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No Longer Invisible

DRIVE NORTH FROM the Mason-Dixon Line past the Civil War fields of Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, and about two hours later you reach a place called "Happy Valley," home of Pennsylvania State University. Penn State's mammoth presence dominates the sparsely populated valley, and it offers nearly everything that one might expect from a fine public university: incredible facilities, world-class scholars, smart students, and an amazingly loyal body of alumni. Like every university, Penn State has its warts and blemishes. In 2009, for example, the university had the dubious honor of being listed in *The Princeton Review* as the number-one party school in the nation, and more recently the school's reputation has been tarnished by an ongoing investigation into allegations of child sexual abuse by an assistant football coach—revelations that led to the dismissal of both the university president and Penn State's longtime football coach, the late Joe Paterno, fondly referred to as "JoePa" by Penn State fans.

What most people don't know about Penn State is that the school is also at the cutting edge of higher education's new engagement with religion. The most visible symbol of this engagement is the massive Pasquerilla Spiritual Center (PSC), located prominently on the campus. Constructed in 2003 and funded entirely by private donations, the center has a 750-seat worship hall that can be reconfigured in minutes to suit the needs of any of the campus's various religious communities, and the building includes office space for all of Penn State's more than sixty student religious (and secular/ethical) organizations, including the Atheist/Agnostic Association. The programs of the PSC are overseen by the Center for Ethics and Religious Affairs (CERA), which says that its goal is to provide "a welcoming, safe, inclusive environment for the Penn State community to explore a multitude of faith traditions in a compassionate, open-minded setting," an environment "that stretches beyond tolerance to a genuine appreciation of and respect for religious and spiritual diversity." Proselytizing is explicitly forbidden, and all PSC-supported programs (whether student-led or university-sponsored) are supposed to "support students' commitment to academics, to self, and to family."¹

As a public institution, Penn State is committed to the separation of church and state, but no tension is assumed to exist between that commitment and the religious and ethical work of the PSC. There was a time in the past when Penn State, like many other public universities, had an ordained Christian chaplain on campus, but that office was eliminated in the 1960s. The PSC today is directed by Bob Smith, a non-ordained former social worker who defines his responsibility as making sure that everyone, regardless of their faith or lack of faith, feels at home and is treated equally, both at the PSC and on the campus as a whole. Smith sees the PSC as a bold experiment in public higher education, and he is not alone. In our conversations with directors of religious or spiritual life at colleges and universities all across the country, Penn State was repeatedly cited as among the vanguard when it comes to dealing with religion in public higher education.

Like many cutting-edge initiatives, it took significant efforts to get the PSC and CERA off the ground, and the one person who did more than anyone else to make it happen was Coach Joe Paterno. Paterno, a devout Catholic who was known for running a genuinely character-building football program, cajoled the president into approving the project, and he and his wife contributed more than a million dollars toward its construction. In a turn of events worthy of a Greek tragedy, the PSC also became one of the primary places where students congregated to sort through their confusion, disappointment, and anger about the sexual abuse scandal involving the former assistant football coach and the university's subsequent decision to fire Paterno along with the university president. The PSC helped to organize a massive candlelight vigil for the victims of the abuse, and when Paterno died of cancer three months later, the PSC, for the first time in its history, was the site of a funeral service. More than 40,000 Penn State students, staff, alumni, and friends filed through to pay their respects before the local Catholic bishop performed the actual service. According to Smith, many members of the campus community expressed their appreciation that the PSC was there to be a place of spiritual hope and healing during a troubled period in the school's history.²

Religion's New Visibility

Religion, as we discuss it in this book, encompasses all of the concerns and activities associated with the PSC at Penn State. It involves traditional religiosity such as that represented by the Catholic, Protestant, Jewish, and other student religious organizations housed in the center, but it also relates to "big questions" (questions of meaning and purpose) and deep moral concerns, whether these matters are expressed in explicitly religious language or not. Religion is about how people relate to God or the "higher power(s)" of the universe, but it is also about how people relate to each other, especially when words fail but sympathy

and support still need to be expressed. And religion is about the values that we live by as individuals and as groups. There was a time in the not-too-distant past when this whole jumble of concerns was metaphorically swept under the rug at most colleges and universities, which tended to operate on the assumption that religion was a purely personal concern that had little or nothing to do with higher education. That is, however, no longer the case. Religion has once again become visible on campuses, and colleges and universities, both public and private, are grappling with how to proceed.

