

A More Perfect Union: Religion, Public Life, and Higher Education *

Compiled by Nancy L. Thomas, Director of SVHE's Democracy Project, with input by Wingspread participants

In July 2005, the Society for Values in Higher Education and the Johnson Foundation convened scholars from diverse disciplines, institutions, and faith perspectives at the historic Wingspread Conference Center in Racine, Wisconsin. The purpose of this gathering, entitled *Religion and Public Life: Engaging Higher Education*, was to discuss growing attention to and concern over the intersection between religion and public life and the role higher education can and should play in response to these concerns. In a sometimes highly charged conversation, conference participants narrowed the areas of focus and created a series of short and long term action strategies. At the end of the gathering, the participants agreed that the concerns raised at Wingspread call for study, reflection, dialogue, critique, and action.

In its capacity as *our nation's think tank*, the academy should seize this opportunity to revisit how it teaches about religion and how welcoming it is to students' religious views and spiritual interests. The challenge is to do so with civility while simultaneously maintaining standards of intellectual integrity and academic freedom.

The Landscape: Religion in Contemporary American Public Life

Religion, faith, and spirituality¹ have always played a significant role in shaping American policy and society. From its beginning, the First Amendment did not exclude religion from the public square – the Founding Fathers themselves opened public meetings with a prayer. But “public” religion remained nonsectarian, something that was probably widely accepted by early American citizens, 95 percent of whom belonged to a Protestant denomination.² Our nation then struggled for nearly two hundred years over public funding religiously affiliated schools, scientific scrutiny of fundamentalist assertions such as the virgin birth or creationism, prayer in school, devotional use of the Bible in public classrooms, and privacy and abortion rights. Religious faith never disappeared – survey data in 1990 indicate that approximately 90% of Americans believe in God or a higher power.³ Nonetheless, religion came to occupy a domain that was generally compatible with American social institutions and public life, a relationship that seemed to preserve some level of civil discourse and American social order.

While many supported a secularized public sphere, others worried that this dynamic led to social problems, among them, a troubling decline in morality, marginalization

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or disregard of those outside the cultural elite, and excessive individualism. Events, laws, and legal decisions on abortion, school prayer, and same-sex marriage provoked strong responses from the more religiously conservative. Angered by social and legal arrangements that, according to legal scholar Stephen Carter, *trivialized* people's belief systems, those historically outside the cultural elite began to mobilize to reshape American social institutions.

Last year's presidential election highlights the result of an alignment of the Christian right and political conservatives. The Pew Research Center reported that demographic factors associated with religion align with Democrat and Republican voting patterns.⁴ Religious commitment (measured by church attendance) was as important as race and more important than geographic location, age, income, gender, or education.⁵ Religious conservatives claim that President Bush owes his 2004 victory to voters (22%) who identified "moral values" as the single most important election issue.⁶ Commentators noted that the anti-gay-marriage ballots helped President Bush win crucial states.⁷ At stake are myriad social issues with religious implications – school-sponsored prayer, abortion, stem cell research, publicly funded faith-based initiatives, teaching evolution, euthanasia, and gay marriage. Issues of this nature seem to push Americans into "religious" and "secular" political corners despite the fact that the majority of *all* voters believe in God and consider themselves to be religious.⁸ The public square seems to be an increasingly polarized and hostile place – an uncivil and partisan arena.

Concurrently, the United States is experiencing significant demographic changes. One change has been the growth in conservative churches in the 1990s.⁹ Indeed, many of the traditional faiths – Protestants, Catholics, Jews, and Muslims – are experiencing increased numbers of those aligning themselves with religious orthodoxies. Equally significant, because the Immigration Act of 1995 eliminated quotas based on national origin, the United States has evolved into one of the world's most religiously diverse nations.¹⁰ For example, Buddhists now out-number Presbyterians, and Muslims equal the number of Jews.¹¹ The number of Americans who claim that they are spiritual but have no religious preference has doubled from 7% in 1991 to 14% in 1998.¹²

This confluence of events has fostered a sense that our civil society is hardly civil. Public Agenda recently reported that Americans are weakening in their ethic of tolerance and are less willing to compromise with others of different beliefs or values.¹³ Most Christian Americans describe themselves as tolerant of non-Christian religions,¹⁴ but Americans also note that racial profiling and discrimination against Muslims, particularly since 9/11, is not uncommon.¹⁵ Despite their self-proclaimed tolerance, most Americans expect an escalation of the conflict between Christians and Muslims.¹⁶ At the same time, the public square appears to have become an increasingly hostile place – a shallow and contentious environment that suppresses dissent and discourages compromise, essential characteristics of a healthy and diverse democracy.

