A Student's Search for Meaning

Reflections on the Intersections of College Chaplaincy, Liberal Arts and the University

Edited by
Melissa Carter, James W. Fraser, Chelsea Garbell, and Amy Wilson

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Introduction: Whose Search, Which Meaning

James W. Fraser, New York University

The chapters in this volume come from two very different arenas within the American university and are designed to provoke more future conversations across boundaries of this kind. For many decades dialogue between those who find themselves in different units on college campuses in the United States have been all too rare. The primary goal of this book is to spark more such conversations, especially among people in very different parts of twenty-first colleges and universities who find themselves engaged with students asking core questions about meaning and purpose in their lives and in the society in which we live. Teachers, scholars, and professional staff from many diverse parts of the university have shared their own ideas in this volume while also listening to and learning from other practitioners in very different arenas. At the same time all are united by experiences of deep engagement with students who are searching for opportunities to discuss and learn about meaning and purpose as an integral part of their college education. Indeed, today's students, perhaps more than their immediate predecessors, are spending time, sometimes significant time, asking questions about meaning, purpose, values, often with the addition of questions about spirituality whether in a humanities classroom, or a chaplain's office, or too often isolated and alone.

- Faculty in the humanities, though often feeling a bit besieged in today's institutions of higher education, teach courses in the humanities that are important both to majors in those fields and to many other students in other disciplines and professional fields. Many students, undergraduate and sometimes graduate, are finding new ways to use these courses and conversations with these professors to ask deep questions about meaning, purpose, and values in their own fields of interest, and regarding their future professional lives, and perhaps most of all their own personal lives now and in the future.

- At the same time, college chaplains and religious life leaders representing many different faiths and sometimes no faith on many of the same campuses lead programs and conferences while spending many hours in one-on-one counseling sessions with college students. More and more students, those from traditional western religions, followers of eastern or newer traditions, the spiritual-but-not-religious, and the "no-religions" who may reject traditional religion but nevertheless are seekers are attending religious life programs in larger numbers than in decades.

Nevertheless, while many students come to humanities courses and they come to college chaplains often asking the same questions about meaning, purpose, values, and spirituality, the adult in the field — humanities professors and college chaplains - virtually never talk to each other. Even though they often have the same students, with the same passionate interests and

questions, dialogue is highly unusual. Humanities professors don't know chaplains in the same college. Chaplains don't generally know humanities professors. The kind of learning that could happen if professionals in these very separate fields could come together to share experiences of the search for meaning is not happening in today's highly siloed world of higher education. This volume is designed to provide one small step in addressing that situation and perhaps — just perhaps — starting a much-needed dialogue. If the dialogue could begin both humanities professors and college chaplains would be wiser for it and, most important students would be better served in their quest for meaning, purpose, and values in their lives; a quest too often marginalized in the 21st century university with its highly professional and materialistic focus. It is important to note from the outset that this quest for meaning, whether in the humanities curriculum or the spiritual life realm is not just a quest for individual meaning. Since Aristotle taught that we are all "political animals" students have used the humanities to ask "what is the good society?" What does it mean to live in the polis well with a variety of other people, some very different from me, some whom I like, and some of whom I don't? And since the Buddha and Moses their followers in all of the world's religious traditions have asked, not only what is a meaningful life but what is right living, an ethical life in the ways we live with our fellow creatures as well as our own souls.

Johns Hopkins president Ronald J. Daniels has provoked important discussion with his new book *What Universities Owe Democracy*. And part of what we owe democracy is the

kind of healing passion which the humanities and religious life programs can unleash. Unless we talk about meaning and purpose, we can't really talk about democracy. Indeed, I agree with chapter author Roosevelt Montas who wrote in his new book, *Rescuing Socrates: How the Great Books Changed My Life and Why they Matter for a New Generation* that "Indeed, the possibility of democracy hinges on the success or failure of liberal education."

Important as questions of meaning and purpose, spirituality, and democracy are, in the modern world of higher education these questions and concerns are not at the center of the action and those of us who do make them the center — humanities professors in different disciplines and college chaplains, along with other colleagues in the university — seldom have the opportunity to talk to each other and share our knowledge and understanding. Just before his death in 2010, Warren Nord who was the longtime director of the University of North Carolina Program in the Humanities and Human Values wrote *Does God Make a Difference: Taking Religion Seriously in Our Schools and Universities*.

