Private Money and the Study of Religions:
Problems, Perils, and Possibilities

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"It's the funders that drive things."
—David Blight (Yale University, quoted in Alterman 2019).

The Museum of the Bible

On a hot, humid day in July, 2019, I made my way to the Museum of the Bible in Washington, D.C. It provided a good opportunity for people watching: the small but steady line of people, myself included, making their way from the L'Enfant Plaza metro stop to the museum, some of the elderly suffering in the heat; a woman on one side of an exhibit talking animatedly to (I presume) friends about what the devil is doing today and how we need to combat him; a child, maybe ten or eleven years old, wondering what was kept in the pantry at the back of a room in the reconstructed village of Nazareth (my guess: the room was a synagogue and the pantry an ark); the ease with which some people publicly acknowledged their difficulty in pronouncing unfamiliar terms such as Tanakh, Torah, Nevi'im, and Ketuvim; and the generally greater fascination with videos and digital displays than with printed Bibles themselves, a not unexpected sign of our times.

I chose to visit the Museum because I had already been asked to reflect on the role of private money in the study of religions, and the Museum seemed to present an interesting local case. Originally its funding came primarily from the family that owns the Hobby Lobby retail chain and the National Christian Foundation. I had my suspicions about what it would display, but I also tried to keep an open mind. I deliberately chose not to read any reviews before my visit.

To be honest, I found some parts of the museum surprisingly congenial. I did not expect to encounter an explicit consideration of what the Hebrew Bible shares with its ancient Near Eastern context: links on a digital display identified "flood stories," "law collections," "treaties, oaths, and covenants," "proverbs and wisdom [literature, I suppose]," and "birth accounts."[1] Nor did I expect to see so many examples of the figurines that people worshiped in ancient Judah, Israel, and surrounding areas, although I suspect that my attitude toward them was rather different from that of the run-of-the-mill visitor. The collection of old books was hardly unexpected, but I was surprised to find a copy of Thomas Jefferson's *Notes on the State of Virginia*, open to the beginning of the query on religion.[2] Most impressive to me was the special exhibit on the so-called "Slave Bible," published on behalf of the Society for the Conversion of Negro Slaves in 1807, an exhibit made possible by a public-private partnership with Fisk University and the National Museum of African American History and Culture. Two walls were filled with plaques highlighting what this particular Bible included and omitted, but I was drawn to the exemplar itself. It

[1] Since I did not explore this digital exhibit, I am not sure what birth stories in the Hebrew Scriptures it referred to.
[2] But only to the opening page; the curious would not encounter passages like this: "The legitimate powers of government extend to such acts only as are injurious to others. But it does me no injury for my neighbour to say there are twenty gods, or no god. It neither picks my pocket nor breaks my leg."

was opened to the page that jumped from Genesis 45 to Exodus 19. To include the account of the Exodus, the publishers feared, might have provoked a slave rebellion.

Such unexpected encounters notwithstanding, I found it hard to overlook the Museum's agenda. Although one room on the ground floor was devoted to the Vatican libraries, the Museum itself was clearly trying to communicate a message that was American, Protestant, and evangelical.[3] As visitors ascended higher and higher, they encountered the impact of the Bible on American culture, then the rest of the world (second floor), an opportunity to experience Bible stories and Bible lands (third floor), and then the history of the Bible: its birth (sort of) and its transformation from a local book into one translated into over a thousand languages (fourth floor). But as with the Slave Bible, what was missing conveyed a message, too. There was no serious consideration of how the biblical books came into being or their intertextual relationships (e.g., the documentary hypothesis of the origin of Torah, the Deuteronomic literature, the synoptic problem). Although the Museum acknowledged religious plurality in the time before Jesus, with the appearance of Jesus plurality seemed to disappear among Christians, at least initially. The Nag Hammadi codices were as absent as the Dead Sea Scrolls and to a lesser extent the Samaritan Pentateuch were present; visitors learned nothing about the diversity of early Jesus movements and early Christian texts. If the Museum said anything about processes of canonization, especially New Testament canonization, I missed it. I also missed any hint that the Bible has not always been interpreted literally. Where were the various other forms of interpretation, starting with the allegory so prevalent when the Bible was finalized in the fourth century?[4] To jump to the U.S.: events such as the social gospel, the Scopes trial, the abolition movement, and the civil rights movement were mentioned but hardly explored. The closest the Museum got to contemporary biblical scholarship was a statement under the heading "Fundamentalist-Modernist Debates": "… Today, debate about biblical interpretation continues to grow with a much wider spectrum of opinion. This discussion stands at the root of current differences between evangelical and mainline Protestants, as well as similar differences in Catholic and Jewish traditions." (Apparently the Bible is not a topic for academic discussion.) Mounted above and to the right of this statement was a large print of E. J. Pace's "Descent of the Modernists." It shows three male figures descending a set of steps from Christianity at the top to Atheism at the bottom.

