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Can We Bring Spirituality Back to Campus? Higher Education's Re-Engagement with Values and Spirituality

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Abstract

In recent years on college and university campuses around the country an expanding and increasingly vigorous dialogue has begun, centered on discovering a place for examining personal values, meaning and purposes, including religious and spiritual values, as part of the educational experience. Individually and collectively, the voices of campus leaders, of faculty, of student affairs personnel, and of students themselves have begun calling for an exploration of ways to better integrate students’ search for meaning and their spiritual quests with their academic preparation in the classroom and through campus activities.

Until the second half of the twentieth century, higher education in the United States was inextricably intertwined with the broad influence of churches, particularly Protestant churches, in shaping the country’s social and political climate. The college years have a significant impact in shaping the direction of an individual’s life. This paper examines the major historical trends in American society and in American higher education that serve as a framework for understanding the current interest in renewing an examination of personal and spiritual values as part of the mission of higher education to address the whole person.

Religion and American Higher Education: The Historical Context

In recent years on college and university campuses around the country an expanding and increasingly vigorous dialogue has begun, centered on discovering a place for examining personal values, meaning and purposes, including religious and spiritual values, as part of the educational experience. Individually and collectively, the voices of campus leaders, of faculty, of student affairs personnel, and of students themselves have begun calling for an exploration of ways to better integrate students’ search for meaning and their spiritual quests with their academic preparation in the classroom and through campus activities.
Until the second half of the twentieth century, higher education in the United States was inextricably intertwined with the broad influence of churches, particularly Protestant churches, in shaping the country’s social and political climate. The vast majority of independent colleges and universities were founded by specific religious denominations and even public institutions, although nominally non-sectarian, were strongly influenced by the dominant Protestant culture. Until the 1960s, for example, at many campuses around the country regular compulsory attendance at religious services was required of all students. The college or university chapel today remains a visible symbol on most campuses of the prominence of the religious influence in the history of higher education. As Douglas Sloan indicates:

The history of American higher education, until well into the middle of the nineteenth century, can scarcely be understood apart from the history of American Protestantism. Besides the family, the church, state, and college were often viewed as the main institutional pillars of early colonial America with the college serving to prepare trained leaders for the other two. In the nineteenth century colleges were being founded by scores in the expanding new nation and were looked to for the preparatory professional training as well as moral formation and cultural learning deemed vital to a healthy and advancing society (1994, p. 1).

The great number of colleges and universities established around the country until the first decades of the twentieth century reflected the lack of distinction between church and state: some colleges were founded by a local community; a number by the initiative of a specific church; many by a combination of church and local citizens; and still others by a single benefactor acting for the church. As George Marsden summarizes the situation: Since during most of its history American higher education was usually thought of as a religious enterprise as well a public service, it seemed natural for church and state to work hand in hand (1992, p. 10).

The following examples illustrate the pervasive ties between the establishment of institutions higher education and the major Christian denominations in the United States:

The Congregational Church founded 45 institutions around the country beginning with Harvard in 1636 and Yale in 1701, and as late as Scripps College founded in 1926. Most of these institutions are no longer church affiliated.

The Southern Baptists established 50 colleges and universities between 1823 and 1968, which are still denominationally affiliated.

The American Baptist Convention founded 16 institutions between 1833 and 1963 that are still church affiliated. A larger number of institutions such as the University of Chicago and Brown University were originally affiliated with the American Baptist Convention but have severed their denominational ties.

Reflecting the popular acceptance that church and higher education acted in consort, early educators in the United States were frequently clergy. College admission, however, was
never restricted to students of the founding church or denomination. All students from within the state were welcome regardless of their church affiliation, since all institutions were considered to have a public status. In fact, most state legislatures, in chartering the institutions, imposed nondiscrimination in the charters they granted.

Historically, even public institutions although founded as non-sectarian were distinctly Protestant institutions. Clergy presidents and faculty were the norm; daily chapel attendance was required; and courses such as “Evidence of Christianity” and “Natural Theology” were frequently mandatory. This was true of such major public institutions as the University of Michigan, University of Wisconsin, University of Illinois, University of Indiana, and Ohio State University. As late as 1890, for example, James B. Angell, President of the University of Michigan, who was trained in theology although not ordained as a minister, worked fervently to promote the advantages of Christianity as part of a Michigan education: “The State as the great patron and protector of the University has a right to ask that the Christian spirit, which pervades the laws, the customs, and the life of the State, shall shape and color the life of the University” (Longfield, 1992, p. 50). At the same time John Dewey, a member of the philosophy faculty at the University of Michigan between 1884 and 1894, insisted that: “There is an obligation to know God, and to fail to meet this obligation is not to err intellectually but to sin morally” (Longfield, 1992, p. 62). This was so, he argued, because knowledge lays a moral obligation on the individual: “Science or philosophy is worthless, which does not ultimately bring every fact into guiding relation with the living activity of man, and the end of all his striving approach to God” (Longfield, 1992, p. 62).

