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Faith and Learning: The Role of Religion in Higher Education

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The coach responded to the student's question of whether or not God was pulling for Marquette University in the basketball finals with, "God doesn't pick sides." (Reverend Edward Bradley, Marquette University, in *The Washington Post*, "Chaplains Take Their Place Courtside for College Teams," Brendan Prunty, March 17, 2007)

If we shared that belief, there would be a lot less tension around religion and spirituality on college campuses and throughout the world today. Jon Meacham, in an editorial about Alan Greenspan's new book on the economy says, "Aside from religion, economics is perhaps the most pervasive yet least understood force in American life" (*Newsweek*, September 24, 2007).

Religion continues to be one of the most powerful differences that divide individuals. As educators, we must continue to promote the idea that our increasingly diverse campuses are laboratories for our students to experiment, develop, and grow. Our role during this time of growth and development is to educate students for excellence as scholars, innovators, and creators. We must equip them with the ability to discern the realities of living justly in a pluralist society.

We have had more experience with racial, gender, and ethnic diversity than with religious diversity on college and university campuses. Unfortunately, in our desire to accommodate some religious groups on our campuses, we have raised the ire of others. Recently, it was reported that the administration of Normandale Community College was criticized by non-Muslim students for making a temporary meditation space appear more partial to students of Islam: One critic said that the administration was "facilitating the room's Islamization." An assistant legal director for Americans United for Separatism of Church and State, Richard Katskee, said that the college has "gone well beyond anything that's constitutionally permissible." In attempting to make the space conducive to Muslims who used it for prayers, Katskee added that the college had taken "steps to

enforce religious requirements on behalf of one group.” Needless to say, this was never the intention of the administration (insidehighered.com, “Meditation Room or Mosque,” January 3, 2008).

Accommodating requests for space for religious practices is not all that is expected of colleges and universities when it comes to supporting the religious and spiritual aspects of students’ lives. The word “religion” in English is derived from the Latin *religare*, meaning “to bind.” This root meaning may be one of the reasons that many educators believe that the United States has insisted on the separation of church and state. In recent times, we in the secular academy have left religion and spirituality in the parking lot or outside our ivy-covered walls.

However, students see our roles more holistically. The “Spirituality in Higher Education Project” in 2004 surveyed 112,000 students and nearly 48 percent of them responded that it is “essential” or “very important” that colleges encourage personal expression of spirituality.

In a follow-up survey of 15,000 of the 112,000 students surveyed in 2004, Alexander Astin, co-principal investigator of the “Spirituality in Higher Education” project, which was conducted at the Higher Education Research Institute at the University of California at Los Angeles, concluded that “college affects not just what students know, but how they feel about themselves and the world.” The study found that “during their first three years of college, students tend to become more caring, more interested in spirituality, and more politically liberal.” However, we were cautioned about reading too much into the ideology question because, according to the report, research has shown that political identification returns to its pre-college status when students leave school.

Educators and administrators in the academic community find themselves in a precarious position. They want to respond to and contribute to students’ total development but realize that any discussions of values, beliefs, and morality are subject to interpretation and potential legal action because of the intensity of feelings about religion and spirituality today.

What we are facing on college campuses is occurring throughout the education system. For example, a federal judge in Russell Springs, Ky. “blocked a high school in southern Kentucky from including prayers in its graduation ceremony, prompting students to begin reciting ‘The Lord’s

Prayer' during the opening remarks—drawing thunderous applause and a standing ovation from the crowd.” The judge made the ruling banning prayers at the ceremony in response to a restraining order issued on behalf of an unidentified student represented by the American Civil Liberties Union.

A tug of war is occurring and advocacy groups on both sides are urging students to file lawsuits to make a case for discrimination based on religion. Faculty, administrators, and trustees of colleges and universities find themselves in the middle of this war as they attempt to balance academic freedom and student rights.

The March/April 2006 issue of *Change* magazine focused on religion with such timely articles as “A Delicate Balance—Preserving Both Academic Freedom and Religious Identity,” “Creating Identity-Safe Spaces on College Campuses for Muslim Students,” and “The Rise of Conservatism on Campus.” The editor of the magazine, Margaret Miller, noted that “more conservative believers have made higher education confront some of the ways in which a religious world view does not comfortably co-exist with an academic one.”