Adding to this mix is concern over religious illiteracy. A recent poll from the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life underscores the positive connection between education and religious tolerance: most Americans have favorable opinions of Jews (77%), Catholics (73%) and Muslim-Americans, with the notable exception being people with a high school degree or less (44%).¹⁷ Not surprisingly, the same poll shows that respondents with higher levels of education show substantially greater familiarity with the basic facts of Islam.¹⁸ While studies have shown that many Americans believe that the Bible (or Koran or other sacred text) is the actual word of God (36% believe it should be taken literally; 40% believe it is the word of God but should not be taken literally¹⁹), other studies suggest that Americans rarely read the Bible.²⁰ Public schools barely teach religion. Students learn about the desire for religious freedom of the Pilgrims and the 1928 Scopes trial and perhaps some religious context for presidential elections, but schools do little to teach students about religious difference, beliefs, or facts.²¹ Historically, Americans derived the rudiments of religious literacy and moral teaching from their own churches and synagogues. This too has changed. Today, the societal influence of mainstream Protestant churches²² has been eclipsed by the rapid growth of new, conservative churches.²³ The new churches and their compatriots want a special place in school curriculum, as evidenced by the movement to include “intelligent design” in science classes.

These forces – the erosion of the secularized public square, changes in religious diversity, increasing incivility and intolerance, widespread religious illiteracy, and increased explicit political activism favoring particular religious agendas – might be described as “the perfect storm.” Religion is a source of strength and character, and it is also a source of conflict and violence. This maelstrom calls for Americans to examine the role of religion in public life, and for the academy to serve as a catalyst for this reexamination.

The Role of Higher Education

The carefully chosen group of scholars of religion, the humanities and sciences, and democratic education who gathered at Wingspread this past July considered this “perfect storm” and its implications for higher education. The invitation list included scholars from a broad range of disciplines, including social and political science, religious studies, American cultures, medicine, natural science, education, and law. Invitees represented evangelical thought and practice, secular humanism, and communitarian and libertarian ideals, among others (for a list of conference attendees and advisors, see Attachment A). The group’s discussion was framed by a paper that included a review of the landscape and identified several key issues facing higher education. (Framing Paper available upon request).

The intense discussion that took place over the course of several days at Wingspread resulted in the group identifying three challenges to higher education: **(1) promote religious literacy, (2) affirm standards of public reason, intellectual inquiry, and**

academic freedom, and (3) engage students who seek purpose and spiritual meaning.

Religious Literacy: One of the unforeseen consequences of the separation of church and state, particularly after the Supreme Court decisions of the early 1960's, was/is the continued exclusion of study about religion from public schools. School authorities have sought to avoid such controversial learning, in part as a response to pressures from the outside (both religious and secular), in part because of the scarcity of appropriate curriculum materials and of qualified teachers, and perhaps because of the continuing nostalgia for an assumed church/state consensus that was largely unexamined.

At the same time during the last 50 years, there has occurred a burgeoning of the academic study of religion at colleges and universities, including public institutions. This growth in quantity and quality, though influential in liberal arts components of higher education, has remained largely inconsequential in the greater university, particularly professional education where the majority of students are now being educated. This state of educational incompleteness, both in public schools and in colleges and universities, results in a nation of citizens characterized by religious ignorance, an atomized spirituality, and an embarrassing naiveté. In general, our religious nation is characterized by religious illiteracy.

The Wingspread participants discussed the need for more study about religion in all its dimensions, disciplines and complexities at all levels of education. The academic study of religion most often involves studying comparative religion objectively in religious studies programs or considering religious traditions as components of cultural or area studies. They are both legitimate and useful in teaching students – generally a relatively small number – that their view might, indeed, be different from that of another. But these approaches have not proven to be adequate for teaching students to negotiate this diverse, complex, religion-infused local and global world. To achieve this level of understanding and competency, students need to be exposed to religion across a full range of disciplines, including the sciences, humanities, arts, social sciences, and the professions. The goals for student learning might be interdisciplinary understanding, a high degree of respect and understanding, ability to question one's own assumptions and beliefs, and an ability to engage in dialogue and to live with others across difference. This model has powerful implications for increasing the level of sophistication on religious matters among American citizens.

Critical and Public Reason: It is almost axiomatic that the academy should be the “keeper” of critical thought and reason, yet this assumption is not without challenge in recent years. As sociologist Robert Wuthnow remarked, “the myth that religion has become irrelevant dies hard – especially among university faculty who consider

themselves too enlightened to be bothered with religion... [but] whether we like it or not, religion must be reckoned with by any serious student of human affairs.”²⁴ A number of philosophical and practical questions are at issue, questions that are central to higher education’s research, teaching, and civic missions.