In retrospect, the Museum seemed studiously designed to avoid provoking and problematizing – shall we say, educating? – American evangelical visitors, and not just in terms of theology. A pillar bearing the heading "Work" contained a quote from Rabbi Jonathan Sacks: "The market economy is deeply congruent with the values set out in the Hebrew Bible." I, too, left with my prior views confirmed: private money presents perils for scholarship; does it also present possibilities?

Religious Studies in a Time of Crisis

News about the study of religions seems to have turned unrelentingly bleak. Granted, I am reading it through lenses tinted by my own recent institutional experiences. Despite having strong and increasing demand for our courses (two of my courses in spring 2019 were overenrolled), our institution has

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[3] As a parallel biblical tradition, Jewish traditions received more attention than did Catholic traditions; nevertheless, I found the video that presented Maimonides not as an extremely sophisticated thinker but as an actor doing a shtick somewhat offensive.

[4] I did note a discussion of Talmud and Midrash, and there was a reader on the history of biblical hermeneutics hidden on a shelf in the book shop.

decided both to discontinue the major in religious studies – but retain the minor – and to eliminate one position upon retirement, mine. The hope is that if more courses are desired in the study of religions, they can be offered by adjuncts – or by a retired professor teaching for adjunct's pay.

I am not looking for pity or sympathy. Rather, there is little point in talking about resources – in this case private money – in an abstract, ideal realm divorced from the realities in which we live and work. At last year's meeting of NAASR and the AAR in Denver, I seemed routinely to encounter bad news, even when I was not looking for it: a reduction in general education requirements (for those schools where students are still required to take courses in "religion"), a reduction in the number of faculty teaching the study of religions, a reduction in support for small, intense classes even at small, arguably elite institutions, and an overall reduction in programs, the elimination of the major being only one possibility. One friend told me that, denied a sabbatical for two years, he finally obtained it by agreeing to eliminate the major in religious studies and replace it with a minor in interfaith studies.

One can, of course, read these developments within the context of a crisis of the humanities in the U.S. One only needs to recall the roller-coaster rides that the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point and Hampshire College have been on this past year. But one can also read it as part of a more global trend pertaining to the study of religions. Consider this comment from a report by the British Academy published in May 2019:

> While the study and research of theology and religion[5] remains an attractive area for many, it has seemingly fallen foul of the many challenges faced by the higher education sector, and particularly since the reforms to fees and funding in 2012: the number of students studying Theology and Religious studies [sic; subsequently TRS] degrees has fallen by a third. Fewer students means additional pressures on schools and departments to demonstrate their worth or face closure. (British Academy 2019: 2)

The report goes on to note:

> the overall trend in enrolment onto TRS courses in UK higher education is downward, in contrast to other humanities subjects like philosophy and history. … The drop in TRS student numbers in 2012/13 and beyond coincided with the introduction of up to £9000 annual fees for full-time undergraduate degrees. The increase in fees may have created both demand-side and supply-side effects leading to a collapse in enrolment. (British Academy 2019: 3)

Notice the roles of private money in these developments. On the one hand, figures from the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA)

> suggest that in 2007/08, as many as 40% of students on foundation degrees[6] in TRS had funding from charities or international organisations to cover their fees, but by 2016/17 the number of UK domiciled foundation degree students with their fees funded by charities or international organisations was effectively zero. (British Academy 2019: 3)

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[5] UK statistics lump theology and religious studies together, so it is difficult to know to what extent the effects the report discusses characterize the study of religions conceived more strictly.

[6] According to the report, a foundation degree is "an undergraduate course which combines academic and vocational elements of learning, equivalent to two-thirds of a first (bachelor's) degree and usually studied over two years if full-time."

On the other hand,

> Around 2700 students are on TRS undergraduate programmes in alternative providers who submit data to HESA. Undergraduate enrolment at these providers increased by 14% between 2016/17 and 2017/18. This suggests that while we are seeing declining enrolment in public [Higher Education Institutes], this may be partly offset by an increase in the private sector. (British Academy 2019: 7)

The alternative providers referred to are primarily Christian, often evangelical, but they also include two Muslim institutions.

