FAITH AND LEARNING IN A POST-TRUTH WORLD

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Abstract
American colleges and universities, along with American culture in general, have entered a new post-truth era. In responding to this new environment, colleges and universities might benefit from a more comprehensive engagement with religion and its complex understanding of truth. The model for engagement proposed here focuses on five educational functions of religion: proclamation, rationality, compassion, transformation, and wonder/mystery. Using this model can enhance learning for students across the religious spectrum, including spiritual and non-religious individuals as well as those who are traditionally religious, while respecting the norms of academic and religious freedom.

The 2016 Word of the Year selected by the editors of the Oxford Dictionaries was “post-truth,” defined as “relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief” (Oxford, 2017). The term came to prominence in connection with Donald Trump’s presidential campaign and his penchant for making assertions at his rallies that seemed disconnected from any factual foundation. His supporters seemed totally unconcerned with this lack of evidence. They liked what Donald Trump said because his description of America rang subjectively true for them and that was enough. Even if Trump’s statements were not grounded in facts, they were deemed to be more truthful at an emotional and affective level than the so-called “fake news” being disseminated by the mainstream media.

Post-Truthing and American Higher Education

The post-truth ways of thinking, believing, and behaving that became evident during the election cycle might have surprised many Americans, but it most likely did not shock people who work with college and university students. Some students have been post-truthing their way through higher education for years. They study for their classes, giving professors the
answers they think those professors want to hear, but in their private lives they maintain their own idiosyncratic and unexamined emotional truths and proudly remain unaffected by their college or universities studies (Nichols, 2017).

The disjuncture between truth as it has been traditionally construed and truth as it now functions in the realms of politics (and among some students) has many sources, but it is at least partly the result of changes in the way higher education itself construes truth. During much of the twentieth century, higher education was committed to “objectivity” in the pursuit of truth, and academicians assumed their students (and everyone else) would simply accept the evidence-based, well-reasoned opinions of knowledge experts in various fields of study. According to this “modernist” perspective, objective knowledge equaled truth, and objective knowledge was understood to represent the world as it really is.

During the closing decades of the twentieth century, this neat and tidy modernist vision of truth began to unravel as it became increasingly evident that expert opinions often contained hidden biases and unexamined assumptions. Total objectivity was revealed to be a myth, and truth became, in the view of many intellectuals, those opinions that possessed the most power to make themselves heard and enforced. The scholars who pushed the academy beyond its modernist confidence did not intend to promote the post-truth culture that is visible today, but their efforts nonetheless paved the way for its development.

The consumer mentality that now dominates American culture seems to have completed the post-truthing of higher education. According to this consumerist paradigm, student happiness and satisfaction are among the most important criteria for assessing both curricular and co-curricular programming. While universities should not be criticized for wanting graduates to feel warmly about their alma maters, this legitimate goal sometimes mutates into a paralyzing fear of offending students in any way, lest their enthusiasm for the school waver. This can translate into an aversion to challenging what students believe and how they think. The result of this failure to engage students in deep personal reflection can prevent
them from fully pursuing truth or even attempting to understand what truth, facts, and reality might be.

Religion and the University

The sway of this new post-truth world view in the academy and in popular culture is forcing colleges and universities across the country to reconsider what truth means, and that reconsideration frequently points not only to evidence-based reasoning but also toward questions about identity, meaning, purpose, and faith. During the modernist era that extended into the late twentieth century, most scholars came to assume that these kinds of concerns, especially when framed religiously, were peripheral to education (Marsden, 1994). Those scholars were correct in observing that some forms of religion have been complicit in laying the groundwork for today’s post-truth culture. This is especially apparent when religious authorities tell their followers to reject learning whenever learning and their current understandings of faith seem to conflict. But most religious traditions and most religious believers do not operate this way. Most religions have a more complex understanding of truth that acknowledges mutual interplay and influence between faith and learning.

In Western culture, in particular, there is a long history of cooperation between religion and education. The great universities of Europe originally emerged from Christian efforts to connect the careful study of the “book of nature”—academic study of the real world—with careful study of the Bible, which they believed was a book of divinely revealed truth. Other religious traditions (Islam, Buddhism, Judaism, and others) have their own alternative ways of connecting faith with the process of learning.

