
The History of Religion in American Higher Education

TO UNDERSTAND THE distinctive ways in which religion interacts with university education in the present requires some awareness of how it functioned in the past. Over the nearly four-hundred-year course of American higher education, religion has moved from being central to being marginal to being newly relevant. This chapter sketches that history, referencing three broad periods of development that we call the Protestant era, the privatized era, and the pluriform era (see Figure 2.1).

The Protestant era began with the founding of Harvard in 1636 and lasted until roughly 1900. During those two-and-a-half centuries, the words “religion” and “Protestant” were functionally synonymous at most American colleges and universities. Higher education was largely owned (both literally and figuratively) by Protestantism. The second era, the period of religious privatization, began around 1900 (although its roots go back further) and extended through most of the twentieth century. This was a time when religion, though never entirely eliminated from higher education, was increasingly separated from the more public domains of teaching and research and was restricted to the private and academically invisible realm of personal opinion and informal conversation. The privatizing proclivities of this era are still evident in some circles of higher education today, which is not surprising because the breaks between historical periods are rarely sharp and clean. One age is usually still waning as the next one begins. The pluriform era, which began in the late twentieth century, represents a new and very different phase in the history of religion in higher education, when pluralism, rather than Protestantism, defines the lay of the land, and when religion has become quite visible once again. The unique place of religion in higher education today becomes clearer when compared to the characteristics of the preceding historical periods.

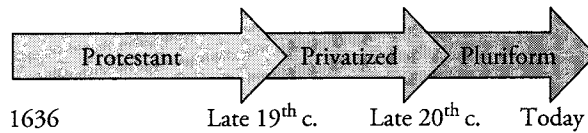


FIGURE 2.1 Three Eras of Religion in American Higher Education

The Protestant Era

The Protestant era of American religion and higher education was a time when all of life, including education, was set within a national culture dominated by Protestant Christianity.¹ Housed in a variety of different denominations, Protestantism defined the ethos of the nation as a whole. It molded public values, shaped public perceptions of the world, and defined the core goals of higher education. Protestantism began as an immigrant faith brought to North America from Europe, but once transplanted, it quickly took on a distinctive American character. Most notably, American Protestantism became a voluntary, pluralistic, and democratic affair, in contrast to the state-controlled established churches of Europe.

Protestantism was, of course, never the faith of all the people, and for those in the minority, it could become oppressive. In the early years of the Protestant era, traditional Native American ways of life were often denigrated; members of smaller religious groups like Quakers, Jews, and Catholics were sometimes abused; and African slaves, who were thought by some to be incapable of conversion, were deemed not only religiously “other” but less than fully human. But Protestantism was also a source of much that was good in the new nation. Perhaps most importantly, Protestantism’s emphasis on the individual gave a significant boost to the formulation of American democracy. For Protestants, true faith is a matter of uncoerced choice—in order to be genuine, religion has to be free—and Protestant insistence on the voluntary nature of faith paved the way for the separation of church and state that eventually became the law of the land.

As America settled into a new national context based on principles of religious freedom and church–state separation, education came to play a significant role in the practice of religion itself. Persuasion was the only approved mechanism by which to create and maintain religious communities, and the first Protestant colleges in America (see Table 2.1) were founded, at least in part, as training institutions to provide ministers with those skills of persuasion.

By the early nineteenth century, the religious education of ministers was being transferred to educational institutions called seminaries or divinity schools, and the function of colleges was broadening to include training for leaders of society as a whole. The theological basis for educating non-ministerial students was found in the Protestant notion of vocation: the belief that almost any form of

Table 2.1 Colonial Colleges²

<i>Institution</i>	<i>Year Founded</i>	<i>Denominational Affiliation</i>
Harvard	1636	Congregational
William and Mary	1693	Anglican
Yale	1701	Congregational
University of Pennsylvania	1741	Anglican (informally)
Princeton	1746	Presbyterian
Columbia	1754	Anglican
Brown	1764	Baptist
Rutgers	1766	Reformed
Dartmouth	1769	Congregational

work that is moral and serves the needs of humankind can be understood as a religious way of life, a way of doing God's will in the world. When ordinary work is potentially infused with religious meaning and significance, it blurs the line between the ministry (ordained religious leadership) and other vocations, and people could move relatively easily from one to the other. This kind of movement was common: More than a quarter of the nineteenth-century graduates of New England's Protestant colleges—places like Amherst, Williams, and Bowdoin—served as ministers, missionaries, or church-related teachers for at least a while before assuming other non-church-related roles in society.³