In it he argued:

> We need to nurture in students a deeper understanding of, and commitment to, the moral dimensions of our lives. Schools can't continue to hone in on [just] professional and economic goals; the end result will be barbarism. Socrates was right: The unexamined life is nor worth living. An educational system that

> ignores the great existential questions — political, moral, spiritual, religious — is not worthy of respect, indeed, it shouldn't count as educational at all.[1]

So this small volume and the diverse chapter authors represented here, both humanists and campus faith leaders, who are all asking the "great existential questions," is designed to move us one small step further in the direction that Nord pointed us a decade ago.

A word of acknowledgement

All of the chapter authors for this volume spoke at a conference hosted by New York University in December 2021 and then took the time to turn their remarks into the chapters of this volume. This unique collection would not have been possible without their interest and commitment.

Four of us are listed as editors of this volume and it has been a pleasure working with Melissa Carter, Chelsea Garbell and Amy Wilson in recruiting those who wrote chapters for this book and shepherding that work through conversations, a conference, and now a published volume. It is also only fair to note that in the last stages of the preparation of this book, Amy Wilson took the lead, made sure the different parts of the manuscript came together and worked closely with our terrific publishers to see the book through to completion. The editors and publishers at

[1] Warren Nord, *Does God Make a Difference: Taking Religion Seriously in Our Schools and Universities* (London: Oxford University Press, 2010).

Ethics International Press — Robert Blair, Sarah Palmer, and Ben Williams — have been a pleasure to work with from the early development of this book manuscript to its final appearance. We are grateful for their interest in this effort.

Finally, a very special word of appreciation to Jonathan Van Antwerpen and his colleagues at the Henry Luce Foundation without whose support this volume would never have been conceived or written. Jonathan has been a strong supporter of the chaplaincy education program at New York University while at the same time consistently prodding us to expand our focus from specific programs to educating the whole university about religious life matters. The larger conversation began with a lecture series on college chaplaincy and then expanded to the conference that laid the foundation for this volume. Jonathan, we are all in your debt.

Part I

The Humanities as a Road to Meaning

Introduction: The Meaning at Stake in the Humanities

René V. Arcilla, New York University

What is a meaningful life? How do the humanities lead us to it? This pair of questions are at the center of the contributions of Roosevelt Montás, Melinda S. Zook, Joe Salvatore, and Angela Zito to the conference, "A Student's Search for Meaning: A Conversation between College Chaplains, Humanities Scholars, and Representatives of the Broader University World" from which this edited volume has arisen. Their conference presentations, which they developed into the present collection of papers, were initially delivered at a panel session entitled, "The Humanities as a Road to Meaning." As chair of that session, I am delighted to see how their thoughts have taken fuller, written form. It is a pleasure to introduce their papers here and to offer some thoughts on how they converse with each other concerning the two questions above.

Roosevelt Montás is a Senior Lecturer in American Studies and English at Columbia University and directs the university's Freedom and Citizenship Program. Author of *Rescuing Socrates: How the Great Books Changed My Life and Why They Matter for a New Generation*, his paper, "Meaning and Liberal Education in the Modern University," echoes some of the book's central themes. As he recounts in the larger text, first-hand experience taught him that "when students search for meaning, they are searching for a way to make sense of themselves." This entails

understanding how one's life is oriented to a "cohesive, integrated notion of the human good." Accordingly, when Montás' education led him to commit himself to the life of a teacher, he was devoting himself to the project of helping students develop their own self-understandings. He and his students' interactions for this purpose are supported by the practices and knowledge of the humanities, a particular and traditional realm of education. However, he remarks that this realm conflicts with the prevailing aim of university education. The humanities stimulate the search for meaning by offering "a kind of knowledge that is not useful for doing things but for knowing what things are worth doing." At the center of Montás' discussion, then, is a tension between a vision of humanities education that aims to cultivate meaningful self-understanding and one, more in line with the rest of higher education, that aims to promote the progressive acquisition of a specialized body of knowledge for the sake of instrumental mastery and professional expertise.