When queried about this report, British colleagues have told me that the difficulty lies specifically with theology, not with the study of religions. Be that as it may, there are clearly differences between the situation in the U.K. and that in the U.S. Whereas enrollments in history programs have been increasing in the U.K., in the U.S. the greatest loss in number of majors – roughly a third – has come in history (unfortunately, the second greatest loss has come in what IPEDS data simply designate "religion") (Schmidt 2018). In an article in *The New Yorker*, Eric Alterman (2019) noted that at Yale the study of history seems to be bucking the national trend: the number of students studying history is increasing. Nevertheless, David Blight, Director of the Gilder Lehrman Center for the Study of Slavery, Resistance, and Abolition at Yale, told Alterman that, in a meeting with a Yale administrator "he was told that individual funders were all looking to fund STEM programs." Blight's commentary is quoted above: "'It's the funders that drive things'."

A Very Brief History of Private Money

Like so much else, higher education seems to present a case of American exceptionalism. Toward the end of his massive history of American higher education up to the outbreak of World War 2, Roger Geiger observes: "In most countries, the role and status of institutions of higher education would be determined largely by governments. This was the case for only minor parts of the American system. …. In the main, … the American system of higher education was a fluid free market with multiple actors" (Geiger 2015: 537). In other words, in the U.S. higher education has generally been inconceivable apart from private money. My very limited knowledge does not allow me to discuss higher education elsewhere, so this very brief history concentrates entirely upon the United States. Most of what I have to say is abstracted from Geiger's voluminous accounts (Geiger 1986, 2015, 2019; cf. Thelin 2014; Thelin 2019).

Most scholars who are active today may find the idea that government has had little to do with the American system of higher education to be somewhat odd. For most of us, even those who attended and then worked in private institutions, as I have, the federal and, to a lesser extent, state governments have seemed great fonts of funds. We tend, justifiably, to lament recent reductions in federal and state support for institutions of higher learning and the shifting of the financial burden for tertiary education onto future student earnings. Nevertheless, from a historical vantage point, the large role that federal and state funds played in American colleges and universities in the second half of the twentieth century was an exception to an exception.

Colonial colleges were largely established to train ministers and promote Christianity (also to create cultural capital for the elite). Their names attest to the importance of private money: John Harvard's bequest of his library and half of his estate; Elihu Yale's donation of books, saleable goods, and a portrait of King George I; the extensive patronage of the Brown family to what was originally Rhode Island College; funds donated into a trust overseen by the Earl of Dartmouth for the education of Native Americans (Geiger 2015: 2, 11, 68, 70, 114, 135). In something of a contemporary-sounding twist, King's College, renamed Columbia after the Revolution, was founded with the proceeds of a public lottery. Nevertheless, the college "was owned and operated by the powerful families that patronized Trinity [Church] and the Dutch Reformed churches" (Geiger 2015: 40–42). In the early days, colleges may have been chartered by governments, but any financial support they received from them was spotty at best.

In the era immediately following Independence there was some interest in supporting higher education with public money, but it generally foundered on Republican (as opposed to Federalist) claims that tax revenues should not be used to subsidize the cultural pretensions of the wealthy (e.g., Geiger 2015: 112, 114, 118, 160–170).[7] After the turn of the century the Second Great Awakening initially promoted a general suspicion of educated ministers and so of the institutions that educated them. Eventually, however, Methodists decided to establish colleges by the droves, more as a means to provide a religiously proper education for laypeople than to create an educated clergy (Geiger 2015: 134). The same period saw the establishment of generally unregulated and often proprietary (private for-profit) professional schools in medicine and law, but also of theological seminaries, such as Andover and Princeton, that were dependent upon donations because students often studied for free (Geiger 2015: 124, 155).

During the nineteenth century American higher education underwent important developments, not the least of which was the opening of doors to women and African-Americans, starting with Oberlin College in 1834 (Geiger 2015: 200–201). Structurally, however, higher education was a hodge-podge of different kinds of institutions, many of them proprietary, but all devoted entirely to teaching (Geiger 2015: 270–277) – until two momentous changes, both made possible by private money.

The first change was the introduction of the German tradition of the research university. It began the slow spread of the expectation, still not entirely uncontroversial, that the task of institutions of higher learning is not just to disseminate knowledge but also to create it. The first such American university was, of course, Johns Hopkins (1876) (Geiger 2015: 323). Soon other members of the wealthy elite recognized the social capital that derived from either creating new universities – Leland and Jane Stanford (1891), John D. Rockefeller II (University of Chicago, 1892), Andrew Carnegie (Carnegie Institute of Pittsburgh, now Carnegie Mellon University, 1900/1912) – or contributing to already existing schools – Washington Duke (to what was then Trinity College, 1895) (Geiger 2015: 326–350). When a handful of public universities embraced the research ideal, notably Cornell (a land-grant university), California, and Michigan, they, too, benefited considerably from private funds (Geiger 1986; 2015: 354–362).

