Friendly Advice from the Other Side for First-Time Academic Job Hunters

By Dr. W. Michael Ashcraft

One key factor in the academic job search process is the huge disconnect between the intellectual and cultural worlds of the typical graduate school and the undergraduate institutions where many newly minted religious studies PhDs seek their first positions.

In graduate school, students are at the bottom of a hierarchy. They are assumed to be among the least knowledgeable people in their academic communities and are expected to learn from, emulate, and rely upon those above them in the ladder of knowledge and wisdom. A graduate student's primary focus involves research into a small corner of a given field or discipline. By the time they receive their degrees, graduate students are assumed to be experts on this narrow topic, pretty darned expert in some related areas, and well-informed about some subfields and specialties within religious studies.

As undergraduate instructors, on the other hand, they enter a world in which most concerns are related not to their research but to pedagogy —preparing lectures, grading tests and papers, evaluating class presentations, keeping office hours, serving on committees for curriculum and hiring, or any of a dozen other concerns related to undergraduate teaching. What's more, most of their interactions are with students whose academic and general knowledge is far less than their own. In the classroom they are expected to be broadly authoritative rather than narrowly expert, often teaching courses outside their areas of expertise.

The following remarks are intended to help job-seeking graduates avoid the pitfalls that can arise during the application process as a result of this disconnect. While I do not mean to diminish the importance of research as a criterion for academic employment, I find that too many candidates fail to recognize the importance of demonstrating an aptitude and passion for teaching as a career. This can be a costly mistake, particularly at institutions like mine, where pedagogy takes precedence over research agendas.

The Initial Application

It's important to approach the application process by imagining it from the viewpoint of the search committee. An opening in a religious studies department typically generates dozens of application packets (if not more), each with a cover letter, CV, teaching and research statements, various transcripts and perhaps writing samples, teaching evaluations and other documents. Additionally, two or more letters of recommendations are sent on behalf of each applicant. Search committee members are expected to evaluate all this material and make decisions that affect the lives of total strangers, although as full-time instructors, they usually have limited time to devote to the process and may have little experience to prepare them for it. Anything you do to make their task easier benefits your chances. Anything you do to make it harder is a detriment.

To that end, read the job ad carefully and take it seriously. The language is not filler. Often it results from careful deliberation and interdepartmental discussion (and

squabbling). Your application materials should focus on how you can accommodate the school's needs, not on how the school might accommodate yours. For example, if the ad says the committee is looking for an Islamist, then you must assume that's what they want. If you are not capable of focusing your highest level of instruction on Islam, do not apply for the position. Applications that focus too much on attributes and abilities not specified in the job ad are more likely to be tossed aside. If you feel it necessary to focus your application on areas not specifically mentioned in the job ad, that could indicate you are applying for the wrong job.

Likewise, your materials should address every item mentioned in the ad. For example, if it says the new faculty member will need to teach a university-wide freshman seminar or participate in a departmental curriculum review, then think carefully about how your skills and experiences can be applied to those duties and discuss those ideas in your cover letter, teaching statement or other appropriate document.

The job ad will list the documents the search committee wants. Do not send additional material. Not only may it not be read, but additional material may be perceived as a nuisance or a clumsy effort to give yourself an edge. On the other hand, make sure you send all the documents the ad asks for. The absence of required documents means that the search committee can't evaluate you by the same criteria as other applicants. This is often reason enough to eliminate you, especially if the search committee has dozens of applicants.

The cover letter affords you the chance to address many kinds of issues, but its main purpose is to quickly convince the reader that you are qualified for the position as advertised. What abilities and experiences render you an outstanding applicant for this position? Why should the search committee pay more than passing attention to you? Here it's important to tread carefully. There's a fine line between showing a search committee that you're qualified and showing off. Be honest and straightforward. Do not inflate your abilities or the significance of your achievements but don't minimize them or apologize for perceived deficiencies either. And try to be specific whenever possible.

If, for example, the committee wants someone to teach an upper level course in American Christianity, do not waste time talking about your great idea for a course on world Christianity. Focus on your knowledge of Christianity in the United States and provide examples that illustrate your ability and experience in teaching it. For example, you might describe an effective assignment that helps students grasp some essential aspect of American Christianity.

