

# Religion's Return to Higher Education: A Primer

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After decades of largely ignoring the subject, colleges and universities across the country are re-engaging religion as an educational concern, and this re-engagement is occurring at public universities and private non-religious colleges as well as many religiously affiliated institutions of higher learning.

A new vocabulary for talking about religion divides the subject into three distinct categories: historic or traditional religion; personal religion, which focuses on ideas and ideals that provide meaning, purpose, grounding, hope, and a sense of wholeness to persons as individuals; and public religion, or what a society as a whole deems to be true, good, right, or “sacred.”

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After decades of largely ignoring the subject, colleges and universities across the country are re-engaging religion. The authors of *No Longer Invisible: Religion in University Education* describe what they learned about religion's new visibility and point out the key educational questions that religion raises for board members and other leaders at colleges and universities.

Board meetings usually focus on nuts-and-bolts issues—action items and financial matters that require immediate discussion and prompt decisions. But larger philosophical issues also sometimes float to the surface—matters having to do with institutional mission, campus ethos, or educational styles—and when these kinds of issues arise, it is becoming more likely that religion will be part of the discussion. After decades of largely ignoring the subject, colleges and universities across the country are re-engaging religion.

We were interested in exploring this new religious terrain, and with generous funding from the Lilly Endowment, we visited more than 50 campuses across the country in the last few years, places ranging from community colleges to state universities to Harvard. In this piece, we describe what we learned about religion's new visibility, define the new reality of “pluriform” American religion, differentiate among three kinds of religion on campus (historic, public, and personal), and point out the key educational questions that religion raises for board members and other leaders at colleges and universities.

## Where Religion Is Visible

Fifteen or 20 years ago, religion was not much of an issue for American higher education. A number of church-related colleges and universities embraced religion and poured significant resources into educating students about their own particular faith traditions, but the vast majority of institutions operated on the assumption that religion had little or nothing to do with the core goals of higher education. While many students were traditionally religious at a personal level, most colleges and universities did their best to keep religion out of curricular instruction offered in the classroom. The historical timeline for arriving at this “secular” educational stance varied from institution to institution. Some, like Johns Hopkins University, were secular in this sense of the term even before 1900. At many colleges and universities, the privatizing of religion did not take place until the 1960s and 1970s, but by the late 20th century, it was the national norm.

Fast forward to the present, and higher education looks very different, as a few specific examples illustrate:

- In 2007, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) appointed a paid chaplain for the first time in its history.
- That same year, Harvard University made news when its faculty debated whether to add a new required course on “reason and faith” to its undergraduate curriculum, as recommended by a university committee that observed “religion is a fact of 21st century life” that students need to understand.
- At the University of Southern California, a robust program to support religious student life has been augmented with a number of semi-independent academic centers related to religion, including the Institute for Advanced Catholic Studies, the Casden Institute for the Study of the Jewish Role in American Life, and the Center for Muslim-Jewish Engagement.
- The University of North Dakota now lists “spiritual wellness” as one of its seven institution-wide goals for all students.

Each of these examples represents a formal institutional response to religion, not a private initiative. Independent organizations like Hillel chapters, Newman Centers, InterVarsity Christian Fellowship, and other religious associations were active on many campuses even during the years when religion was most marginalized. Those groups continue to exist—and sometimes to flourish—on many campuses today. The change that is taking place now, however, is that colleges and universities themselves are re-engaging religion as an educational concern, and this re-engagement is occurring at public universities and private non-religious colleges as well as many religiously affiliated institutions of higher learning.

The new prominence of religion extends to the academic disciplines. Religious topics are proliferating in the courses and academic journals of history, anthropology, sociology, psychology, politics, science, literature, and virtually every kind of professional study. According to the American Historical Association, religion has now displaced “cultural history” as the most popular subject for dissertations in American history. The American Psychological Association recently called for its members to pay more attention to religion and spirituality, because they are factors that powerfully influence human behavior but have not yet been adequately studied.