Character education played a huge role in these early Protestant colleges. They were essentially training institutions for religious and social leadership, and students often were required to take a final capstone course, typically taught by the college president, that summarized all the moral and religious values it was hoped students would internalize before graduating. Learning and character were assumed to intertwine, and the job of the college president was to model the connections of faith, knowledge, wisdom, and moral virtue that students were supposed to emulate. Mentoring of this sort was feasible only because the colleges of the time were so small. Up until the middle of the nineteenth century, higher education was largely reserved for members of the social elite and for those who might aspire to join it. No colonial college ever enrolled more than one hundred students at a time, and as late as 1880, only twenty-six colleges in America had more than two hundred students on campus.⁴ In this context, a focus on character

and the liberal arts, as opposed to practical skills or job preparation, made a great deal of sense. College education provided an education in moral and intellectual responsibility for those destined to be leaders. It was a privilege with incumbent duties, not a means of personal advancement.

The Civil War was a watershed in American history, and it represented a crucial turning point in the history of American religion. The nation lost some of its perceived innocence during the war, and Protestantism itself was tarnished. President Lincoln famously noted in his second inaugural address that people on both sides of the war “read the same Bible, and pray to the same God; and each invokes His aid against the other.”⁵ American Protestantism was fractured, and it would never again be the same. In the South, Protestantism was remodeled to align with the myth of the Lost Cause,⁶ while Protestantism in the North became more connected than ever with the idea that America as a unified nation was a special, God-blessed place.

During the post-Civil War years, the nation was on the move. The agrarian age was ending, and the industrial boom was underway. A new sense of purpose and progress was in the air, and the demands on education were expanding accordingly. Character and vocation remained central, but useful knowledge and pragmatic skills were blended more and more deeply into the mix, giving rise to a whole new range of institutions designed to educate individuals and to advance democracy. This is when the first women’s colleges began and when the first African American colleges and universities were organized for the purpose of “uplifting the race.”⁷ Also, the first “normal schools” were created to produce teachers for the nation’s ever-expanding public school system, and in 1862 the Morrill Land Grant Act provided funding for a new public university system dedicated to the advancement of learning and the common good. Although Protestantism had fractured, the moral ethos of Protestantism—its generalized biblical vision of life—continued to function as a kind of *de facto* religious point of reference for all of these schools. Most Americans remained confident that Protestantism was still the best and highest expression of religion the world had ever seen.

Protestants themselves also remained firm believers in the importance of higher education. They supported the institutions that were already in existence, and different Protestant churches continued to create their own explicitly church-related institutions during this post-war period. Some Protestant groups established ethnic denominational colleges, hoping to preserve old-world ways of faith while simultaneously training the children of immigrants for success in a new land. Examples include St. Olaf College in Minnesota, which served Norwegian Lutherans, and Hope College in Michigan, founded by and for Dutch Calvinists. Another new kind of Protestant college was the evangelical “Bible school” or “Bible College,” organized to prepare ministers and missionaries for the tasks of home and foreign missions. Protestantism was not the only educationally active

religion during the post-Civil War years, however. Catholics began the task of building a separate non-Protestant educational infrastructure for themselves, a comprehensive system that extended from grade school through college, and these were also the years when Jewish efforts in American higher education began.

It is impossible to provide one blanket description that covers all the various nineteenth-century American colleges. Many of them were academically respectable institutions; many were not. Some endured; a good number did not. Some were "private" institutions, and others were "public," but the distinction between public and private was not very clear, and it meant much less than it does today. Most of the new schools were, like their predecessors, quite small, but some universities grew to have enrollments in the thousands. The one thing almost all of these schools shared in common—except for those that were Catholic or Jewish—is that every one of them was still discernibly Protestant in ethos and orientation. This was so much the case that even "state schools" frequently required students to attend chapel services that functioned in a thoroughly Protestant manner.

