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Teaching Religion and Theology in a (Racialized) Split Academic Market

Tat-Siong Benny Liew, *College of the Holy Cross*

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Recent studies suggest that African American students, despite the opportunity to attend college, tend not to major in disciplines that are linked to a high income generating future, such as a STEM field; instead, they choose to major in humanities, human sciences, and fields that are connected to social services. These studies raise the important question about whether, given the accessibility to higher education, there is still a split in the labor market on the basis of race.

While discussions of a split labor market by sociologists tend to refer to the division of what has traditionally been known as “white collar” (literally being more for whites) and “blue collar” jobs (being done disproportionately by people of color), these studies provocatively imply that a similar racial divide may actually exist within the “white collar sector.”

Reports of and responses to these studies have been “interesting” to say the least, though I must admit that the studies themselves tend to be more balanced and even-handed. Much of the media and much of the follow-up discussions seem to assume that African Americans—if they only had the contacts, the models, the necessary preparation, the required financial support, or the smarts—would or should have chosen a STEM major. This is so not only because these majors tend to mean greater future incomes but also because they are supposed to be academically more demanding and difficult.



What should faculty members who teach religion and theology, especially those who are themselves part of the minoritized populations, do with this information? Should “we” make an all-out effort to steer African American students to major in STEM?

I certainly do not dismiss the need to monitor whether or not there are racialized divisions within the “white collar” labor market. As a teacher of undergraduates, I also cannot deny, dismiss, or downplay the importance and implications (including financial ones) of their choice of major. This may be particularly true, given the fact that I was raised by Chinese parents who emphasized incessantly the need to study and be “practical.”

At the same time, I find myself questioning many of the assumptions and articulations I read. Who and how may someone judge the comparative “difficulties” involved in, say, the study of chemistry and religion/theology? I have had pre-med majors who found my introductory New Testament class “difficult,” just as I have taught religious studies majors who cannot fathom taking another class in mathematics. Is it not thinkable that entry into medical school is more “difficult” than entry into seminary because more people are interested in pursuing a medical career (partly for the potential monetary reward?) and that this phenomenon actually has nothing to do with the comparative “difficulty” of the two disciplines, assuming that a comparison can even be made for disciplines that require different intelligences and skill sets? Is it not also thinkable that some African Americans who choose to major in fields that are generally linked to social services do so because their own experience of marginalization has sensitized them more than the majority population to the reality of human and social needs?

I also wonder, given my earlier reference to the split labor market, if the academy or higher education is now no longer just divided into, for the sake of convenient reference, the (natural) sciences and the arts, but also, to use the terms for the split labor market, “primary” and “secondary” disciplines. We all know where religious and theological studies fall within this division, though I must point out that minoritized scholars generally remain a minority in the (racialized) *academic market*, regardless of sector and discipline.

I may be wrong about this, but I think professors of religion and theology have to do something basic or fundamental, if we are to better nuance these recent talks and thoughts about majors and money. What I think we need to change is the basic understanding and primary rhetoric that my own parents used to tell me. According to them, education is the way to gain socio-economic mobility; that is why having an education is imperative. My parents are, of course, far from being alone in this, since this kind of assumption and discourse have become ubiquitous and across all kinds of geographical, political, and racial divides; I have even heard colleagues “advertising” openly how religious and theological studies are viable options because “our” discipline can give you what employers really desire: skills to think critically and solve problems, abilities to communicate and work with people, etc., etc. If education is but a means to decent-paying jobs and hence ultimately a monetary end, then what I am reading and hearing regarding these recent studies is really nothing but the logical conclusion to this kind of rhetoric and understanding. I’m left wondering how we champion choice and opportunity for all students while at the same time encouraging and enabling them to challenge the priorities and pressures imposed on them by the global—capital—marketplace.

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