The second major change that transformed American higher education was standardization, which resulted in the tiered system that we know today: high schools, followed by undergraduate studies, then graduate and professional studies. Inasmuch as politics at the time prevented the federal government from establishing meaningful national policies for education, this system, too, was the creation of private money (Geiger 2015: 479). Particularly important were activities of foundations established by John D. Rockefeller and Andrew Carnegie: Rockefeller's General Education Board (founded 1902), the

[7] The University of Virginia and South Carolina College were exceptions to this rule; cf. Geiger 2015: 119, 167, 181.

Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching (1905), the Carnegie Corporation (1912), and the Rockefeller Foundation (1913) (Geiger 1986: 45 et passim). Although Carnegie spoke disparagingly about the humanities and general education (Donoghue 2008: 3–4), both he and Rockefeller had an interest in fostering research, particularly in the natural sciences (e.g., Geiger 1986: 46, 143). After the Second World War, leadership among philanthropic organizations passed to the Ford Foundation (Geiger 2019: 99).

Public support of higher education was not, of course, unprecedented in the second half of the twentieth century. Lotteries and land grants had a long history. The latter was especially important in promoting agricultural studies and engineering in the form of the Morrill Land Grant Act of 1862, passed – significantly – when the Civil War removed many potential objectors from Congress (Geiger 2015: 166, 269–314). Additional funding for agricultural research came from the Hatch Act of 1887 and the second Morrill Act of 1890 (Geiger 2015: 303–304). But it was the participation of universities in the military efforts of the Second World War that led to a massive expansion of federal involvement in higher education. Especially noteworthy has been support for research in the natural sciences, engineering, and medicine. Equally noteworthy is the manner in which federal funding transformed what had been a privilege of the elite into a product for mass consumption, from the GI Bill to tuition grants to what now seems to be an ill-conceived program of abundant student loans (Geiger 2019). Today over half of the funding for university and college research in the United States comes from the federal government. More than half of that funding comes from the Department of Health and Human Services, with the Department of Defense and the National Science Foundation each adding slightly under 15% more ("Research-and-Development Spending, by Source of Funds" 2018; "Federal Support for Research and Development, by Agency" 2018). Federal programs that benefit the humanities, including the study of religions, are apparently easy to overlook. Neither the Fulbright Scholarship Program (1946) nor Fulbright-Hays Act funds (1961) nor the National Endowment for the Humanities (1965) nor the Woodrow Wilson Center (1968) merits mention in Geiger's recent account of *American Higher Education Since World War II* (2019).

The federal government may invest heavily in university research, but private money (including tuition revenue) still dominates research in the humanities. Of the one hundred institutions – fifty public and fifty private – that spent the most on research in the humanities in 2016 (the latest figures available at the time of writing), research in the humanities accounted for only 0.87% of the federal research funds received, and in aggregate, only 12.78% of the funds that these institutions devoted to humanities research came from the federal government. In only four of the one hundred institutions did federal dollars constitute more than half of humanities research funding: Brigham Young (89.20%), Johns Hopkins (81.10%), Virginia Commonwealth (79.2%), and Yale (71.20%). Twenty institutions reported receiving no federal funds for humanities research at all (figures calculated from "Colleges That Spent the Most on Humanities Research" 2018). When *The Chronicle of Higher Education* reported these statistics, however, it did run a story that highlighted a relatively well-funded humanities program at the University of Michigan – in the study of religions and directed by Donald Lopez (Adams 2018).

Knowledge about Religions – Who Needs It?

The preceding paragraph only begins to capture the role of private money in the study of religions. First, not all funding in the study of religions is funding for the humanities; for example, one should also count funding for social scientific and cognitive studies of religion. Second, the numbers do not identify what percentage of federal funding for the humanities supports the study of religions; they may be quite small compared to funds for fields such as literature and history. Third, the numbers do not distinguish between the study and the practice of religions. For example, Valparaiso University (my alma mater) ranks 36th overall in private universities that support the humanities, and 4th among all 100 universities in the percentage of research and development dollars devoted to the humanities. The Associate Provost for Faculty Affairs tells me, however, that he thinks a large chunk of that funding might derive from the Lilly Fellows Program in the Humanities and the Arts, which "seeks to renew and enhance the connections between Christianity and the academic vocation at church-related colleges and universities."[8] Finally, the figures exclude faculty salaries, which, given the relatively low cost of doing research in the humanities, surely make up a sizable proportion of indirect research funding, at least in those institutions that expect their faculty to engage in research.