## **“Pluriform” Religion and Spirituality**

The religion that is visible on American campuses today is a different entity than the religion that was there in 1950 or 1970 or even 1990. A generation ago, most Americans shared a similar conception of what constituted religion: believing in God, going to church or synagogue (because almost everyone was either Christian or Jewish), and living in accordance with the moral dictates of one’s faith community. But that description of traditional organized religion is no longer sufficient to understand religious dynamics on campus. Older views still predominate within some college and university constituencies. This is especially

true among senior faculty, senior administrators, and board members, because many of them formulated their views of religion during the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s. But for many students, younger faculty, administrators, and staff members, “religion” has become something else.

We identify this something else as “pluriform religion.” It is pluriform, first of all, because it is pluralistic. American college students now attend classes not only with Catholics, Jews, Protestants, and skeptics, as would have been the case a generation or two ago, but also with Muslims, Hindus, Jains, Buddhists, Zoroastrians, Wiccans, Sikhs, and members of many other religious communities and sub-communities. That development alone would require rewriting the rules of religious engagement on campuses. But a second dimension of today’s pluriform religion is equally important: The boundary line between what is and what is not considered to be “religion” has become blurred almost to the point of obliteration. If secularity is like fresh water and religion is like saltwater, life in America is now thoroughly brackish. Many Americans, including students, are cobbling together their own distinct combinations of personally meaningful ideas, practices, experiences, and values from a variety of religious and nonreligious sources.

The term “spirituality” is frequently used to describe this new do-it-yourself style of faith. Some people who consider themselves “spiritual” still see themselves as also traditionally religious, but others describe themselves bluntly as “spiritual but not religious,” and the numbers of such people are growing. A 2010 survey of young adults (18–29 years old) conducted by LifeWay Research asked whether they considered themselves more spiritual or more religious, and 72 percent indicated a preference for the term “spiritual.” For many young adults, even those who remain tightly connected to the religious community in which they were raised, the term “spirituality” connotes something that is authentic, meaningful, and good, while “religion” may be associated with being political, divisive, and hypocritical.

## Talking about Religion: Historic, Public, and Personal

As the new reality of pluriform religion has become more apparent on campuses—especially after the terrorist attacks of 2001, which underscored the prominence of religion in global affairs—many educational leaders (faculty members, administrators, and board members) have discovered that they do not have adequate language for talking intelligently about these developments and their implications for higher learning. The difficulty is due in part to everyone being out of practice after so many years of not talking publicly about religion, but it is also difficult because the new complexity of religion has made the subject itself more unwieldy.

That complexity became apparent in our initial visits to campuses around the nation. Faculty members, students, administrators, and student life staff usually gave rather incoherent responses when we asked generic questions about the place of religion on campus. Everyone brought their own, often idiosyncratic, experiences into the conversation. Because their personal references to religious matters—whether those matters were admired or hated or simply observed—were based on very different definitions of religion, the discussions often floundered. With time, we developed better vocabulary for questions that led to more fruitful and constructive conversations.

Our new vocabulary for talking about religion divides the subject into three distinct categories. *Historic religion* is traditional religion. This is the kind of religion that has a formal name—like Christianity, Judaism, Islam, or Buddhism—and that is organized into observable communities of practice and belief. *Personal religion* focuses on ideas and ideals that provide meaning, purpose, grounding, hope, and a sense of wholeness to people as individuals. Our third category, *public religion*, consists of what a society as a whole deems to be true, good, and right, or in some sense “sacred”—concerns that are often subject to intense scrutiny and debate.

For most people, the notion of historic religion seems perfectly clear, but personal religion and public religion sometimes require a bit more explanation. There was a time when personal religion was typically

linked with historic religion. People acquired a sense of meaning, purpose, and identity in their lives by identifying with the faith of their church or temple. But many people today feel comfortable developing their own personal religion without the aid or oversight of any historic religious community. This is obviously true for the one-third of traditional college-age young people who describe themselves as religiously unaffiliated, according to the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, but it is also characteristic of many of the religiously affiliated individuals who still make up the majority of college and university students.

Public religion also often needs to be explained. Public religion is a society-wide phenomenon, and this makes it very different from both historic religion, which is preserved by an identifiable subgroup within society, and personal religion, which is the prerogative of the individual. Rather than being a settled source of salvation or personal meaning, public religion takes the form of a continuing argument about what really matters to a society and its people. This is why, for example, the political culture wars of recent years have been so hot and nasty: They are about public religion and not just public policy. Sometimes the word “values” is used to describe these conflicts, which in reality are arguments about what and who will define the moral and spiritual norms of the nation.

