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# The dissolution of the history of religions: Contemporary challenges of a humanities discipline in Sweden

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## Abstract

The discipline of History of religions has changed in Sweden over the latest decades. Its traditional connection to text and language has weakened and its emphasis shifted towards social and contemporary aspects of religion. In this article the societal trends and the reforms in Swedish university politics that lie behind this change are pinpointed and discussed. It is argued that the transformation has been twofold. On the one hand the discipline has grown considerably and expanded into empirical fields, methods, and theories that were alien to it only twenty-five years ago. On the other it has been forced to adjust to a political climate focused on direct social relevance, measurability, and quantifiable efficiency. The article presents the transformation as consisting in four parallel processes labelled the efficiency turn, the altered knowledge contract, the replacement by *religionsvetenskap*, and the loss of prestige, respectively.

Keywords: *History of Religion, Religionsvetenskap, Knowledge contract, New Public management*

As a discipline the history of religions has traditionally been strongly rooted in the humanities. Historians of religion in the Uppsala tradition in which I was trained used to think of themselves as scholars of text and language. The historian of religion was expected and required to learn the language of the sources with which he or she worked, and the most obvious scholarly partners of the discipline were found among specialists in the languages and histories of the regions studied. When I was a PhD candidate in the 1990s, our seminars were frequented by Indologists, Iranists, Egyptologists, and Greek and Latin scholars, depending on the topics discussed. I cannot, however, recall a seminar ever being visited by a sociologist or an anthropologist, or any other social scientist for that matter.

It is clear that this has changed. Today the connection with text and language is much weaker within our discipline. In a forthcoming study on Swedish doctoral dissertations in the history of religions during the last two

decades Lena Roos shows that the scholarly emphasis has clearly shifted towards the social and contemporary aspects of religion (Roos, forthcoming). I believe it is difficult to identify a single reason for this. As always such developments are the result of a number of different processes. However, in what follows I shall try to pinpoint a number of policy changes and societal trends that, taken together, may help elucidate what has happened. The purpose of this article is therefore to provide a description and analysis of the societal and political changes that have led to the transformation of the history of religions discipline in Sweden. Needless to say, the transformation that has taken place in Sweden is not isolated to this country. The situation of the humanities is being discussed in many countries, and many of the trends that I will pinpoint here have their parallels in many of these (Holm, Scott & Jarrick 2015) Focussing on the Swedish case I shall here attempt to explain why these changes have occurred. I have divided my analysis into four sections: the efficiency turn; the altered knowledge contract; the replacement of the history of religions by *religionsvetenskap*; and the loss of prestige.

### **The efficiency turn**

The development of the history of religions does not take place in a societal vacuum. On the contrary, the development within our discipline reflects changes that are taking place in society at large, both in Sweden and internationally. One change in this respect certainly lies in the general turn towards quantifiable efficiency and measurability in society as a whole. In academic life these higher demands for transparency and quantifiable productivity have resulted in a situation where universities can no longer uphold or encourage long-term educational programmes in fields of unclear economic value. The result is that small humanities disciplines suffer a languishing existence and find themselves branded as dysfunctional and ineffective. In the Swedish system this trend – sometimes referred to as New Public Management – has been implemented through a number of administrative reforms of the university system. Three such reforms, all of which were introduced in the 1990s, have had an especially big impact: the HÅS/HÅP reform; the Bologna Process; and the Tham reform.

HÅS and HÅP are abbreviations for ‘full-year student’ (*helårsstudent*) and ‘full-year performance’ (*helårsprestation*) respectively. In the early 1990s, when Per Unckel was Minister of Education, the right wing government introduced a performance-based funding system for education. In this new system universities became eligible for government funding not only on

the basis of how many students had registered on their courses (HÅS), but also whether or not these students passed them (HÅP). Not only was the potential for universities to succumb to the temptation to lower the standards expected of students to access more funding inherent in this system; there was also a built-in economic and competitive logic that, arguably, brought about a situation where the benefit and usefulness of academic courses started being measured in terms of popularity and profitability.

Universities in Sweden are free to dispose of government funding as they see fit, but the system's default setting is that courses that attract a certain number of successful students are allowed to continue, while courses that attract fewer students have to close. As a result the supply of academic competence loses vision and becomes vulnerable to the whimsies of popular culture, instead of being based – as would be preferable – on broad and thoughtful consideration of the kind of competences our society needs.