A number of scholars have researched the changing trends in American society that have resulted in the strong adherence on most campuses today to a separation between education and religion. In accounting for the declining influence of churches on institutions of higher education during the first half of the twentieth century, George Marsden (1992), for example, points to the growing adherence to the scientific, research-based approach to knowledge and the associated disciplinary specialization among scholars. The establishment of the American Association of University Professors in 1915 provides a striking example of the profound change that occurred in higher education as faculty with advanced degrees and significant specialization in their disciplines began to replace faculty who were generalists. In its 1915 statement of principles, the American Association of University Professors confirmed the “sacred status of scientific knowledge and free inquiry”: “If education is the cornerstone of the structure of society, and if progressing in scientific knowledge is essential to civilization, few things can be more important than to enhance the dignity of the scholar’s profession” (Marsden, 1992, p. 19).

Douglas Sloan (1994) posits that the dilemma in higher education today, as reflective of the larger society, consists of ignoring the whole area of knowledge based on faith or experience. According to Sloan, the distinction between two forms of knowledge in higher education resulted from the whole scale acceptance by the 1960’s of the university as the institutional center for developing the knowledge on which modern scientific technological society depends. As a correlate of the separation of faith and knowledge in modern society, the church has become the sole guardian of faith and the university the
prime champion of knowledge.

The Current Climate Of Religion In The United States

The present identification of institutions of higher education as centers of scientifically-based knowledge, in contrast to faith-oriented knowledge, was only fully established during the 1960’s, a period in American social history that produced significant changes in personal attitudes and in political and social institutions. A number of sociologists have documented the impact of the major social and cultural changes of the 1960’s and 1970’s on the religious beliefs and practices of the American people. Wade Clark Roof’s on-going study of religious trends in the United States since the 1950’s provides one prominent example. Roof (1999) posits that the social upheavals of the 1960’s and 1970’s and the concomitant cultural theme of self-fulfilment produced what he calls a “quest culture.” While in previous decades religion emphasized social belonging, Roof’s research demonstrates that the majority of the American population today focuses its religious energies more on the development of personal meaning, on the individual level of experience and interpretation rather than on socially defined expectations and beliefs. Americans are asking questions such as, “Does religion relate to my life?” “How can I find spiritual meaning and depth?” and “What might faith mean to me?”

According to Roof, this approach to religion as spiritual searching or quest has become pervasive throughout American society. Dominant among the various themes in this search for spirituality is an emphasis on self-understanding or self-reflexivity. The great mass of Americans today considers their own personal religious narratives as evolving, as open-ended, and as revisable. Religious authority lies in the individual believer, rather than in the church or in the Bible. It is a deeply personal and intentionally self-conscious spiritual style, not just in the obvious psychological sense, but also theologically and metaphysically.

Roof’s data provide evidence that such spirituality is not just on the margins of society but is typical of the mainstream, across social classes, ethnic and cultural enclaves. By the late 1980’s large sectors of the population, including mainline Protestants, Catholics, Jews, Born-again Evangelicals, and New Agers, were deeply focused on spiritual matters. Roof suggests several factors at the national level that contributed to and reinforced the general shifts in American religious attitudes and practices beginning in the 1960’s.

Major legislation in 1965 rescinding immigration exclusion opened doors to migrants with diverse cultures and religions from around the world.

Changes in policy by the Federal Communications Commission democratized the airwaves. As a result, religious broadcasting was now available to any group that could purchase airtime, which in turn led to the growth of televangelists.

By the early 1970’s an increasingly heterogeneous religious population in combination with several major Supreme Court decisions meant that the older religious culture could no longer sustain its hold on the public schools and larger public realm.

As a result of these major political and social changes, the established Protestant and
Catholic churches began to lose religious control of the American population and the so-called "alternative spiritualities" flourished.