## **Massachusetts Institute of Technology**

### **Robert Randolph, Chaplain to the Institute**

Robert Randolph is the first Chaplain to the Institute at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT). Which is not to say that he is the first chaplain ever on campus—far from it. There are more than 20 chaplains at MIT, representing faiths from American Baptist to Zoroastrianism, each sent and paid for by their religious communities. Randolph’s role, in which he has served since 2007, represents the first time MIT has paid a chaplain to work full time on its campus. The governing board has been supportive of his appointment, which he believes is a testament to the institution’s desire to be attentive to the whole student, including his or her spiritual life.

“I tell people my primary job is to make sure the playing field is level,” he said with a laugh. What that means, in practical terms, is working with the Board of Chaplains (those 20+ people mentioned above) to help facilitate interfaith dialogue and educate the community about religions around the world. His role is to be concerned with the core values of MIT, which he described as “civility, respect, diversity.”

Randolph, who has been at MIT since 1979 in various deanships in student affairs, has many opportunities to observe the religiosity (or lack thereof) of today’s students. He is happy to say that the reports of religion’s demise on college campuses have been greatly exaggerated.

“There’s a nuance there that gets lost,” he said. “Religion has never gone away. It’s always been a part of the American college experience and I think that’s really important. What we’re seeing now is that colleges are recognizing it. Education is not just pouring knowledge into the head.”

For students, it’s important to interact, as those soldiers did more than 60 years ago, with people from many traditions. It makes it harder to hate someone once you’ve gotten to know him, Randolph said, noting that his office is situated between the Hillel office and the Muslim prayer room. Exposing students to other traditions can help them find their own religious identities.

“Some will change traditions, some will frame their lives in terms of non-belief,” he said thoughtfully. “It’s part of the process of growing up when you make your own religious tradition,

something you choose instead of something you inherited.”

—Julie Bourbon

## Religious Questions for Colleges and Universities

It is not the job of colleges and universities to address all the religious questions that students might ask. Some questions are more appropriately wrestled with independently, discussed among friends, or directed toward a spiritual mentor. However, it is the business of colleges and universities to help prepare students to live in a world where religion is a complex and unavoidable component of social, personal, and corporate life. Using the categories of historic, personal, and public religion can help colleges and universities reflect intelligently on how religion can be approached in ways that reinforce, rather than undermine, institutional goals and mission.

With regard to historic religion, the most pressing issue for all colleges and universities—whether they are church-related, independent, or public—is how to prepare students to live in a religiously diverse world. As institutions grapple with the implications of globalization, it seems obvious that students need to know something about the world’s religions. Robert M. Randolph, the newly appointed chaplain at MIT, says his main task is simply to keep people with differing faiths (or no faith at all) talking to each other. He explains: “In [25] years, [today’s students] are going to be decision makers in wider worlds than we can imagine. And having some appreciation and understanding of these different religious communities and traditions will serve them well.” It is appropriate for college and university leaders to ask this question related to historic religion: *Do our students learn what they need to know in order to interact appropriately with followers of all the world’s religions?*

When institutions of higher education move into the territory of personal religion, other concerns emerge. Personal religion is about having a secure sense of self and one’s place in the world, but today’s entering college and university students—often described as “emerging” adults because it takes them so long to become independent—frequently lack that kind of personal grounding. The absence of grounding is, no doubt, partly a failure of churches, synagogues, temples, and parents to intelligently and articulately pass along the faith of previous generations to their children, but it also results from living in the religiously pluriform world of contemporary American culture.

Finding one’s footing in today’s swirling spiritual waters is challenging, and until very recently most colleges and universities were not addressing this concern. While promotional rhetoric often promises that a particular college or university will help students develop personally as well as intellectually, students frequently perceive their college years as a time of moral holiday, with no personal responsibility beyond avoiding long-term harm to self or others. When college is experienced as a moral holiday, it can be exhilarating for some students but exhausting and debilitating for others.

