Religion and Education: How They Have Changed and What Those Changes Mean

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Although I sometimes have difficulty absorbing the fact, it will not be long before I will celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of my first appearance in a college classroom as a teacher. The mid 1960s turned out to be an unusual time to be doing anything, but it was an especially unusual time to be entering the life of the mind—to try to tell college students something about the world, especially when I was just a couple of years older than they were. So many of us attracted to graduate school at that time, while no doubt interested in avoiding the draft so that we would not be sent to Vietnam, were persuaded that all the leading institutions of American society were corrupt and oppressive and it was our job to take the radical and in some cases revolutionary instincts that moved us and bring them to the attention of those unfortunate freshmen and sophomores sitting in those seats in front of us.

Of all the oppressions we then believed our students suffered from, none were more important to confront than those of family and faith. Since we had broken free, or so we thought, of the complacency and careerism of our parents, so we would encourage them to rebel against their own. It did not take long for us to conclude, in the manner of so many radicals and revolutionaries who came before us, that the shackles we wanted to remove were held in place in large part because of the religious beliefs those parents had passed on to their off-spring. Long before any of us actually experimented with drugs, we knew what the opium of the people was. Religion was responsible for obedience, dogmatism, sectarianism, and, for the emerging feminists among us, sexism. If at some level we may have realized that the civil rights movement in the south we so much admired was led by people of faith, we managed not to absorb that uncomfortable fact into our perspective. (Maybe we thought it was all for show). Religion was bad. Our cause was good. The one would have to triumph over the other.

Back then, it hardly mattered which religion we were dealing with: the problem in our minds was not Catholicism, Protestantism, or Judaism but religion itself. Indeed, for all my certainty that religion interfered with the life of the mind, I knew almost nothing about any of them. My parents had never made much of religion one way or the other and although I was exposed to some religious instruction as a child, it was carried out in such a perfunctorily way that no one could take it seriously. Meanwhile my graduate school training in political science offered no help in dealing with the particular religious beliefs my students at that time may have held; religion was simply not studied by a discipline intent on establishing its credentials as a serious social science. If someone had given me a quiz back then asking me to distinguish between a Pentecostal and a Presbyterian, I would have flunked.

I am not here today to confess my sins and acknowledge that everything I did then was wrong – sorry about that. Fifty years later, I still adhere strongly to a belief in what all too many religious believers skeptically call The Enlightenment Project. When I read about a place like Wheaton College letting a faculty member go because he believes in
the wrong things – or using the influence its board possesses to spike a much needed article from *Books and Culture* – I see the specter of Elmer Gantry once again at work in the world of Christian higher education. And I do not mean to pick on Wheaton, or Christians for that matter. Since we are meeting here in the great city of Santa Barbara, I cannot help but note that the other institutions of higher learning across town witnessed efforts on the part of your local Anti Defamation League to harass a professor, and a Jewish one at that, who had said unflattering things about the Israeli occupation of the Gaza Strip in his classroom. It still happens far too often for my tastes that those with strong faith convictions prove themselves uninterested in the kinds of robust debate and intellectual searching so essential to a liberal education.

Still there is little doubt that the way religion and the liberal arts interact with each other has changed dramatically during the – gasp – half century I have been engaged with these issues. I want to consider here some of these changes and how educators ought to respond to them.

One change, if I may continue in a personal vein, is that religion itself, even in my own field of political science, is no longer *terra incognita*. As someone involved in this development – I currently serve as chairman of the American Political Science Association’s Task Force on Religion and Democracy in the United States – I have watched both the world of academia and of journalism develop such a fascination with religion that there is now more published material on the subject than any one person can read and absorb. I hope it comes as no surprise to be told that the academic world is subject to fads. Religion was once out. Now it is in.

The huge outpouring of scholarship on American religion has taught us many things but one thing in particular has major implications for the subject we are addressing this weekend. When I look back on the 1960s I thought at the time that I was on the side of good ideas about enlightenment and liberation while my religious students held on to bad ideas about obedience and divine power. Now I would like nothing better than for religious students to have any ideas at all – even wrong ones.

