelevant (and thus often ignored and rendered invisible), and yet it continues to creep back into broader public and social discourses. With “creeping back” I do not necessarily mean that religion simply re-enters public discourse after having left it or having been pushed out, although that is one aspect of what I refer to. Rather, I mean that religion creeps back into public discourse after having been wished away and ignored – without really having gone away completely. This re-

17 Stausberg 2024, 27.

turn, or reemergence, of religion is largely ignored unless it happens more forcefully, for example in times of conflict. In the context of current crises, the polarization of politics, supremacist thinking, and a sense of being left behind by a failed state, pockets of religion are becoming increasingly visible and find their way into public and political discourses across Europe. This reemergence is carried by means of communication, mediation, and material practices, with this “hidden visibility” of religion a particularly suitable subject for scholars of religion and media. They have the tools to trace these visibilities and their social impact – and thus demonstrate that there is value in funding the study of religion.

Political discourse in Europe, for example, is ripe with religious undertones, communicated through visual images and reliance on religious imaginaries. The right-wing Italian prime minister Giorgia Meloni frequently draws on the image of the heterosexual family promoted especially by the Catholic Church when conveying her political messages. Given the power and political success of such references, scholars of religion and media can demonstrate how visual-religious traditions continue to matter, not in an abstract way but very concretely, by breathing life into ideas of family, marriage, and identity with the power to shape social and legal discourses.¹⁸ In Austria, the right-wing FPÖ promotes values it claims are based in a cultural Christianity.¹⁹ That claim did not prevent a controversy around the election campaign slogan “Euer Wille geschehe” (“Your will be done”), which was held to be mocking the Lord’s Prayer.²⁰ Representatives of Christian churches stated that the FPÖ was violating religious sensibilities. This example shows the remarkable capacity of right-wing parties to create narratives around sovereignty, self-determination, identity, and morality and to critique the “establishment” using religious norms, language, and images. With the recent successes of right-wing parties across Europe, the entanglement of politics and religious narratives provides religion and media scholars with plenty of opportunities for critical analysis of contemporary socio-political landscapes.

Campaign slogans are not the only opportunity for scholars of religion and media to unpack the hidden visibility of religion in political discourses. Across Europe, right-wing parties have become some of the most outspoken and vocal supporters of Israel in the ongoing Israel–Palestine conflict, sup-

18 Fritz 2018.

19 FPÖ 2024a.

20 Rauscher 2024; Religion ORF 2024.

port that is communicated through social media, blogs, websites, and press photography.²¹ For scholars of religion and media, these discourses provide opportunities to explore how identities, communities, and events outside national borders impact everyday domestic politics.

Scholars of religion and media also have analytical tools to detect the presence of religion when it is more hidden from the public eye, for example when US debates about religion and politics quietly spill over into Europe, as in the case of increased lobbying of UK politicians by US anti-abortion groups.²² Lobbying relies not only on hidden (from the public eye) communication with decision makers but also sometimes on a carefully orchestrated public media presence and strategies for engagement with the public, providing religion and media scholars with traces of how religion continues to shape policies.²³ Government-commissioned reports, too, provide religion and media scholars with material that enables them to demonstrate that how governments interact with religious groups impacts societies more broadly, i.e. beyond “the religious sphere”. The Bloom Review, a report on how the UK government ought to engage with faith communities that was published under the Sunak Conservative government, is a vehicle for considering why such a review was commissioned, for what purpose, and for whose benefit (politically or otherwise), and for exploring how faith communities are labelled and which imaginaries governments use in including/excluding people of faith.²⁴

European popular culture is full of visual material that blurs the lines between religion, politics, and mythology. For example, the visually rich opening ceremony of the Paris Olympics 2024 featured an extravagant Dionysius, but the background scenery of drag queens was interpreted by some Christians as a mockery of Leonardo da Vinci’s Last Supper. A scholar of religion and media could analyze this example from a variety of perspectives, with regard to (a) the extent to which religious and mythological visual literacy is being lost to the general public, (b) the possible overlaps between visual representations of various mythological and religious narratives, and (c) the role that mythological and religious narratives still play in attempts by European societies to explain their place in and connection to history.