By the end of the nineteenth century, the Protestantism of the nation was no longer the same kind of Protestantism that had given birth to American higher education during the colonial period. American Protestantism had been stretched and pulled and heated and cooled in many different ways, but some themes remained consistent nonetheless: belief in God, reliance on the moral teachings of Jesus, an emphasis on the individuality of faith, and confidence in the superiority of Protestant Christianity when compared to all other religions. Perhaps most importantly, the development of character was still a predominant concern. In the Protestant view, a college education came with responsibilities. Higher education was supposed to make its recipients better people, better able to discern and advance the common good. Many other elements of the old Protestant model of higher education have passed away, but this ideal remains a central theme in the rhetoric of higher education even today.

A Century of Religious Privatization

Over the course of the twentieth century, religion in American higher education was increasingly privatized. At most colleges and universities, religion was slowly withdrawn (or withdrew) from the more public domains of education and came to be seen as a personal matter that faculty and students, if they so desired, could address on their own terms outside the academic framework of the institution. The move toward privatized religion accelerated during the 1960s, with religion becoming an almost exclusively personal concern on most campuses by the 1980s and 1990s.⁸

This privatization of religion has often been told as a narrative of secularization,⁹ as a story of religion's slow exile from the academy.¹⁰ No one has told this story

better or more convincingly than the former University of Notre Dame historian George Marsden, whose magisterial treatment of the topic, *The Soul of the American University*, is subtitled “from Protestant establishment to established nonbelief.” Marsden’s focus is on what he identifies as the “pace-setting American universities” (places like Harvard, Yale, Princeton, Johns Hopkins, the University of Michigan, and the University of California), and he says that all of these schools changed from being visibly Christian (meaning Protestant) at the beginning of the twentieth century to being stridently secular or nonreligious by the late twentieth century.¹¹

This trajectory of religious “decline” or secularization (with the image of a “slippery slope” frequently invoked by those lamenting it) is not necessarily wrong, but it overemphasizes particular elements of what occurred. For the most part, religion was not pushed out of the academy; instead, the privatization of religion on campuses was often religiously motivated. In fact, the privatization of religion, when viewed from some perspectives, is a religious step forward. Most obviously, it opened up space for greater religious inclusivity. As the dominance of Protestantism in higher education waned, it became easier for people of other religions to feel comfortable on American college and university campuses. At the beginning of the twentieth century, Catholics and Jews (members of the two largest non-Protestant religious communities in the nation) were still barred from many colleges and universities, but by the 1960s and 1970s, they were welcomed at nearly all institutions of higher learning.¹² Even so, there is a Protestant irony in this development. The pathway to academic acceptance for any religious person was the privatization—read “individualization”—of that person’s religious identity. This is a natural stance for many Protestants, but it is decidedly foreign to the practices of many other religious traditions.

Various factors combined to encourage the privatization of religion in higher education. One of the most important was the massive upheaval that divided American Protestantism in the early years of the twentieth century into two camps, with fundamentalism at one end of the spectrum and modernism at the other. Fundamentalists took a stand against what they saw as the modern “apostasy” of the sciences, while the more liberal or modernist wing of the Protestant movement embraced the new findings of science as the equivalent of religious revelation. The most famous symbolic event in this conflict was the Scopes trial in 1925. John Scopes, a high school teacher in Tennessee, was charged with teaching evolution in his science class in violation of state law. Scopes was found guilty and assessed a \$100 fine, but old-fashioned religion was the big loser in the court of public opinion. By the end of the trial, the Bible-believing, fundamentalist Protestantism embodied by William Jennings Bryan, whose testimony spearheaded the prosecution’s case against Scopes, appeared out of sync with modern culture. The news coverage of the trial made fundamentalists into

laughingstock among the cultural and intellectual leaders of the nation. By the late 1920s, many fundamentalist Protestants began to separate themselves from mainstream culture in an effort to maintain their religious views and way of life. They created their own independent world of private institutions, including not only new churches, but also schools, radio stations, and publishing houses. Their withdrawal from higher education dramatically altered the face of religion in the mainstream academy.¹³

