

SAMPLE ARTICLE 4

RELOCATING RELIGION IN THE SECULAR UNIVERSITY.

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Professors in contemporary state universities face two realities: they work in secular organizations, and they must keep silent about their religious beliefs. Many other professionals also experience this same kind of secular reality. Yale Professor Stephen Carter notes that the problem is not so much that there is discrimination against religion in public life as it is that religion is trivialized, that is, treated as a hobby rather than as a grounding for public moral behavior. In most public settings, Carter emphasizes, religious values are subordinated to the secular political and legal values, resulting in "a culture of disbelief."^[i]

Although the prevailing "culture of disbelief" may foster privatization of religious values in official work settings, this culture does not dissolve these convictions altogether. Rather religious convictions resurface in discussions of moral issues in popular culture. For example, Thomas Bender (1994) argues that "private beliefs are not diminished by being disestablished, but they are [only] relocated and shorn of formal authority." He concludes that these beliefs relocate in the popular culture through its discussions of public moral issues."^[ii]

This essay considers the culture of disbelief and the relocation of religious issues in university settings. To accomplish this goal, the essay (1) traces the evolution of the secularized university, (2) identifies signs of the relocation of religious belief in popular culture, and (3) explains how teachers can make use of the re-emergence of religious belief in public discussions of moral issues.

SECULARIZATION OF UNIVERSITIES

The secularization of the American university took place in several phases beginning with the rise of science and empirical method, followed by the re-emergence of the humanities, and ending with the growth of postmodernism.

Most American universities in the nineteenth century acknowledged the Christian heritage of their Protestant founders. Jon H. Roberts and James Turner note that:

Prior to 1870, colleges typically functioned as the intellectual arm of American Protestantism. Indeed, the Protestant churches had given birth to higher education in North America and had nurtured it for much of its history. Even institutions of higher education created under the auspices of the states, though typically nonsectarian, retained [a distinctly] Christian character."^[iii]

Until the 1880s, the curricula of private and public universities centered upon moral philosophy and emphasized that knowledge was part of God's revelation. Eventually, though, the growth of science changed the educational paradigm from a required curriculum based in moral philosophy to a collection of courses focusing on the scientific method and empirical observation of natural phenomena. The high value placed by universities on science eventually spilled over from the natural sciences into the human sciences, leading to curricula emphasizing "the scientific explanation of causes and effects of phenomena in human society."⁽⁵⁰⁾ Just as the natural sciences created a plethora of new specialized courses in

biology, chemistry, and geography, the emergence of the human sciences generated the new disciplines of psychology, anthropology, and sociology.

Extensive preoccupation of universities with scientifically grounded curricula led to a re-emergence of the humanities in the early 1900s. In many universities, scientism displaced much of the classical curriculum of literature, history, rhetoric, and art. By the early 1900s, however, educators recognized that the humanities not only provided mental discipline, but these kinds of courses were also "the glue" that held all of the other educational disciplines together. (81) In other words, the humanities resurfaced, not as courses in moral theology typical of the early curricula in American universities, but as humanities courses steeped in moral values located in historical, aesthetic, and literary contexts.(92)

At the same time as universities became increasingly specialized, American culture also changed. Instead of Protestants being the corpus of students, learners from diverse backgrounds of Catholicism, Judaism, and non belief enrolled in universities. These two forces, curricular specialization and diverse student populations, created what Roberts and Turner call "an ecumenical remodeling of higher education."(117) The result was the secularization of the curricula of universities, a process emphasizing empirical observation, investigation of social behavior, and interpretation of historical and literary texts. Universities considered all of these pursuits as legitimate ways to produce knowledge. This set of assumptions continued to be the norm for universities until the 1980s.

The curricula of the 1980s reflected the growth of the postmodern paradigm. Paul Lakeland describes postmodernism as an "attitude toward the preceding time."^{iv} This attitude debunked science and questioned its emphasis on rational means of gaining knowledge. Some postmodernists even called modernism "a gigantic conspiracy" perpetrated by the privileged, powerful, eurocentric ideologies that valued scientific progress at the expense of other equally valid approaches to knowledge.(21) This postmodern paradigm challenged the principles of scientific objectivity as well as many of the interpretive ideologies created by the scholarship of primarily white eurocentric men.