Roof's research demonstrates that the interest of a large percent of the American population in deepening its spirituality includes those who have rejected their original religious grounding. Of particular significance, the more intentional, self-conscious spiritual style that gained precedence in the United States by the 1980's is found both inside and outside religious establishments. Spiritual reflexivity is not just an individual trait. Established religious institutions also engage in interpretative and monitoring processes. As the social demographics of religious constituencies change over time, religious and spiritual leaders are in positions to envision beliefs and practices appropriate to changing social and cultural circumstances. The resulting alterations in the practices of traditional religious bodies in the United States reflect what Roof defines as an open, competitive religious economy, which like any marketplace must be understood in terms of "demand" and "supply." In Roof's interpretation, to stay "in business," the traditional Protestant and Catholic churches have had to design services that meet the interests of a generation more focused on personal spiritual fulfillment than on socially motivated church participation. Roof further asserts that the quest culture now permeates the "established" religions. Older religious language has been redefined to make it more acceptable in the new climate and incorporates the concept of spirituality as a revitalizing religious form. In addition to producing major revisions in the practices of established religious bodies, the orientation toward spiritual quest arising by the 1980's created an environment ripe for new suppliers catering to the emerging quest themes predominant among the American population. According to Roof, the development of this "spiritual marketplace" reflects the shift in religious narrative style from the hands of theologians and established religious leaders into those of ordinary people. The new religious suppliers take religious pluralism for granted and play to themes of choice, individuality, and the desirability of a cultivated and spiritually sensitive self.

As individuals increasingly take a more active role in shaping the meaning systems by which they live, they also are faced with a widening range of suppliers, all contending with one another in creating symbolic worlds. Outside of the established churches and synagogues, seeker themes find eclectic expression in a variety of workshops, seminars, conferences, and retreat centers. The spiritual marketplace is reflected in a proliferation of newsletters, meditation cassettes and videos, 1-800 psychic lines, self-help groups, book publishing, magazines, and the music industry. And spiritual seekers frequently engage in and weave together the belief structures of a range of religious suppliers, creating their own personal practice of religion and spirituality. Unlike the religious doctrines of the past, the new spirituality does not imply the necessity of a unitary faith and practice.

Based on these findings, Roof concludes that the current religious situation in the United States is characterized not by a loss of faith but a qualitative shift from unquestioned belief to a more open, questing mode. The evidence clearly demonstrates that high levels of religious individualism do not necessarily undermine spiritual vitality. Remaking religion need not be viewed as an erosion or secularization. The multiplicity of new religious approaches is transformative and pluralistic. They result in personal struggles and growth,
which ultimately generate an individual and private commitment far deeper than the previous religious practices and beliefs grounded in established religious doctrine. While affirming the continued strength of spirituality in the United States today, Roof’s data demonstrate that spiritual individuality does erode certain forms of institutionalized religious participation. This change, however, opens space for new religious activities and solidarities. As a result traditional religious structures, as well as new spiritual movements, must accommodate and embrace personal concerns in the formation of religious or spiritual community.

Seeking Spirituality on Campuses Today

The social and historical trends outlined above serve as a framework for understanding the current interest in renewing an examination of personal and spiritual values as part of the mission of higher education. The great social changes of the 1960s had an immediate impact on institutions of higher education. The 1960s, for example, saw the advent of the Civil Rights movement and the subsequent victories of the 1964 Civil Rights Act and the 1965 Voting Rights Act. This civil rights legislation resulted in expanded economic, political and social opportunities for American minorities. Colleges and universities responded with programs and policies to insure increased educational access for minority populations and to promote greater knowledge of the rich diversity of racial and ethnic cultural traditions in the United States. Significant progress has been made to include an understanding of American multiculturalism as an essential component of higher education.

Ironically the passage of the landmark Immigration Act in 1965 opened America as never before to non-European immigration and the beginning of a new chapter in American racial, ethnic and religious pluralism. The resulting major changes in educational access for American minorities and the increased multiculturalism of family backgrounds now typical of the American population are reflected in the diverse student bodies of today’s colleges and universities. The religious profile of American campuses has changed just as radically as the civil rights movement changed their ethnic and racial profiles.

Given the rejection of faith-oriented knowledge that was fully established by the 1960s, however, although religious pluralism is now typical of the students and faculty, it is generally not included in measures developed by colleges and universities to strengthen multiculturalism on their campuses. The recent events of September 11th dramatically illustrate the necessity for American Colleges and universities to expand the scope of multiculturalism and diversity to include religious diversity and pluralism. Post 9-11, educators across the country are challenged to utilize their scholarly and pedagogical expertise to encourage students to learn about and develop an appreciation for the diversity of global religious traditions and practices that is now a basic fact of American life. As a result of the immediacy of worldwide communication networks and the increasing globalization of the world’s economy, Americans have developed an awareness of the complexity of other societies and cultures. But in attempting to understand the devastating actions of 9-11, it has become clear that we need a better understanding of the basic belief systems embedded in the range of world religions beyond the Judeo-Christian traditions dominant in Euro-American societies.
A few colleges and universities have begun to address this educational challenge with the introduction of new programs. The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill's controversial assignment to incoming freshman to read excerpts from the Qur'an represents an example of an innovative programmatic initiative. It also highlights the fears and prejudices that higher education seeks to counter, and the clear need for fostering greater knowledge about and understanding of diverse religious traditions.