I exaggerate of course. But only somewhat. The degree of religious illiteracy in the United States has been documented by others, especially by my Boston colleague Steve Prothero, making it unnecessary for me to go there. But surely we are all aware of the extent to which the religious revival that has taken place in the United States in recent years has been accompanied by an emphasis on feelings and emotions rather than discernment. We have an astonishingly rich religious culture in our country and an astonishingly impoverished theological one. When I started visiting Christian colleges and universities, I had hoped that meeting bible believers would introduce me to people familiar with books. To be sure, I thought, it might be only one book. But when dealing with a culture stressing images at the expense of words, one book, as it happens a great book, would do. Fidelity to a text does not look so bad when so many have no familiarity with texts at all.
How disappointing, then, to discover a religious world that makes what Richard Hofstadter once dismissed as anti-intellectualism seem vibrant by comparison; Fundamentalists such as Carl Henry and J. Gresham Machen would be as appalled as I am by the megachurch phenomenon. An emphasis on love at the expense of truth makes for a less sectarian and dogmatic faith but at the same time makes for a less thoughtful and inquiring one. The emotional fervor witnessed in so many Pentecostal churches impresses with its sincerity but leaves one wondering about *logos*; in the beginning, it would seem, there was the sway. In my book *The Transformation of American Religion*, I bend over backwards to avoid making explicit value judgments but when it came to the question of music, I could not restrain myself; whatever else it may be, and I suspect it is not much, contemporary Christian rock is not Bach. Give me the old-time religion any day; at least the tune is one you can remember.

I have said very little about my own religious commitments to this point so let me tell you now what they are. I consider myself a non-believing Calvinist. I am simply not religious. But if I were, I would admire the theological aspirations of a John Calvin. I would want my convictions to guide me firmly, to offer a strong sense of right and wrong, to remind me of how fallen this world is in comparison to the one that awaits. My religion would ponder the darkness in my soul and never let me forget my propensity to sin. It would never let me escape into an easy democratic egalitarianism in which we are all equal in our sincerity, but would teach me that the hard truth that some ideas are right and others are wrong and that some people understand this more than others. Above all else, it would remind me that faith is work. If it comes easy, it is not worth having. Take ideas such as these and render them into secular language and there you have me. I think of the life of the mind roughly as Calvin did of God: austere, demanding, unforgiving, dark, and ultimately the way to truth.

As religious as my students may be, indeed as religious as most Americans are, they are not religious in the sense I just described. I am reminded in this regard of another Jeremiad written by someone under the influence not of the Judeo-Christian God but of that the paganism once known as ancient Greece: the late Straussian political philosopher Allan Bloom. In his ever-entertaining *The Closing of the American Mind*, Bloom searched long and hard for the ugliest and most contemptuous word he could find to describe the vacuous, rock-music loving, uncurious students who showed up in his classes. Finally, in Eureka-like fashion, he came up with the proper epithet; his students, Bloom announced, were “nice.” One did not have to read deep between the lines – Straussians, remember, look for the words never spoken – to realize what an insult this was meant to be.

It is not my intention today to insult people of faith. Forgive me, then, for mentioning that all too many of them are – nice. Throughout my travels, especially in evangelical America, I run into people who are the exact opposite of Pat Robertson. (Once I ran into Pat Robertson, but I leave that for another time and place). No one I met on these travels – and especially not those I met on my previous trip to Westmont – would blame the Haitians for the earthquake; much more than my secular friends, they would be on the first plane to Port au Prince to offer their help. If I were in need of help, I would much
rather be in Naperville, Illinois or Grand Rapids, Michigan than on the Upper West Side of Manhattan. Once meeting with a group of believers in Atlanta, I got on the elevator and the door was held open so that two participants at the religious convention I was attending could get on – with their quadruple paraplegic child in tow. This kind of compassion is literally awesome.