What about the tone of your cover letter and the personality it conveys? Search committees are looking for someone with whom they can work for many years to come. They assume that you have done well in graduate school, that your dissertation research is sound, and that you can hold your own in scholarly debates related to your specialty. They are most interested in finding a colleague, someone who will carry her or his share of the workload and who will be reasonable in considering the thorny issues that inevitably arise in an environment like the teaching institution. They hope to find

someone who can take a joke and see the humor in daily situations. They most definitely need someone who genuinely cares about students and their learning. And they want a person who is satisfied settling into the position at their institution, someone who will not be looking at job ads to see where else he or she might move in a year or two.

The cover letter might also be a place to address some unusual or unique circumstances. For example, applicants who earned all their degrees (BA, MA and PhD) from the same school are often seen as not having a wide enough academic experience. If you fall into that category, you might mention educational and/or teaching experiences at other schools, or cite mentors from other institutions. If you earned your PhD more than seven or eight years ago, you might explain why you are only now applying for a tenure-track position. If you graduated from a department other than religious studies, you should indicate in your application materials that you can teach about religions.

Letters of recommendation can either open the door wider or slam it shut. While you should not try to control what recommenders say in their letters, you can offer suggestions to help them craft good ones. And you should choose recommenders who will give the committee a full picture of your academic skills. For instance, your dissertation project is an important part of you academic career and certainly should be mentioned prominently in one or more of your letters of recommendation. But it might be counter-productive if all your recommenders were to focus heavily on your research and give short shrift to your teaching experience and ability. This does not mean that you should ask recommenders who know your research but have not seen you in the classroom to comment on your teaching ability. In fact, you should ask them not to; they can only make assumptions or pass along second-hand information. Instead you should seek recommenders who can speak authoritatively about you as a teacher. Some of the strongest recommendations could come from colleagues or instructors who know your classroom work but have little knowledge about your research.

It's also important that your letters of recommendation give a realistic sense of how you function as a colleague. Anecdotes and examples can be very persuasive. Search committee members will be impressed if, for example, you did something exceptional as an adjunct, such as starting a project in the department that your full-time colleagues wanted to but never seemed to have the time to do, or if you thought of something creative to help students learn and took the initiative to make it happen. These types of activities indicate that you are a self-starter, that you are willing to go the extra mile, and that you have vision and can put it into practice. It also shows that you are serious about teaching, that you are willing to invest yourself long-term in the teaching process and environment, and that you have the dedication needed to be a good instructor.

One problem that I have seen in too many recommendation letters is the assertion that the candidate is among best graduate students the recommender has worked with in the past 10, 20 or 30 years. This kind of praise occurs so frequently that it has lost its impact. Everyone who applies for a position, it seems, is among the greatest students their recommenders have ever seen. I often wonder where the average graduate students are. Ask recommenders to refrain from such hyperbolic praise.

Finally, good letters should indicate that the recommenders have evidence for what they say about you. If they are going to comment on your teaching ability, they need to have seen you in the classroom. If they want to talk about how well you can think on your feet, they need to have seen you present a paper at a professional conference and field questions afterward, or seen you perform in a graduate seminar discussion centered on a difficult problem or subject.

The Initial Interview

Applicants who pass the first cut will typically get a preliminary interview, either by phone or face-to-face at the AAR's annual meeting through the Employment Information Services (EIS) Center. The preliminary phone and face-to-face interviews have obvious differences. One is length of time. Interviews at the annual meeting are typically 15 to 20 minutes, though some can run longer. Phone interviews are usually longer — an hour or more — and less hurried. On the other hand, face-to-face interviews allow candidates to read non-verbal cues that might help in answering questions. Here are some tips for either kind of interview.

As noted already, if the search committee is trying to fill a tenure-track position, they are looking for a long-term colleague. Your manner, your willingness to enter the flow of conversation, your humor – all of these can affect your chances. Being nervous is natural. Preparation can help minimize it. To that end, find out as much as you can about the institution and department the search committee represents. An enormous amount of information is available online. Talk to contacts who have professional and/or personal connections to that institution or department. After your research, try to anticipate what questions the search committee members will ask. If the department devotes a lot of its teaching load to introductory courses taken by the general student body, the search committee will probably ask you about teaching an introductory course. If the department has a major with many upper level courses, be prepared to talk about upper level courses that you can teach with confidence. If the institution's student population is mostly first-generation college students, think about how you will relate to people from family backgrounds that didn't emphasize higher education.