A related tension is at the center of "Bringing Meaning to the Lives of Students: Great Teachers, Great Texts and General Education," the paper by Melinda S. Zook who is Professor of History at Purdue University and the Director of its Cornerstone Integrated Liberal Arts Program. She testifies that "young people want their college education to transform them . . . [they] want to be moved, changed, have their eyes opened, be made anew." It is this longing on the part of students that determines the mission of the humanities. The latter, according to Zook, should be guided by the insight that "education is personal and nothing can replace 'the living inspiration of the

living teacher.' This should be our goal in general education courses — great teachers, teaching great texts, embodying the living inspiration." Unfortunately, she observes, this kind of humanities general education these days runs up against two dominant countercurrents. The first, registered by Montás, promotes over transformative inspiration the teaching of useful (to one's employers) skills. And the second countercurrent, more specific to the humanities, pushes the disenchanting critique of traditional texts, whose "greatness" is now viewed as based on the politically interested, distorting judgments of those in positions of power. Zook explains that in contrast, her program employs texts as inviting pretexts for discussing with students the full range of human experience. She affirms this kind of humanities education for personal inspiration and transformation in opposition to educations that are narrowly practical and spiritually disillusioning.

Joe Salvatore, Clinical Associate Professor of Educational Theatre at NYU's Steinhardt School of Culture, Education, and Human Development, and Director of the school's Verbatim Performance Lab, agrees with much of the spirit of Montás' and Zook's visions, but in "Theatre as Fuel for the Search for Meaning" he broaches an additional dimension of a humanities education. Like the other two, Salvatore is interested in the way this education can put at stake "personal discoveries and profound changes of perspective," in how it may galvanize individual transformation. Reflecting on his own road to this, however, leads him to foreground more distinctly the embodied dimension of meaning. However spiritual, meaning gains in presence when it inspires speech acts performed by a physical

human body interacting with other bodies in ritual, theatrical space. Indeed, it is striking how Salvatore's professed movement away from Catholicism ironically recalls Blaise Pascal's contrary assertion that if one performs the rituals and recites the prayers, one will end up believing. Although the meaning of such action may not be as rigorously definable as a word, its very surplus of iterativeness, alternately withdrawing and overwhelming, can open up questions that fuel our transformation. Accordingly, for Salvatore, the road to meaning in the humanities goes through incarnate, actively performed meaning-making, rather than through more disembodied, passive practices such as book reading.

Finally, "The Humanities, Religious Studies and Meaning in the Wild" by Angela Zito, Associate Professor of Anthropology and Religious Studies at New York University where she also co-directs the Center for Religion and Media, introduces an additional tension in how we understand the humanities. She pursues the question, "What is it about meaning, education and being human that presses us to push the individual to center stage — and yet to realize that the one-man show, as it were, is always inadequate?" For her, the individualist, typically masculine drama of the search for meaning tends to obscure its social dimension and thus favors certain conservative, patriarchal interests over others. Implicated in this political struggle is the very identity of the humanities as a special, even sacred, realm. Rather than encouraging students to find something in this enclave different in kind from what they negotiate in the overarching social world, Zito helps them appreciate how the realm is shaped by, and supports,

the same kind of practical interests that traverse all of society. Meaning is less about one's personal orientation to an idea of the good, as Montás and Zook argue, and more about one's social participation in any number of activities that produce "the pleasures of engaging with forms." Mapping the powers that enhance and stifle this pleasure spurs students to claim "the right to make meaning for ourselves with others," that is, the right to a meaningful life. For Zito, the humanities, as such a road into the practical and political world of meaning making, stands in tension with the humanities followed as a road out of that world.

To where, then, do the humanities truly bring us? Montás, Zook, Salvatore, and Zito, despite their shared interest in the theme, evidently disagree about this. It would appear that the humanities is far from a smooth and straightforward road; encountering each other on it, these scholars disclose jarring contradictions and a proliferation of forks and twists along its length. As they lead us into something more like a labyrinth of questions, we may start to doubt whether any clear destination is really forthcoming. Perhaps meaning is nothing but a mirage and its search, a waste of time?

That I have taken the time to ponder and write this essay expresses my belief otherwise. Indeed, reading these papers and the conversation they open up between them strengthens my sense that meaning is hardly the sort of thing that could ever be conclusive. Although it is responsive to our deep, mortal concerns, it is not on the side of death. Meaning draws us into life not by fixing things but by animating them with

suggestiveness. It reminds us that there is always more to wonder about — hence more to celebrate. In its name, I thank the authors of these papers for their wide-ranging and nuanced feast of thinking.