The need to explore how faith and learning interact has taken on even greater significance in recent years as the religious geography of America has changed. In the recent past, faith’s presence in American culture was largely confined to historic, organized religious institutions. Being “religious” was associated with being a member of a religious denomination,
affirming that particular group’s package of beliefs, and attending services at a church, synagogue, or temple. Today, more and more Americans are religiously unaffiliated. However, being “non-religious” does not mean that these individuals are anti-religious or that they have no spiritual convictions. Many non-religious people are deeply spiritual, and even when people describe themselves as thoroughly secular they often hold faith-like, functionally sacred convictions about themselves and the world.

We describe contemporary American religiosity as being “pluriform” in nature, meaning it is not just pluralistic (inclusive of many different organized religions), but also conceptually fuzzy. A single individual may draw from multiple religious sources, with inputs from traditional religion, personal spirituality, and secular values blended together in a seamless religio-spiritual-secular mix (Jacobsen & Jacobsen, 2012). On campuses, the prevalence of pluriform religion is reflected in the increasing popularity of the words “spiritual” and “spirituality” (in contrast to “religion”) and by the creation of secular humanist chaplaincies (Kolowich, 2009). Successful challenges to post-truth thinking and attitudes among college and university students will need to engage with the realities of the new pluriform religious landscape in America.

The changeability and nebulousness of pluriform religion requires a new paradigm for creating and delivering effective educational programming. But pluriform religion is still religion, and examining the ways that different religious communities have linked faith and learning in the past can provide insights that are helpful in today’s more fluid religio-spiritual-secular context. Across many traditions, religion has had five distinct educational functions: proclamation, rationality, compassion, transformation, and mystery/wonder (see Figure 1). While these functions are derived from traditional religion, they are by no means limited to that context, and they do not impose any religious or academic restrictions on the learning process. Instead, they provide contemporary educators with a new and nuanced framework for thinking about how faith and learning are often commingled in teaching and learning.
Figure 1: Five Functions of Religion

- Proclamation: articulating convictions for discussion and assessment
- Rationality: evaluating views in light of evidence and logic
- Mystery/Wonder: conceeding that not all of reality is necessarily knowable
- Transformation: accepting that we ourselves must change in order to know some things
- Compassion: acknowledging interdependence and treating others with respect

**Proclamation**

Academic disciplines and historic religions are both dependent on followers who share a commitment to a particular set of values and missions. For example, one school of economists claims that an unregulated free market will boost prosperity for all. Existentialists, one school of philosophy, declare that life is absurd and meaning can only be provided by the person alone. Other individuals believe in God, and they do so in many different ways. Some of them proclaim that Jesus is the savior of the world (Christianity), some say there is no God but Allah (Islam), and others assert that desire is the cause of all human suffering (Buddhism).

Almost everyone possesses deep-seated hopes and convictions that they express as proclamations. Such proclamations do not end the search for truth, but begin it. They serve as initial assertions of truth that then must be pondered, analyzed, and eventually accepted, rejected, or modified. Rather than being a hurdle to learning, expressing such deeply-held convictions in public—proclaiming them—can be a critical step in the educational process. When convictions are not articulated, they cannot be assessed, and unassessed convictions are precisely what give rise to post-truth claims that seem impervious to evidence and reason.
Many educators worry about the conflicts that might occur if religious views are voiced openly. Red flags might be raised when students proclaim their beliefs too energetically or emphatically. Many administrators seek to manage religious expression on campus, just as they manage and control other potentially disturbing exposures that might make students unhappy. An avoidance of religious topics might succeed in making classrooms and student discussions more placid, but reining in proclamation too tightly can yield an educational environment so thin and disconnected from the real world that it is irrelevant.

Faith is about the deepest, most comprehensive values that inform the behaviors of individuals and the norms of societies. Faith accordingly intersects with all of life and learning. If colleges and universities are genuinely preparing students for life in the world as it actually exists, then colleges and universities must intentionally welcome all varieties of proclamation, including those that arise from religious perspectives. Though it may be messy, making space on campus for competing faith proclamations (whether traditionally religious, spiritual, or secular in orientation) helps to prepare students for life in the real world and undermines the intellectual isolationism that breeds post-truthism.

Rationality

Proclamation by itself does not establish any claim of truth, and most religious traditions augment proclamation with a parallel appeal to rationality. While it is true that most historic religions contain a subset of fundamentalists who will respond to all contrary evidence by demanding tighter adherence to reigning orthodoxies, the vast majority of religious adherents affirm the importance of logical analysis and empirical research as a means of bolstering, and sometimes modifying, their proclamations.