No matter how detailed your research, you cannot anticipate all questions. Being able to think on your feet is a very useful skill. If that is not something you are good at, practice with some friends before the interview. Have them pose some of the questions you anticipate but also ask them to surprise you with unexpected, even implausible questions. You might also ask them to role play different kinds of personalities, from abrupt and aggressive to laid back and friendly.

If you have experience in teaching, be prepared to talk about it very specifically: What kinds of students did you teach? Which assignments worked well and which didn't? What did you learn about yourself as a teacher from your experiences? What is the single most important thing you are trying to accomplish in your teaching? How does that take concrete form in your syllabi and course assignments? The more you can paint a picture for the search committee members of a three-dimensional, fully human *you*, interacting

with students, speaking to them in lectures as well as discussion sessions and in the hallways and quads of a campus, the better are your chances of getting a call for a campus visit.

Be prepared to talk about activities that you see growing out of your dissertation project. (This is also something that should be addressed in your written application materials — in the cover letter, for example, or in a research or teaching statement.) Being able to integrate students into research activities can be particularly beneficial. If your dissertation led you to related research topics, talk about that too. Addressing these issues indicates to search committee members that you can reflect on research and academic issues beyond the limits of your dissertation. For example, if your dissertation was about anti-Semitism in Martin Luther's work, can you now see possibilities for research on anti-Semitic statements by Protestants today, or for understanding Protestant activities during the Holocaust? Is this research that students might take part in, say, by interviewing Protestants where you live about their attitudes toward Jews and Judaism? The search committee wants to see that you maintain a passion for discovering new insights, even if your teaching duties at their institution may not allow you to pursue research to the extent you did in graduate school. What's more, they will want to see how you plan to instill the same passion in students.

During either a phone interview or an annual meeting interview, the topic of university service is likely to arise. This phrase — "university service" — refers to duties at a teaching institution beyond the classroom. They include committee memberships, work with student organizations, participation in university-wide initiatives, serving on faculty governing bodies, and many other activities. Any projects that you participated in as a graduate student that aided your department and/or enhanced student learning will be of interest to a search committee. If you are not asked about them, look for an opportunity to mention them.

The best interviews are those in which your conversation with search committee members deepens from questions and answers into a natural exchange of ideas. An interview of twenty minutes will probably not lead to this kind of exchange. But if you have an hour or more, then it might evolve. Although you cannot force the conversation in this direction, you can do some things to increase the odds that it occurs. All the above advice applies here: Be yourself, do your homework, talk about teaching, be open and frank, and talk about research in broader terms than your dissertation. If you sense that your conversation with the search committee is taking that deeper turn, the most important advice I can give is stay out of the way! Let it happen naturally. The beautiful thing about such a conversation is that it flows, and the participants flow with it.

One final point. Often an applicant is given a few moments at the end of the preliminary interview to ask or say something. This is a chance to emphasize a pertinent point or to make sure you understand what the committee plans next. But do not prolong the interview unnecessarily. When it's over, let it be over. Thank the committee members for their time, then get up and leave (or hang up the phone). It's likely that they need time to decompress after your interview and prepare for the next one.

The Campus Visit
If the stages of the job process are like sporting events, then the campus visit is the Olympics. More than a single interview, it is a marathon of one or more days of interviews, meetings and events in which you will interact with dozens of people who work and study at the institution where you have applied for a job. You are usually expected to give a guest lecture. Meals are provided for you, and these are often occasions for you to interact with professors, administrators and students. I refer to this stage of the job process as a "visit." but that word cloaks the intensive nature of the experience. Many applicants find these visits intimidating and exhausting. Here are a few tips to make the experience easier and more successful.

- Give some thought to how you will dress. It never hurts to look professional, even if that is not your style. But you also need to dress comfortably. You will be wearing the same clothes for many hours at a time.

- Think about what and how much you should eat and drink. Most, if not all, meals during your visit will be taken in restaurants, where portions are large and food is usually heavily seasoned. Eating lightly and smartly is a good idea. Also, if you have special dietary needs, let the person arranging your visit know ahead of time. The same is true if you have certain physical needs that affect mobility.