Bringing Meaning to the Lives of Students: Great Teachers, Great Texts and General Education

Melinda S. Zook, Purdue University

Any "search for meaning" begins with the individual, to seek oneself and one's place in the world. That search can be carried out without a college education, but it cannot be fully realized without the humanities, meaning simply it requires the contemplation of religions, art, history, literature, philosophy. In short, the culture of our humanity is what makes us human.[2]

Our goal as humanists is to educate free people: To inculcate in them curiosity and wonder; an appreciation of creativity and beauty; a respect for historical contexts and ideas; a capacity for compassion and critical self-examination. It is, in short, to live the examined life. Or as Roosevelt Montás writes, "turning students' eyes inward," so that they might explore their own humanity.[3]

Institutions of higher education have an obligation to lead the young who arrive at their doorsteps on their journey to self-

[2] In Willem B. Drees, *What are the Humanities For?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021) he defines the humanities as "academic disciplines in which humans seek understanding of human self-understandings and self-expressions, and of the ways in which people thereby construct and experience the world they live in." 12.

[3] Roosevelt Montás, *Rescuing Socrates: How the Great Books Changed My Life and Why They Matter for a New Generation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2021), 19.

realization, to grow them as responsible and centered adults and citizens. They are failing at this task. They bow to the demands of the market, administrators, and politicians, as well as anxious parents. Those of us in the Liberal Arts know the allure of our competition: the well-branded and well-funded STEM disciplines. The number of students in their degree programs have surged since the Recession of 2007; while our numbers continue to spiral down. In 2020, fewer than one in ten college graduates obtained a degree in the humanities.[4] In fact, it often feels like our own institutions are conspiring in the demise of the humanities by creating, nearly every year, new degree programs in data analytics, computer coding, and cybersecurity – all of which have high job placement and above-average starting salaries – while simultaneously diminishing humanities programs.[5] These are dismal times for those of us who believe in the life of the mind; and for the power and beauty of the word: the written word, the spoken word; that crystallization of ideas that comes through reading, thinking and communicating; the words, images, and art that connects us and maybe sometimes divides us, but is always shared and without which we are utterly alone.

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[4] Joshua Wright, "STEM Majors Are Accelerating in Every State: Just as Humanities Degrees Are Declining," EMSI (March 20, 2016), https://www.economicmodeling.com/2016/03/20/stem-programs-humanities-in-each-state/; Jill Barshay, "The number of college graduates in the humanities drops for the eighth consecutive year," *American Academy of Arts and Sciences*, November 22, 2021; https://www.amacad.org/news/college-graduates-humanities-drops-eighth-consecutive-year

[5] Jim Fong, "What the Numbers Tell Us: Re-Engineering the Liberal Arts Degree – A Baseline for the New Economy," *Unbound: Reinventing Higher Education* (2019), https://unbound.upcea.edu/research-and-policy/re-engineering-the-liberal-arts-degree-a-baseline-for-the-new-economy/.

And, yet despite the sense of loss and even disarray, especially over the last two plague years, I am convinced we have reason to hope. We have hope because of scholars like Roosevelt Montás and his celebration of the power of core texts and Andrew Delbanco in his lucid analysis of the state of higher education and its vital role in democratic citizenship.[6] We have hope because of core texts programs, from the more traditional Core Curriculum at Columbia, and Yale's Directed Studies, to Purdue's innovative Cornerstone program, as well as all the other core texts programs across the country. We have hope because of conversations like that between humanities faculty and college chaplains at New York University seek answers. But, above all, my hope resides in our young people. For if my experiences teaching what we at Purdue call "transformative texts," have proved anything to me, it is that our students are eminently open and searching, teachable and transformable and this is especially true at the outset of their college careers.

This brings me to general education. The humanities are for everyone; we, all of us, search for meaning. Montás makes this point with far more eloquence than I ever could. Whereas he is concerned with bringing core texts to marginalized communities, I want to stress the need to reach across our campuses and provide all our students, particularly those in STEM and management degree programs, a more robust, coherent, and meaningful general education experience. The Liberal Arts are not merely for those students in our dwindling

[6] Roosevelt Montás, *Rescuing Socrates: How the Great Books Changed My Life and Why They Matter for a New Generation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2021); Andrew Delbanco, College: *What it was, is, and should be* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012).

majors. They provide us with a doorway to the rest of the campus. General education requirements are the doorway through which we can teach all undergraduates and they, in turn, can learn about us, and about everything we believe in: the power of stories, ideas, words; the beauty of music, art, film and theatre. Those things that make us human.