The medieval Catholic philosopher Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274), one of the most influential individuals in Western intellectual history, promoted rationality as a dimension of
faith. Aquinas believed that the Christian religion was true, but that was not enough for him. He also wanted to be able to know and prove that Christianity was true. So he examined as many established facts as he could and he used the best logic possible to explore how his Christian beliefs interfaced with other sources of knowledge. For Aquinas, rationality and empirical evidence almost always supported what he already believed, but when they did not he sometimes willingly changed his religious views to bring them into line with the best science of his day.

The process of trying to coordinate religious beliefs with science and reason is still ongoing, and one of the places where it is often visible is in biology departments, where students who identify as creationists sometimes dispute the claims of evolution. Typically these students are trying to “proclaim” their faith in opposition to what they see as mistaken science. But on this particular issue, religion seems generally to be ceding ground to science as many Christian churches and other religious groups now consider evolution to be a valid theory and have adjusted their theologies accordingly. In the Catholic Church this happened as early as 1950, when Pope Pius XII affirmed the legitimacy of evolution in the encyclical *Humani Generis* (O’Leary, 2006).

Some academicians assume this is how “progress” always occurs, with religions backing away from their claims as science advances. But sometimes it is science that is corrected. At the beginning of the twentieth century, for example, some scientists were advocating a eugenic theory of human development. Relying on the best evolutionary science of the time, some eugenicists argued that advancing the human race required sterilization of “inferior” individuals for the good of humankind in general. It was only a short step from this posture to the horrors of Nazism, and conservative religious voices provided some of the loudest and most effective criticism of the movement (Rosen, 2004).

Science is always a work in progress. Scientific literature grows and changes, leaving errant views behind. Religions often progress the same way, yet the popular caricature is to
portray religion as rigid and locked in the past. It is essential for students to understand that religions have histories, and that individual and institutional perspectives regarding both religion and science (often in dialogue with each other) change and advance in light of reason and new evidence. This does not equate with an endorsement of the post-truth view that any opinion is just as good as any other opinion. Change is a fact of life for both science and religion, but both science and religion are committed to reasonably assessing the worth and veracity of any idea that is proposed (Barbour, 2000).

**Compassion**

Compassion means to “feel with”—to be connected to the emotions of other people—and compassion defines another significant educational function of faith. Compassion is a virtue in almost every religion on Earth, encapsulated in the moral adage known as the “Golden Rule” that calls for every human to treat other people as they would want to be treated. This tenet is found in variant forms in Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, and other religions and in various secular traditions (Neusner, 2008).

Compassion-inspired awareness of the similarities and differences in human experience makes us aware that people are not meandering their way through the world solely on their own steam. People encounter challenges that cannot be overcome by individuals acting alone. We are dependent on each other. We all literally rely on one another for our survival (MacIntyre, 1999). Most of the world’s religions accept this truth with humility and a touch of relief. In contrast, post-truthism is passionate but not compassionate. Rather than seeking to “feel with” others, it celebrates one tribe’s success in opposition to all others.

The dictates of the Golden Rule correlate with the contemporary academy’s emphasis on understanding “the other.” No program of higher education is considered complete or well-rounded if it is reliant on one and only one sociocultural context. Understanding the world realistically requires skill in reading and feeling the human condition through the eyes of others,
including the eyes of others whose lives are very different from those of the learner. American higher education stresses independent thinking and personal autonomy, but the compassion function of religious faith reminds us that people are interdependent.

The function of compassion does not end with reflection. Compassion also demands action. The educational goal related to compassion is not merely for students to understand how other people live and what challenges they face, but also to take action in response to the needs of others and to observed injustices. Because of their compassionate commitments, individuals of good will, regardless of their particular religious or secular belief systems, can unite in service to those in need. This is, for example, the key insight of the Interfaith Youth Core, which builds better interfaith relationships on campuses by having students of all religious persuasions participate in joint programs of community service and then asking students to identify the personal values and religious commitments that mobilize them to action (Patel, 2007). Religious insights derived from our common humanity can help colleges and universities to become more humane places of learning.

**Transformation**

Education necessarily involves personal transformation. There are some aspects of reality that will never be understood unless people change and grow and become in some way different than they were before they gained new knowledge and insights. On university campuses, transformation typically occurs through a process of “critical unsettling.” In the dorm or in the classroom, students are exposed to viewpoints that challenge their previous assumptions and that open them to new ideas and perspectives. This is often an intentional process, and it assumes that immature ways of thinking need to be deconstructed in order for intellectual growth and maturation to take place. Colleges and universities excel at this task of challenging and critiquing inadequate thinking, but they often are less adept at supporting students personally as they try to develop better ways of thinking and living.
Faith traditions offer a different model of personal transformation that can be utilized in tandem with other educational approaches. Unlike critical unsettling, which aims to unmoor students from their previous foundations, faith traditions transform people by inviting them to become something more than they currently are. This is a process that we have termed “transcendent unsettling” (Jacobsen & Jacobsen, 2012). Transcendent unsettling happens when students are introduced to people, stories, or events that reveal the smallness of their current self-understandings and visions of life and that encourage them to grow into someone better. Whether it is reading the words of Martin Luther King, Jr. or Malala Yousafzai or religious scriptures, or studying in a different country, or meeting an artist or activist who wants to make the world a better place for everyone, this type of encounter can change lives permanently, calling students to new ways of being human and adding depth to their varied and diverse quests for truth.