21 FPÖ 2024b.

22 Das 2024.

23 Vesa/Binderkrantz 2023.

24 Bloom 2020, 11.

Advancements in technology, too, are an area of high social relevance with which scholars of religion and media are engaging. For example, while AI has become popular for its ability to generate texts, it is also quickly expanding into the audio-visual space, with image and video creation. This raises questions around issues of trust, authority, authenticity, and bias. Scholars of religion and media who already have expertise in deconstructing the power of images and challenging visual authorities can contribute to broader academic and public discussions around the status and use of AI in society.

As these examples show, scholarship in religion and media has multiple opportunities to speak to the wider public on relevant questions and thus also illustrate its importance as a field of study, together with that of the study of religion more broadly. Scholars in the field can discuss topics that the general public has encountered, relates to, and has seen or heard about. In embracing this opportunity, they can help make the study of religion itself more tangible, relatable, and relevant.

Beyond the Western Paradigm and Visual/Narrative Traditions

The attentive reader will have realized that I have focused on recruitment challenges in European countries and ignored discussions of challenges that colleagues in other regions might face.²⁵ On the one hand, I have done so because the western European context is my more immediate (institutional) work environment. On the other hand, I have done so to illuminate an issue that persists in the teaching of religious studies: a deeply ingrained and normalized Western (European) perspective, which is hard to overcome. A colleague recently shared an anecdote from a 2024 conference on decolonizing the curriculum in the humanities and social sciences in UK higher education. Some participants felt that decolonizing teaching was too time consuming, with time already devoured by the various pressures of UK academia, workload requirements, threats of redundancies, course closures, and university management mandated savings.

I have been in the fortunate position of being able to teach cohorts of international students from Africa and Hong Kong, albeit in non-religious studies courses. I am immensely grateful for this opportunity, which I have found humbling and insightful. And with this experience in mind, I need to

25 Fujiwara 2005; Banda 2024.

recalibrate my comments on the state of the study of religion and media (and religion more generally):

- Religious practice continues to be pervasive on a global scale. This is nothing new, but (abstract) studies and lively discussions with people from various geographic regions and with various levels of religious practice are two separate things.
- Religion and media scholars with expertise in the transnational exchange of ideas, images, and communication through media need to make the pertinent point that what happens globally with respect to religion almost always affects local communities, even if local communities see themselves as (mostly) secular.
- Because of that connection between the global and the local and because of the transnational exchange of images and narratives, Western countries that perceive themselves as “secular” will not be able to escape religious narratives and imageries. Not because of a dichotomy between the “secular West” and the “religious other”, but because religious narratives cannot be limited to an imagined “private sphere” or an imagined (and non-Western) “other”. Instead, religious narratives and imaginaries spill over into social practices and are being appropriated, used, and abused by social actors. Scholars of religion and media are in a position to trace the weaving of religious narratives through social practices across contexts.

Religious studies scholars such as David Chidester or Richard King have discussed the various ways colonialism shaped the study of religion and the implications of post-colonial theory on their field for some time.²⁶ There is also an ongoing debate about what decolonizing the curriculum and decolonizing methodologies mean for the study of religion.²⁷ What strikes me, however, are my students’ testimonies that Europe’s colonial legacy and colonial violence are still part and parcel of their everyday life, their African identity narratives, and their continuing experience of ignorance and exploitation.²⁸

In this situation, scholars of religion and media, in particular those specializing in non-Western religious and visual traditions, can provide valuable

26 Landoe Hedrick 2024; King 1999; Chidester 2013; Chidester 2014.

27 Horrell 2024.

28 Parashar/Schulz 2021, 870–871.

and concrete entry points to deconstruct the power of Western images and mediated narratives. They can act as a resource for exploring visibility and invisibility in and beyond the West. It is not enough to merely look at visual artifacts from different geographic regions and cultural traditions, for to do so would merely perpetuate the Western gaze upon the other.