Now, I know that sometimes we all complain about students: obsessed with their phones, easily distracted, focused on credentialism and vocational instruction. But, if so, we are in part to blame. Because given the opportunity, as we have found at Purdue, students are completely capable of putting technology aside, engaging with ideas, with texts, and each other, in an open, inclusive environment with a faculty member. In fact, they have been more than willing to put aside "childish things."

The truth is young people want their college education to transform them. They want something we humanists can provide in abundance: inspiration, beauty, transcendence. Although they may not be able to articulate it, our students want to be moved, changed, have their eyes opened, be made anew. That transformation is what college is for and that is far more important to their development as responsible adults than teaching them skills that may soon be outdated. If we can teach them to be flexible learners; to be able to identify dubious claims; to understand nuance and subtly, and to be able to communicate their ideas with precision, we will have fulfilled a great service to their futures as employees and citizens.

Our institutions already have the resources in place to do this: their Liberal Arts faculty, both humanists and social scientists. We, from the philosopher to the historian to the sociologist, remember what turned us on, what fired our imagination when we were undergraduates. We remember the professors who brought Plato or Nietzsche or Thoreau alive for us and taught us so much more than just the text. If you had never experienced an inspiring teacher, you would not be an educator now. Education is not simply words on page or a screen, nor gained simply from pixels, books, or bytes. Education is personal and nothing can replace "the living inspiration of the living teacher."[7] This should be our goal in general education courses – great teachers, teaching great texts, embodying the living inspiration.

I direct the Cornerstone program at Purdue and teach the foundational sequence, Transformative Texts. I have learned a lot about students over the years. We are now dealing with Generation Z. On the whole, I find that they yearn for direction, connection, and for meaning, although they seem puzzled at where to look. They have been scarred by two years of pandemic and online instruction, but far worse by social media. They need mentors; they need great teachers; they need living, breathing inspirations, and this is where we the faculty come in. The undergraduate capacity for learning is ripe when they first set foot on campus. They have an eagerness and an

[7] Julius Seelye quoted by Jonathan Zimmerman, *The Amateur Hour: A History of College Teaching in America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2020), 30. Seelye was the president of Amherst College, in 1887 he wrote, "Education is a wholly personal work. It is not gained by books, or by instruction alone, nor by anything in place of the living inspiration of the living teacher."

openness that is our window for opportunity. We can throw it wide open, or we can slam it shut.

Consider how easy it is to smother their enthusiasm; the eighteen or nineteen-year-old comes to college wide-eyed and ready to absorb different ideas and traditions. But even before they have a chance to enjoy the sublimity and beauty of Rumi or Shakespeare, even before they have a chance to grasp the ideas and wisdom of Plato or Locke or Gandhi; we point out their flawed thinking and blindness, according to twentieth-first century standards.[8] We reduce these texts and their author's humanity and limit their words to mere ideology. We breed in our students' cynicism, contempt, and distrust for every authority and tradition. And once we have done that, mission accomplished, we have killed their interest. They won't be taking any more of our classes. Off they go to code and build bots.

This is the future without the humanities: a world of technicians and technocrats who believe that only science, technology, and the market can solve our problems. And why, because when we had the opportunity, during their first year, we did not instill them with a relish, an appreciation, and a recognition of the complexity and poignancy of the human condition or a thirst to learn more about history or philosophy or world literature. We did not inspire them to take more

[8] I heard a graduate student do exactly this recently, giving a talk on Mary Astell, the brilliant seventeenth-century English feminist. Before the students had any idea how Astell had contributed to the history of women's liberation, the instructor demolished her by describing her as "privileged," code for biased, unreliable; in short, 'nothing to see here.' This would have been startling news to Astell herself; an outsider without family connection and a woman trying to compete in the male world of the publishing.

advanced Liberal Arts courses so that we could continue to challenge them with the wisdom of the past and the complexity of the present. If you want the young to reflect critically upon their own convictions and arguments, ideas, and identities, then you have to get them in the door, provide them with a foundation and an appreciation of the human experience. Don't expect them to critique John Locke or Adam Smith before they *understand* John Locke or Adam Smith.

The Cornerstone Integrated Liberal Arts program at Purdue is now in its fifth academic year. Its purpose is to provide our undergraduates, the vast majority of whom are in the STEM disciplines, with a robust Liberal Arts experience.[9] First-year students take a two-semester general education sequence, called Transformative Texts I and II. These are intensive courses: part core texts; part communication skills. We teach them Aristotle and Hobbes and Frederick Douglas and Langston Hughes. We teach them writing and presentation skills. We teach them teamwork and research basics. We use full-time faculty, scholars, and teachers, from every Liberal Arts department in the College. We provide our first-year students with a small classroom experience in a large public university setting; mentoring, directing, consoling, and assisting students who have problems or simply need an adult to talk to.