Needless to say, the new system has an especially forceful impact on disciplines with few students. It also hits the humanities and social sciences particularly hard, because the allowance price tag for students in these fields is significantly lower than it is for those in the natural sciences, for instance. However, the freedom to reallocate funds between different faculties gives the universities a way to level out this inequality. At most universities some of the funds received to cover the costs for courses in other faculties are reallocated to cover the costs of underfinanced humanities courses. The problem with this system, however, is that it creates a situation where the humanities, given the unequal subsidies, are dependent on other, better funded, fields. This increases the impression that humanities departments – although they only receive some five per cent of the tax allocated to education and research – are dysfunctional environments that are unable to carry their own costs.

The Bologna Process is a political programme that aims to strengthen European higher education by standardising the university systems of the forty-seven countries involved. According to the Bologna Declaration of 1999 one of the three main goals of its reform programme for European higher education is to promote *employability*. This is defined as: 'the ability to gain initial meaningful employment, or to become self-employed, to maintain employment, and to be able to move around within the labour market' (Ellström 2010, 17-8). It is difficult to argue against the usefulness of this ambition where the majority of educational programmes is concerned. The universal application of the employability ideal to all courses and programmes, however, reflects a limited understanding of the purpose of knowledge. Courses about, say, medieval Russian literature, or ancient

Greek drama, or, for that matter, specific subdivisions of botany, do not ultimately serve the purpose of creating a more efficient or flexible workforce, but cater to our human desire for knowledge and understanding of ourselves and our world. Many disciplines within the humanities primarily serve to satisfy this need. A system that forces them to articulate their usefulness in terms of employability therefore falls short of highlighting the potential of these disciplines. 'Not since the days of Karl Marx,' remarks the historian of ideas Sverker Sörlin about this development, 'have science and education been defined so one dimensionally as a productive force as they have been in recent decades' research and education politics.' (Ekström & Sörlin 2012, my translation)

The much debated Tham reform of 1997/1998 is a third important example of the efficiency drive of Swedish university administration. Carl Tham was a Social Democratic Minister of Education who changed the law concerning Swedish PhD education, making it impossible to be a PhD student for more than four fully funded years. With this reform all doctoral candidates became the employees, rather than merely the students of their universities. For a discipline like the history of religions, where many PhD students hitherto had been part-time students earning their living through other employment, the Tham reform entailed a major change, because the number of affiliated scholars that the different research environments could involve was dramatically decreased. The reform also meant that it became practically impossible to pursue a career as a traditional language-oriented historian of religion at a Swedish university if you did not already have the language qualifications needed. Before the Tham reform people used to spend decades writing their PhD theses. With the new system the limit of four years was fixed, and PhD candidates had to squeeze in up to two years of reading courses that only exceptionally included language.

I am not saying that the HÅS/HÅP system, the Bologna Process, and the Tham reform have been entirely negative for our discipline. They have also had many benefits. Nevertheless, they are concrete expressions of the general political and societal efficiency drive in our university system and they have all, in differing ways, hindered the history of religions in continuing as it always had.

The reforms and the general quest for measurable efficiency in society have forced historians of religion to find other ways of pursuing their research. The discipline has had to be more socially relevant, more popular among students, and it has had to be learnt more quickly. The obvious solution has been to shift the focus from the inaccessible ancient scriptures,

requiring as they do a facility in foreign languages, to texts and data with no language barrier. Inevitably the focus has now shifted to contemporary languages and more accessible material.

It is worth mentioning that this change of focus also coincided – or perhaps brought with it – a new kind of theory with its own new focus to our discipline. It should perhaps be acknowledged that when the study material became more accessible, the scholarly analysis of it needed to be more advanced. Previously it was considered a scholarly achievement in its own right to make hitherto inaccessible material available. To find and translate an unknown manuscript from a foreign language could in itself be a large element of a PhD project. This is to a much lesser extent the case today. Instead, the last two decades have brought about a theorisation of our discipline, and much of the theory that has been introduced has come from the social sciences. It may even be possible to speak of a sociologisation of our discipline over the last two decades. I remember a lecture by the late Professor Jan Bergman in Uppsala in the autumn of 1994: ‘In this discipline,’ the professor told us jokingly, ‘it used to be said that theory is for those who know nothing for real,’ and he added: ‘But that is not how we view it today.’ Bergman was himself theoretically well-read and broad in his approach, and I believe he welcomed the change of attitude about which he was informing us. Nevertheless, his statement serves as an illustration that something was about to change in the mid-1990s.

This, then, is one way of telling the story of the last two decades of our discipline. It is, however, not the only way. The administrative changes alone cannot explain this development. I shall therefore now focus on another aspect of the societal development during the same period.

### **An altered knowledge contract**

Swedish sociologist Mats Benner has argued that in recent decades we have witnessed a thorough renegotiation of the knowledge contract between the state and universities, both in Sweden and in many other European countries (Benner 2001). Although the Swedish picture is a little ambiguous, the development can be described as a crisis for the traditional Humboldtian university ideal. At the core of that ideal lies the eighteenth century German philosopher Johann Gottfried Herder’s notion of *Bildung* and the idea that higher education serves the purpose, not only of educating people as competent civil servants, but of forming them in a holistic way as fully fledged, learned, intellectual, and culturally versatile citizens. It is this idea that,

since the nineteenth century, has constituted the motivation for supporting costly state-funded education in disciplines such as literature, philosophy, and the history of religions, and it is this ideal that has defined the task and meaning of the universities as institutions for the intellectual, cultural, and spiritual formation of the people. In the 1960s this ideal gained new strength in Europe as progressive political movements – as part of an overall ambition to deconstruct and renew society – expanded the humanities at many European universities.

The last two decades bear witness to a change in attitude and a return to a pre-Humboldtian – or at least a pre-1960s – view of higher education. *Bildung* is no longer a buzzword in Swedish university politics or administration (except, of course, among those who oppose the general development). Instead, as the administrative reforms previously mentioned illustrate, the existence of the university seems to be thought of as stemming from its immediate and direct usefulness to society and, of course, predominantly on the basis of its ability to help create the right conditions for economic growth.

All in all this development has placed the classical philological history of religions in a precarious situation. It is hard to imagine a discipline whose *raison d'être* is more firmly based on an appreciation of *Bildung* rather than on economic efficiency and direct societal relevance. It is therefore unsurprising that this particular type of scholarship has had to swim against the current in recent decades. Scholars are no longer asked to produce knowledge for its own sake, but to provide information and analyses that are immediately useful.

It is important to stress that the disappearance of the *Bildung* ideal has less to do with a loss of appreciation than with a loss of understanding of it. Open disregard for the humanities is rare in Sweden. The debate has seen some expressions of open hostility towards the value of knowledge about history, philosophy, and literature – perhaps the most flagrant of which was a report from the Confederation of Swedish Enterprise (*Svenskt näringsliv*) entitled 'The Art of Messing up a Life' (*Konsten att strula till ett liv*), in which it was suggested that career-inefficient humanities courses should not offer students grants at the same level as other, more societally beneficial, courses. This report was, however, an exception and, as a 2014 Norwegian report about this issue has indicated, open hostility is rare (Rem & Jordheim 2014). On the contrary, most institutions and voices in the public debate are positive in their view of the humanities. No one can challenge the importance of knowledge in history, language, and culture. Indeed, competence in these fields is highly regarded by most. The problem for the humanities, it seems,

lies not in lack of appreciation but in system changes that in indirect ways have marginalised the field. Perhaps these changes are the product of an inability to articulate how the traditional knowledge of the humanities can be accepted as meaningful by our result-oriented climate of debate. As the Norwegian report pointed out, many are eager to voice their endorsement of the humanities, but few are able to articulate exactly how they are useful (Rem & Jordheim 2014).

This lack of concrete arguments is connected with the marginalisation of the humanities in today's Sweden. I have already mentioned that humanities scholars do not have the position in the media that they once had: they are rarely called in as experts; and fewer and fewer editorial writers in Swedish newspapers have a humanities background. Humanities elements are also poorly represented in non-humanities education. Education programmes in medicine, economy, and law contain few or no humanities elements at most Swedish universities, and if there are courses – in moral philosophy for example – they are often voluntary. Similarly, a qualification in the humanities is not valued when young people are looking for employment, and reports show that humanities faculties enjoy the lowest trust among the Swedish public (VA-rapport 2015, 9). There are also few political research visions for the humanities. The eighty billion euro research programme *Horizon 2020*, launched by the European Commission in 2014, has been severely criticised for the way it treats the humanities, and in the latest bills concerning Swedish research the humanities have barely been mentioned.

Where the history of religion is concerned, scholars and PhD students have been forced by these trends to try to identify the societal issues where knowledge about religion can be helpful and to steer their research in that direction. This is certainly a rather different criterion than, I imagine, Geo Widengren had in mind when he chose *Ancient Accadian Psalms of Lamentation* as the subject of his doctoral dissertation. Nevertheless, this has been a strong development in our discipline, and I think it is safe to argue that it has helped to instigate an increased focus on contemporary and politically topical matters. Of course, the development in world politics has also been significant in this development. In the last two decades religion has been restored to the societal agenda in a way many have found surprising. The challenges presented by a more religious multiculturalism in Sweden and the growth in the apparent presence of religio-political groups and conflicts in world politics has made religion more topical than ever. Scholars of religion have thus found that their services are called for in a different way, and that they have been asked to shift the focus of their knowledge to topical issues.

### Replaced by religionsvetenskap

Another development that has unquestionably contributed to the transformation of the history of religions in Sweden is the growth and, to a certain extent, the replacement of the history of religions by the *study* of religions, *religionsvetenskap*. To a large extent this growth has been a result of the general expansion of the Swedish university sector, which has led to the establishment of a number of new Swedish universities and colleges over the last two decades. As religious education is a school subject in Sweden, and teacher education has been an important part of the curriculum of many new universities, these new universities have had to introduce religious studies. It is striking that these new environments at all new universities have been labelled, not as departments of the history of religion or theology, but as departments of *religionsvetenskap*.

Now, *religionsvetenskap* is a contested term in Swedish academic life. Some, including myself, see it as the Swedish equivalent of the German *Religionswissenschaft*, that is, as a multidisciplinary and non-confessional discipline dedicated to the academic study of different religions and religion as a phenomenon. Those who hold this position have been keen on maintaining a border between *religionsvetenskap* and *theology*, where the latter is seen as having a constructive, prescriptive, and possibly confessional component that the former lacks. The distinction between *religionsvetenskap* and *theology* is reflected in the name of some of the largest academic formations where these disciplines are present, for instance, the *Centrum för teologi och religionsvetenskap* (CTR) at Lund University, or the Department for *religionsvetenskap och teologi* at Gothenburg University. In other places, most notably at Uppsala University, however, this distinction has not been made as clearly.

Among historians of religion the ambiguity that surrounds the term *religionsvetenskap* has given rise to mixed feelings. On the one hand many, including myself, now find themselves in *religionsvetenskap* positions rather than positions linked with the history of religions. Some scholars have expressed a desire for a coherent approach to such labelling, arguing that the discipline of *religionsvetenskap* should be regarded as synonymous with the history of religions. At the same time, many are hesitant to wholeheartedly embrace the term *religionsvetenskap*, because it has ambiguous connotations that may blur the boundary with theology. In the Swedish Association for the History of Religions (SSRF) there is a debate on whether or not the organisation should change its name to The Association for *Religionsvetenskap* rather than for the *History of Religions*. This has not happened, but the continuing debate reflects the ambivalence that many scholars feel in relation to these labels.

Thus, many historians of religion now struggle with whether or not to identify with the field of *religionsvetenskap*, and opinions differ about how the word *religionsvetenskap* relates to theology. It is clear, however, that the connotations of *religionsvetenskap* are broader than those of the history of religions. *Religionsvetenskap* is, de facto, a discipline that encompasses a number of different methods and scholarly approaches. Even setting aside its ambiguous relationship with theology, it is correct to think of it as a multidisciplinary field that can be divided into a number of subdisciplines. Some scholars of *religionsvetenskap* work as historians, others conduct quantitative sociological surveys, others are more to be compared with philosophers, and still others with anthropologists or psychologists. Today, with the growth of cognitive studies of religion, some of us are even most closely affiliated with neuroscientists and evolutionary biologists. Our discipline thus has no obvious faculty to which it can belong.

As far as the transformation of the history of religions is concerned, this change means that many scholars who received their doctoral degree as historians of religion find themselves riding many horses. I am myself an example here. I received my master's degree in the history of religions and Iranian languages; my doctoral degree was in the history of religions but obtained from a theological faculty; I obtained a position as a lecturer in *religionsvetenskap*, and later earned my docentship and professorship in this discipline. I now work at a department with fifteen scholars (including PhD students) of whom only two, or perhaps three, would identify as historians of religion.