Growing out of these developments, the question that has driven our research and reflection is this: How is religion present within higher learning, and how might educators maximize the cognitive, social, and personal dimensions of student learning by paying more attention to the inherently religious or spiritual dimensions of higher education? One of our earliest findings was that many educators do not know where to start when such a question is asked. Many people acknowledge that religion and spirituality are somehow relevant to educational processes, but most don't know how to talk about it. The conversation about such matters is dominated on many campuses by the extremes: by convinced believers championing traditional religion, on the one hand, and by emotivists of vague spirituality, on the other. Conversations with those in either camp tend to be not particularly fruitful. The first defines religion too narrowly to take into account the diversity of faith that exists within higher education; the second defines the topic so loosely and individualistically that there is little to do other than swap personal stories. The goal of this book is to chart a middle ground where religion can be discussed critically and intelligently (in other words, in the natural language of the academy) so that the multiple connections between religion and higher education can be identified and analyzed.

We are not suggesting that colleges and universities need to *add* religion to the already overloaded list of concerns they are supposed to address. Religious and spiritual matters are already embedded in the work that colleges and universities do. The goal is to become more aware of and attuned to what is already going on, and the potential gains are enormous. Giving more careful attention to religion (broadly construed) has the possibility of enhancing the work of higher education in untold ways, because religion is inextricably blended into the key dispositions that drive learning itself—the mixing of critical thinking with hope, the awareness of difference, the ability to wonder and to see the world in new ways, the skill of focusing on one thing at a time, and the blending of the personal with the impersonal. Attending to religion can enliven all of these dimensions of higher learning; ignoring religion undermines them.

That said, we are not at all suggesting that religion itself is somehow above criticism. At colleges and universities, religion should be subjected to the same critical inquiry that is directed at every other topic of study in the academy. Religion is

not an unmitigated good; it can be a repository of evil as well. But that is precisely why religion needs attention. It has too much power to be ignored, and it is too enmeshed in life to be treated as irrelevant to the choices people make and the ways in which societies organize themselves.

If any particular event signaled a sea change regarding the place of religion in university education, it was a conference that took place at Wellesley College in September of 1998. The theme of the meeting was “Education as Transformation: Religious Pluralism, Spirituality, and Higher Education,” and the organizers assumed that it would be a relatively modest gathering of administrators and academicians. That assumption was mistaken. More than 800 people showed up, representing 350 institutions of higher learning, including the Ivy League, some of the nation’s most elite liberal arts colleges, and a variety of research universities. The hypothesis of the conference was that religion and spirituality are inseparable from learning. Education itself, the conference proclaimed, is a spiritual journey, an inherently transformative experience.

Just as religion was beginning to re-emerge as a significant concern within higher education, it also resurfaced with deadly violence in society as a whole when religiously motivated terrorists attacked the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on September 11, 2001. Across the nation, people asked how this could have happened. How could the American government and its intelligence-gathering organizations have so completely misunderstood the world situation? How could the negative consequences of religion have been so overlooked? Religion could no longer be ignored—not by politicians or the military, and not by the academy. Although many scholars had dismissed religion as tangential to the quest for geopolitical understanding, that attitude was changed in a day. Like everyone else in the nation, educators had received an unwelcome wakeup call. It was time to start taking religion more seriously, and it was time to learn how to “manage” religion on campus more effectively. This was a matter of national security and political necessity; it had to be done. What might have been a gradual process of re-engaging religion on campus suddenly became a matter of grave urgency.

The recent “return” of religion to higher education—in both the Wellesley sense and in response to 9/11—is a complex phenomenon. On the one hand, the return of religion simply means that religion is more visible, less private, and more integrated into the learning process than it has been for years. It now pops up regularly in the courses and academic journals of history, anthropology, sociology, psychology, politics, science, literature, and virtually every kind of professional study. Religion is now the hottest topic of research for the American Historical Association, nudging out “cultural history” for first place,³ and the American Psychological Association recently stated that it wants more attention given to religion and spirituality, because these factors “are under-examined in psychological research both in terms of their prevalence within various research populations

and in terms of their possible relevance as influential variables.”⁴ The same kinds of developments are evident in other disciplines as well.

It is important to note, however, that the religion that is “returning” to university life and learning is not the old religion of the past. The word “return” accordingly needs to be used with care. Religion in America has undergone a significant transformation in the last ten to fifteen years, and the primary difference is that it has become much more diverse, so diverse that we prefer to use the term “pluriformity” to underscore the expansiveness of current options. This pluriformity has two sides. One side represents traditional, “organized” religion, and the main change here is that the range of organized religions in America has increased exponentially. College and university students now attend classes not just with Catholics, Jews, and Protestants (and many different kinds of secular individuals), but with Muslims, Hindus, Jains, Buddhists, Zoroastrians, Wiccans, Sikhs, and members of other religious communities and subcommunities. This development alone would call for rewriting the rules of engagement with religion on campus.

The other side of today’s religious pluriformity, however, makes things even more complex and confusing: The boundary line between what is and what is not religion has become thoroughly blurred. If secularity is like freshwater and religion is like saltwater, life in America is now thoroughly brackish. More and more people are cobbling together their own unique combinations of religious ideas, practices, experiences, and core values from a variety of religious and nonreligious sources. The term “spirituality” is sometimes used to describe this new do-it-yourself style of faith. Some people who consider themselves “spiritual” are also traditionally religious, but many of them are atheists, agnostics, or self-proclaimed skeptics. To be spiritual, understood in this sense, is to have deeply held convictions, and anyone can have those kinds of heartfelt allegiances. This new ambiguity about what counts as religion or spirituality makes it virtually impossible to keep religion out of higher education, because no one knows exactly where to draw the line indicating that one person’s convictions count as religion while those of someone else do not. To say that religion has “returned” to higher education is thus something like saying that dinosaurs have returned to earth in the form of birds. Birds are the evolutionary descendants of dinosaurs, but they are hardly the same animals, and American religion today is a very different animal than it was in the past.

Three Stories from Boston

The multifaceted and complicated character of religion in higher education today can be illustrated by stories from three universities in the academically rich and culturally diverse city of Boston. The first comes from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. MIT was begun in 1861 as a polytechnic institute, and founder William Barton Rogers defined the school’s purpose somewhat inelegantly as

“the teaching, not of the minute details and manipulations of the arts, which can be done only in the workshop, but the inculcation of those scientific principles which form the basis and explanation of them, their leading processes and operations in connection with physical laws.”⁵ MIT is a practical, scientific place where religion, while never being entirely ignored, has never been central. The campus is graced with a beautiful prayer chapel, and religion courses have been taught for decades, most notably by the prolific author and spiritually eclectic Huston Smith who chaired the philosophy department from 1958 to 1973. But the university has no formal religious connections, and it never had any officially designated overseer of religious life on campus until the fall of 2007 when it appointed Robert Randolph to be “chaplain of the institute.”

MIT, like most universities, is awash in students of faith, and the main administrative task of the new chaplain is to coordinate the work of the twenty-two unpaid associate chaplains who serve the religious needs of the student body, representing all of the world’s major religions and a dozen different versions of Christianity. But since MIT always had religious students on campus, why appoint a chaplain in 2007? In short, MIT needed a chaplain because meeting the religious needs of individual students—something religious volunteers could do—was no longer enough. What matters now is helping students learn how to conduct themselves in a world inhabited by many different kinds of secular and religious people. Randolph explains; “The biggest challenge... is simply keeping people talking to each other, so that the stereotypes that operate, and have operated for far too long out there, are not allowed to reimpose themselves.” Randolph says that getting Muslims and Jews and Hindus and Christians and everyone else to be comfortable with each other is the most important religious work he does. He notes: “In [twenty-five] years [these students] are going to be decision-makers in wider worlds than we can imagine. And having some appreciation and understanding of these different religious communities and traditions will serve them well. That’s the goal; that’s what we’re trying to do.”⁶ In Randolph’s opinion, the very future of the world may hinge on the interfaith friendships that are born at MIT and the skills of religious etiquette that are developed there.

A second story: The same year that MIT appointed its first official chaplain, an interesting debate about religion and education was taking place next door at Harvard University. The focus at Harvard was on the classroom, and specifically on general education requirements, the package of courses that every student is required to take in order to graduate. A faculty task force, chaired by the Pulitzer Prize-winning literary scholar Louis Menand, recommended the addition of a new general education requirement in an area of study the committee called “reason and faith.” The rationale was straightforward: “Religion is a fact of twenty-first-century life,” and a Harvard education should recognize its presence. The committee noted that 94 percent of Harvard’s incoming students say they

discuss religion frequently or occasionally, and 71 percent attend religious services. The new requirement was designed to make a place in the curriculum where students could “sort out the relationship between their own beliefs and practices, the different beliefs and practices of fellow students, and the profoundly secular and intellectual world of the academy itself.” The courses that would fulfill this requirement were supposed to be scholarly and not “prescriptive,” and the goal was to help students “understand the interplay between religious and secular institutions, practices, and ideas” in order to become “more self-conscious about their own beliefs and values” and “more informed and reflective citizens.”⁷

Dissent erupted almost immediately. Some members of the faculty detected a weakening of Harvard’s commitment to hardheaded, rational, empirically based learning. The evolutionary psychologist Steven Pinker was particularly outspoken, asking why the university would waste its time on the “ignorance and irrationality” of religion at a time when “the rest of the West is moving beyond it.” He further wrote that “[u]niversities are about reason, pure and simple,” and “faith—believing something without good reasons to do so—has no place in anything but a religious institution.”⁸

The final resolution of faculty debate was to require a course called “culture and belief” instead of “reason and faith.” The redefined course was still supposed to provide space within the curriculum for students to reflect on “cultural issues of concern or interest that are likely to arise in students’ own lives,” but religion, defined as a “cultural issue,” became only one potential topic of study.⁹ This outcome disappointed many Harvard watchers, including Lisa Miller, the religion editor of *Newsweek*. In a multipage article entitled “Harvard’s Crisis of Faith,” she opined: “[T]o dismiss the importance of the study of faith—especially now—out of academic narrow-mindedness is less than unhelpful. It’s unreasonable.”¹⁰

A third story comes from Boston College, a Catholic university. It was founded by the Jesuits in 1863. Its history largely mimics the history of Catholic higher education in America as a whole. During its first hundred years, Boston College was a solidly Catholic institution serving an almost entirely Catholic student body. Like many religiously affiliated schools, it was also frequently in debt. But in the 1960s, things began to change. Over the years, American society had become much less stridently Protestant and more welcoming toward Catholics, and the Second Vatican Council of the Catholic Church (1962–1965) had redefined Catholic structures to make them more open to non-Catholic ideas and ideals. In fact, one of the most famous documents of the council affirmed that “nothing genuinely human” is foreign to Catholic Christianity.¹¹ The religious and cultural walls that had formerly separated Catholics from other Americans were dissolving. Boston College, like many other Catholic colleges and universities, concluded that the maintenance of a distinctively Catholic identity was no longer the institution’s main concern. Quality of education became

the goal. The school, accordingly, opened its doors to everyone, sought federal aid, expanded its donor base, and changed its faculty hiring patterns. Today Boston College is one of the most financially solid and academically respected institutions of higher education in the country, and until very recently it had a relatively low-key approach to its Catholic identity.

Then, during spring break in 2009, various examples of religious art—most notably crucifixes—suddenly appeared in many of the campus's classrooms. The walls had been bare when faculty and students left, but they were festooned with religious icons when they returned. Reactions were mixed. Some individuals were disturbed, or even irritated, by the new art work. Amir Hoveyda, a professor of chemistry, said, "For [eighteen] years, I taught at a university where I was allowed to teach in an environment where I felt comfortable... [then] without any discussion, without any warning, without any intellectual debate, literally during the middle of the night during a break, these icons appear." Dan Kirschner, a professor of biology who is Jewish, had to take on "three hands" to express his consternation: "On the one hand, BC wants to be all-inclusive. On the other hand, they do things like this to make people feel not included. On the other hand, it is a Catholic university."¹² Many faculty and students were confused about what message the university was trying to communicate.

Speaking on behalf of the administration, Reverend Jack Dunn, chair of the campus committee on Christian art, said that, far from wanting to offend anyone, the newly installed crucifixes were intended to send a message of welcome. Drawing on the writings of Pope John Paul II, Dunn explained that the crucifix should be seen as a "sign of God, who has compassion on us, who accepts human weakness, who opens to us all, to one another, and therefore creates the relation of fraternity." Dunn added that the crucifix is simultaneously "an invitation to love, and an invitation to faith.... One is not required to respond, one can decline, and one can have many reasons for declining the invitation, but to imply that a Jesuit and Catholic university is not free to offer this invitation is simply an impossibility."¹³

Clearly, the crucifix is a symbol of Catholic identity, and a Catholic university like Boston College has a legal right to display it. Doing so may be an act of simple honesty about who they are. But can it function as a sign of compassion and a source of fraternity? Can a very specific religious symbol like the crucifix draw people together, or does it inherently divide? More broadly, does making the campus a place of welcome for everyone mean that religion has to be kept out of sight, or might the public acknowledgment of an institution's religious (or nonreligious) orientation be a necessary first step toward putting everyone at ease—a way, so to speak, of naming the elephant in the room?

These kinds of questions about religion can be aimed at many colleges and universities, not just at Catholic institutions like Boston College. In the recent past, institutions have often assumed that the only valid model for accommodating

diversity on campus, especially religious diversity, is the model of the public square—a place where everyone has equal status and standing. No one is special; everyone is similarly ordinary. But Boston College and other American colleges and universities have begun to ask whether a hosting or hospitality model might provide a better alternative for their campuses. When people or institutions act as hosts, they welcome others positively into their space and try to make them feel not simply “at home,” but rather like honored guests. Hosting implies a difference between residents and guests—insiders and outsiders—raising the specter of discrimination, but it also has the potential to offer something more humane and thoughtful than the hustle, bustle, and jostling for space that define the public square. Whether Boston College’s new crucifixes communicate good hosting of a diverse college population is an open question. Crucifixes aside, the notion of hosting may be worthy of consideration by any university looking for a way to alleviate the alienation of a purely “public square” approach to campus life.

Defining Religion

All three Boston stories are about “religion,” but religion is notoriously difficult to define. In many traditional societies, both ancient and contemporary, there is no separate word for religion. Religion is simply “the way” of that society, a reflection of reality itself. The *tao* of Chinese traditional religion refers to the way things are, the natural harmony that exists among all living (and nonliving) things, and it also refers to the way that things are supposed to be. The *tao* is inextricably part of life. It cannot be isolated, and it emphatically cannot be named. It simply is what it is. In the Western tradition, religion has been construed differently. Rather than being part of the natural world, religion is seen as bringing order to the natural world and as tapping into spiritual power that comes from beyond the natural world. More recently, in the modern era of the last several centuries, religion has come to mean a single facet of life that exists separately from the rest of ordinary, nonreligious, secular life.

It is this last assumption, in particular—belief in a neat distinction between the sacred and the secular—that has become increasingly problematic in recent years. Neither religion nor secularity seems to be staying in its defined place. The two now overlap, interact, and sometimes even merge.¹⁴ This new reality can be described metaphorically by picturing organized religion as one mountain and secularity as another, with almost everyone now living somewhere in the religio-secular valley that lies between them. In this valley, every person is to some degree simultaneously secular and religious.¹⁵

Those at the extremes, both secularists and religionists, would prefer to depopulate this middle valley where religious and secular impulses overlap. For example, the outspoken atheist Sam Harris has argued that moderate religious

views and religious tolerance are some of the “principal forces driving us toward the abyss,” because they mask the horror of real religion, which in his view is necessarily literalist, irrational, and evil.¹⁶ As far as Harris is concerned, the religious half of the religio-secular valley is nothing more than a dangerous delusion. On the opposite mountain, untold numbers of fundamentalist Christians, Muslims, Hindus, Jews (and other religions as well) are convinced that “real” religion has nothing at all to do with the kinds of middling and mixed views that prevail in the valley of religio-secular experience. For them, any kind of “compromise with the world” is as wrong as the most extreme forms of secular atheism. Still, it seems a simple acknowledgment of reality to say that most Americans today experience the world as a place where religion and secularity mix.

A generation or two in the past, life was different. Back then, most Americans knew what religion was. It meant believing in God or gods; it meant going to church, synagogue, or temple; and it meant living in accordance with the moral dictates of one’s particular community of faith. That is no longer an adequate description. All the things on that list still count as religion, but religion overflows those old containers. Now, many individuals who never enter a church or other sacred building say they are religious or spiritual, and even the most devout believers tend to pick and choose which rules and doctrines really matter.

Religion today is much more personal and interpersonal, and less institutional and theologically dogmatic, than it was in the past.¹⁷ A friend of ours illustrates this contemporary approach. She wanted to join a church and was deciding between two options: One was a congregation of the United Church of Christ, often called the most liberal and progressive denomination in the country; the other was an independent Pentecostal church that was fundamentalist in its theology and right wing in its politics. But our friend found them to be “actually very similar”; she said both congregations were filled with friendly people, and both worship services “gave [her] spirit a lift.” She was not concerned in the least that the two churches have historic religious beliefs and practices that are miles apart. What mattered was how she experienced the churches. This kind of religious subjectivity and choice has a long history in the United States, with roots in the so-called “Great Awakening” of the mid-1700s and the “Second Great Awakening” of the early 1800s, but the trends have accelerated in recent decades, making religion ever more difficult to define in terms of beliefs and organization. More and more, religion is a matter of personal preference and affectivity.

Simultaneously, religion has become more political. When running for president in 1960, John F. Kennedy famously pledged that his religion would have nothing to do with how he behaved in office. Kennedy was going out of his way to assuage Protestant worries because he was only the second Catholic to ever be seriously considered for the highest office in the land. But politicians in general avoided religion during these years, and even ordinary citizens typically kept their

faith and politics in separate compartments. That is no longer the case. In court-ignoring religious voters, politicians now routinely explain how their faith and religious values will guide them in office. Citizens, too, see religious overtones (positive or negative) in many pieces of legislation that are ostensibly about other matters such as civil rights, health care, international relations, or local zoning laws. It is this new sensitivity to religion (or religious-like concerns) in public life that has fueled the culture-war mentality that still infuses much of American politics.

Given the breadth of what religion has become—ranging from traditional “organized” religion to personal spiritual preferences to public values and political wrangling—some scholars have suggested that the word “religion” itself has lost its usefulness and that a new vocabulary needs to be developed for naming the various attitudes and activities that the word “religion” is sometimes used to describe. The well-known Canadian Catholic philosopher Charles Taylor, for example, uses the term “fullness” (instead of “religion”) to describe the human quest for “life [that] is fuller, richer, deeper, more worthwhile, more admirable, [and] more what it should be.”¹⁸ The Jewish social commentator and moral philosopher Susan Neiman, author of *Moral Clarity: A Guide for Grown-Up Idealists* (2008), suggests that the phrase “gratitude for Being itself” might be a better term for religion at its best: “an experience not simply of pleasure, but of silent celebration. These are feelings that enlarge us, and make us better than before.”¹⁹ But religion also has its negative side, and some scholars today would prefer to name that negativity more directly. They see religion as an illusion or simple prejudice or a mask for power over others or a destructive cognitive “meme” that has infected human thinking.²⁰ More neutrally, the sociologist Thomas Luckmann proposed the term “invisible religion” as a name for the many different ways in which people think, act, and feel religiously outside the boundaries and control of traditional, institutional religion. This kind of “invisible religion”²¹ is a widespread phenomenon that applies to many people who might never use the word “religious” to describe themselves, including many people who might label themselves as secular or even atheistic.²²

Although we sympathize with those who are looking for new terms to describe the broadly varied phenomenon of religion, we think there is wisdom in retaining the word and using it in the singular. However diverse the referents of religion might be, they are all interconnected. Understanding those interconnections (and understanding religion’s complex relationship with secularity) is part of what scholars around the world are busily investigating.

But what is this thing—religion—that is being investigated? In our own use of the term we lean in the direction of Paul Tillich, who more than half a century ago defined religion as “ultimate concern,” a definition that encompasses the experiences of all humans, however traditionally secular or religious they may be.²³ Following Tillich, this book uses the word “religion” to refer to all the different

ways in which human beings seek to understand the world and order their lives in light of what they believe to be ultimately true, real, and important. Religion in this sense of the term includes all the ideas, values, rituals, and affections that people reference when they are focusing on “things that really matter.”²⁴ Obviously, this will differ from individual to individual and from society to society—what one person or culture considers religious, another may not—but that fluidity of meaning itself is one of the key characteristics of religion as it exists in the world today.

The “Soul” of Higher Education

The well-known educator Ernest L. Boyer, who served as U.S. commissioner of education in the 1970s and was later president of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, once commented that “today we are rediscovering that the sense of the sacred is inextricably interwoven with the most basic of human impulses.” In that light, he suggested that while “no school should impose religious belief or practice . . . it’s simply impossible to be a well-educated person without exploring how religion has shaped the human story.” Going further, he asked whether it might even be necessary to move beyond merely studying religion and actively engage “the sense of the sacred” itself.²⁵ Some educators are troubled by that kind of suggestion. Anthony T. Kronman, a self-described secular humanist and the former dean of Yale Law School, is one of them. Now teaching in Yale’s undergraduate Directed Studies Program, Kronman says that what colleges and universities need is a revival of the humanities, not more interaction with religion or the sacred. He argues: “The crisis of spirit we now confront is a consequence not of the death of God, but of man. It is the forgetfulness of our own humanity. . . . [I]t is not God that needs to be remembered. It is man. Only the recollection of humanity is an adequate response.”²⁶

Kronman makes a valid point—higher education is a human endeavor, not a divine one—and yet his own use of the term “crisis of *spirit*” points beyond academic business as usual toward something deeper, toward something that “really matters.” Other intellectuals also reach for spiritual metaphors in describing the goals and purposes of higher education. In her book *Not for Profit* (2010), for example, Martha Nussbaum uses the language of soul to describe the current woes of higher education, saying “we seem to be forgetting about the soul, about what it is for thought to open out of the soul and connect person to world in a rich, subtle, and complicated manner.” Soul is a religious word. In traditional usage, the soul is the animating force of life that differentiates living things from inanimate objects. “Having soul” or being “soulful” can, however, also mean being sensitive to life in all its many facets—its wonders, its horrors, its joys, its tragedies, its achievements, and its defeats. Soul alludes to the capacity to experience all of

these modalities of life with and alongside others. In Nussbaum's usage, soul refers to "the faculties of thought and imagination that make us human and make our relationships rich human relationships, rather than relationships of mere use and manipulation."²⁷

The boundaries separating the religious and the secular have become too fluid and porous to sustain the kind of clear distinction between the humanities and religion that Kronman desires, and much the same can be said about religion and learning in general. In the seamless fabric of human experience and knowledge, these matters are interwoven. It makes sense for colleges and universities to examine the many different aspects of reality separately, but higher learning also involves the work of seeing life as a whole and of bringing together knowledge and meaning. That includes religion.

Colleges and universities have many roles. They expand the boundaries of human knowledge and introduce students to the search for truth. They train people for future employment. They provide students with the skills and information that can empower them to become community leaders. They teach people how to see the world in new ways that may differ considerably from the ways in which they were raised. And they also provide opportunities for students to reflect on life in general, asking them not only to analyze reality as it is but to ponder the meaning of the world and what it could become in light of their own deepest values and commitments. These roles point to the very "soul" of why colleges and universities exist: to educate students as *persons* and not just as minds.

There is no question that paying attention to religion sometimes can make the educational process more difficult. Religion can disrupt classroom conversation, exchanges between students can become heated, personal feelings can be interjected into academic debates, and "faith" can sometimes express itself in ways that seem antithetical to critical thinking. But religion can also deepen discussions, connect students more holistically with the process of learning, and force everyone to grapple more realistically with the world as it actually is—a world where religion is no longer invisible.

NO LONGER INVISIBLE

*Religion in
University Education*



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and

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