*Mystery/Wonder*

A final educational function of religion is to acknowledge and celebrate the existence of mystery and wonder. Faith traditions assume that humans do not yet, and never will, know everything about reality. For everyone, to some degree, living as a human being means walking by faith and not only by sight. Religion is sometimes critiqued within the academy for precisely this point. Religion’s easy appeal to mystery and wonder seems to undercut the need for hard-headed thinking, logic, and research. The criticism serves as a legitimate warning that the existence of mystery and wonder should never be used as an excuse to avoid thinking. Instead, mystery and wonder serve as acknowledgements of the complexity and beauty of the world, adding a sense of reverence to the search for truth. Approaching the learning process with a sense of mystery and wonder opens the door to be surprised by discovery and provides a shield against efforts to cram all reality into categories of understanding that are too narrow and limited.
There is accumulating evidence that “mindfulness”—a sense of interior peace and oneness with life’s mysteries—is crucial to learning (Rechtschaffen, 2014). At its best, higher education nurtures this very mindfulness about learning and the search for truth. Mystery and wonder are reminders that what we think we “know” about the world and how the world is actually put together are not identical. This humility drives learning and sparks a person’s willingness to question what is currently known in response to wonder-inducing encounters with reality itself. A sense of wonder and an appreciation of life’s mysteries can reset the purposes of education to something far more compelling than mere socialization into current ways of thinking and acting (Palmer, 2009; Parks, 2011). Cultivating a sense of mystery and wonder encourages students to become lifelong learners who will never be satisfied with partial understanding and who will always seek a deeper and better grasp of reality. Such attitudes are utterly different from post-truth reflexivity, which squashes all sense of wonder from the universe with ill-informed confidence.

**Conclusion**

Student life professionals have special and very important roles in the process of enabling students to connect their faith with their learning. More than most central office administrators and more than most faculty members, student life professionals observe the tangled web of concerns and relationships that surround and shape the learning process. These educational professionals are in positions that allow them to see how proclamation, rationality, compassion, transformation, and mystery all weave their way into and out of student learning experiences, and they are trained to help students through those times of personal growth that are sometimes difficult and disorienting.

Connecting faith and learning is not an optional add-on to higher education. Professionals in higher education are aware that helping a student with the acquisition of new skills and information requires a deep understanding of human attitudes, competencies, and capacities. An appreciation of the five educational functions of faith honors the complexity of
the learning process and acknowledges the humanity of the learner, no matter what mix of religious, spiritual, or secular values students bring to the learning process.

But the educator’s work related to faith and learning does not end with the individual. It is also social and civic. Colleges and universities have a civic obligation to help students develop their capacities to communicate honestly about the deep and meaningful goals of society at the local, national, and international levels. Helping students to engage each other in conversations that are authentic (expressive of their own deepest values, commitments, and faith), oriented toward truth (respectful of how the world is really put together), and desirous of advancing the common good is central to the task of higher education. Creating cultures of conversation on campuses that move beyond the mere exchange of opinions to become journeys toward truth and civic cooperation is an idealistic and lofty vocation, but it has never been more necessary than in the present post-truth climate of American culture.

The goal of connecting faith more intentionally with higher learning is not meant to advance any particular religious faith, to criticize individuals who describe themselves as secular, or to undermine rational academic inquiry. Rather, the goal is straightforwardly educational: helping students to learn more about themselves, more about others, and more about the world around them. The approach to faith and learning outlined in this essay asks universities to offer students, whether they consider themselves to be religious or spiritual or secular, opportunities for intellectual and interpersonal engagement at the level of their most deeply held religious (or religion-like) beliefs, attitudes, values, moral dispositions, and visions of life. Apart from this kind of deep and thoroughly honest dialogue it will be all but impossible for students to develop capacities for speaking and acting in public life that move them beyond the silos of the post-truth echo chambers that currently dominate public life in America.

References:


