

37 Years and Counting

I don't intend to speak for long. What I do hope to do is start a discussion.

in 1986, I registered as a fresh Unisa first year student, with the intention of majoring in Science of Religion, as the discipline of Religious Studies was called at the time. I suppose it is relevant to name the two sources that led to that: The first was a science fiction novel, Robert A Heinlein's "I Will Fear No Evil" (1970), in which a character mentions that he had once done a course in "Comparative religion", an even older term. That struck an immediate chord with me. "Wait, you can actually study that?" The other source had been even some years earlier: an article about Unisa in the South African version of the Readers' Digest. The combination of the two led me to get my hands on the Unisa yearbook. There was nothing under "C", but I looked further and struck gold. You could actually get a degree in Science of Religion from Unisa! So, if you have been wondering who to blame for foisting me on the department, the university and the world at large, you now know where to direct your class-action lawsuits. In 1990 I started working at Unisa with my freshly minted BA and by 2000 I could add "Dr." before my name. In 2023 I will retire, though this is by far not the last you will hear from me: I have an ambitious ten-year research project ahead of me.

So If I look back over my career, what do I think about Religious Studies? Let's try and keep subjectivity out of this as far as we can and go through the evidence of my publication list. If we accept, just for the moment, that my career would be fairly typical of a Religious Studies scholar, then we get a very strange picture of what this discipline is. As a side benefit, it gives me the rare pleasure of committing outrageous amounts of self-citation. But in the end, the purpose of this presentation is to reflect on what value, if any, Religious Studies has in the twenty-first century.

My very first academic publication, which appeared in print a month or two before I graduated, saw me comparing aspects of the psychology of Victor Frankl with Zen koans (Clasquin, 1989). Naturally, today I cringe when I see the argumentation, but I still treasure it. My other major was Psychology, and this was the first, and also the last, time that I brought these two pillars of my undergraduate training together.

My MA thesis was a straightforward exercise in the exegesis of a Buddhist text (Clasquin, 1992a). I like exegesis, taking the term broadly to mean not only the explication of ancient religious texts, but also finding religious meaning in modern ones. I have done more of it since (Clasquin, 1995a, 1995b, 2005b, 2007; M. Clasquin-Johnson, 2012, 2013) and I plan to do a lot more in the future. But I am not an exegete. I actually have very little formal training in the theory of texts.

For my Doctorate (Clasquin, 1999c), the focus was on History. This is an important aspect of Religious Studies. Indeed, yet another name for my discipline is "History of Religions". Since then, I have published other works on the historical aspects of religion (Clasquin, 1995c, 1997a, 1999a, 1999b, 2004, 2005a; M. Clasquin-Johnson, 2021b). But now it is the turn of my colleagues from the History department to be scandalized. I am not a historian. In fact, I never did a single history course back in my undergraduate days.

I did do a few Sociology courses, though never any Anthropology. Yet somehow, there are publications of mine that clearly reflect on social trends and events (Clasquin, 1992b, 1997b; M. Clasquin-Johnson, 2021a).

And then, worst of all, Philosophy. My next publication will be a chapter in a book on the *philosophy* of humour and my name will be listed among all the professional philosophers that also contributed. And what formal training have I had in that most august and ancient of disciplines? Second-year formal logic. That's it.

A few years ago I published an article on a very contemporary philosophical turn: metamodernism (M. Clasquin-Johnson, 2017). It turned out to be the first-ever peer-reviewed article on metamodernism and religion, not that I was aware of it at the time. Ever since, the metamodernism crowd have been trying to pull me in, inviting me to conferences and such. But I am not interested in making a career out of that. I am a Religious Studies scholar. I said what I had to say about the topic, added it to the toolkit, and now I'm moving on. By the way, in that article I also committed the greatest of academic sins: I pointed out that metamodernism also had theological implications, and thereby opted out of the civil war between Religious Studies and Theology. Nor is it the only time I've trod on the theologians' toes (M. Clasquin-Johnson, 2010, 2022).

In recent years I've also collaborated with my wife to publish articles in the field of Education (M. G. Clasquin-Johnson et al., 2020; M. G. Clasquin-Johnson & Clasquin-Johnson, 2018, 2023). At least there I can say that I've modestly claimed just second or third authorship because my actual training in Education is non-existent.

What do I not see in my publication record? I do not see a single publication of which I can say unequivocally "This is a Religious Studies publication and only a Religious Studies publication: it does not overlap with any other discipline." Everything I have published in a nominally "Religious Studies" journal or book could have been published in a historical, anthropological, sociological or, at a pinch, philosophical outlet with little modification.

Perhaps it's just me. Perhaps this publication record just reflects my unsystematic, disorganized approach to Religious Studies. But I don't think so. I see some of my colleagues increasingly collaborating with the English department, and others moving towards Gender Studies, or Anthropology. For now, anyway. The converse is also true. Religious Studies conferences have always been open to colleagues from other disciplines and we have always seen them presenting their papers there. Right now, in fact, there is a noticeable influx of anthropological contributions at the conferences of the Association for the Study of Religions in Southern Africa.