To counter the adverse effects of modernist assumptions, the postmodern perspective encouraged knowledge based on the multicultural perspectives of women, ethnic minorities, and other politically muted persons. Additionally, postmodernism promoted texts of popular culture as sources for the voices of oppressed groups. However, the religious perspective still did not reemerge as part of the voice of oppressed groups. Instead, George Marsden claims, postmodernism further marginalized religious knowledge. In fact, multiculturalism promoted the idea that "cultural influences from one's African, Mexican, or Native roots make a difference in how things are perceived," but this perspective often denied that religious culture also was "part of one's social location" and cultural perspective.^v

The history of American universities informs the discussion of how religion disappeared and then reappeared in academic study. The learning environments of universities changed dramatically with the advent of the specialized curricula of the natural and social sciences. Even though the return of the humanities permitted academic discussion of abstract moral values, religion became detached from university curricula. In fact, public universities permitted faculties and students to study about religion in specialized departments in religious studies, but discouraged the study of religion as a relevant set of assumptions about belief and moral action. As a result of these historical developments, Marsden claims, "Our dominant academic culture trains scholars to keep quiet about their faith as the price of full acceptance in that community."(7) For both professors and their students, "Scholarly detachment from a religious perspective is the ideal."(13)

Even though faculties and students live in "a culture of disbelief," complete scholarly detachment from these beliefs may not be possible given the complexity of the issues that face professors and students. My experience confirms that moral questions grounded in religious assumptions frame what professors and students study, what

questions they likely ask about their subject matter, and what answers they will give to those questions.

PROFESSORS AND RELIGIOUS BELIEF

One way to recognize the impact of religious belief at a secular university is by understanding how beliefs are relocated. My religious beliefs became relocated in my methods of teaching. This process of relocation began many years ago when I was completing my doctorate. I recall going to a local hangout with my advisor to discuss the final chapter of my dissertation. At that time, I was anticipating my defense and my new life in the academic world. His comments about the final chapter were short, but the conversation turned to the future. Since I recently had signed a college teaching contract, I wanted to share with him my plans for that job and the teaching life I had envisioned for myself. As usual he was a supportive academic mentor, sharing with me my dreams for future research and my enthusiasm about teaching. During this conversation, he encouraged me to pursue my overly ambitious and somewhat unrealistic visions. But he also voiced concerns about my religious convictions. "Jan," he said, "you take your religion too seriously." He supported this judgment by saying that very few scholars have been able to retain their religious values, and then he claimed I was unlikely to find support from any of my colleagues for my interest in such issues. I was taken aback by this uncharacteristic advice from a man with strong Quaker values whom I had admired so much.

After more than twenty-five years of teaching in secular universities, I have developed methods for integrating religious beliefs into the courses I teach. For this reason, I have found my academic mentor's advice only partially true. My experience disconfirmed his conclusion that I would be unable to maintain my religious convictions as a university professor. On the other hand, my experience strongly confirmed that secular universities marginalize religious beliefs and demand that faculty privatize personal religious views.

STUDENTS AND RELIGIOUS BELIEF

Universities often trivialize religious views, but they rarely suppress these views entirely. Two forces strongly resist this impulse to repress. One potent force is the strength of religious belief among our students. The other potent force is the presentation of religion in popular culture. These two forces underlie my discussion of how faculty and students relocate religious values into their classroom activities.

One way of relocating religious beliefs occurs among students. University students are typical of the general population when it comes to religion. They have religious beliefs, and they act upon them. In 1997, the Pew Research Foundation concluded that 71 percent of respondents believe in the existence of God, a figure that increased by 10 percent from an identical study in 1987.^{vi} Additionally, this study showed that 61 percent believe in miracles, and 53 percent say prayer is important in their daily lives, an increase of more than 14 percent from the 1987 study. In 1998, priest-sociologist Andrew Greeley showed similar percentages of belief and devotion. Among other findings, his research concluded that religious beliefs and practices have remained fairly consistent in the last part of this century (that is, about 45 percent of all Americans attend church and pray daily).^{vii} Even more recently, a 1999 CNN-Gallup Poll found that 96 percent of Americans believe in God or a universal spirit, 63 percent say God is very important in their lives, and 70 percent describe themselves as religious.^{viii}

Although believers have shifted from traditional denominations to evangelical religions in the last fifty years, about the same number of Americans attend church, pray daily, and believe that God is a power in their lives. These polls found no strong differences between the old and middle-aged cohorts and those of college age; senior citizens and young adults expressed similar levels of belief. Even though many evangelical publications challenge these statistics, and instead preach and write about the decline of religious values and practices among all age groups, sociological data disconfirm their views.

The national surveys cited here include students and indicate that students also possess strong religious values and beliefs. My experience in the classroom confirms these research findings. Students' beliefs surface in the classes I teach in communication through their discussions of media events, choices of topics for presentations or essays, office conversations, and selections of subjects for research papers, theses, and dissertations. In the past few years, many different kinds of media events about religious issues have prompted such discussions and research.

One example in 1997 involved media stories about a religious cult. Shortly after posting mysterious revelations on the Internet, Guru Marshall Applegate and thirty-eight members of the Heaven's Gate spiritual group committed suicide, claiming that the Hale-Bopp comet would carry them to a higher spiritual level. Students inquired about whether Heaven's Gate was a religious cult, whether the members exercised free will, or whether they truly believed what their Website claimed was their dogma. Some viewed this act of mass suicide as absurd; others saw it as righteous. Others wondered how such beliefs could rule one's life. Still others mused about the technological savvy of Heaven's Gate members, who created sophisticated Websites yet espoused such unscientific beliefs about the conditions of an afterlife. All the students saw the public media coverage of this event as a religious phenomenon worthy of academic discussion.

A second example emerged in media accounts of an evangelical movement aimed at preserving family values from a Christian point of view. In recent years, the Promise Keepers Movement has drawn a million or so men to the National Mall in Washington, D.C., in an emotional display of repentance and a reaffirmation of men's commitment to marriage, family life, and racial reconciliation. At the time when this movement received the most publicity, some young men in my classes appeared wearing Promise Keepers' T-shirts, a quiet way of declaring their solidarity with men who had joined this movement and attended public rallies. Students unfamiliar with Promise Keepers were puzzled about what the term meant and why their male colleagues were wearing these T-shirts. These inquiries allowed Promise Keeper loyalists the opportunity to talk about what the movement meant, prompting conversations about beliefs among students from different religious backgrounds. In this instance, students relocated their beliefs from personal and social contexts into academic discussions.

A third example resulted from the deaths of two public figures. For students, the death of Princess Diana, shortly followed by the death of Mother Teresa, stimulated discussions about what a contemporary saint does and how women should act out their religious and moral values in the contemporary world. Most young women identified more with Princess Diana than Mother Teresa. But most also recognized why Diana's media star outshined that of Calcutta's saint of the streets. Television's visual depictions of the gorgeous, tall princess with her arms on the shoulders of the wrinkled and tiny nun pointed out both the difference and the solidarity between the moral actions of these women. One student saw these depictions as a parable: "I always wanted to be a princess when I was a child," she said. "Diana showed me that behind the glitzy dresses there exists so much pain, a different kind of pain than Mother Teresa saw in the streets of Calcutta but real pain nonetheless." Thus the deaths of these two public figures caused students to reflect on their own moral lives and sparked discussions about how others are to lead a moral life in the complex contemporary world.

A fourth example came from public discussions of science and religion in the media: reports about suicides assisted by Michigan doctor Jack Kevorkian, the cloning of "Dolly" the sheep by Scottish scientists, the reality of human genetic engineering—all these were provocative topics for students engaging in debates and writing argumentative essays. The perceived threat of technological interventions inevitably forced students to grapple with tensions between scientific possibility and moral responsibility. Two central questions in these controversies were: How much should human beings intervene into the workings of nature? Do human beings have the right to intervene in natural matters once reserved for God?

The media coverage of legal issues sparked a fifth focus for several other classroom discussions. Should Christian based pro-life groups encourage fanatics to bomb abortion clinics? Did President Bill Clinton deserve to be impeached because of the sexual transgressions he admitted committing with the

young intern Monica Lewinsky? Did the gunmen at Columbine High School in Denver, Colorado, single out Christian students as their victims? Should a group of religious leaders have helped the Department of Justice to force the transfer of the young Cuban refugee, Elian Gonzales, to his father? Media coverage of all of these legal events raised moral issues related to religious beliefs of students.

