Gary Anderson of the University of Notre Dame was awarded a Barry Prize for Distinguished Intellectual Achievement in 2024. In this video, Greg Forster of the American Academy of Sciences and Letters interviews Dr. Anderson about the difficulties modern universities encounter in understanding religion and its place in general human experience, as well as some unexpected challenges that AI presents for language-dependent disciplines in particular.

Greg Forster, American Academy of Sciences and Letters

Hello, I'm Greg Forster, executive director of the American Academy of Sciences and Letters. Here with me today is Gary Anderson, one of the 2024 winners of our Barry Prize for Distinguished Intellectual Achievement. Gary is the Hesburgh Professor of Catholic Theology at the University of Notre Dame. Gary, thank you so much for joining us.

Gary Anderson, University of Notre Dame

It's my pleasure.Thank you so much for inviting me to participate.

Forster

Congratulations on winning the Barry Prize. Let me begin by asking, what are some underappreciated ways in which the work in your field contributes to human understanding and well-being?

Anderson

That's a great question, and the great example I would give of that issue concerns the general public's understanding of the nature of religion, world religions, their place within world civilization. When I taught at Harvard, there was a conference at the Center for the Study of World Religions, and someone, the scholar's name I no longer recall, was talking about the United States' presence in Tehran, Iran, leading up to the Islamic Revolution in the 1970s, in the Jimmy Carter era. We had an enormous staff in Tehran. If you've watched the movie *Argo*, you certainly know that. The claim was that we understood every inch of contemporary Iranian culture, economics, education, all the standard tools of measuring a culture.

But the one thing that was not measured, and that people had no understanding of, was religious observance on the ground. It wasn't because of some prejudicial decision—we're not going to study that—it was rather simply ignorance of the fact that it would be important in any way. Of course, that had the tragic results of simply not foreseeing what was happening and not understanding the gravity of the situation.

That example simply emphasizes how important it is that at a curricular level we educate young people coming through the university about religions globally, that it is crucial for understanding human culture across the world, and frequently, because of the residual secularity in North America and Europe, that it is underappreciated in terms of its global significance. That is an example from the 1970s, but I think it's a problem that perdures to the present day.

Forster

We can't only study religion from a social scientific standpoint, measuring behaviors. If we really want to understand religious behavior, we have to have some sense of the meaning of religion, what it means

for the people who believe in it. So theological disciplines contribute to human understanding in that way.

Anderson

That's an excellent point that raises another challenge in the contemporary study of religion in American universities. It often tends to be filtered through categories that are deeply important to secular Americans, the role of women, social or sexual orientation, et cetera, et cetera. All those questions are certainly important, but they have a tendency in university education in the United States to elbow out other concerns that would be native to the practitioners of those religions. So it's understandable that when we look at the "other," especially an "other" from a very different culture than ours, we try to reach for those elements that are similar to ours. It's certainly an initial step to understanding. But if that becomes the only way we engage, for example, Islam in Iran, we're not going to understand Islam in Iran in its native environment. To understand Iranian culture, you need to do that.

Forster

In some cases, the needed transition is from thinking of religion as an eccentric thing that some people are hung up on to thinking of it as a normal part of human life. Even if you personally don't believe in it, you need to recognize that it is normal and part of human life so that you will take it seriously and give it the kind of explanatory place that it ought to have in an understanding of human behavior.

Anderson

I was going to give a more pedestrian example. Over the course of my lifetime, retirement plans have moved from what a company or a corporation provides for you to what you essentially provide for yourself. Most of us, certainly those in the humanities like me, understand very little about the stock market and investments. But it behooves us to at least learn something because our future as a retired person is going to depend on decisions we're going to make.

So, in all areas of life, we're forced to develop levels of competency that allow us to make our way in the world. Understanding world religions is certainly one of those areas. One of the challenges in the modern academy is an underlying prejudice against religion that frequently prevents people from seeing its curricular importance. For my field, that's a huge desideratum for university learning.

Forster

It's very difficult to become fluent in a new language; it's much easier to become conversant. I love your example of retirement funding. If you don't become at least conversant in how finances work, you're not going to be able to make your way.

Let me ask you a second question. What would you say are the one or two most important challenges right now for maintaining high intellectual standards in your field?

Anderson

As you mentioned, I'm the Hesburgh Professor of Catholic Theology, but my specialization in that enormous field happens to be the Bible. Within the field of the Bible, it's the Hebrew Bible, the Old Testament. That discipline is philologically driven. The best scholars in the area are frequently the ones

who have the most detailed mastery of the principal language in question, which of course is ancient Hebrew, not modern Hebrew. But good scholars are facile to varying degrees in languages contemporary with biblical Hebrew, including classical Akkadian and Aramaic. Some people even learn hieroglyphic Egyptian.

The challenge all along in my career, certainly for a school to be able to produce the highest-caliber scholar in these areas, is maintaining the ability to teach these languages. The same would be true of classics, Greek and Latin, because the normal metric that a dean is going to use in terms of staffing departments and languages is going to be the number of, for lack of a better term, rear ends that occupy seats in a classroom. That's a huge priority for deans. These ancient languages that don't have a lot of speakers, some have no speakers at all, require a commitment on the part of the university to offer so that scholars can study cultures from antiquity. This wouldn't be true only of the Bible; people who work in Sanskrit, ancient Chinese, all of these disciplines suffer from a similar set of challenges. In the advent of the kind of pedagogical infrastructure that's grown up since COVID, especially Zoom, there are opportunities for universities to provide this kind of specialized instruction that won't require hiring scholars on the ground in every institution. But being committed to teaching languages that don't have normal—I guess the professional term is FTE—student admission numbers is a huge issue.