In other societies, a greater level of specialization may be possible. When I attended an AAR conference back in 1982, there was a lecture by someone who focused her career entirely on the Southern school of T'ien T'ai Buddhism in the 16th and 17th centuries. Such a level of in-depth study is unthinkable in South Africa. Even if I had been able to specialize entirely on Buddhism in my career, I would, to put it in theological terms, have had to do the Old Testament of Buddhism, the New Testament of Buddhism, and the Practical and the Systematic Theology of Buddhism. And Buddhist Church History too. But if we look back at the T'ien T'ai specialist, the audience she was reading her paper to was not comprised of other T'ien T'ai specialists. She still had to write her paper in a way that made sense to people from a variety of backgrounds in Religious Studies, and even from other disciplines.

Academia does operate in historical waves. When I arrived at Unisa Religious Studies was just coming out of a sociological period and entering one focusing on deconstruction. But in Religious Studies, the waves never seem to subside. As I remarked elsewhere:

... we never entirely discard a methodology. We can still write exegeses of the various religions' scriptures that would have been entirely recognisable to F. Max Müller. We can use survey methods borrowed from the social sciences, analyse religious performances using the playful irony of postmodernism and so on. *Bricolage* seems to come naturally to us (M. Clasquin-Johnson, 2017).

Nor is this a new phenomenon. When Religious Studies, by whatever of its previous names, was created in the early twentieth century, it was formed out of a complex mishmash of Sanskrit Philology, Anthropology, Sinology and a dozen other influences, all loosely held together by a fairly superficial reading of Husserl's phenomenological philosophy. Religious Studies remains true to its origins. It is not really a discipline. It is a transdisciplinary field in which its practitioners are expected to know just enough of all the other humanities to apply it to the phenomenon of religion, itself a notoriously ill-defined category. As long as religion exists, someone will study it. If Religious Studies was somehow banned, it would quietly be re-established, under another name, within another discipline.

Does this mean that Religious Studies is the "Queen of the Humanities", tying together all the lesser disciplines in a higher synthesis? No, I think that is the wrong metaphor. If anything, Religious Studies is a soldier of fortune. There is very little she won't do for a fresh new methodology to add to the toolkit. Perhaps we should rather not employ these personalizations!

Let us step away from research for a moment and consider what we teach. We teach the different religions. But that by itself does not mean that we advance acceptance of diversity. We could just as easily teach all the religions on the basis of "know the enemy". However, when we combine the teaching of different religions with the acknowledgement that there are different ways to look at them, to know and understand them, we arrive at a different conclusion.

Religious Studies requires the development of an agile mind, a willingness to acknowledge that there are different ways to look at human existence, all of which are arbitrary and subject to revision. To be a Religious Studies student means to be constantly re-training oneself. And if the ways we look at religion are all relative, then the religions themselves become relativized. Ananda Coomaraswamy once remarked that the more we learn about Buddhism and Hinduism, the harder it becomes to tell the difference (2011, p. 57). I submit that to some extent Religious Studies makes that true of all the religious traditions. As we learn more, we see that some branches of historically separated religions, seen from a specific methodological perspective have more in common, tell us more about the shared human experience, than the stem traditions from which they respectively evolved. Shift the methodology and that affinity disappears and is replaced by others. This does not cheapen and de-emphasize religion. Quite the contrary, it shows us how religious impulses are a vast, complex network of influences and counter-influences.

I don't believe I have trod on the toes of Islamic Studies yet, so let's take an example from there. A strict reading of Islamic scripture will give us the impression that at one historical moment there was Arab polytheism. Then the Prophet Mohammed arrived and there was Islam. But history tells us that not only were there Jews in Arabia, but that the Arabian Peninsula, especially Yemen, was a hotbed of Monophysite Christianity (Block, 2012; Gibb, 1962; King, 1980), which happens to be the kind of Christianity that most resembles Islam, theologically speaking. Does this lessen Muhammad's historical importance? Does it lead to "nothing-buttery" in which he was just "nothing but a Monophysite"? That would be one way to read it (cf. Johnson, 2012, p. 243), but it is not the Religious Studies way. Instead, we start to see that Muhammad was not an empty vessel into which divine knowledge was poured. We see a man aware of the religious and philosophical currents of his time, and Islamic teachings such as "The people of the Book" start to make sense in a different way. We see how the peninsula had been pre-conditioned for Muhammad's message. Not just anyone could have founded Islam. Only Muhammad. A fuller awareness of the time, the place, the social conditions gives us a greater, not lesser, appreciation of his monumental achievements.

And so we see that Religious Studies has a contribution to make to society. The successful Religious Studies graduate will understand that there is not just one way to truth, not to religious truth and not to truths about religion. There is no one definition of religion. There is no one

approach to studying religion. Life is not simple. Reality is complex, multifaceted and always open to reinterpretation. By denying the pull towards simplification, Religious Studies gives us citizens who are able to reinvent themselves and their society.

I am happy to have played a small part in this.

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