This program has been successful. It is making a difference on our campus culture and in the lives of our students. We taught

[9] See the Cornerstone Program homepage at https://www.cla.purdue.edu/academic/cornerstone/index.html. For a detailed discussion of the program including its origins, see Melinda S. Zook, "Giant Leaps for the Liberal Arts at Purdue, *Change: The Magazine of Higher Learning*, 51:6, (2019): 45-51.

4,200 students in our first-year sequence in 2020-21 and are on track to teach around 8000 this year, 2021-22. Our faculty range from the keenly innovative, newly minted PhD in comparative literature to the full professor in political science with extensive teaching experience and everything in between. We help teach each other in workshops. We work with other units across the university: from our Data Mine and Galleries to our Archives and Special Collections and Film and Video Studies.

In the Transformative Texts sequence, our texts are pretexts, leading us to discussions about life, love, loss, hope, despair, suffering, friendship, fairness, and forgiveness. The human condition. The full array of what we are as humans. And in addition to our small Socratic classroom settings, we take our students out of the classroom, to the theatre, art galleries, and films festivals, and concert halls and cultural centers. To know the arts, you must experience them. Transformative texts, along with good teaching, can change lives.

Young people have a great capacity for wonder and for love. They yearn for transformation; new vistas that can both open their eyes to the world and allow them to see themselves anew; to be shown something beyond mere technique. Our window of opportunity comes when they first step on campus. We can transform our general education requirements into something that inspires, enriches, and nourishes our students, rather than simply something they are trying to get beyond. At Purdue, we are throwing open the window as wide as it will go; and if a Research 1, STEM-oriented university can do this – so might we all. Together, let us make learning a joy that enlightens and inspires and provides meaning.

The Humanities, Religious Studies and Meaning in the Wild

Angela Zito, New York University

After being invited to address this topic, the first thing I noticed was that the title of this volume envisioned a single student — *The Student's* Search for Meaning. This really hit a cultural anthropologist between the eyes. We are a very sociable crowd: not only in our object — which is social life — but in our methods. We hang out and listen and talk and observe, data gathering as an elevated form of gossip, perhaps, though I think it is honoring the stories that people live by, their meanings. I cannot imagine a world where any aspect of meaning-making is done without others. The integument of language itself requires that we enter it via hearing the words of our foremothers and fathers — biological or otherwise. But another reason why the title caught my eye is because it seems to bespeak assumptions, and that is anthropological gold. We might all contemplate the paradox of how our work with students proceeds both one by one, and yet as a community. What it is about meaning, education and being human that presses us to push the individual to center stage — and yet to realize that the *one-man* show, as it were, is always inadequate?

Religious studies as Humanities

I came to Religious Studies in a roundabout fashion from studying imperial ritual in 18th century China, a subject of

eye-rolling cynicism in the 1970s — both in China and abroad. It was thought that such gaudy performances by emperors were simply distractions from the real business of ruling the country — tax collection and military conquest. Even though immense wealth was "wasted" on ritual, no one considered that Chinese people of the period might find their elaborate ritual life meaningful. It is this division of meaning from function that I cannot abide and that sent me to religious studies as a field. I early concluded that human beings are driven by the pleasures of engaging with forms — that the world around us is saturated in aesthetics that speak to each of us differently and all of us all the time. I became fascinated by the aesthetics of politics and the politics of aesthetics.

As a staunch pillar of the Humanities in the modern university (and more on that in a moment), the academic study of religion seemed to me a terrific place to study devotion to forms of human creation that are dedicated to the meaningful making of invisible things visible. Would analyzing and teaching about religion further my own sense that there is no politics without the pleasure of form, and that aesthetics — because they make us feel things — power a good deal of religious (and political) life, no matter whether mentioned or not?