The *Journal of Religion, Film, and Media* has featured a number of examples of scholarship aiming to deconstruct Western narratives that are valuable not just for scholars of religion and media but for the study of religion more broadly. Based on his analysis of colonial images, Philippe Bornet, for example, argues that societies never develop in isolation but have been connected through media and visual practices for a long time. He proposes that the production, distribution, and consumption of images must always be understood “as part of a transnational and connected history of visual practices”²⁹ that oscillates between power and resistance in a context shaped by the heritage of colonial oppression. In my experience, transnational connections often remain abstract in the classroom: why would an 18-year-old British student whose primary concerns are living expenses, juggling study and work commitments, their post-academic career, and potentially tuition fees care about an image that might have circulated in a distant culture and society? Bornet makes a compelling case and provides visible and tangible evidence for why students should care and how societies and cultures are inseparably entangled.³⁰

Scholars of religion and media can also demonstrate the value of listening to (or better: looking to) artists who use the visual as a medium to critically reflect on society. Such exercises in seeing and visual awareness can raise questions about how power, race, and gender play out on a social level through visual communication: who represents whom in what way? Who has power over their own self-representation? And who has the power to represent others? The *Journal of Religion, Film, and Media* has featured a number of examples, such as the visual artist Amruta Patil, who retells traditional Hindu narratives in the form of graphic novels. Rather than recounting the narrative as is, she retells the stories from the perspective of the underdog, the oppressed, and those who are left out in the stories. She aims to be a storyteller who has her “finger on the pulse of the land: local politics, local calamities and scandals. The aim of telling stories is to offer

29 Bornet 2021, 84.

30 Bornet 2021, 57.

insight into the human experience, to allay fears and traumas.”³¹ In this, religion is central, as she argues: “What interests me about religions is the stories they came up with as means to this end.”³² Her work offers a new look at traditional Hindu narratives and representations that allows them to speak to today’s issues while also being accessible to students.

Engaging with artists such as Patil, scholars in the study of religion and media have an opportunity to lead the way in decolonizing teaching and research in religious studies and related fields. As Patil argues, “we underestimate and undermine the effect of the visual and material”³³ as well as the opportunities and challenges visual spaces bring. As scholars in the field, we can provide examples of how to make use of the opportunities of which Patil speaks to highlight issues that affect all of us – issues of power, discrimination, gender, race, sexuality – and to better understand why we are facing the challenges we are facing today.

Concluding Thoughts: The Future Is Now

The future of the study of religion and media as well as the diversity of research interests present in the field depend on student numbers not just in the study of religion but also in other disciplines related to the study of religion and media in all its interdisciplinarity. In an academic context where the study of religion is increasingly marginalized, university managers will not be the driving force behind recruitment initiatives. Instead, it will fall to scholars in the study of religion to provide a compelling answer to the question of what students can learn about society by studying religion that they cannot learn elsewhere, and how that knowledge translates into career paths and practical knowledge. Once we have that answer and can communicate it to the tax and tuition-fee paying public, we might stand a good chance of driving student numbers up again.

In this essay, I have attempted to highlight some areas where scholars in the study of religion and media are particularly suited to contributing to a renewed interest in religion more broadly, by uncovering how religious practices, ideas, ideologies, and iconographies continue to shape social struc-

31 Patil 2021, 21.

32 Patil 2021, 21–22.

33 Patil 2021, 20.

tures and political debates. In other words, they must show that how “religion” affects everyday life should also be of interest to those who are not religious or have no interest in religion. Scholars of religion and media have an opportunity to demonstrate the need for continued financial investment in the study of religion more broadly, because religious ideas continue to be mediated in secular debates and are being repurposed for various social and political agendas. Where traditional religious practice is in decline, many people flock to media (social media, influencers, podcasters) to help them answer the existential questions they face in times of crises and turmoil.

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the year 2023/24 only include winter semester intake as summer semester intake were not available yet in the database. Final 2023/24 numbers will therefore be slightly higher than represented in the graph above, <https://www.statistik.at/statistiken/bevoelkerung-und-soziales/bildung/studierende-belegte-studien> [accessed 9 December 2024].

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