Needless to say, this has meant that the border between the history of religions and disciplines like missiology, the history of Christianity, and the sociology of religion has become more blurred. As long as historians of religion were organised in cohesive departments or subdepartments that limited themselves to work on ancient and non-Christian religions, the division of labour was quite clear. Now, for good and ill, we find ourselves absorbed into a discipline that is wider in its focus and more calibrated to the demands of society.

### **A loss of prestige**

It seems clear, then, that the transformation of historians of religion into contemporarily-oriented and sociologically inclined scholars of *religionsvetenskap* has diminished the humanities identity that once dominated the discipline. In general the field has become more social scientific, less lan-

guage and *Bildung*-oriented, and more focused on contemporary issues. The obvious response to this observation is, so what? Why is this development problematic? Is it not positive that our discipline has been able to transform itself in accordance with the changes and new requirements of society? These questions are related to the much debated idea of a crisis in the humanities and to the unresolved question of whether such a crisis exists at all.

The answer to that question, of course, depends on how one defines what a crisis is. As Geoffrey Harpham points out in his *The Humanities and the Dream of America* (2011), discussions about a crisis for the humanities is as old as the humanities themselves. As early as the 1940s there were reports of a crisis in language disciplines in the United States, and since the 1960s, when the humanities boomed in both Europe and America, reports about the imminent crisis it faces have been frequent. In Germany Helmut Reinalter wrote in 2011 about the *Krise der Geisteswissenschaften* even as the same country was producing two and a half thousand doctoral dissertations in the field every year. In Sweden it is similarly difficult to argue for a crisis based on quantitative measures of output: such figures, it seems, point in the opposite direction.

In this connection it is important to remember that although there have been some negative developments for the humanities in Sweden, the overall picture is quite positive, at least when it is compared with many of our neighbouring countries. The last two decades have entailed a stronger focus on efficiency and economical usefulness, but they have also brought a large expansion in the number of positions, educational programmes, and in the research funding for the humanities in this country. The vast expansion of the university sector during the 1990s has also entailed a hitherto unseen growth in university disciplines in the humanities. The study of religion has expanded no less greatly, because the discipline is needed for teacher education in the Swedish system. Twenty years ago only a handful of universities and university colleges in Sweden provided education in this field. Today education and research are available in more than twenty different places. Of course, it is *religionsvetenskap* rather than the traditional history of religions that has expanded, but the development has still meant a huge growth in job opportunities and research environments for scholars who take a traditional history of religions approach as well. There are no inherent rules that prevent a focus on classical philology or a traditional humanities-based history of religions approach in these places. The efficiency focus already mentioned makes time-consuming language education difficult, but, within the given time frames, there are

no externally imposed limitations governing the content of education and research.

So what is the problem if the field has expanded and it remains possible for scholars to choose the topic they want? Is there a problem at all? Or is the talk about such problems perhaps part of our self-identity as humanities scholars? It could be argued that the legitimacy of the humanities lies in its ability to challenge that which is taken for granted in society and to consider and formulate provocative and uncomfortable ideas. If this is the idea of our work that we seek to uphold, then it is not especially surprising that we would also benefit from seeing ourselves as being questioned and opposed by the system. Could such a dynamic explain why the notion of crisis endures, despite evidence to the contrary in university budgets? Is the supposed crisis in our field a matter of prestige?

There is no doubt that a side effect of expansion and growth is a loss of exclusiveness. As has been pointed out by the Swedish historian of ideas, Sven-Eric Liedman, scholars of the humanities used to have an obvious place in Swedish public life. In the 1950s professors in the humanities constituted a small and well-paid elite with direct access to the then still prestigious high schools, as well as to the culture pages of the big newspapers (Liedman 2010, 51). Today the community of scholars is considerably larger but less secure. Needless to say, there is a class aspect to this development. As long as humanities scholars were part of an exclusive upper class elite, they could go about their business more or less undisturbed. Today, with a majority of young people continuing to higher education and with such a greatly expanded university sector, the academic world is less of a secluded area for the elite and thus, naturally, carries less prestige.