- Make sure that you understand travel arrangements and can manage them. The school will contact you in advance to tell you how they want to transport you to their campus. Usually they will book your airline flights and arrange to meet you at the airport.

- Find out in advance whatever you can about the faculty and administrators you are likely to meet.

- Take items that help you to relax: a lap top computer, video games, a deck of cards, a good novel, bubble bath — whatever helps you unwind at home that you can transport easily in your luggage will probably help you during the on-campus visit.

- If possible clear your schedule during the on-campus interview so that you are not distracted by obligations at home.

- Ask your spouse or significant other, friends, graduate school mentors and colleagues, or any others whom you trust to be available to talk by phone. Speaking with them, if only for a few minutes, can be both relaxing and encouraging while you are in a strange environment.

- During the on-campus visit, you can expect some individuals to make remarks that reveal personality conflicts or rivalries at the school. While such remarks may help you read between the lines and gain valuable information about the

department or institution, I advise you not to respond them. You are not there to arbitrate disputes or to provide a sympathetic ear to aggrieved parties.

When you arrive on campus, or perhaps even before, you will be given an itinerary of your visit. Your hosts will probably schedule interviews with faculty, students, and administrators, into time slots of 45 minutes to an hour. (Hopefully they will also schedule a little time between these meetings to allow you to decompress.) You should abide by their schedule, although there is nothing wrong about politely seeking clarifications about details in the itinerary you don't understand.

Much of your campus visit will involve formal meetings with people such as members of the department, deans or other academic officers, the institution's president, and perhaps other administrators. Meetings may also be arranged with one or more students, often majors in the department. Many of these people will have thought in advance about questions they want to ask you. Some of the questions will be the same ones you were asked in the preliminary interview. And you undoubtedly will be asked some of the same questions in more than one of the campus meetings. Be prepared to answer them politely and thoroughly. Don't mention that you were asked them before.

One of the most important formal meetings might be one with the entire department in which they talk to you about your dissertation research, your other academic interests, how you might react in certain teaching situations, where you would like to be in ten years, and so on. For some job candidates this is the hardest part of the campus visit. My best advice is to rely on your preparation, speak clearly and confidently, and answer their questions directly and honestly rather than trying to figure out what answer is most likely to please them.

Throughout your campus visit, you will have numerous conversations and encounters with people that are not scheduled. Some will last for only a minute or two, other 15 minutes or longer. Escorts will 'meet' with you as they take you from one appointment to another. You will run into people in the hallway, at the restaurant or dining facility, in someone's office or the library. Meetings with students may be billed as informal. But they are important nonetheless, and the faculty will ask the students for their candid feedback about you.

You can anticipate some but not all of the questions you will encounter during your campus visit. Your hosts' questions come from their deep immersion in the institution's community. It is impossible for you to know very much about this complex and multi-faceted community in advance. So you are probably going to be asked questions that won't have an immediately recognizable context. Seek clarification where necessary and answer them as best you can.

It is also likely that in some meetings, whether formal or informal, you will not be at your intellectual or emotional best. After a full day of formal interviews, for example, you may be told that Professor Smith, who didn't think she had time to meet with you, has cancelled an appointment and wants to talk with you for 20 minutes. Although you may

be looking forward to taking a bath, checking your e-mail and relaxing before dinner, you will need to talk to Prof. Smith. If you are tired, confused, or frustrated by the day's encounters, the best you can do is call up reserves from within. If the interview does not go as well as you would like, chalk it up to experience, cut your losses, and move on. You cannot be at your best every minute that you are on campus. Inevitably you will say things that you wished later you had not, fail to make yourself clear and ask what seem in hindsight to be foolish questions.

The campus visit typically involves a guest lecture, one that you prepare in advance and give to a group of students and/or faculty in a classroom or auditorium. The students may be in a course whose instructor is providing you the time and space to give your lecture. If that is the case, you may be asked to give the guest lecture on a specific topic. Although it's likely that you will be assigned a topic related to your field of expertise, you could be asked to lecture on just about anything within the boundaries of a religious studies undergraduate curriculum. During a campus visit that I was part of several years ago, the candidate was asked to prepare a lecture on Shinto, although she specialized in Christian theology and the relationship between science and religion. The reasoning behind this request was that one of the job requirements was to teach a survey course on world religions that included Shinto, and applicants were expected to be able to lecture about most of the religions covered in such a course. In addition, the instructor in whose class she was lecturing had planned to cover Shinto at that point in the semester.