The fundamentalist departure is only half the story. The modernist or liberal Protestants who remained connected with higher education were themselves in the process of redefining Christianity in ways that made it more private. In particular, liberal Protestants welcomed the distinction between facts and values that some academics were beginning to make. From their perspective, issues of factuality belong in the sciences, and it is not the job of religion to pontificate about facts. The job of religion is to add values: ethics, meaning, significance, and wonder. One consequence of this division of labor was that liberal Protestantism was forced ever more deeply into the private world of personal opinion, because liberal Protestants themselves often disagreed vehemently over which values to espouse. Perhaps no one grasped this situation better than the Harvard psychologist William James, who opined early in the century that religion, in the modern sense of the term, should be defined as “the feelings, acts, and experiences of *individual men in their solitude*, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine” [emphasis added].¹⁴ Although the Social Gospel movement that was popular during the early years of the twentieth century provided an alternative and more communal option for liberal or progressive Protestants, it never became a major force in American higher education. It was the individualism of liberal Protestantism that provided the enduring influence.

A second, quite different, nudge toward privatization came from the American adaptation of the German university model. The German version of higher education placed a new emphasis on research and discovery (*Wissenschaft*), in addition to the development of character (*Bildung*). Its goal was to balance both purposes of higher education, but in the pragmatic context of American democracy it was *Wissenschaft* that quickly assumed the leading role. Concerns about character were never entirely jettisoned, but the discovery and dissemination of new knowledge became the central rationale for creating a new group of research *universities* that saw their work as decidedly different from that of *colleges* devoted to teaching and learning. The first school to be founded on the basis of this new vision of higher education was the Johns Hopkins University launched in 1876. The new educational ideal was formalized in 1900 when the Association of American Universities was created, an organization self-defined as including the best of the best American institutions of higher learning. It did not take long for the “university ideal” of research and scholarship to become the benchmark for higher

learning in general, the standard by which quality was measured at all universities and colleges.

The new German-inspired model of the university was not at all antithetical to religion, at least not at first. However, as more and more emphasis was placed on research and on new scientific discoveries, it became increasingly unclear where religion fit and what its proper role might be in terms of creating knowledge and building character. The eventual consensus was that religion really did not fit anywhere, and it was especially unfit for the classroom or laboratory. Religion was not a science, and attempts to make the study of religion more scientific usually succeeded only in making it less appealing to students. An even more basic question had to do with use of time: Should the tasks of the academic workday include religion? The general agreement was that they should not. Time in the laboratory and the classroom was to be spent creating and disseminating knowledge, and time for religion should be made somewhere else. Religion and character were still considered important by many leaders in higher education, but they were matters to be dealt with by individuals on their own time or in dialogue with their religious communities, not within the teaching and research settings of the university.

A third force diverting higher education away from religion arose from the business community, especially the new breed of industrial philanthropists who emerged in the latter years of the nineteenth century and took it upon themselves to support higher learning. The founding of new universities became a kind of competitive sport among the business magnates of the time. Leland Stanford (railroads) founded Stanford University, and Benjamin Duke (tobacco) founded Duke University. Somewhat less egoistically, John D. Rockefeller (oil) gave his money to the geographically named University of Chicago. But the story was the same everywhere. Flush with money, private universities set out to become the best educational institutions possible, competing with each other for top ranking just as their financial supporters competed with each other for status in the world of business and finance. Historian Mark Noll notes that the entrepreneurs who started these universities “were not paying for moral uplift but for the means to advance a vision of the good life that increasingly stressed the powers of free choice and the pleasures of personal consumption.”¹⁵ These philanthropists expected to be in charge, they assumed their friends should be on the board of trustees, and they wanted their university presidents to think like them. During the first half of the nineteenth century, almost every college president had been a member of the ordained clergy, but few presidents of the nation’s new research universities were cut from that cloth. Most of them were scholars and academic entrepreneurs who applied a pragmatic, businesslike logic to the work of the academy.