A number of recent studies and publications reflect the strength of concern to promote the examination of personal and moral values and an understanding of religious diversity and pluralism as essential to the mission of higher education. In their study of Meaning and Spirituality in the Lives of College Faculty, for example, Alexander and Helen Astin, Directors of the Higher Education Research Institute at the University of California, Los Angeles, found that, in general, faculty are enthusiastic about discussing issues of meaning, purpose and spirituality in their lives, but reported that their institutions provide few, if any, opportunities or encouragement for such discussions with their colleagues or with students. David K. Scott, former Chancellor of the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, challenges higher education to develop a remedy for the fragmentation between the intellectual life and the life of the spirit which has become firmly entrenched on college and university campuses during the past 50 years. He encourages institutions of higher education to promote the integration of the intellectual, emotional, physical, and spiritual aspects of the individual for the creation of an educational system that engages all areas of knowledge, including critical, objective, passionate, advocacy-based and contemplative knowledge.

Over the past ten years, the growing recognition among student affairs professionals of the importance of supporting students in their search for personal meaning and values, and in their spiritual quests is exemplified in the increasing number of conference presentations and professional publications on these topics. As expressed in such publications as Transforming Campus Life: Reflections on Spirituality and Religious Pluralism edited by Vachel Miller and Merle Ryan, student affairs professionals are seeking an acknowledgement from faculty, administrators, and staff that spiritual questions and concerns of students should be integrated with academic concerns as part of the learning environment, not excluded on campus as is generally the case. Jon Dalton, for example, in calling on higher education to attend to the spiritual as well as intellectual development of students, asserts that students' spiritual reflections are part of their process of deeper learning to arrive at their own meanings and purposes. He indicates that the college experience can have a major impact in shaping the lives of students because late adolescence is a time of great potentiality and vulnerability in development, when concerns about individual purpose, meaning and commitment interact with forces of cognitive development, maturation, and social expectations (2001, p. 18).

In the more than 35 years since enactment of the Civil Rights Act, great advances have occurred in establishing racial and ethnic diversity as basic to campus life. Too many students, however, remain ignorant about religious beliefs and practices other than their own. It is now time to give the same attention to creating a campus environment that encourages an understanding of and appreciation for the religious diversity and pluralism of
American life and of peoples around the world. To address this gap, there is a growing call among educators to broaden the understanding of diversity and multiculturalism to include issues of religious and spiritual pluralism. Margaret Jablonski (2001), for example, editor of the recent publication Implications of Student Spirituality for Student Affairs Practice, emphasizes the importance of connecting the diverse spiritual voices among today’s students with the campus concern to incorporate multiculturalism as part of its mission. Robert Nash (2001) urges the incorporation of religious understandings and influences as basic to a liberal education: Religion has been such a fundamental component of life in all cultures and times that students cannot understand the history, politics or art of most societies, including the United States, without examining religion’s central role in producing both good and evil during the last three millennia (p. 55).

The concerns to include the examination of personal and moral values as part of the undergraduate educational experience and to address religious pluralism within the institution’s multicultural programs grow out of the recognition that the college years have a significant impact in shaping the direction of an individual’s life. Institutions of higher education are beginning to explore specific programmatic approaches for supporting students in deepening their development of values, including spiritual values, in conjunction with furthering their intellectual growth. To date, however, most initiatives have been piecemeal, generated by a few dedicated individuals, and most often do not have a major impact on producing institution-wide changes. For example, while student affairs personnel have begun to appreciate the importance of supporting students’ development of personal and spiritual values, there has been little thoughtful public recognition by faculty that this concern should be addressed as part of their roles and responsibilities. It is clear that if significant progress is to be made, institutions must adopt rigorous and comprehensive measures that have a reasoned place in the broader curriculum and are embraced widely by faculty, administrators, and staff.

To truly create a learning environment that promotes religious understanding, colleges and universities need to use their considerable faculty and staff resources to assist students in developing their personal and moral values, including their religious and spiritual understandings and beliefs within the context of knowledge about the range of global religious diversity. The rigorous research methodologies and analytic frameworks used to understand other critical social, psychological and cultural issues, need to be applied to understanding students’ spiritual experiences and their development of values and personal beliefs. Curriculum and co-curricular experiences are needed that subject the examination of values and the diversity of religious experience to the same analytic and critical contexts as other academic subject matter. And, campus leadership is crucial for affirming and strengthening the commitment to incorporating the search for personal meaning and values, for authenticity and spiritual growth, as central to the mission of higher education.

References