Finally, the messages of religious leaders sparked student interest. Pope John Paul's recent visits to Cuba and to the Middle East promoted media discussions of the blurred lines between religion and politics, showing that a religious leader may in fact influence governmental decisions. The concessions made by longtime Cuban leader Fidel Castro -- to allow the celebration of Christmas and to sponsor the visit of the pope -- gave hope to the free world that religious worship would resume in this neighboring country. In another example, the papal visit to the Holy Land regenerated hope that peace would eventually come between Jews and Muslims. The visits of the pope stimulated questions among students about the meaning of religious freedom and the connections between religious belief and political ideology.

All of these issues and resulting discussions convince me that students have strong interests in religious issues and that they will bring their religious perspectives into the classroom whether or not the university wants to suppress these views. I believe these interests should not be suppressed but instead should be encouraged as a step toward achieving the goals of the university in the form of reasoned decision making and problem solving, representation of diverse points of view, understanding of human values, and ability to express ideas. In my classes students manifest these interests in the way they develop written essays about media effects, their analysis of contemporary public discourse, and the perspectives they adopt in oral presentations.

RELOCATION OF RELIGIOUS BELIEF IN THE PUBLIC SPHERE

Popular culture and the public discourse it fosters create a contemporary public sphere that can and should be incorporated into the classroom. German philosopher Jurgen Habermas takes a middle ground when he relates university curricula and his idealized public sphere. On the one hand, he acknowledges the value of modernism through disciplinary specialization, the importance of reason, and the value of empirical evidence as the foundation of learning. On the other hand, he agrees with the postmodern ideal that knowledge be created in an open discussion resulting from a consensus of all types of people representing a variety of different experiences.

My notion of a public sphere classroom derives in part from Habermas's philosophical concept of the public sphere. Habermas defines the public sphere as a place where rational and critical discourse occurs; it is a location or site where private people come together as a public to engage in debate about public affairs and political relationships. Habermas's conception of the site of the public sphere fits the way students and faculty come together in a university classroom. Like Habermas's public sphere, the secular university classroom is a place where all sorts of topics over which church and state have exercised a monopoly in the eighteenth century are now open to interpretation and discussion. Habermas emphasizes a normative ideal, what he calls "ideal communication," that is, reasoned and civil communication between persons from different perspectives who use their knowledge and information as a critique about the issues, persons, institutions, and power structures that enforce the public order. Habermas concludes that communicative action requires an openness toward the other, a commitment to equal participation, and an intersubjective way of arriving at norms. His communication-based community accepts the rule that all knowledge must be tested by appeal to evidence and that every member of the community must be accorded equal access to the discourse.^{ix[ix]}

Habermas's ideal of the public sphere parallels the learning environment of a contemporary university classroom. This ideal applies to my discipline and perhaps to others in the social sciences and humanities as well. In short, then, public university education should be a sphere in which the existing beliefs and values of students gained from their families and their cultures expand and change as their knowledge increases. Knowledge should be expressed and challenged in an environment of reasoned

discussion where diverse points of view are recognized and appreciated. The university needs the kind of free and open discussion envisioned by Habermas as "ideal communication."

How can this ideal be achieved in a public university? If it can be achieved, one necessary step is to acknowledge the religious interests of the students and the moral and religious voices of popular culture and public discourse. Popular culture refers to the culturally disseminated information of newspapers, magazines, television, film, music, and art that express contemporary values and assign cultural meaning. Thus, popular culture can be a vehicle for the illumination and elaboration of religious and moral issues.

To get closer to the ideal of the public sphere in the classroom, the content of popular culture needs to be informed by historical and critical research in order to frame a lively, reasoned discussion. For example, the following lesson in my classroom stimulated student debate about the use of the death penalty. It shows how teachers relocate religious beliefs into the classroom and how students incorporate their religious perspectives into their papers and oral presentations on public moral issues. This teaching method attempts to integrate religious values into classroom content and create a learning environment resembling the public sphere.

The first step was to encourage students to gain background knowledge through general readings about the death penalty from proponents and opponents, to learn historical background on the issue, and to understand current statistical information related to the policy. For example, students learned about the disproportionate number of minorities on death row as well as the number of death row inmates who later through DNA testing were shown to be not guilty of the crimes for which they had received the death penalty.