Not everyone was sanguine about the waning of religious influence in higher education, and many mechanisms were explored to keep religion visible on campus, ranging from endowed professorships in biblical studies to the “great books”

curriculum that included many Christian classics of Western culture. But the overall trend was toward the increasing privatization of religion on campus. Given the larger social developments of the era, this development seemed perfectly sensible to most people. American society as a whole was becoming more specialized, and life was being sliced up into different, separate realms of activity and expertise. Religion represented one sector of life and scholarship another, and it seemed reasonable for the two to be kept mostly apart.¹⁶

This pragmatic separation of religion from the classroom received a huge boost after World War II, when higher education began to boom. Before World War II, the percentage of Americans who attended college or university was still relatively low, around 10 percent. This represented a significant increase over the 3 or 4 percent who pursued higher learning in 1900, but it was nothing like the explosion in numbers that was about to take place (see Figure 2.2). The initial trigger for the boom was the G.I. Bill that provided tuition reimbursement for any military veteran who wanted to go to college, but once that generation had experienced the benefits of higher education, they were convinced that their children should have the same opportunity. By 1975, roughly a quarter of all eighteen-to-twenty-four-year-old Americans were involved in higher education, and a college or university degree was becoming a prerequisite for most of the nation's better-paying jobs. Today, nearly half of all young adults undertake at least some study at the college or university level.

This incredible expansion of the student population produced a commensurate multiplication of institutions. Roughly 1,000 colleges and universities existed in America in 1900; today there are about 4,500 (see Figure 2.3). Higher

