

Why Religion Matters?

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Goals for this Presentation

- ❖ Highlight the role that religion has and continues to play in society
- ❖ Touch upon the importance of religion in the lives of college students
- ❖ Describe how college students use religion to create meaning and find purpose
- ❖ Uncover factors that hinder exploration and dialogue concerning religious matters
- ❖ Show why religious perspectives and voices are needed on college campuses
- ❖ Offer suggestions for encouraging and facilitating meaningful conversations between religious and non-religious individuals on difficult topics

Significance of Religion

In History

- The Renaissance and Enlightenment in Western Europe
- Development of Colleges and Universities in Europe and America
- European colonization in Africa, Asia, and the Americas
- The American Revolutionary and Civil Wars
- Rise of Communism in Russia and China
- Assassination of Mohandas Gandhi
- Civil Rights Movement
- Israeli and Palestinian conflict
- 9/11 Attacks and tension between America and Islamic Nations
- Present Day Economic mobility in India

Significance of Religion

In Literature

- Lord of the Rings
- The DaVinci Code
- A Thousand Splendid Suns

In Movies

- Dogma
- The Matrix
- A Walk to Remember

In Television

- South Park
- Battlestar Galactica
- Anime

Significance of Religion

In Music

- Led Zeppelin – Stairway to Heaven
- U2 – I Still Haven't Found What I'm Looking For
- Madonna – Like a Prayer
- R.E.M. – Losing My Religion
- Nine Inch Nails – Head Like a Hole
- Kanye West – Jesus Walk

In Musicals

- Fiddler on the Roof
- Jesus Christ Superstar
- Altar Boyz

Importance of Religion for College Freshmen

79%	Believe in God
69%	Religious beliefs provide them with strength, support, and guidance.
74%	Feel a sense of connection with God or a Higher Power
81%	Occasionally or frequently attend religious services
61%	Pray weekly
28%	Pray daily
40%	Strongly or somewhat agree that it is important to follow religious teachings in their everyday lives.

Importance of Religion for College Juniors

77% Pray.

74% Religious beliefs provide them with strength, support, and guidance.

70% Attended religious services during the past year.

81% Helps them develop their identity.

67% Gives meaning or purpose to their lives.

71% Gain spiritual strength by trusting in a higher power.

72% Believe that meditation and prayer can help people reach a higher level of consciousness.

71% Claim we are all spiritual beings.

Themes for Freshman and Juniors

Religion is personally helpful to them.

Discuss religion with friends and family.

Searching for meaning and purpose.

Most preference one religion over another.

Seek out opportunities to develop their spirituality.

Believe non-religious people can grow spiritually and live more lives.

High levels of spirituality are linked with strong connections to religion.

Conservative students display higher levels of spirituality and religious engagement than liberal students.

Commitment to religious faith and engagement in religious practices has a high correlation to finding meaning and achieving centeredness.

Struggles of College Students

Feeling distant from God.

Disagreeing with family members about religious issues.

Questioning their religious beliefs.

Making sense out of evil, suffering, and death.

Feeling unsettled about spiritual or religious matters.

Feeling angry at God.

Becoming disillusioned with the religious tradition of their youth.

What is the Affect on Higher Education?

Freshmen Expect College to...

- Enhance their self-awareness (69%)
- Prepare them for responsible citizenship (67%)
- Help develop their values (67%)
- Provide for their emotional development (63%)
- Encourage their personal expression of spirituality (48%)

Juniors Experience

- Professors never allow for discussion of meaning and purpose (56%)
- Classes that never encourage discussion of religion or spirituality (62%)
- Dissatisfaction with the lack of opportunities for reflection or spiritual matters (45%)
- Lack of impact on strengthening their religious or spiritual beliefs (61%)
- Attending college has strengthened their spirituality (13%)

Student Development Theory

"[Every] major era or stage in the life span is marked by its own way of making meaning...making meaning includes (1) becoming critically aware of one's own composing of reality, (2) self-consciously participating in an ongoing dialogue toward truth, and (3) cultivating a capacity to respond—to act—in ways that are satisfying and just."

"When human development happens well, we embrace a new way of interpreting the world because it can account for things that the old way no longer could. We can acknowledge considerations previously ignored, take more facts into consideration, and extend hospitality to questions that earlier we could not entertain."

"If faith is discounted, the human landscape becomes arid, and hope and commitment wither; the human spirit grows parched, and not much more than a prickly cynicism can be sustained."