Rather than multiply examples of private money supporting the study of religions, it is perhaps more important as a springboard for discussion to identify structural tensions that interfere with this support. These tensions are widely familiar, but they are still worth identifying, especially when the commitment of colleges and universities to the study of religions, a major source of researchers' salaries, is diminishing. I will draw on ideas that Steven Brint has developed in his essay, "An Institutional Geography of Knowledge Exchange" (Brint 2018).

Brint begins from the premise that not all knowledge is produced in an academic setting.[9] He writes, "Knowledge produced outside of academe can have a studied, systematic quality that, like academic knowledge, distinguishes it from folkways or mere opinion. Typically, its validity has been subjected to some degree of critical scrutiny—though usually not at the level that would pass muster at the highest levels of academe" (Brint 2018: 117). Indeed, in the geography of knowledge exchange academia occupies the central place; it is "the home of the ultimate cultural authority (and the privileged work space) that permits knowledge generated both in universities and elsewhere to be examined, proven, deepened, revised, or rejected on the basis of evidence" (Brint 2018: 137). Evidence is critical in this process, for knowledge is "based on more than assertion, convention, or opinion." It requires "the potential for verification." Without that potential, one may have a "conceptual structure," perhaps a very complex one, but not a "knowledge structure."[10] Illustrating the difference, he writes, "Religious systems, for example, are conceptual structures that are not subject to empirical verification" (Brint 2018: 120, 118).[11] In this regard religious systems differ from the study of religions. The latter seeks knowledge in Brint's strict sense of the term.

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[8] Personal communication, 5 August 2019; https://www.lillyfellows.org/about/about-us/. I have been unable to get clarity about the amount of funding from the Lilly Fellows program itself. Given the topic of this essay, and in the interests of full disclosure, I should perhaps acknowledge that I make a modest contribution every year to the particular college that runs this program – not to support the Lilly Fellows program but in gratitude for the education in critical thinking and the appreciation for the humanities that I received as a student.

[9] Distinguish from others, such as Andy Abbott.

[10] As distinct from knowledge, "knowledge structures" provide a framework of interrelated concepts, results, and procedures within which subsequent work is structured" (Brint 2018: 118).

[11] But Brint allows that religious systems are not entirely divorced from knowledge. At the beginning of his chapter, he writes, "knowledge structures generated outside academe include … spiritual practices of Eastern religions insofar as they are tied to health benefits," and he notes that there is some overlap "between social-science evidence on marriage as a benefit and conservative religious institutions;" cf. 2018: 115, 133

The topic of private funding for research is different from that of knowledge exchange. Knowledge exchange involves a bidirectional exchange of knowledge goods between academia and other organizations. Private funding refers to a unidirectional movement of money from sources outside of academia to support knowledge creation within it. The two do, however, share some characteristics. As Brint (2018: 131–132) observes, "All organizations have an interest in knowledge structures that lead to greater effectiveness in the achievement of valued outcomes." So, too, do donors. And both face what we might call barriers to trade. Brint identifies three such barriers in knowledge exchange. In order of ascending degree of obstruction, they are: corrupted knowledge goods, as when religious groups make misleading use of the results of academic research; failed exchanges, as when academic knowledge structures do not align with the objectives of outside institutions and vice versa; and complete blockages, as when conservative politicians and business leaders reject the results of climate science (Brint 2018: 133–135). Three similar barriers to trade impinge upon private funding for the study of religions.

First, several minority religious groups in the U.S. have recognized that they have a vested interest in encouraging the academic study of their own religions. They may do so to counter a dominant narrative, whether Christian or ethnocentric, or they may do so out of a basic concern with self-preservation (consider the violence Muslims, Sikhs, and South Asians suffered in the wake of the 9/11 attacks).[12]

