

## **Why the Humanities Matter to Me!**

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I am a scholar of religious studies. I could begin here answering why the Humanities matter. To critically examine and interrogate systems of activities and beliefs directed toward that which is perceived to be of sacred value and or transforming power is essential to understanding the ways human beings and social institutions function in this world.<sup>i</sup> Religious studies helps to identify and explain the sacred stories and ultimate values that animate human activity beyond reductionist or determinist economic or political theories. Put another way, any attempt to understand or interpret the multiple webs of meaning within which people live, the political choices humans make, their views toward the economic, educational or familial spheres must consider the sacred myths and rituals of that given society.

Moreover, and more to the point of why we are here today, to grapple with the subject of religion is to wrestle with what it means to be human. The term religion can be traced back to the Latin *religare*, meaning to bind together or reconnect. Indeed one thing that those of us assembled here share with the earliest *homo sapiens* are the creation and circulation of cosmic stories to explain the origins, justify the current ordering and to cast a normative vision of and for the world we live in. For between the violent, peace of birth and when the bell tolls immediately following our final breath, all of us are dealing with anxiety, insecurity, uncertainty and a sense of dread. This is why I would argue that all of us need something to believe in to make sense out of life—a system of commitments and activities that keep us bound to ourselves and bound in relationship with other human beings. An ideal or vision of reality that is greater than the doldrums of life, yet, at the

same time, maybe even allows us to live within the ambiguities and mysteries.

Nevertheless, still something sacred that ushers our imaginations out of the dry valley of mendacity into refreshing springs of an alternative reality. This is what the study of religion can offer from my perspective. But having said this, the value of the study of religion is not the primary response as to why I believe the humanities matter.

Beyond being a scholar of religious studies broadly defined, my work focuses on religion, media and culture in general, and televangelism in particular. Televangelism, what some have identified as a quintessentially American religious phenomenon if there ever was one. Televangelists are one-part urban revivalists, one-part entrepreneurs, one-part captains of industry, and one-part entertainers and/or cultural celebrities. Yet their message of optimism, prosperity and indulgence grounded in a theological framework of hellfire, Puritanism, and self-loathing illumines the complicated and contradictory nature of American identity—an ascetic Protestant work-ethic fused with a hyper-capitalist, mass consumerist worldview. So I could talk about today how the Humanities in general, and the development of American studies in particular, provides the space for me to engage this particular form of religious culture.

In the postwar era, American studies pushed the Humanities to study American culture on its own terms as both a whole and particular ways of life. We could begin to talk about the Americanness of American religion, the Americanness of American music or the distinct contributions of non-epistemologically centered philosophies without genuflecting before the alters of European intellectual traditions.<sup>ii</sup> Culture, or to be cultured, was no longer defined simply as the perceived best that a society has to offer in the Arnoldian sense, and thus restricting and rendering the Humanities as a crude and

provincial imitation of European ideals. Rather, American studies helped to expand our intellectual vision beyond the normative ought to a descriptive is. By so doing, matters of national identity were able to be suggested and contested. Just as the stories we tell ourselves and cultural practices we engage in can now be placed under the intellectual microscopes of scrutiny. This is how and why I was able to write a doctoral dissertation on the many ways Christian televangelists reflect and inform popular and political culture as opposed to producing what would have been for me a provincial, masturbatory project about John Calvin in Geneva or the relationship between neo-Orthodox theology and German Idealism. Not that I don't appreciate the value and virtue of anyone who does. But I also think it is important to understand how it is that two evangelical preachers that many "intellectuals" would otherwise dismiss as backwater hicks, T.D. Jakes and Rick Warren, end up being the morning preacher and offering the invocation at President Obama's inauguration. These are the sorts of questions that the Humanities allows us as to investigate in a scholarly way so that such work is not left to the producers of Larry King Live or writers at the Huffington Post.

But beyond the way the changing contours of the Humanities has helped to decenter Europe, it has also helped to disrupt the legacy and logic of white-Anglo Saxon-male Protestant supremacy in the Academy. Its within the institutions and discourses of the humanities that a diversity of ethnic, racial, religious and sexual voices have been illumined and thus better appreciated in terms of the many ways we are human. Zora Neale Hurston and Alice Walker's contributions in terms of how black women creatively and constructively negotiate and navigate the triple jeopardy of racism, sexism and classism in America. Flannery O'Connor's moral tales concerning religion, race and

redemption in the Southern region. Orlando Espin's theological insights concerning the multiple constitutive sources of Latino Catholic identities. And James Baldwin's interrogation of such categories as whiteness, maleness and American innocence all come to mind. Thus, to challenge the place of the Humanities is in essence to dismiss and possibly dismantle the one trusted, though still terribly imperfect, place where persons seriously consider the ways racial, gender, ethnic, and sexual differences and histories contribute to the fecundity of intellectual life both at home and abroad. In short, if it wasn't for the Humanities, not only would we not be discussing Ralph Ellison's contemporary classic protagonist, yours truly would literally be an invisible man in higher education.

But as important as this point about racial, ethnic and gender diversity is, however, it is still not the primary reason that for me the Humanities matter. Moral sensibility for me trumps racial, ethnic and gender identity. And the humanities, as I understand it, and largely due to the very attributes I have explained thus far, is a center for intellectual and moral development. As we wrestle with the perennial questions concerning our existence like, "Why am I here?" "What is my purpose in life?" "And how do I make sense of the seemingly nonsensical as I move from my mother's womb to the time when I am laid down in a tomb?" It is the Humanities that produces aesthetic insight, textual analysis, historical and geographic context, as well as philosophical and religious understanding, which enable us to rise to the challenges of life.

To be sure, amidst such vulnerable economic times and vacillating government responses, it is little wonder that persons are approaching higher education from the most pragmatic postures possible. Escalating tuition over against decreasing wages seemingly

necessitates such. But structuring our curriculum in response to “how to make a living” cannot be the telos of higher education. Rather asking, “how can we make life worth living?” should always be our ultimate end and goal. In the words of W.E.B. DuBois, “any program that becomes a gospel of Work and Money to the extent that it overshadows the higher aims of life” is an educational program of adjustment and submission.<sup>iii</sup> We are in effect encouraging adjustment to injustice and submission to the status quo. And then we wonder why so many of us can feel uncomfortable with the machinations of Wall Street, the hegemony of a two-party political system or the preponderance of economic and educational inequality, yet so few possess the moral imagination or courage to do anything about it.

So it is particularly during trying times of economic insecurity, cultural contestation and social change, that the Humanities should not be viewed as an impractical luxury or a an unnecessary indulgence. To the contrary, the ways in which we are, as Martin Luther King, Jr. put it, “inextricably linked by a common fabric of humanity and garment of destiny” are more important, relevant and necessary than ever.<sup>iv</sup> And it is in the Humanities where persons are challenged to have the courage and the conviction to better understand the past, rightly interpret the present, in order to draft a vision of a more humane future.

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<sup>i</sup> James Livingston, *Anatomy of the Sacred*, 6<sup>th</sup> edition, (Upper Saddle River: Pearson Hall, 2009), 8.

<sup>ii</sup> See Leila Zenderland, “Constructing American Studies,” pg 281.

<sup>iii</sup> W.E.B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk*

<sup>iv</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr. “A Letter from a Birmingham Jail”