Humanities as a protected preserve

Here comes the "but not so fast" moment. The difficulty I came upon is that the Humanities have themselves been cast a kind of protected preserve inside the institution. Instead of being seen as a space of the intersection of all aspects of

human social life, I found an enclave often isolated in the university. And Religious Studies was further isolated in the Humanities in a way hauntingly reminiscent of American religious life itself. You know what I mean — the modern idea that religion should ideally occur only during the leisure time of weekends, separate from the "real life" of economy and work. Where it is, of course, joined by "art," something that is also done "for its own sake" and supposedly kept separate from political concerns. Doubly cocooned by a perception of its "uselessness" in a world of utilitarian economy — leisure-time art and religion within the fancy Humanities.

Yet a glance at the sorts of projects taken up by Humanities scholars of history or literature blows that myth away. It is in Humanities departments that sweeping topics systematically neglected for decades upon decades of higher education professionalization are seriously investigated: for example, archives hidden because of racist assumptions. The Princeton Project on the Ethiopian Miracles of the Virgin Mary led by Professor Wendy Laura Belcher of African literature in the departments of Comparative Literature and African American Studies, digitized and created a database of the over seven hundred stories, dating from 1300-1900, stories precious to the everyday lives of Ethiopian and Eritrean people today.[10] The massive work underway to reread the history of the circum-Atlantic world in light of the slave trade from the 17th-19th centuries has knit the histories of Africa, Europe and the New

[10] Princeton University, "The Princeton Ethiopian, Eritrean, and Egyptian Miracles of Mary Digital Humanities Project (PEMM)," 2018. Accessed January 22, 2022. https://pemm.princeton.edu/.

World together in new ways. The public reception and trolling of The 1619 Project, headed by Professor Nikole Hannah-Jones, and the Pulitzer prize-winning professor of journalism's own professional hardships thereafter — she was denied tenure at UNC — give ample evidence that these profound projects of the restoration of social meaning are often not easy to mount.[11] Continuing the comparison between humanities in the university and religion in American life, both are expected to be devoid of normative content with political weight — unless those valuations pose no threat to the status quo. "Real" scholarship and "real" religion has nothing to say about political life.[12]

At NYU — to take my own institution as an example of wider trends — the departments most likely to undertake these projects of "meaning restoration" in defense of important differences are housed in the Humanities Division. There we find the History Department, departments of literature (Comparative Literature, English, the European languages) and of course, the non-European "area studies" departments of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies, Hebrew and Judaic Studies, and East Asian Studies. Many scholars in those same departments undertake the inverse of seeking to make visible what has heretofore been hidden. The undertake the open

[11] See Nikole Hannah-Jones, "The 1619 Project." The New York Times Magazine, 2019. Accessed January 22, 2022. https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/08/14/magazine/1619-america-slavery.html; For an overview of Hannah-Jones' hiring and tenure at UNC, see Katie Robertson, "Hannah Nikole-Jones Denied Tenure at University of North Carolina," The New York Times, May 19, 2021. Accessed January 22, 2022. https://www.nytimes.com/2021/05/19/business/media/nikole-hannah-jones-unc.html.

[12] I'd like to thank my graduate student in Religious Studies at NYU for this observation.

criticism and rethinking of what has always been in front of our eyes as canonical. In that spirit, NYU has founded a Public Humanities curriculum for graduate students whose courses, in fact, are founded in both theorizing and practicing the humanities from a perspective that seeks to rethink some very fundamental premises about their sequestered uselessness.

Thus the sequestering into Humanities of these — to some people — troubling programs serves again the doubled function it did for Religious Studies. The study of religion is hidden away in an enclave unfairly thought of as "extra" and unnecessary, where its supposed association with the non-modern and the non-scientific can be overlooked. And in imitation of the wider society, the most pressing issues concerning our deepest moral values, those upon which our identities as humans exist –race, religion, sexuality and gender, ethnic difference — are herded into a no-fly zone of putative uselessness where they can be safely ignored as the world goes on about its business of business.[13]

With meaning-making increasingly herded out of sight, people are convinced that whole swathes of their lives simply must be lived in a condition bereft of a deeper sense of coherence and understanding of purpose — since the purpose of most of the

[13] I must add a caveat — as someone jointly appointed in Anthropology in the Division of Social Science, I would certainly include that department among the ones I discuss here, along with Sociology. And surely there are many individual scholars scattered among other departments here and at other universities for whom these issues loom large. However, they are often outliers in their disciplines, and thus do not work in units whose funding and very survival is constantly questioned. Surely it is not coincidental that that honor belongs to the Humanities, where NYU, to its enormous credit, finally upgraded a 50-year-old degree-granting program to the status of full department in 2019.