Yet religious persons and organizations also make their own claims to knowledge. Some of them are quite open to adapting their conceptual systems and knowledge claims to accommodate the results of rigorous, critical academic investigation, but generally there are limits, sometimes severe. One relatively recent, relatively high-profile example concerns Rajiv Malhotra, his associates, and his Infinity Foundation. Malhotra and the Infinity Foundation have in fact provided some funding for the study of religions. For example, they helped support the 2010 Congress of the International Association for the History of Religions. But they are best known for attacks on Indological scholarship, especially the study of Indian religions (e.g., Banerjee, De Nicolás, and Ramaswamy 2007; Malhotra, Nilakantan, and Infinity 2011; Malhotra 2016; Malhotra, Voice of, and Infinity 2016).[13] Malhotra's claims have provoked some discussion within the academy itself (e.g., Gier 2012; Larson 2012; Yelle 2012; Pennington 2013; Rambachan 2013), but I presume that most academics who take charges of academic Eurocentrism seriously give much more credence to in-house arguments advanced by scholars like Dipesh Chakrabarty (2009) and Philippe Descola (2013a) – at least Descola when he is critiquing anthropological categories like nature and culture (cf., too, Descola 2013b). By contrast, Malhotra is generally in the business of presenting "corrupted knowledge goods" to a more general audience.

To be fair, though, barriers to trade on the level of corrupted knowledge goods – a stance that supports academic scholarship in the study of religions only to the extent that it confirms rather than threatens the funders' own ideological agendas and commitments – is hardly limited to minority religious communities. Just recall my visit to the Museum of the Bible.

A second barrier to trade is analogous to Brint's notion of failed exchanges. It arises from a misalignment between the goals of funding sources and the aims of the academic study of religions.

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[12] Jain Studies. Theravada at Chicago.

[13] Note that the Infinity Foundation provided some much needed financial support for the 2010 Congress of the International Association for the History of Religions, held in Toronto, Canada.

Among other places, potential for such misalignment is found in the relationship between foundations and scholars of religions.

Scholars have, of course, undertaken a very large number of successful research projects with foundation support. The first project that comes to mind, although it is not a project in the study of religions, is the multi-sited, collaborative ethnography of the Matsutake Worlds Research Group (cf. Matsutake Worlds Research Group 2009; Tsing 2015), which, on the initiative of the anthropologist Anna Tsing, received a sizeable award from the Toyota Foundation in 2007.[14]

As is well known, foundations generally frame competitions for funds in terms of themes that seek to advance their agendas. For example, in 2019 the theme for the Toyota Foundation's Research Grant competition was "Exploring New Values for Society," while the theme for its International Research Grant Competition was "Cultivating Empathy through Learning from Our Neighbors: Practitioners' Exchange on Common Issues in Asia." (The Toyota USA Foundation only supports projects in STEM fields.)[15] The Ford Foundation aims to combat inequality, which it attributes to five interconnected "drivers" – "entrenched cultural narratives, failure to invest in and protect vital public goods, unfair rules of the economy, unequal access to government, [and] persistent prejudice and discrimination;" it seeks to address these drivers with grants in "seven interconnected areas:" "civic engagement and government, creativity and free expression, future of work(ers), gender, racial, and ethnic justice, just cities and regions, natural resources and climate change, [and] technology and society."[16] The Henry Luce Foundation has two programs of potential interest to scholars of religions: Religion in International Affairs and Theology, the second of which "aims to advance understanding of religion and theology."[17] Much more limited is the Lilly Endowment, which states: "Our primary aim in religion is to deepen and enrich the religious lives of American Christians, principally by supporting efforts that enhance the vitality of congregations."[18]

There is no point in multiplying examples of foundations, and there is no justification for criticizing the orientations of the foundations just mentioned: people with money have the right to seek "greater effectiveness in the achievement of" whatever outcomes they value. The examples above do, however, illustrate potential misalignments between the goals of foundations and basic work in the study of religions. One way to deal with this misalignment is simply to frame one's own projects in the language of the foundation's agenda and themes. Such rhetorical accommodation will be more readily available to some projects than to others, but I wonder if it also exacerbates problems in the long run. First, to what extent should funding sources outside academia decide what research scholars of religions pursue? Second, to what extent does changing the frame for projects in the study of religions obscure the visibility and thus the perceived value of the knowledge that the study of religions creates?

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[14] http://toyotafound.force.com/psearch/JoseiDetail?name=D07-R-0502.

[15] https://www.toyotafound.or.jp/english/research/2019/; https://www.toyotafound.or.jp/english/international/2019/; https://www.toyota.com/usa/community/grant-guidelines-applications/overview.html.

[16] https://www.fordfoundation.org/work/challenging-inequality/.

[17] https://www.hluce.org/programs/religion-international-affairs/. .

[18] https://lillyendowment.org/our-work/religion/.