Next, the students viewed an artistic conception of the issue by watching the film *Dead Man Walking*. The film story is about the work of a Catholic nun, Sister Helen Prejean, as a spiritual advisor for a convicted criminal facing the death penalty. The story reflects Prejean's strongly held religious position on the death penalty. The film also presents some biblical teaching about love of one's neighbor and forgiveness. As students watched the film, they were to react to a number of questions, such as: What is the theme or argument of the movie? How do the characters reflect different perspectives about the death penalty? Can viewers understand the point of the film without understanding the religious viewpoints of its characters? How do the verbal and visual depictions of Matthew Poncelet, the man facing death, show the inconsistencies of his moral point of view? How do the religious beliefs of Sister Helen Prejean affect her public actions? These questions promoted discussion about the connections between belief, communication, and action and invited analysis about the way people reason on the death penalty issue.

The third step for students was to research a recent death penalty case. Some students read the testimony from the death penalty phase of the Timothy McVeigh trial. Other students read the testimony of the victims, especially those using religious imagery and biblical justification. Still others read the pleas by McVeigh's family to save him from death. After students had read several of the examples of testimony, I asked them to identify examples of what they believed were particularly powerful examples of persuasive discourse on the subject.

The fourth step was to review public discourse on the subject. Students received excerpts from political remarks made over the past several years on crime, violence, and the death penalty. Then students read essays and speeches made by religious leaders and families of crime victims who both supported and opposed the death penalty.

Finally, students formulated issues, collected evidence from political, religious, and legal sources, and presented an oral debate on the death penalty. In order to approximate the ideal of the public sphere, students constructed their arguments using traditional academic research, information gleaned from popular culture, and their own religious beliefs. The students' oral debates on the issue, presented to classmates, mirrored the public sphere, at least partially. This was shown by students' openness toward

others' opinions, equal participation, and the intersubjective method of debating public norms. Students who participated in the death penalty debates located popular conceptions of religious culture into their reasoned approach about a public moral issue. This learning activity incorporated modernist principles of reason and fact-finding with postmodern methods of interpretation in which the voices of the oppressed enter into the analysis. Together these methods led to a reasoned deliberation grounded in religious viewpoints about a salient public moral issue. Moreover, this learning activity demonstrated how students relocated religious beliefs identified by popular culture into their own discourse.

CONCLUSION

Although secular universities are part of the "culture of disbelief," faculty and students can relocate their beliefs into their learning environments when they research and reason about public moral issues. This relocating of belief detaches the beliefs from religious authority and instead attaches them to public moral issues. If my doctoral advisor were alive today, he may have changed his mind about the advice he gave me so many years ago. For example, he might recognize that not only can college professors incorporate religious perspectives, but they garner support from students who find these perspectives to be a useful and informed way to learn about public moral issues. Although secular universities may try to marginalize the religious beliefs of faculty and students, the teaching methods of the faculty, the interests of students, and the predominance of popular culture can relocate religion into the mainstream of the university learning environment.

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i[i]. Stephen L. Carter, *The Culture of Disbelief: How American Law and Politics Trivialize Religious Devotion* (New York: Basic Books, 1993), *passim*.

ii[ii]. Thomas Bender, review of *The Soul of the American University*, by George M. Marsden, in *CultureFront* 3 (Fall 1994): 78-79.

iii[iii]. Jon H. Roberts and James Turner, *The Sacred & the Secular University* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), 20.

iv[iv]. Paul Lakeland, *Postmodernity: Christian Identity in a Fragmented Age* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 1.

v[v]. George M. Marsden, *The Outrageous Idea of Christian Scholarship* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 27.

vi[vi]. Pew Research Foundation, 1998 Poll on American Religious Practices (www.ffrf.org/fttoday/jan_feb98/polls.html).

vii[vii]. Andrew Greeley, "Religious Values and Law." Paper presented at the 1998 Conference of Legal Educators in San Francisco, California.

viii[viii]. The poll questions and result appear at the following Website:
www.religioustolerance.org/chr_poll.htm

ix[ix]. Several of the works of Jurgen Habermas develop his concept of the public sphere: *Knowledge and Human Interests* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971); *Theory of Communicative Action* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1987); *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity: Twelve Lectures* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1987); and *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: A Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1989). For a critical approach to the public sphere, see Craig Calhoun, ed., *Habermas and the Public Sphere* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1993).