



"Religion Chapel" by Thomas Morphis | COLLAGE, 1998

RELIGION

AND THE ADVENTIST UNIVERSITY

By Richard Rice

"Enrollments Surge at Christian Colleges," proclaimed a headline last year in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*.¹ From 1990 to 1996, the article went on to say, undergraduate enrollment increased by 5 percent at private institutions and 4 percent at public colleges, but by 24 percent at ninety U.S. evangelical institutions. More and more young people evidently want to spend their college years at institutions where learning is based on Christian principles and where student life reflects solid Christian values.

Many of these young people are coming to Adventist campuses. At La Sierra University, the non-Adventist enrollment is around 25 percent overall, and higher among incoming freshmen. At Loma Linda University, about half the students are non-Adventist.

Although there is growing interest in pursuing a college education in a religious environment, there is growing disagreement among certain Adventists as to just what that environment should involve. Clearly, the time has come to rethink this issue. Just how important is religion to the identity of our institutions of higher learning? What role should religion play in college and university life? In other words, how religious should we be? And how should we be religious?

How Religious Should We Be?

Religion can figure in the life of a college or university in several different ways. The purpose of certain institutions is indoctrination. They exist to promulgate a specific religious vision. At a Jewish yeshiva, a Roman Catholic seminary, or a fundamentalist Bible college, religion is not only central to the curriculum, in many ways it *is* the curriculum.

Religion also plays a role in many secular institutions. Within the past few decades, the study of religion has come of age as an academic discipline. Community colleges, state universities, and private universities not only offer courses in religion, many of them also offer a major in religious studies.

At public institutions, the approach to religion is one of scholarly examination. They study religion as an important aspect of human culture, and the institutions as such take no stand on religion.

Many institutions stand somewhere between these extremes, including some prestigious universities. Harvard, Yale, and Princeton all started as training schools for ministers, and they all have divinity schools today. But nobody thinks of them as religious institutions anymore.

Other institutions emphasize their religious identity while striving for intellectual breadth and academic excellence. They give religion an important role in both their curriculum and student life and typically attract students who have deep religious commitments.

Still other institutions have a close association with

religion, but their students do not share a specific religious perspective. At places like Notre Dame University, there is considerable diversity among students (and faculty members, too) in attitudes toward religion.

Do any of these profiles fit the Adventist college or university of today? The situation varies from one institution to another, but overall the answer is No. The traditional goal was clearly indoctrination, but things have changed. Whatever the future of religion at Adventist colleges, one thing is obvious—it will be different from its past. We cannot return to the 1950s and 1960s.

So, where should we go from here? Some say it is time for us to modify our religious identity and dedicate ourselves to having the best private educational institutions we can.

Following this course would put us in good company. It is the route taken by many fine centers of learning. The question is not whether this is a model worth emulating; clearly, it is. The question is whether this is the best model for Adventist academia. The answer, I believe, is No.

There are practical reasons to preserve our religious identity. Our Adventist constituents want higher education to be a positive experience for their children both academically and religiously. We must continue to attract Adventist young people.

A strong religious identity will also make our campuses attractive to college young people generally. There is a growing appreciation in society today for spiritual and moral values.² We can do this most effectively at institutions with strong religious identities.

The most important reason for affirming a strong religious identity is the essential purpose of higher education. While colleges and universities seek to stimulate intellectual growth and provide professional preparation, this is only part of the picture. A more basic goal of higher education is to assist students in becoming well-balanced, fully mature human beings. As described by Sharon Parks, it consists in helping students on the difficult path to adult faith—which she calls “meaning-making.”³

Contrary to popular belief, young people do not arrive on a college or university campus with a well-formed system of personal values and religious convictions. The young adult years are a period of immense fluctuation and transition. During this critical time, college professors play a role of great significance.

People often speak of the educational enterprise at church-related colleges and universities as a religious version of what is essentially a secular task. If Parks is right, however, the converse is true. Non-religious

institutions provide a secularized version of what is really a religious task—to help students make meaning in their lives. We can pursue this objective most effectively in a setting where religious values are implicitly affirmed and explicitly acknowledged.

How Should We Be Religious?

The ideal role of religion in our future differs from both alternatives mentioned earlier. It consists neither in seeking to indoctrinate our students nor in making religion an object of mere scholarly interest. Indoctrination is no longer an option because of the growing religious diversity of our students.

Just as significant, there is a wide range of attitude toward religion, particularly organized religion. Today religious commitment does not necessarily equate with denominational loyalty. While many students are active in traditional organized religion, others with an interest in religion are not. Our approach to religion must take into account this sort of diversity, too.

At the same time, religion on Adventist campuses must be more than an object of scholarly examination. This calls for something more than dispassionate inquiry. The best way to describe it, I believe, is along the lines of “recommending a religious perspective.” While we do not assume, or expect, a certain attitude toward religion from our students, neither do we treat religious values and beliefs as matters of purely private preference. Instead, we encourage students to think carefully about their religious convictions, and we provide a framework of values and commitments for them to consider as they do so. This proposal calls for several concrete measures.

First, it will affect the way we teach religion. To recommend a religious perspective, we will require students to take religion classes in several different areas, and we will explore our religious tradition “from within,” as well as “from without.” In other words, we will teach as representatives of a religious community, not merely as historians, literary scholars, sociologists, anthropologists, philosophers, and so on. The goal is for students to reflect carefully on the claims of Christianity for themselves.

To recommend a religious perspective we will also bring Christian ideas and values into conversation with the beliefs and values reflected in all the disciplines students study. This involves the entire faculty, not just religious teachers. It does not mean that faculty members hold identical religious views or avoid raising serious questions about religious issues. It does call for

faculty members to be sensitive to students’ religious needs and invites them to share their own convictions with students inside and outside the classroom.

To recommend a religious perspective, we will attend to the public side of religion, too. Students need to learn something about the perspective we’re recommending in settings other than the classroom. We will require students to attend religious services on Adventist campuses, and, to show that we are serious about this aspect of religion, we will provide programs of the highest quality, whatever the cost.⁴ Students should also have plenty of opportunity to express and explore religion on a voluntary basis in informal settings. In addition, we will express our commitment to a Christian ethic by encouraging students to participate in community service.

Finally, recommending a religious perspective means bringing Christian beliefs and values into conversation with all academic disciplines and with all human concerns. One of the most important things we can communicate to our students is an expansive vision of Christian scholarship.

In *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind*, Mark A. Noll challenges Christians to “think like a Christian” in every area of life. This means taking “seriously the sovereignty of God over the world he created, the lordship of Christ over the world he died to redeem, and the power of the Holy Spirit over the world he sustains each and every moment.”⁵ This is the kind of thinking we must encourage our students to do.

Notes and References

1. Mar. 5, 1999, A42.

2. Examples of this trend include William J. Bennett, ed., *The Book of Virtues* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1993), and Stephen L. Carter, *The Culture of Disbelief: How American Law and Politics Trivialize Religious Devotion* (New York: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1994).

3. Parks, *The Critical Years: The Young Adult Search for a Faith to Live By* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1986).

3. Parks’s book convinced me that, if I could send my children to an Adventist school for only four years, I should send them during the college years.

4. We should abandon the oxymoron “required worship.” If worship is the soul’s free response to God, it cannot, by definition, be required.

5. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1994), 253.

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