A third, even more severe barrier to trade in support of the study of religions is analogous to Brint's blockage. One example is the refusal of fundamentalists even to consider critical scholarship on texts such as the Bible. Another is the pervasive, long-standing use of private money in higher education to promote one's preferred religious outlook.[19]

To some extent this use exhibits corrupted knowledge goods. For example, the chapter "Religion, Spirituality, and College Students" in the recent *Oxford Handbook of Religion and American Education* (Rockenbach and Park 2018) presents a rather enthusiastic account of the importance of religion and spirituality among college students, apparently as part of an agenda to encourage colleges to nurture spiritual development (see "Future Directions, pp. 406–407). The quite different survey of research published by Damon Mayrl and Freeden Oeur (2009), now ten years old, remains useful in exemplifying a significantly more balanced, nuanced approach to the subject (Mayrl and Oeur 2009: 260; cf. more recently Hill 2017).

The agenda of promoting religion and spirituality is so typical of the *Oxford Handbook*, at least of the section on Religion and Higher Education, and so severe, that it constitutes a blockage to non-partisan research in the study of religions. In effect, the volume continues the project, begun in the 1990s, of attempting to re-establish within higher education the hegemony of Christianity, particularly of Protestantism, whether in evangelical or liberal form (interfaith studies, spirituality) (cf. Marsden 1994, 1997; Burtchaell 1998; Schwehn 1993; Sloan 1994; Palmer 1983; Cherry, De Berg, and Porterfield 2001; Schwartz 2001; Mahoney, Schmalzbauer, and Youniss 2001; Jacobsen and Jacobsen 2018: 315–320; Palmer 1998). Casual readers could be excused if, after perusing this section, they were completely unaware that there even is a serious, academic study of religions concerned with furthering knowledge about religions rather than with spiritual development.

Here are some examples: The Jacobsen's present the academic study of religion as an outmoded, naïve endeavor pursued by antiquated scholars unaware of postmodern epistemologies and occupying a minor place within a broader movement that seeks to destroy religion or at least to ignore it as unworthy of academic investigation (Jacobsen and Jacobsen 2018: 314–315). Eugene Gallagher (2018) at least acknowledges that there is disagreement about what teaching religious studies should entail, but he says precious little about what the academic study of religions actually is and does. A single quote should be sufficient to demonstrate the many missed opportunities in Robert Nash's chapter on "Teaching About Religion Outside of Religious Studies": "... start the conversations with candid, personal disclosures on everybody's part concerning where they currently stand on their religio-spiritual journeys and where they would like to end up. Putting our religio-spiritual cards on the table early is a good way to set the stage for enlarging the conversational space for everyone" (Nash 2018: 446). In other words, Nash is teaching religion under the guise of teaching about religion. As far as an understanding of religion is concerned, scholars in anthropology, sociology, psychology, history, literature, political science, economics and so on apparently have nothing of value to offer.

It is clear, at least in principle, that persons or organizations who want to promote religious or spiritual development (the Lilly Foundation, the Louisville Institute, and so on) or skew research in a religious direction (e.g., the John Templeton Foundation) might donate money – in some cases a great deal of

[19] Equally problematic, of course, but less common in the history of American higher education, is the donation of money in the interest of eradicating religion.

money – in the hope of achieving their valued outcomes. It also seems clear that in a variety of ways such contributors might be uninterested in or hostile to the critically sifted knowledge that the study of religions seeks to provide. As an article in *Zygon* on the significance of Huston Smith's *Why Religion Matters* (2001) and *The Purposes of Higher Education* (1955) puts it: "Verification belongs to the future" (Kenney 2015: 242).[20] No; absolutely not. Verification – the testing of ideas on the basis of evidence, as well as the assessment of the adequacy of one's ideas and methods, including their political and moral "imbrications" – is a continuous, never-ending process, one that requires unceasing judgment in the present, not a deferred judgment that can only be experienced proleptically.

Let me put the question that underlies each of these barriers to trade bluntly. There are plenty of private interests that might find the critical assessment of knowledge in and about religions that the study of religions provides to be antithetical to – or at least misaligned with – "greater effectiveness in the achievement of [their] valued outcomes." Are there private interests that need this knowledge?

Can Private Money Save the Study of Religions?