Sometimes the guest lecture may occur in a room full of people recruited specifically for the occasion. I recall attending a guest lecture for a job candidate during the summer. The search committee asked anyone they could find — students, secretaries, faculty members from different departments — to attend. In spite of the artificial nature of her audience, the candidate did an outstanding job and got the position.

Some or all of your faculty hosts are likely to attend your lecture. They will look for the qualities that they believe make for good teaching. They will watch how you field questions from students. They will note whether you make eye contact with your audience, seem relaxed or nervous, stick rigidly to your notes or depart from them on occasion to make spontaneous observations. Those who evaluate you will be especially interested in your communication skills. Whether in interviews or the guest lecture, they will be looking to see f you can express yourself in language that is plain and straightforward yet authoritative — that doesn't insult the intelligence of your audience, yet doesn't dilute the complexity and importance of the topic.

The students will often be asked for their feedback, either written or oral, and sometimes both. Faculty members consider student evaluations very carefully. Students are the "customers" buying your "product." If they are not impressed, the faculty won't be either. Remember that students like to be talked to, not talked at. They like for instructors to ask their opinions and have a dialogue with them. But they also want to learn about something interesting and meaningful, and they want to be challenged to think about something in a way that they haven't before.

The guest lecture is a crucial part of the campus visit. If you fail to give a good guest lecture, then no matter how sparkling you are in interviews, your chances of getting hired will be diminished. If all this seems overwhelming, remember that the faculty members observing you know that you are in a difficult situation. They once made campus visits and gave guest lectures to get their jobs. Most will remember the feeling. If you can show them that you are at home in the classroom teaching their students, then you will have made huge strides toward getting a job. Above all, keep in mind that you should not use the guest lecture to show off how much you know. Use it to demonstrate how well you can teach.

The on-campus visit is not only a time for others to assess you. It is your opportunity to assess the community where you might live and work for many years. During the on-campus visit you will probably be given a tour of the town or city and told about shopping, housing, schools, churches or synagogues, and many other aspects of the larger community. This is a chance for you to think about what you want from a place of residence, what you are willing to live with and what you are not. My institution is in a small town in a rural area. The nearest big airport is a three-hour drive away. The nearest shopping mall is an hour and a half by car. Before moving here my wife and I lived in or near large cities. When I was offered the tenure track job at my institution, we decided that we could get used to living in a small town, and over the years we have come to enjoy it.

You also need to decide in advance what you want in your work environment. If you like a lot of student interaction, in and beyond the classroom, then a teaching institution is probably the right fit for you. On the other hand, if student interaction feels like an interruption to your other work, then you might be very unhappy at a teaching institution.

Finally, the on-campus visit gives you the opportunity to assess a specific institution. You will enter buildings that might be your professional home for many years. You will meet people with whom you might interact daily for many years. The campus visit will help you decide whether you can be content in this place and among these people.

Conclusion

Successfully navigating the job search process, from application through the campus visit, is like juggling. You have to be aware of many things at once and one slip can ruin the performance. It's not easy! Anyone who says otherwise is either deluded or lying. On the other hand, it is possible to do it well, and get a job. People less qualified than you get positions.

My last piece of advice is to be as transparent about yourself as you can. Teaching is a vocation of self-revelation and self-discovery. It requires conscientious and unreserved introspection. The process by which you arrive at the place where you teach should be marked by the same transparency and candid presentation as teaching itself. If you are not honest and forthright during the job search process, you will sabotage your effort. Others will see through the façades you construct. On a deeper level, if you behave in a manner that distorts your essential qualities, or diverts attention from them, you

compromise the very way of life to which you purport to devote yourself. There is much about the academic world that is harsh, unforgiving, and self-serving. No one is immune to the seduction of power. No one ever behaves with one hundred percent moral purity. But teaching has to be pursued with honesty, and that goes for the process of getting a teaching job.

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