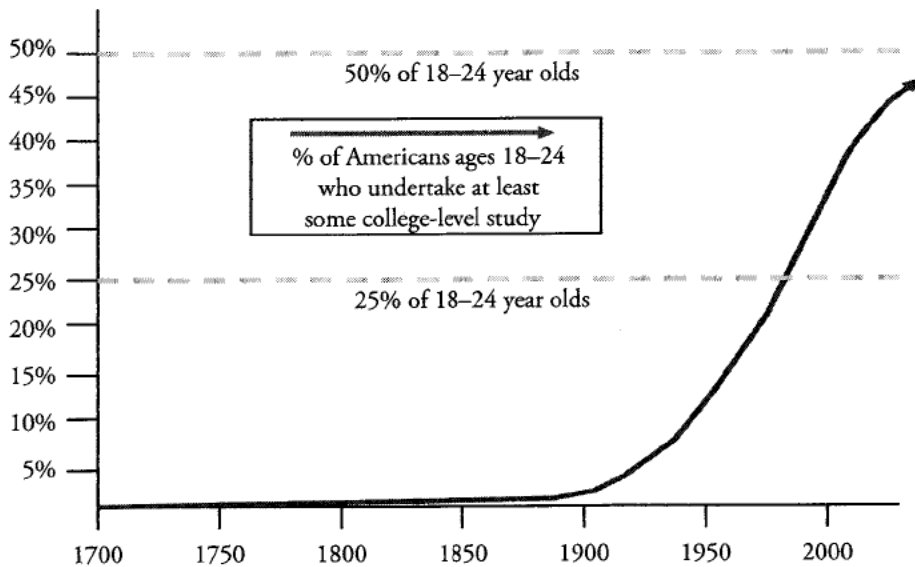


FIGURE 2.2 College/University Attendance in the United States, 1700–2010

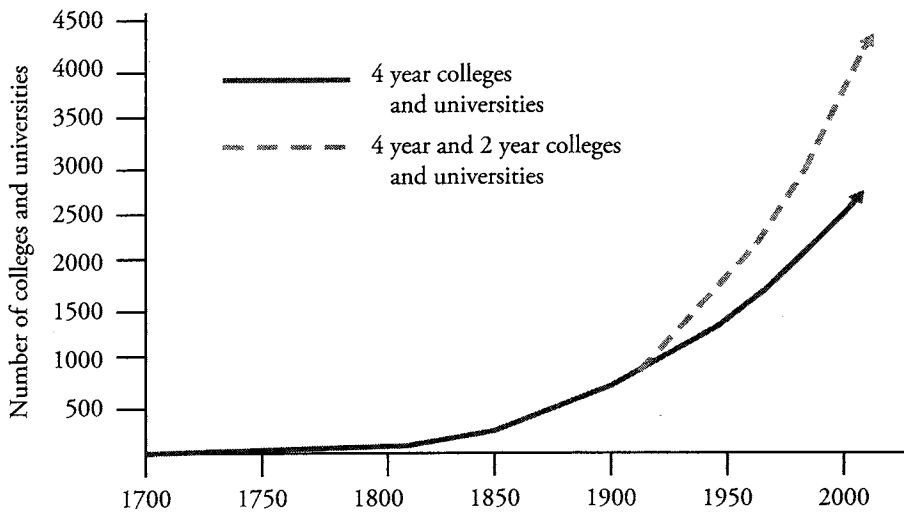


FIGURE 2.3 The Number of Colleges and Universities in the United States, 1700–2010

education in America is now a gigantic industry, embodied in a vast menagerie of schools, including a variety of elite public and private research universities, many different state schools and community colleges, and a wide range of private higher educational institutions, some of them profit-making but most of them nonprofit. In 1900, most students were enrolled in private universities or colleges. Today, two out of every three students attend public, state-funded institutions. In the emerging world of public-dominated higher education, job preparation became increasingly central, pushing aside not only religion but also the liberal arts. Campus communities (including faculty, students, and staff) also became ever more religiously and secularly diverse, making the privatization of “personal” matters like religion the easy default position for maintaining civility on campus.

The same trends were visible outside the bounds of higher education; all of American society was moving in a similar direction. In the two decades following WWII, America was proud to be a “melting pot.” It was assumed that all Americans, regardless of social, ethnic, or religious identity, were slowly blending together to create a single homogeneous American culture. What mattered in melting-pot America was being “nice,” without being extreme. Religion, as long as it didn’t become fanatical, was part of that niceness. During these years, President Dwight Eisenhower famously commented that America made “no sense unless it is founded in a deeply felt religious faith, *and I don’t care what it is.*”¹⁷ And this is when Will Herberg wrote his widely acclaimed book, *Protestant, Catholic, Jew.*¹⁸ Herberg argued that whatever differences might have existed among America’s Protestants, Catholics, and Jews in the past, those differences no longer really mattered. Instead of being a Protestant nation, America had become a “Judeo-

Christian” country where Catholics, Jews, and Protestants were all equals. In this new America, religion in general was good and morality was expected, but personal religious preferences were to be kept to oneself.

Most Americans perceived this new public ethos of religious moderation as nothing more than being polite, but by the early 1960s, some intellectuals began to suspect that religion was not merely becoming more private and more polite; it was also becoming much less powerful. The trend toward secularization was obvious in Europe, and many scholars assumed that America would eventually follow the European lead. Peter Berger, one of the leading proponents of this new theory of inevitable secularization, predicted that American society would eventually free itself “from the domination of religious institutions and symbols.” As he observed the trends of the time, Berger speculated that “probably for the first time in history, the religious legitimations of the world have lost plausibility not only for a few intellectuals and other marginal individuals but for broad masses of entire societies.”¹⁹

Those who accepted the theory of secularization as an accurate predictor of the future thought that higher education had a responsibility to prepare students for a world in which religion would soon be a nonfactor. Some people thought that learning how to think about the deepest values of life without recourse to religion was an educational necessity. This thoroughly secularist perspective of higher education was never adopted universally across the academy, but it was widespread, and its increasing prominence was what led George Marsden to argue in 1994 that “nonbelief” had become the established faith of higher education.

While Marsden was documenting higher education’s trend toward nonbelief, however, other scholars were beginning to detect signs that the privatization of religion in America may have passed its peak. As early as 1970, Peter Berger retracted some of his claims about secularization, arguing in *A Rumor of Angels* that symbols of transcendence continued to abound in modern society, even though some forms of religion were on the decline.²⁰ When Protestant evangelicals (the offspring of early twentieth-century fundamentalists) began to re-enter American politics in the form of the Moral Majority (later the Religious Right) in the mid-1970s, when the Islamic Revolution took place in Iran in 1979, and when Polish Catholics united with workers in the Solidarity movement that helped end communist rule in Poland, the predictive power of secularization theory seemed to dissolve. Rather than disappearing, religion was becoming more visible, and privatization ceased to be an adequate strategy for either society or higher education.

Religious Pluriformity

The religion of contemporary America is pluriform, more complex and multifaceted than it has ever been before. It is not just that religion has become more pluralistic—that more of the world’s religions are now represented in the

American population—but also that the notion of religion itself has undergone a major restructuring. Being religious used to mean being part of a historic religious community, but most Americans now assume that a person can be spiritual or religious to varying degrees without any connection to a particular religious group. The differences between religious and nonreligious lifestyles are not always obvious, and the line between public and private has also become blurred.

This new, foggy pluriformity of religion in American society did not emerge overnight. The massive social upheaval of the 1960s paved the way, creating a milieu in which inherited notions of social and religious authority could be cast aside and new pathways for being religious and nonreligious could be forged. Huge social movements for civil rights and equality challenged older patriarchal and hierarchical notions of religion, and they also spawned their own egalitarian and justice-oriented religious alternatives. Changes in immigration laws made it possible for many more Asians to move to America, bringing their Asian religious traditions (Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, and others) with them. The Second Vatican Council sent a shock wave through American Catholicism, updating Catholic faith and practice, and leading some Catholics to lose faith in their church and others to become more active. The religious and political resurrection of conservative, evangelical Christianity also reshaped the landscape, invigorating traditional Protestantism. All of America's religious communities have been reconfigured in recent decades, often becoming more fluid and flexible than before, but sometimes becoming more distinctive and dogmatic. The number of people who identify themselves as nonreligious has grown, and nonbelief has become more acceptable—although many nonbelieving, nonreligious individuals now consider themselves to be “spiritual.” Whatever spin is put on this complicated set of developments, one thing is clear: Religion in America today is not the old religion of nineteenth-century Protestantism, nor is it the privatized faith of the twentieth century. Religion as it is present in twenty-first-century America is something quite different.

The same cultural shifts that were reshaping American religion were simultaneously having an effect on colleges and universities. Some of the core orientations of higher education were being modified, and some of these changes—even though this was not their conscious intent—paved the way for colleges and universities to re-engage religion. Three almost totally unrelated developments were especially significant in this regard: (1) the rejection of epistemological objectivity and the embrace of multiculturalism, (2) the growth of professional studies, and (3) the turn toward student-centered learning. None of these changes was undertaken with the goal of pushing colleges and universities toward a new engagement with religion, but they made it easier for religion to slip back into some of the public domains of higher education almost without notice.

Multiculturalism and the rejection of objectivist epistemology: Starting in the mid-1960s, scholars in a variety of disciplines began to question the objectivity of knowledge. Much of what appeared to be fair and objective scholarship began, on closer inspection, to look as if it was laden with bias. Women saw male prejudice; African Americans saw racism; postmodernists and post-colonialists saw issues of power and control everywhere. Once articulated, these criticisms stuck, because even a cursory examination of older scholarship showed that the criticisms had some validity: Intellectual prejudice is everywhere. Just as troubling was the dawning realization that there was no easy cure. Prejudice is built into the work of scholarship. People are the products of the cultures, communities, families, and the times in which they live. They have feelings, they have values, they have likes and dislikes, and they have both blind spots and areas of hypersensitive awareness because of who they are and how they have lived their lives. Subjectivity and finitude infuse everything people know or think they know, and there is no way around it.

Multiculturalism has become the term used to name this awareness of the finitude and particularity of knowing, but multiculturalism does not imply that there are no ways of making judgments about the relative intellectual worth of differing perspectives. Peer review and evidence-based reasoning remain central to the scholarly process in all fields of study. But the role of interpretation and the importance of personal and social influences are now widely acknowledged. Who one is as a person—what one has experienced, the different forms of intelligence one possesses, the angle from which one approaches an issue, the cultural grid through which one sees the world, and one's religious or spiritual convictions—affects one's work as a scholar, teacher, and student. In acknowledgment of that reality, most colleges and universities have begun to emphasize the multifaceted nature of learning and the importance of epistemological diversity within the scholarly community. Exposure to a variety of alternative perspectives or “ways of knowing” is now considered a sign of good teaching and scholarship.