It is obviously not the job of colleges and universities to dictate how all students should develop morally and spiritually during their years of enrollment, but many institutions are finding ways to prompt students to reflect on how they are acting and who they are becoming. For example, educators at church-related Pacific Lutheran University, whether they are themselves Lutherans, atheists, Jews, Catholics, or something else, have agreed to an educational program that communicates one simple question to their students: “What will you do with your one wild and precious life?” At the University of South Carolina, a public institution, there is a “Carolinian Creed” that lays out expectations for students regarding personal integrity and concern for others along with academic achievement. Whatever its particular formulation, the underlying question about personal religion that is relevant to every college or university is: *How does our institution nudge students toward lives of meaning and purpose?*

Paying attention to public religion raises other sets of questions. Public religion is necessarily and

unavoidably contentious. Yet the continued existence of democratic society depends on identifying and nurturing common values and engaging citizens in respectful debates about divergent ideals. Almost all colleges and universities claim to be places where future leaders are being trained. And those claims are true; today's students are tomorrow's leaders. But who will those leaders be, and how will they lead? Will they unite or divide? Will they be leaders in search of personal gain or leaders for the common good? These are moral questions, but they are also more than merely moral. They define the "spirit" of the nation. A question that colleges and universities must accordingly ask is: *Do our educational practices enable students to become constructive participants in public discourse and public action?*

## Why Give Attention to Religion?

Religion's return to higher education has taken place without much fanfare. It has unobtrusively come in through the back door, while most educational leaders—including board members—have been focused on the front door of structural change and financial accountability. There is no question that these front-door concerns (such as being efficient, balancing finances, maintaining competitiveness, tracking the employability of graduates, and keeping up with technology) are matters that require urgent attention. Yet many of the most important outcomes of higher education—outcomes that are less easily measured and may take a lifetime to mature—also need attention.

The intellectual, moral, and spiritual/religious trajectories that begin in college often shape the rest of a person's life. An undergraduate program of study should be useful, it should be affordable, and it should be delivered efficiently, but it should also consist of more than this list of practical concerns. That, at least, is the longstanding assumption of American higher education, and it is what has made the American system the envy of the world.

The new visibility of religion on college and university campuses is re-energizing this more reflective, less immediately practical side of higher learning, and as a bonus it also contributes to students' job skills. Employers are looking for graduates with global awareness, cultural competence, communication skills, and integrity—traits that are honed by educational engagement with personal, public, and historic religion. On the grounds of both urgency and importance, it makes sense for board members and other college and university leaders to include religion on their list of educational concerns. Religion is no longer a purely private affair, and careful, nuanced attention to religion will be a necessary dimension of any truly excellent college or university education in the 21st century.

## University of North Dakota

### Wellness Center

About six years ago, students at the University of North Dakota (UND) voted to tax themselves, as it were, to build a \$20 million Wellness Center. First among the seven wellness dimensions embraced by the university, dimensions chosen to encourage "a culture of wellness and life balance" among students, is spirituality. (The others include intellectual, occupational, environmental, physical, social, and emotional.)

While folks in North Dakota have always placed "a high premium on religion," said Peter Johnson, executive associate vice president for university relations at UND, the inclusion of spirituality represented "the belief that students will perform at optimum if they are taking care of the whole person. That will create a better environment for learning."

The campus is home to a Newman Center and the Wittenberg Lutheran Chapel, as well as the Hopper-Danley Spiritual Center, which was built using a \$1 million alumni donation to create a spiritual center for meditation, prayer, walking the labyrinth (an ancient symbol of spiritual

seeking and wholeness), or sitting in silence, away from the busyness of college life.

UND is governed by a state board of higher education, which approved the building of the Wellness Center. For in addition to educating their students, said Johnson, the university also asks, "What does it mean to be a person who is as healthy as can be? What does it mean to be well? To be centered?"

—JB

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**T'ship Links:** Rev. William J. Byron, S.J., "[Essential Ingredients for Trusteeship at Today's Catholic Colleges](#).<sup>[2]</sup>" September/October 2011.

**Other Resources:** Cathy Lynn Grossman, "Survey: 72% of millennials 'more spiritual than religious,'" October 14, 2010, *USA Today*.

Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, "'Nones' on the Rise: One-in-five adults have no religious affiliation" (October 9, 2012).

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