

Career Alternatives for Religion Scholars

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When I began my doctoral studies at the University of Iowa School of Religion in 1968, there were forecasts that within the next ten years there would be a need for 5,000 more PhD's in theology and religious studies. This forecast was based upon the assumption that more and more state universities and colleges were going to be adding religion majors in the coming years.

During my four years of graduate study, the situation and forecast changed dramatically (remember Kent State?). By 1972 my fellow graduates and I were told that there were very, very few positions available, and almost all of those were for one-year terminal positions. We were thrown upon our own wits to determine our future. Our dream of sorting through multiple teaching offers was shattered as we looked everywhere and anywhere for any kind of teaching position.

I had very brilliant friends who accumulated thousands of dollars of debt moving cross-country for one-year positions, only to have to move again the next year. The situation made me realize that the assumption that we had made — (PhD = lifetime teaching position) — was naïve in the extreme. It also made me think about other ways in which I could use my hard-earned degree. I did eventually find a teaching position where I stayed for 12 years, but I also did stints as a hospital chaplain (3 years), parish pastor (2 years), librarian and library director (5 years), and association executive (11 years and counting).

Opportunities for permanent teaching positions are still scarce four decades later, and many who entered graduate school with the goal of teaching will find themselves adjusting to a different vocation and lifestyle than they had envisioned. The good news is that opportunities for non-teaching positions have never been more diverse than they are today. How does one decide what to pursue? What to try? How does one find interesting and challenging positions outside of academic teaching?

I would like to suggest that, in contemplating your professional future, you should begin by taking inventory of your own skills, values, and goals. Here are the questions I would ask myself and possible answers to those questions:

1. Why did I decide to pursue a PhD in religion?
 - a. To secure the credentials needed to teach
 - b. To pursue research in a specific field of great interest to me
 - c. To continue my graduate study since I really love graduate study
 - d. Other

2. Why did I choose the specific field I'm in?
 - a. Because I have a strong interest in this field
 - b. Because I think a degree in this field would be more marketable than a degree in another field
 - c. Because it was suggested to me that this is the field where I am strong

- d. Other
3. What appeals to me most about life as a faculty member?
- a. Interaction with students
 - b. The academic life — relationships with other faculty, a set schedule, etc.
 - c. The opportunity to continue to pursue my research areas of interest
 - d. Job security, recognition, and stature
 - e. Other

If you were to wrestle seriously with these kinds of questions, you would be intellectually equipped to pursue other vocations that would provide challenges, opportunities, and rewards that match one's talents, goals, and aspirations. If your primary interest is scholarly research, for example, you would probably be frustrated in a parish or serving as a hospital chaplain. You might find a position as an indexer or as part of a publishing enterprise fits you better.

If your primary interest is interaction with students then, with a little adjustment, you might find parish ministry or hospital chaplaincy or even reference librarianship as a suitable alternative for you. If you like a mix of things (as I do), then you might find that working in a nonprofit association in the field of religion would be the right thing for you.

What's of most importance, however, is that you objectively and clearly assess your own talents, strengths, desires, and goals, and that before you seek a non-teaching position you have a clear idea of what motivates, challenges, and satisfies you. With that self-knowledge in hand, you are ready to look for alternatives. Here are several resources to support your explorations of alternative careers in religion.

1. The *Chronicle of Higher Education* regularly publishes special careers sections that frequently discuss alternative careers:
www.chronicle.com/jobs/archive/firstjob.htm
2. Some college and university placement services offer information about careers in religion. The McGill University Placement Service has an especially comprehensive outline, "What Can I Do with My Degree in Religious Studies?"
www.caps.mcgill.ca/handouts/whattodo/religious_studies.pdf
3. Finally, there are people who have gone into technology with their religion background. One has developed the Selling Out Web site:
www.ironstring.com/sellout/sellout_faqs/sellout_faqs.shtml

Your theological librarian can help you find additional resources, and remember, if you decide you wish to explore a career in theological librarianship, please contact the American Theological Library Association; we would be happy to provide information and support.

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