### **Why a humanities approach to the study of religion?**

I have argued that humanities scholars have been compelled to adjust and motivate their research so that it conjoins with the logic of a result-oriented society. I have argued that the major challenge to the traditional history of religions, and the main cause of its transformation as a more contemporarily focused and sociologically inclined *Religionsvetenskap*, lie in this changed research ideal and the altered knowledge contract between the universities and society that it has brought about. Let me conclude this discussion by briefly mentioning one way to argue for the necessity of a humanities approach in the study of religion that conjoins with the new societal logic.

It has been argued that it is superfluous and counterproductive to uphold the distinction between the humanities and the social sciences (Ekström & Sörlin 2012). The development in the study of religions, as well as in many other disciplines, points to the sense of such an argument. Why maintain outdated divisions when scholars on both sides work with similar questions, methods, and materials in administratively combined research settings? This is a relevant question, but there may also be a risk that perspectives and approaches that have been unique to the traditional humanities disciplines will be lost if two faculties are merged.

In the above discussion above I have emphasised that a focus on language and text has been an important element in what made the traditional history of religions a humanities discipline. A knowledge of text and language are of pivotal importance if we want to understand religion. Indeed, without such knowledge, we lack the most basic tools needed even to begin to talk about religion in history. There are, however, other aspects that might be emphasised in speaking of the humanities approach to the history of religions. One such aspect is the hermeneutical method and epistemology. The humanities, it has been argued, are a climate of thinking (Bridon 2011). As in other scholarly endeavours, researchers within the humanities seek knowledge about the world in which they find themselves. What makes humanities scholars different, then, is the means by which this is done. Where natural scientists explore reality with the laboratory as their most prominent tool, social scientists construct and test models as their main method. For scholars of the humanities, then – from philosophers in the tradition of Gadamer, through ethnographers working in the footsteps of Malinowski (Gadamer 1960; Malinowski 1967) – the foremost means of knowledge production is through language and interpretation. For them the exploration of reality is not detached from, but intimately connected with, the experience of the researcher's subject. Hermeneutically inclined humanities scholars, unlike those of other faculties, do not seek to distance themselves from the world they seek to understand. Instead they acknowledge their own embeddedness in it and make use of the unique source of knowledge that lies in the fact that they themselves, much like the people and artefacts they study, are creatures of language and culture. One could argue that it is in their methodological acknowledgement of this that the humanities differ from other research traditions.

Now, this does not (necessarily) mean that research within the humanities seeks to fulfil a goal that is fundamentally different from that of the natural and social sciences. All academic endeavour is governed by the desire to produce knowledge about reality, however hopeless such an ambition may

seem. In this respect, I believe, there is no major difference between the scholars of different faculties. The differences in method do not necessarily reflect differences in our view of science, knowledge, and reality. Rather, the methodological and epistemological differences between laboratory work and hermeneutical interpretation can be informed by the differences between the questions to which answers are sought.

To answer certain questions a hermeneutical humanities approach is simply necessary, not because it affords a softer and less accurate complement to the hard facts produced by the social and natural sciences, but because it can provide the most relevant and precise answers to a certain type of question. Ponder, for example, the case of religious radicalisation among young European men. It is obvious that it is urgent for society and scholars alike to understand the processes that cause this phenomenon. Knowledge grounded in the humanities is what most would agree is needed for an appropriate response to this. We need to know why people are radicalised, what it means to them, what it is they find appealing in the radical messages to which they turn; we need to understand the role that their different relationships play; we need to know how their individual life stories interact with the ideologies they encounter; how culture, personal preferences, theological systems, sex, class, and ethnicity play in and interact with the complex processes that cause them to change. It is obvious that both the natural and the social sciences can provide important knowledge here, but if we are to have the realistic understanding required to make decisions concerning the kind of societal measures called for by the situation, we need the kind of interpretative and qualitative picture that only the humanities can provide.

The Swedish discipline of the history of religions has transformed itself. On the one hand it has, in the form of *religionsvetenskap*, grown considerably and expanded into empirical fields, methods, and theories which were alien to it only twenty-five years ago. On the other it has been forced – by societal currents and administrative legislation – to adjust to a political climate focused on direct social relevance, measurability, and quantifiable efficiency. In the process it has lost some of the features that constituted its identity as a scholarly tradition. It is now up to us – the active scholars in the field – to bring the discipline forwards in a society where its relevance seems to grow day by day, and navigate between the trap of being made redundant in an age blinded by its focus on the contemporary, or the trap of losing our integrity by retreating from our confidence in the importance of in-depth engagement with our sources.

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