Cited (in order) from pages 6, 101, and 18 in "Big Questions, Worthy Dreams" written by Sharon Daloz Parks, 2000.

Some Barriers to Religion in Higher Education

- Maintaining the constitutional separation of church and state.
- Personal bias from faculty or university administrators.
- Sole emphasis on science, rationalism, and a material worldview.
- Labeling students as fundamentalists, sexist, or homophobic.
- Assumptions about students and the values they hold.
- Preventing authentic engagement by constantly tearing down their religious perspectives and expecting them to recover or change their position.

Overcoming Barriers to Religion in Higher Education

- Supreme Court has ruled that public schools cannot favor one religion over another and must not take sides between religion and irreligion (Prothero, 2007).
- University personnel must become aware of their own personal leanings and bias, and work around or with them.
- Important themes of human experience cannot always be quantified or fully understood through logic and reason (e.g. love, courage, hope, and self-sacrifice).
- We must move from labeling to questioning and seeking to understand the reasons and/or motives behind religious positions.
- Instead of defining our students for them, we need to allow students to define and redefine their beliefs, positions, and values through each encounter we have with them.

Encouraging Authenticity

- Students are not seasoned philosophers or theologians and cannot be expected to defend their positions as if they were.
- We need to acknowledge that there will be disconnects, contradictions, and weak points in their (and our) moral, spiritual, and religious positions.
- We must allow students to work through their beliefs, morals, and values at the speed that they are comfortable.
- Students always need the freedom to come to their own conclusions even if they arrive at a positions that are opposite than what we would want for them.

Moving Beyond Authenticity

- Authentic engagement will not ensure meaningful dialogue.
- Students can still participate in heated arguments and debates that silence some and isolate others.
- To help students develop their spirituality we must create space for mutually beneficial dialogue between religious, spiritual, and non-religious individuals.

Our Need for Civility

- Erasmus coined the term *civilité *, which our world civility originates.
- Civility means more than just being polite to one another. It encompasses a way of life, in how we carry ourselves and interact with others, that is civilized.
- City, civilization, and civilized all share a common etymology with the word *civilit * with the root meaning "member of the household" (p. 15).
- Being civil enables us to live in society together as in a household.
- To be moral people we must allow our relationships with our fellow citizens to be governed by standards of behavior that limit our freedom.
- Andrew St. George said, democracy " can be seen not only as a type of government but as a system of manner, a form of social life" (p. 279).

Democratic Principles of Civility

- 1) Our duty to be civil toward others does not depend on whether we like them or not.
- 2) We must sacrifice for strangers, not just for people we happen to know.
- 3) Civility has two parts: generosity, even when it is costly, and trust, even when there is risk.
- 4) Being civil is not merely the intending to do no harm, but actively trying to do good.
- 5) Each person brings with them something unique to offer, so we should treat each other with a sense of awe and gratitude.

Democratic Principles of Civility

- 6) Disagreements will occur but civility reminds us not to mask our differences but acknowledge and resolve them respectfully.
- 7) In dialogue we must listen to others while being aware of the possibility that they are right and we are wrong.
- 8) We should always express ourselves in ways that demonstrate our respect for others.
- 9) Civil dialogue allows criticism of [ideas, beliefs, and positions], and sometimes even requires it, but the criticism should be fair and respectful.
- 10) Democracy and civility values diversity, disagreement, and the possibility of resistance. Therefore we must not try to limit or homogenize the thoughts of our students.

Theory to Practice

- Be up front about your expectations.
- Explain the importance of civility and that democracy is dependent upon respectful dialogue between citizens.
- Role Model appropriate behavior.
- Address issues preventing or undermining dialogue.
- Take back control and reinitiate conversation, when necessary.
- Recognize that emotions also need room for expressions in respectful conversations.
- Go back to the principles from time to time as a reminder for yourself and others.

Theory to Practice

- Be vulnerable and ask others to be vulnerable with you.
- Treat all positions fairly and do not favor one over another.
- Remember that talking honestly is always a risk; be courageous.
- Encourage everyone to participate to the level they are comfortable, and ask them to take chances from time to time.
- Ask participants to evaluate the quality of conversation at the end of each session.
- No matter what happens, Never give up.

"As long as the *reason* of man continues fallible, and he is at *liberty* to exercise it, different opinions will be formed."

~ President James Madison

Questions?

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