Yet colleges and universities are not necessarily places in which compassion should reign. I run the risk of offending some of my Boston College colleagues should they hear me saying this. A Jesuit-Catholic college as those on the left call it – those on the right view it as a Catholic-Jesuit college – BC is strongly committed to the ethic of social justice. We have a required theology course for all undergraduates. One way a student can fulfill it is by working in the inner city and reflecting upon what learned. I would rather have all undergraduates read Augustine and Aquinas. Recall what Augustine says about the Romans whose city was being sacked and you may join me in asserting that compassion is not a word that comes to mind when we consider this man’s ideas. But we need to read and absorb Augustine if we are to understand what Hannah Arendt said about Adolf Eichmann or why Stanley Milgram’s electric shock experiments received so much attention. Give me a book any time. Fortunately, or not so fortunately for my students, Augustine wrote more than a hundred of them.

The niceness of American religion makes the classroom today quite different than it was fifty years ago. I teach a course at BC on the American culture war and one of the topics we discuss is abortion. “I think,” one student will say, “that the right to life is sacred. Once conception happens, a new life comes into existence. Because of abortion on demand, more innocent lives have been taken than took place under the Holocaust. Abortion is murder. End of story.” Then another student will chime in: “To me,” she will say, “abortion may not be pretty, but these days women have won a substantial amount of autonomy and ought to be in control of their lives. Those trying to prevent access to abortion in reality hate both sex and women and are as dangerous in their fanaticism as any Americans can be. Roe v. Wade must protected.” Neither position strikes me as unusual. What does is the third student who will smile brightly and say “Actually I believe both are right.” Well meaning – yes. Discerning and willing to recognize tragic choices – no.

If when I began teaching I craved students who had imbibed H. L. Mencken and Clarence Darrow, these days, I wouldn’t mind students willing to defend William Jennings Bryan. Give me someone, anyone, who believes passionately in an idea and is willing to stand behind it; at least then we would have something to argue about. I do not even care if I win the argument; in many ways, I would be disappointed if I did – or at least if I did too easily. Unlike some of those Stanley Fish has called “the children of Rawls,” political theorists who insist that only those who can supply rational reason for their beliefs can make good democratic citizens, I do not look down of those whose faith provides for them unshakeable positions that they will hold whether subject to the rule of reason or not. For me the reason why we have free speech and academic freedom – things, by the way, that Professor Fish does not believe even exist – is to give people voice to express
their views in ways they best see fit. As long as they think, I do not especially care how they think.

Although I would not mind a religious culture more thoughtful than the one we have, I am in no position to do anything about it. I was a bit astonished, I have to admit, when my book on American religion was picked up by Cal Thomas, Chuck Colson, and Albert Mohler – you know who they are – as proof positive that American evangelical Protestantism had gone soft. (Somehow the fact that a secular New York intellectual made their case for them convinced them that their case had to be correct). But really I do not take sides in the on-going struggle for the soul of evangelicalism – or, for that matter, Catholicism or Judaism. These things I leave to the believers themselves. However they resolve them – whether they ordain women, approve of gay clergy, find or do not find common cause with each other – their affairs are ones I watch, often avidly, but in which I cannot participate. I only hope that however these debates are resolved, American religion does not collapse into a form of generic spiritualism that lacks content, sharp edges, and even – I am not sure of the right word here – something other than niceness. One time I served on a panel discussion in Aspen Colorado with Rick Warren. After his polished and quite moving presentation, he was asked, as I sort of knew he would be, whether in his view Jews would burn in hell. Thinking carefully, as if judging his audience of high-rolling, Lear-jet flying, and exceptionally fit and well-preserved audience, Rick paused and said – yes. It was the only thing, given his beliefs, that he could say. I would never want to live in a society in which someone could use the power of the state to enforce such views. But I think our society is better off when people are free to express them.