While many agree with Miller, other scholars say that just because we are educators does not mean we believe religious doctrines need to be based on “observation, measurement, experimental evidence, as well as classic logic.”

Natalie Gummer, assistant professor of religious studies and a professor of international studies at Beloit College, says that “covert intolerance [is] at the core of secularism;” “secular worldviews are implicitly privileged as truth; religious traditions remain ‘other’ as do the people who view the world through various religious perspectives” (“A Profound Unknowing: The Challenge of Religion in the Liberal Education of World Citizens,” *Liberal Education*, AAC&U, Spring 2005).

If educators are on opposite ends of the spectrum and everywhere in between regarding religion and the academy, it is imperative that we study and discuss the impact of the role of religion and spirituality on the student experience and on higher education.

We are now seeing how laws and politics are having an impact on academic freedom and students' rights to personal beliefs. The question many raise is: Whose rights are protected by the controversially named *Academic Bill of*

Rights? Some see the inclusion of this “Sense of Congress” in the next reauthorization of the Higher Education Act as an aggressive attack on academic freedom. Others see the *Academic Bill of Rights* as a way to protect students from the influence of faculty with biases against those who express conservative viewpoints.

Legislation recently passed in Missouri offers a good example. The American Association of University Professors (AAUP) called the *Emily Booker Intellectual Diversity Act* “one of the worst pieces of higher-education legislation in a century” (*The Washington Post*, “Is There Disdain for Evangelicals in the Classroom?” Alan Cooperman, May 5, 2007).

The legislation was sparked when a faculty member in the School of Social Work at Missouri State University assigned his class to “write letters urging state legislators to support adoptions by same-sex couples.” When student Emily Booker objected to writing the letter because it violated her Christian beliefs, she was brought before a panel and accused of discriminating against gays. She then filed a lawsuit. The university settled the lawsuit by “removing the discrimination charge from her record and paying for her to go to graduate school.”

This led to “accusations by conservative groups that secular university faculties are dominated by liberals who treat conservative students, particularly evangelical Christians, with intellectual condescension or worse.”

Results of an independent investigation reported that many students in the School of Social Work at Missouri State University had a “fear of voicing differing opinions, particularly about spiritual matters. They found such a ‘toxic’ climate of intellectual ‘bullying’ that they suggested shutting down the social work school and restarting it with a new faculty.

A survey by the Institute for Jewish and Community Research designed to “gauge anti-semitism” found that 53 percent of its sample of 1,200 college and university faculty members said they have ‘unfavorable’ feelings toward evangelical Christians.” On the one hand, Institute Director Gary A. Tobin says that because the respondents were asked about their feelings for an entire group of people, that “there is no question this is revealing bias and prejudice.” On the other hand, AAUP President Cary Nelson said that the poll reflects a “political and cultural resistance, not a form of religious bias”

based on political activism and opposition to scientific objectivity by many evangelicals (*The Washington Post*, “Is There Disdain for Evangelicals in the Classroom?” Alan Cooperman, May 5, 2007).

In addition to issues related to providing appropriate space for religious activities; supporting students in their spiritual growth; and discrimination and liberal bias on the part of faculty; there is increasing confusion and various legal interpretations regarding the use of student activity funds. Policies about whether or not religious groups can apply for student activity funds run the spectrum from inviting religious groups to apply for funds to prohibiting them from receiving student-activity funds. An article in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, notes this confusion centers around “whether religious groups and nonreligious groups should receive the same treatment” (“Pennies for Heaven,” Thomas Bartlett, July 6, 2007).

Problems arise when staff members try to assess if student activities are religious activities, regardless of the affiliation of the student sponsoring group. The confusion about policy implementation promotes problems beyond a particular group and the administration. Students who bring lawsuits to demand that their religious groups share in activity fees face backlash from fellow students who see the pot of activity-fee funds shrinking as more groups, especially those whose ideologies they do not embrace, gain the right to access the funds.

The impact of spirituality and religion on students’ university experience is spiraling into ever widening circles. Administrators need a clear understanding of related laws and how to implement them to reduce the negative impact on students and the academic community. Throughout history, religion has been a source of international contention, but educators must find a way to address the current uneasy and potentially incendiary problems that may inhibit the larger mission of higher education in the years to come.