One other thing is going to emerge as a challenge in light of AI. One of the things that AI can do quite incredibly is translate materials. So, looking forward 5 or 10 years, departments of German, French, Russian, and the like will start to crater or collapse themselves because people will say, well, why should I invest all the time in learning these spoken languages when I can just pull out my phone and translate whatever I need? I look forward to that moment. There are many things I would love to be able to put through an AI bot and be able to read. But anyone who's a serious student of language knows that translation is never just a simple one-for-one correspondence. When you translate any language, even a modern language, into English, an AI bot or a human person is making all kinds of decisions that you, the reader, might want to know about or to make those decisions differently. The only way to make those judgments intelligently is to know the language in question. I wonder if this will have a huge impact on the way we are going to be able to interact at a sophisticated, serious level with people who speak other languages.

I mentioned the retirement plans as a similar example. A lot of people know how fantastic GPS systems are to find your way around town. I use my GPS all the time. But the problem with GPS is that you're not looking at a map. You don't learn the geography of the place you're in. You get to your destination, but you have no idea how it happened. You couldn't plot it out on a map. You are completely ignorant of the topography, which has a certain sadness. We can't go back. People aren't going to give up GPS for maps so they can learn the topography. But we should realize that something is really being lost as we rely on GPS systems to orient ourselves in a geographic location. There will also be a loss if AI becomes our modality for understanding documents, text, speech in other languages.

Forster

For a century, one of the hottest topics in philosophy has been the relationship between language and thought, with positions ranging from an extreme postmodernism that says thought never really escapes language—it's all culture—to an extreme reactionary modernism, if you will, that demands that thought

is independent of language. Probably the truth is somewhere in between. But AI is now going to make these discussions very, very high stakes.

And you bring up the issue of translation. I feel that tension. My dissertation was on Augustine. On the one hand, I lament there's an enormous literature on Augustine that's in languages I don't have, so I'm reliant on secondary conversations that give me no more than fragments about that. Yet, at the same time, if people begin, for example, to read Augustine in a translation made by AI rather than having the Latin or using a highly reliable English translation, they'll miss the very important nuances of Augustine's Latin. We don't want to miss things like that.

Anderson

That's exactly right. If you're translating it yourself, you realize with every word you're rendering from Latin into English all the decisions you're making in terms of foreshortening this option, that option, which you can see because you know Latin well. I say this not because I rue the introduction of AI to translate. Whether you rue it or not, it's coming. To be fair and honest here, there will be tremendous benefits from employing that kind of technology.

But, as you indicate, there are going to be significant losses as well, just as using GPS essentially takes us out of the world of concrete, geographical space. You might want to say AI translating texts will take us out of a principal humanistic category of figuring out how to render the meaning of one word in one civilization to another word in another civilization, which is actually an example of great intercultural understanding. It's one of the reasons I also love working in foreign languages. It's sad that people aren't taking them anymore, as it's a discipline that takes you out of yourself. Learning German gives you a different way of seeing the world. When you learn an ancient language, of course, it's not only a different set of words, but just a completely different way of understanding human life, which is desperately needed. We tend to get closed in, and we can only imagine the world the way we see it.

Forster

I think of C. S. Lewis talking about literature giving us windows into how other people see the world. We're going to need to think very carefully about the dependency of those windows on the languages in which they're expressed. So I guess the takeaway is buy stock in hermeneutics. Hermeneutics is going to be the big discipline.

Anderson

I certainly hope that's the case.

Forster

Let me ask you one more question. In what ways does the public at large have a good understanding of the mission of the university? And in what ways does it lack a good understanding of the mission of the university?

Anderson

That's a great question. I would want to slightly reframe it this way. A big challenge for humanistic scholars writing books for the public or for their discipline, is to render accurately the culture and world

they're studying. That's one desire. But the other desire is, what difference would any of this make for the average reader? And those aren't always easy to correlate. I sometimes get exasperated with people who put down humanistic scholars like me because what we write about doesn't intersect at all with their lives. That's a legitimate criticism. I understand it and take it seriously.

On the other hand, I usually try to write in such a way that I *am* doing that, but the way in which it will intersect with their life is going to demand that they take seriously a set of documents and thoughts that are different, sometimes very different, at least at first blush, from who they are. To weigh in on scholars that they're writing about things that don't touch me can be a legitimate criticism of what I do, what we do. But it also can be a criticism of the person voicing it that they're not willing to stop and say, maybe Elizabethan England is different from my world, or the world of the Persian Empire in which many biblical books were written, is also different from my world. I'll have to spend some time trying to orient myself to that world to benefit from what the people in that world might say about me.

We really need a back and forth here. I do agree with the criticism. I think humanists need to take seriously the questions that the average reader might pose to the things we study. On the other hand, I think the average reader also has to be willing to take a step out of their comfort zone and enter into a universe and world quite different than theirs.

Forster

It's the intellectual equivalent of saying you need to get out more. Alan Bloom said once, we used to say to students, that these authors know things you don't know and need to know. They see things that you don't see and would benefit from seeing. But now we say, these authors can help you think about the questions you already care about, which reduces these classic authors to mere tools that we use for our twenty-first-century or for Alan Bloom's twentieth-century concerns. We're narrowing the range of our vision by doing that.

Anderson

Exactly. It's all going back to a question or an issue I've raised a couple of times in our conversation about seeing the world through eyes different from your own, which is one of the tasks of a university education, but also one of the tasks of writing books.

Forster

Gary, thank you so much for this fascinating conversation. And thank you for the excellent work you do at Notre Dame. And congratulations again on winning the Barry Prize.

Anderson

Thank you so much. It was a true honor. I hope I can do justice to the honor that's been shown me.