It is not just religion that has changed so much since the 1960s – our colleges and universities have as well. Back when I started teaching, diversity was not highly valued, access to elite colleges and universities was all but unachievable for many aspiring high school students, the curriculum had not changed in years, and fraternities and sororities dominated campus life. Outside a few cranks somewhere – in this country one can always find cranks somewhere – no one wants to go back to that. When it comes to colleges and universities, I am no traditionalist. Their democratization is an all around positive good.

Still there is also no denying that our colleges and universities fifty years ago did not witness rampant grade inflation, expanding pre-professional undergraduate degrees, ratemyprofessor.com, laptops in the classroom, and other distractions from serious study of the liberal arts. I know all the responses before I even go forward with my argument – that so many students get As because there are so many A students or that studying business or nursing or anyone of a number of worthwhile endeavoring can be just as challenging as reading Plato. If you want to believe those things – well, like I said, I have a number of students whose faith is also impervious to challenge. But I know, and those who worry about the things I worry about also know, that each year we assign fewer books, then fewer pages in those books, then fewer sentences on those pages – and even then run the risk of having our courses dropped because the syllabi are discovered to
be too demanding. Our colleges need what our religions need: books, good ones, and lots of them.

Call me reactionary but the four years students spend at college and university ought to be – forgive me for the religious language – a blessing. Life is hurried enough, pressures to get ahead intense enough, and television attractive enough to make the years between 18 and 22 the only window our culture allows for keeping alive the greatest that has been thought and said. And what do we do with this opportunity? For one thing, as I have just suggested, we create all kinds of incentives, from grades to career counseling, to insure that as few students as possible have access to it.

But the situation is in many ways worse than that. There are, and always will be, students who appreciate the liberal arts and want to major in English, history, or even political science. Yet what we offer them is hardly better than what those in business or nursing are learning. We recruit our faculty, after all, from the best graduate programs, and the best graduate programs teach abstract theory and tendentious methodology. True the highpoint of academic post-modern theorizing may well be over and professors of English may once again be teaching and reading books. But in my own field, political science, the fad represented by rational choice theory, and the dismissal of anyone who does not crunch numbers as a mere journalist, goes on unabated. Indeed once upon a time it was the Big 10 schools who did the number-crunching while the Ivies still had some links to the political science of old. Nowadays the Ivies had joined the movement and only an odd-ball department continues to take political philosophy or humanistic social science seriously.

What this means for undergraduate students are faculty members lacking both the time and the background to offer serious reflection about the human condition. Students in political science classes can have a good deal of fun analyzing election returns. They are unlikely to spend much time dealing with governance of the soul. This has nothing to do with the politics of left and right that frame so much of our discussion of higher education. It has far more to do with the way tenure decisions are made, grants are given out, and the rewards associated with academic mobility are provided. A model of academic excellence based on the sciences is increasingly applied to all fields whether it is appropriate or not. The undergraduates suffer.

In this particular atmosphere, religious colleges stand out as a major exception to the trend. We make the study of political philosophy so central to what we do at Boston College because of our religious heritage, and we are not alone. I do not agree with the right-wing politics so evident in places such as Hillsdale College in Michigan or Baylor University in Texas but I very much admire the commitment of so many of the faculty at both institutions to the big questions. If it were not for religious colleges and universities, humanistic undergraduate education would be that much more difficult to find in this country. We are, after all, here at Westmont and not at UCSB. I have many friends at the other school in town and believe it is an excellent institution. I do not think it pays as much attention to the life of the mind of undergraduates as people here at Westmont do.
Just as I would love to have some seriously religious students in my class, I love having seriously religious institutions in the multifaceted world of American higher education. I am no fan of their faith statements. I wish they did not come down as often as they do on their student newspapers. But I also recognize that in comparison to what gets taught in so many prestigious graduate programs, they at least are committed to teaching the classics. In ways I never could have anticipated when I was in graduate school myself, the transformation of graduate education has left an important vacuum that faith-based colleges help fill.

