

Religious Studies and the Quest for Meaning during the CoVid19 Pandemic

We might wonder what there is to celebrate about the field of religious studies right now. It's a hard time. People are out of work, loved ones are sick, and we're physically separated from our families and communities. In higher education, many are worried about the impact that this shutdown will have on the humanities, those academic disciplines such as history, philosophy, and even religious studies that some believe are not as important as pre-professional programs such as nursing. It's not immediately clear, after all, how the humanities will help us find a job. We joke about the English major who works at Starbucks after graduation. After finishing my own master's degree in theology I spent a year as a landscaper in work that was far from my chosen field.

And yet, I argue, all the time and effort that you've invested in religious studies will reward you. You've spent the last few years learning how to think critically, to communicate your ideas through writing and dialogue, to apply theory and see how it plays out in the real world. Our motto at St. Joseph's is "Esse non videre"—To be, not to seem. As students of religious studies, you're the real thing. You've learned that people are complicated, their stories unpredictable, their contexts diverse. You know the importance of justice—of living out your values and serving others. The ability to grow and learn—to observe, discern what is right, and take action—will be an invaluable skill for all your relationships, work or otherwise.

Statistical studies bear this out. In a survey by the Association of American Colleges & Universities, 96 percent of employers indicated that it was important for their employees to be "comfortable working with colleagues, customers, and/or clients from diverse cultural backgrounds." In the same survey, 93 percent of employers agreed that "a [job] candidate's demonstrated capacity to think critically, communicate clearly, and solve complex problems is more important than their undergraduate major." (https://www.aacu.org/aacu_news/aacunews13/august13/facts_figures) Even if the path ahead seems unclear, these are the skills that you've acquired. You have the power to forge your own way forward, and no one can take that away.

Beyond these practical considerations, however, I also want to reflect on what the study of religion might tell us about ourselves. The Coronavirus presents an unprecedented challenge to our society, yet it also reveals our deepest questions and longings. Who are we? Why do we exist? Does our suffering mean anything? Is there a God, and, if so, what is that God like? Even though our economy has slowed and our world seems postponed, these fundamental human questions are more pertinent than ever.

One of my favorite theologians is Dr. Elizabeth Johnson, CSJ. She is a Sister of St. Joseph, world-renowned feminist theologian, and—lucky for us—also a member of the Board of

Trustees here at St. Joe's. In her work, *Quest for the Living God* (New York: Bloomsbury, 1997), Dr. Johnson offers three reasons for why the quest for God—that is, the quest for truth and our own fulfillment, is still relevant today.

First, she says, the answer to all human questions and desires is “incomprehensible, unfathomable, limitless, ineffable, and beyond description.” (12) Whether we call this reality God, Allah, Brahma, Dao, or something else altogether, the transcendent is always beyond our limited human capacity to describe or control it. In Johnson's words, “the human mind can never capture the whole of the living God in a net of concepts images, or definitions.” (13) The quest must go on.

Second, because this God is beyond our understanding, our desire for the knowledge and experience of God will always leave us striving for more. Although we may taste the divine in short, sporadic experiences such as the hug of a friend, the smile of a baby, or the falling leaves on a sunny autumn day, we spend most of our lives yearning for a deeper encounter. As Johnson writes, we “keep on journeying through beauty and joy, through duty and commitment, through agonizing silence and pain, toward greater meaning and deeper union with the ineffable God.” (13)

Third and finally, the quest for God continues because we live in a dynamic and ever-changing world. Human history, which is bound up with the world around us, presents new opportunities and challenges to reflect on God's work. Where is God moving at this moment? How can I discover the transcendent in my own life, and what does the divine say to those around me? Ancient religious traditions strive to answer these questions anew in every time and place. Our own location in history is also a mediation of God's presence through us. Our lives become a canvas upon which the eternal paints beauty, love, and truth. We do well to wonder at it.

As we conclude this strange, difficult academic year, I encourage you to continue your own quest for truth and goodness. There is so much more to be discovered; there is so much more to be understood. Our hurting world desperately needs thoughtful and action-oriented people to communicate meaning and hope. You can be the one who makes a difference.