Professional studies: A second recent development in higher education centers on the growth of professional and applied programs of study. Today, a majority of the courses offered at colleges and universities are in fields of study like business, health, engineering, and education. By their very nature, these fields of study focus on human behavior. Human behavior requires making choices, and choices involve ethics, that is, judgments about which options are better or worse. Almost all programs of applied study have accordingly decided that discussions about ethics and professional behavior need to be included in their curriculums. Giving space to reflect on these kinds of moral and ethical concerns necessarily brings the personal values of both students and faculty into play. Do their own natural inclinations agree with the ethical norms of the field? What existing attitudes or practices might need to be modified to bring them into line with the rules of

the profession? Or, more critically, do the norms of the profession seem right? Is it ever appropriate—or even morally required—to disregard some rules of one’s profession some of the time? People in all of the applied fields of study must wrestle with these kinds of questions, and higher education has a responsibility to help students acquire the needed skills of reflection.

Student-centered learning: A third major shift in higher education has been the move from professor-centered teaching to student-centered learning. Up until the 1970s, college students were often treated as empty vessels that professors were supposed to fill with knowledge. The focus was on teaching: Professors communicated what students had to know. But the amount of intellectual material available in the world today is overwhelming, and the educational focus has shifted toward student learning. Rather than simply pouring information into students, learning occurs when students understand and use information, developing the intellectual skills and habits to access and digest the ever-expanding storehouse of knowledge that is available to them. A student-centered approach also recognizes that people learn better, and retain what they learn longer, when they have an active role in the learning process, connecting new information and insights with other things they already know or believe or have experienced. In other words, learning is maximized when students bring themselves wholeheartedly into the learning experience, and for many students, religion is part of who they are.

None of these three developments was initially connected to religion, but religion was invisibly bundled up inside each of them. Religious perspectives are unavoidably intertwined with multiculturalism and epistemological pluralism; the divergent ways that people make sense of reality are often influenced by their own religious or religion-like views of the world. Similarly, questions of ethics or professional conduct open the door to religion, because religious beliefs, values, and habits of behavior shape how people define what is good and right action. Finally, student-centered learning contains an implicit receptivity to religion, because respecting the autonomy of students as learners necessarily entails some degree of respect for the religious identities and the spiritual quests of those students. If the world as a whole had continued to become more and more secular, the religious implications of these three developments may never have become particularly obvious. But because religion has instead become increasingly more visible in society as a whole and on campuses, these three developments began to function like huge cracks in the dam of privatization, allowing religion at first to trickle and then to cascade back into the “public” work of colleges and universities.


One facet of higher education’s focus on student-centered learning is especially relevant: Today, it is often students themselves who are asking to have more attention given to religious and spiritual matters. According to the Higher

Education Research Institute (HERI) at UCLA, 80 percent of today's first-year students say they have "an interest in spirituality," 76 percent say they are on a "search for meaning and purpose in life," 64 percent say their "spirituality is a source of joy," and almost half (47 percent) say it is essential or very important to "seek out opportunities to help me grow spiritually."²¹ Students do not want colleges and universities to take on the role of "church" and supply religious answers to life's questions, but many students do expect their undergraduate experience to help them think more clearly, feel more deeply, and consider more responsibly the broad questions of life. These questions no longer necessarily come pre-labeled as religious, but they are functionally religious because they focus on ultimate concerns: how to make sense of the world, what to hope for, who to care about, how to script one's own life, where to place trust, and what really matters.

Nearly everyone in America now rubs shoulders every day with people of differing faiths and lifestyles. Students know this. They know they live in a religiously pluriform world, and they are trying to figure out the implications. This means that, perhaps for the first time in American higher educational history, the push for talking about matters of religion and spirituality and answering questions about human purpose and meaning is coming from the bottom up, rather than from the top down. Paying attention to religion in higher education today is not at all a matter of imposing faith or morality on anyone; it is a matter of responding intelligently to the questions of life that students find themselves necessarily asking as they try to make sense of themselves and the world in an era of ever-increasing social, intellectual, and religious complexity.

NO LONGER INVISIBLE

*Religion in
University Education*



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