Bulletin for the Study of Religion

If I Only Knew Then … Tenured Scholars on Professionalization: Mark Hulsether

Posted on January 18, 2016 by mattsheedy



On the heels of a successful series based on Russell McCutcheon's Theses on Professionalization, where 21 early career scholars weighed-in on a separate thesis, we at the Bulletin *would like to continue with the theme of professionalization as it relates to mid-to-late career scholars, asking them to name one thing (or several) about their career (in either teaching, research, or service work) that they know now but wish they had done earlier on*. For other posts in this series, see here.

by Mark Hulsether

I stayed in school through the Ph.D. level and entered an academic job market because the ideas in the books I was reading, and the debates about them in the syllabi and classrooms that have structured my life, seemed to matter. After that foundational premise was on board, I hoped that I would be lucky enough to land a job with a decent quality of life, and that even if that didn't play out I could be happy in graduate school for a few years without blighting my future. Would I do it again today? Probably, but my answer is murky enough to merit further reflection.

An obvious reflex is to problematize: what does "matter" mean, and what is a "professional" way to approach it? I study religion, politics, and culture in US history. Studying this, it is hard to ignore how people's choices to invest themselves in some religious practices rather than others, and to deploy their institutional or rhetorical resources toward some socio-political agendas rather than others, is often non-trivial and at times rises to a matter of life and death. Priorities take shape through multi-leveled dialogue and contestation—and under conditions in which decisions by scholars about what to study are sometimes significant factors in the contests for hegemony. Those who argue that scholarship can be neutral with respect to these contests, with no dog in the fight, often make decisions that matter in such contests anyway.

(I wish it could go without saying, although I fear it does not, that focusing on the value of setting certain scholarly priorities over others—amid the myriad things one could study and ways one could study them—does not imply compromise on the [value of] rigorous use of evidence to build persuasive arguments about the questions at

stake.)

Of course the sort of mattering that I am trying to evoke was not true of every book, every day. Anyone smart enough to get into a Ph.D. program can resonate with a joke that my uncle liked to tell—where B.S. refers to bullshit and Ph.D. means "piled higher and deeper." However, the petty conflicts, hypocrisies, and trivialities of academia did not seem worse than in other fields I was considering; in fact they seemed less decisive.

This was because (we circle back to my opening point) the ideas being fought about seemed to have substance that mattered.

Although I feel fortunate to have found a professional niche that is good in many ways, nevertheless over time I have become increasingly concerned about the shrinking size of academic spaces that matter and scholarly trends as I have experienced them. I perceive more and more deans, and increasing proportions of public discourse, reducing the purpose of education to (for students) making more money than one could otherwise make and (for teachers) rising through a career. Full stop. If a course of study toward being a prison guard is the most successful measured in starting salaries for graduates, book contracts for scholars, external grants for departments, and "consumer satisfaction surveys" (formerly known as student feedback) then so be it. The market has spoken. Prison Guard Studies should get the faculty lines of retiring religion scholars, and prisons should get even more of the tax revenues that now support prisons and education.

Pushing back against such ideologies—including their embedded assumptions about what things are legible as [valuable forms of] embodied agency—and fostering a critical understanding of the histories through which such assumptions came to seem commonsensical, is a significant public good that education still can provide. If we consider it a valid social priority to build pleasing sports stadiums and efficient sewers—although it is often exceedingly unclear whether stadiums benefit taxpayers, and surely someone is making a lucrative career out of privatizing sewers and restricting them to neighborhoods "worthy" of them—then educating a populace for critical thought about history and culture has at least an equal claim to value. But sadly I am old enough to remember when this train of thought had more traction for many stakeholders—students, trustees, voters, employers beyond academia, and faculty colleagues—than it does today. Whereas I thought I was joining a collective pursuit of work that (with appropriate disclaimers) mattered, increasingly I worry that we are losing our way.

I suppose most readers will agree with me about some of the misplaced priorities: commercialized college sports, the fetishization of business and STEM degrees, or the idea that the US can afford to take on mind-boggling levels of debt to fund criminal wars of choice while being a world historical champion of imprisoning its youth, yet cannot afford to subsidize its youth's education. I don't need to belabor these points here.

Rather than preaching to the choir, I will note that my disquiet also extends to some discourses that writers in the *Bulletin for the Study of Religion* recommend, as opposed to what we agree to hate. Quite often when I read arguments for [the implicit value of] being "value-free" or "scientific"—with the stakes including whether one is advantaged or disadvantaged in cutthroat career competitions—it seems to me that these function more to reshape the study of religion as a covert *enabler of neoliberal logic* than of carving out space to *critique* this logic. (I suppose most people here intend the [value of] critique, at least insofar as their scruples allow them to admit it.)

Not only do I grant, in fact I want to emphasize, that there are many contexts in which debunking religious value claims—especially those held uncritically—is exactly the proper priority. Nevertheless, the way I have framed my

argument—appealing to many contexts and priorities but not all of them—requires a case-by-case mode of analysis that goes against the grain of some writing in the *Bulletin*. I suggest an approach that is more dialogical and attuned to thinking concretely about how counter-hegemonic movements take shape, and less invested in sweeping rhetoric about explanation and causation. This is not new—I have argued in this vein throughout my career—but lately I worry more that the academy as a reasonably hospitable space for such critique is being suffocated.

Thinking back, I probably would not have done much differently, knowing what I know now. I still think the academy is at least as conducive as a space to explore substantive issues of aesthetic worth, warranted truth claims, and cultural critique compared to most other spaces. I still think it is worth fighting to defend these spaces, assuming that one is lucky enough not to be utterly traumatized by the job market. In this sense it is more important than ever for scholars at all levels to take up such a fight.

Yet I do wonder if the equation is shifting, making it increasingly important for younger scholars to consider alternatives to scholarly life. I would urge them to stay centered on why they care about their work and to be prepared to say "take this job and shove it" if—usually through no fault of their own, but because of the structural qualities of today's academy—their efforts do not work out in minimally satisfying careers. The times I have most feared that the machinery of academia was crushing my soul have been when I could see no escape. Thus I caution my students against a "college teaching or bust" mentality and increasingly use the descriptor "ponzi scheme" for graduate study and "rats fighting for scraps" for the reward you reap if (against the odds) you succeed. On many days I still glimpse the scholarly life as a satisfying space of collective work on worthwhile issues of mutual interest, with the things I have been complaining about are part of its beautiful struggle. Yet more than I expected when I began, I see us being drawn into an alienating hunger game in which focusing on how education matters can be surprisingly lonely or even risky to one's career.

Mark Hulsether is Professor of Religious Studies and Chair of the Program in American Studies at the University of Tennessee, with special interests in the interplay of religion and social issues in recent United States history. He has written many articles and reviews on the course of the religious left in the US since the 1940s, various aspects of US popular religion, and issues of theory and method in the academic study of religion. His most recent book is *Religion, Culture and Politics in the Twentieth Century United States*, co-published by Columbia University Press and Edinburgh University Press in 2007.

Share this:

22

This entry was posted in If I Only Knew Then … Tenured Scholars on Professionalization, Religion and Society, Uncategorized and tagged Culture and Politics in the Twentieth Century United States, Mark Hulsether, Religion, Russell McCutcheon, Theses on Professionalization, University of Tennessee. Bookmark the permalink.