I want to conclude with some thoughts about community. Whenever I mention my unhappiness with statements of faith, my friends who teach at universities that have them respond that they are about community. Unlike secular colleges and universities, which they view as purposeless, religious ones, or so I am told, take the idea of mission seriously. They recruit to mission, want students who share the mission, and hold firmly to the idea that communities ought to be places where people share a common sense of commitment.

There is no doubt in my mind that such views are sincerely offered. But I would ask of community the same question I ask of compassion: even if it is a good thing, should colleges and universities be the places to cultivate it? I am by no means sure that they are.

To demonstrate why, I need to go back to the era in which I began teaching once again. One of the most alienating features of modern American society, we radical leftists believed in those days, was that its market-based individualism and intense careerism left no place for genuine community. People were social beings. They should have strong group loyalties. Only together with others could they develop the ties that bind and have meaning.

One form the search for community quickly took among those moved by the spirit of the 1960s was to find community in gender, race, and other versions of what we now call identity politics. Women would find strength by joining together with other women; one of the most famous people ever to teach at my university, Mary Daly, became famous not only for her work in theology but for her refusal to allow men in her classroom. Dorms as well as classrooms were segregated, this time by race rather than gender, and before long, the irony was too obvious to ignore: a movement that began as transracial began to defend separate living quarters, and even courses, for African-American students. Attached to group identities we lost our common identities or, as the author and former SDS president Todd Gitlin has argued, our common dreams.

I am one of those who believe that the politics of identity went too far, imposing group demands on individuals and losing the benefits that occur, especially the educational benefit, when people cross over the boundaries that separate them. Fortunately, at least in my view, the rage for identity politics on campus has begun to pass. No longer do I hear much in the way of calls on the part of groups to segregate themselves off from the rest.
Except among some of my religious friends and colleagues. The quest for community I hear about so much in faith-based colleges sounds an awful lot to me like the identity politics that was once the rage on the left. Although in the news media we are often informed that the rise of religion in the past few decades was a reaction against the libertinism and value relativism of the 1960s, I have always believed that without feminism and the black power movement as precedents, there would never have been such a profound shift toward evangelicalism over the past couple of decades. People of faith are like everyone else; identity matters to them. Being born again in Jesus is not that dissimilar from coming out as gay. In both cases one discovers through communion with like-minded others a great deal about one’s values, beliefs, and lifelong commitments.

My purpose is not to disparage the quest for identity. It is instead to ask whether identity reaffirmation is easily absorbable into the demands of an effective liberal arts education. I do not think it is. Much of what good education seeks to teach is exactly what identity politics seeks to overcome: standing up, as Ibsen’s Doctor Stockman did, against the demands of the group; learning about alienation and its seductions, even if, like Roskalnikof, the result is mindless death; wandering, like Wagner’s Flying Dutchman from place to place unable to call any home. As valuable as community may be, it is also something we need to learn to live without. Or, to put it another way, the communities that matter most to well educated people are communities of choice, even when we choose what is most familiar to us. We need to imagine ourselves as outside community if we are to appreciate community’s benefits.

Faith-based colleges – or even students at secular colleges who group themselves by faith – can, in their quest for identity, become too stultifying. I strongly believe on constitutional grounds that religious students have the right to freedom of association and cannot be forced to admit to their clubs those whose values or lifestyle they find incompatible. But constitutional grounds are not educational grounds. When we seek to educate ourselves we force ourselves, even if we do not want to, to engage with others precisely because their values and lifestyles are different. That is why we have anthropology or study foreign languages.

I am aware of the extent to which today’s faith-based colleges and universities want to avoid what has been called the dying of the light. They know what has happened to Emory, Wake Forrest, Brown, and Yale and want to keep the light of faith burning. But affirming their identity is not, in my view, the best way to do so. Instead of withdrawing into their own world, they should do what the Jesuits did and meet the world on its own terms, convinced that they have something to offer it. That kind of service, viewing one’s faith as a gift to be offered rather than as a gem to be protected or a truth to be proselytized, is what I hope to see faith-based colleges and students of faith doing in the future.