My ultimate concern is with research, not pedagogy, the creation of knowledge rather than its transmission. The two are not, however, easily separated. Compared to the natural sciences, the major cost involved in research in the study of religions is generally an indirect labor cost: the ability to earn a living in a manner that allows enough time to read, think, and write and provides the wherewithal to have access to the data about which one writes and to communicate with one's colleagues. For most scholars of religions, this indirect cost is met in some way, shape, or form by teaching. That is the foundation upon which any special funds for research, even funds for research leaves, generally build. And while it may be tempting to fantasize about being independently wealthy and not dependent upon any institution for a living, I suspect that on the whole the financial benefits derived from such independence are outweighed by the intellectual costs of being removed from the give and take of the academic context – our "ultimate cultural authority (and [our] privileged work space)" for testing and refining knowledge.[21]

To be sure, a case can be made that governments should support the study of religions. For one thing, they need the critically sifted knowledge that the study of religions provides in order to establish "policies on religion … shaped by research evidence" rather than based upon hunches, guesswork, and local prejudices (Stevenson and Aune 2017: 17). Furthermore, although I see no reason why governments should take an interest in nurturing (or impeding) religious or spiritual development, Stephen Prothero has made a well-known argument that a modicum of religious literacy is necessary for responsible citizenship, something in which democratic governments do have an obvious interest (Prothero 2007; cf. Gallagher 2018: 429). But religious literacy is a little like art appreciation: it provides precious little in the way of critical reflection and analysis. And besides, the United States has a long history of favoring teaching over research in subjects such as this. So religious literacy is not a particularly robust justification for the study of religions. In any case the question at hand concerns private money, not public.

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[20] But note the Catholic position.

[21] In the interests of space, I have left to one side here research grants from private sources as well as the possibility of establishing research institutions, such as centers for the study of religions.

There is one respect in which our colleagues who favor spiritual nurturing are correct. In a time of dwindling commitment to the humanities and to the study of religions in higher education, the case needs to be made that knowledge about religions is important. One way to make that case – a very pragmatic way, if it can be pulled off – is through private money, just as a century and more ago the Rockefeller and Carnegie Foundations made the case that American higher education needed to up its game. Clearly there are people with money who care about knowledge about religions; their willingness to support the study of religions would go a long way in helping to sustain it. Although in the current climate, dominated by funding for STEM fields, it seems like a hopeless fantasy, imagine what could be done with just the $100 million wasted in building the Ark Encounter theme park in Williamstown, Kentucky.[22] Invested as endowment in generous, $5 million blocks, the funds could provide income for twenty academic positions in the study of religions more or less indefinitely.

At the same time, in the interests of overcoming barriers to trade, scholars of religions need, carefully and patiently, to make certain points clear to those who raise and receive funds on behalf of academic institutions (essentially a process of cultivating long-term relationships[23]), to fellow members of the academy, and especially to donors.

First, from the recognition that all knowledge arises contextually and involves preconceptions it does not follow that all claims to knowledge are equally good. Otherwise, biologists should embrace creation science as well as evolution. Higher education is not about sharing, nurturing, and elaborating personal opinions, convictions, and traditions; it is about examining, proving, deepening, revising, and rejecting alleged knowledge – including cherished opinions, convictions, and traditions – on the basis of evidence. Second, pursuing such knowledge with the utmost seriousness does not mean adopting an outsiders' perspective that needs to be supplemented by the "involvement of religious practitioners in teaching religious studies" (Stevenson and Aune 2017: 17). It is a grievous error to equate the difference between theology and religious studies with the difference between an insider's and an outsider's perspective. As a scholar I am committed to taking the views of religious practitioners with whom I work as seriously as possible. And as a religious insider I still find the results of the study of religions compelling; they represent the best knowledge available. I also recognize that appeals to complex conceptual (rather than knowledge) systems, however traditional or emotionally compelling they may be, have evidentiary value only if I happen to be studying those complex systems. Third, to claim that "[e]ducation in Theology and Religious Studies should ensure both scientific detachment *and the personal attachment to one's own tradition*" (van Saane 2017: 182, emphasis added) is to abandon the academic pursuit altogether. Jonathan Hill may or may not be correct when he concludes that, "despite concerns about the secularising influence of higher education, college tends to have [at least at the present] a few positive (in the form of institutional belonging and practice), a few negative (in terms of certain super-empirical beliefs), but mostly no influence on religious faith" (Hill 2017: 37). In any case, serious work in the academic study of religions pursues knowledge, come what may. The consequences for a person's attachment to her tradition are beside the point. Expecting – and funding – anything else is unacceptable.

[22] https://arkencounter.com/press/

[23] Or so I was told by a former student who worked in the principal-gifts office at the University of Chicago.

My mind is drawn back to the Museum of the Bible. Not to overcome these barriers to trade and to allow academic study simply to affirm a religious tradition and to nurture spiritual development seems uncomfortably familiar. It is the 21st-century academic equivalent to producing a Slave Bible.

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