What is the academy’s responsibility as an advocate, teacher, or “keeper” of civil and informed public discourse? How should the academy respond to charges that it operates in a culturally biased way that privileges secular and liberal values and shuts out or discredits all others? Will biblical interpretations, on the creation of life, for example, compromise important tenets of science, academic freedom, and intellectual integrity? Should faculty challenge the rise of resurgent religions as possible threats to standards of intellectual inquiry or, for that matter, American culture and social order? What are the appropriate ground rules for civil discourse and disagreement in an increasingly religiously pluralistic society?

At Wingspread, the discussion included many worrisome accounts of challenges to academic freedom – such as the recent controversy at one large university that required first-year students to read from the Koran. Standards of knowledge and intellectual integrity can be challenged when students demand a forum for their religiously based assumptions or speech. It appears fairly easy to agree on academic freedom as a general principle, but application presents more difficulties.

Yet another perspective emerged at Wingspread: the academy needs a broader notion of public reason, one that protects scientific, empirical, and instrumental rationality but also considers truth-claims based in faith traditions. At the very least, the remedy for uncritical and unreflective religious assertions in an academic setting is not the secularist exclusion of such discourse. An appropriate remedy would be the cultivation of critical and reflective religious inquiry *and* meaningful public discourse. Discourse on matters of religious importance demand not merely a spirit of tolerance but also ground rules of mutual respect and an affirmation of the value of pluralism in a democratic society.

Students’ Spiritual Growth and Quest for Meaning: In April 2005, the Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) at UCLA issued a report on the spiritual life of college students. The study revealed that college and university students have a high level of spiritual interest and involvement. Three-fourths say that they are “searching for meaning/purpose in life” or that they have discussions about the meaning of life with friends. The same percent of students expects college to help them develop emotionally and spiritually. Eight in ten students attended religious services during the past year. More than two-thirds pray and four in ten consider it very important to follow religious teachings in their everyday life.²⁵ This dimension – if not expectation – of student learning, however, seems to fall into the category of “everybody’s business and nobody’s job.” In another survey of faculty perceptions of student learning, only

half of faculty members surveyed said that they structure their courses so that students develop a personal code of values or ethics.²⁶ And 87% responded that they focus in their courses “very little” or “some” on students’ developing a “deepened sense of spirituality.”²⁷

At Wingspread, questions emerged regarding whether and how higher education should address students’ “search for meaning.” Is this a valid, intellectual pursuit? What should the academy do if what students want to pursue does not, in the eyes of the faculty, contribute to their learning? Many Wingspread participants were highly critical of adding a spiritual dimension to traditional curriculum, expressing the view that values clarification is both anti-intellectual and beyond the scope of their jobs. Some faculty argued that the moral life is already encapsulated in a liberal education, and that those who push for a more spiritual dimension to student learning simply do not understand what faculty already do. Others worried that more traditional views of student learning fail to respect new ways of learning and the spiritual dimension as an enhancement to student learning. Matters of religion, faith, and spirituality are caught squarely in this divide.

In the end, the group wondered whether students’ overwhelming focus on personal gain and career advancement nullified higher education’s role as either a catalyst for public reason or spiritual growth.

A Significant Sticking Point: In the process of examining these issues, a clear division emerged among the Wingspread participants that deserves special attention: a fundamental tension developed regarding the role of faculty and the primary function of a liberal education. When the question of attending to the spiritual dimension to student learning arose, several Wingspread participants argued that religion is best taught in ways that are values-neutral and that emphasize critical thinking and reason. Defenders of this perspective on the faculty role felt that the recent call for attending to the students’ quest for meaning and related concerns for student development and civic engagement imperatives were asking teaching faculty to take on “therapeutic” functions that were inappropriate. Others disagreed, opining that attending to issues of purpose, meaning, and commitment is at the heart of the role of faculty. How this is achieved and who is responsible for it surfaced as a primary divide in contemporary higher education that must be addressed as the academy moves forward on the religion and public life agenda.

While this tension in higher education is not new, the need to address it anew seems apparent when one considers the intense criticism against the academy for allegedly chilling the educational quality of religiously motivated students and for failing to respond to students’ spiritual interests. We simply cannot attend to the needs and opportunities presented by changes in the landscape between religion and public life without also finding common ground on the primary goals – arguably the

advancement of knowledge, intellectual skills, and personal and social purpose – of higher education.

Where Do We Go From Here?

Wingspread participants agreed that there is much to be done to foster postsecondary teaching and learning about religion and public life. First and foremost, it seems, is the need to get the academy to take matters of religion, faith, and spirituality more seriously. Practically this basic recognition calls for strategic action on many fronts: 1) the engagement of religion faculty with colleagues in related areas so that study of religion becomes multi- and cross-disciplinary for faculty and students alike; and 2) engaging religious studies faculty to round out education so that it includes teaching and learning about matters with religious implications, particularly in disciplines where it is most relevant (political science, sociology, education, philosophy, among them); 3) new programs and curricula, and perhaps a new cadre of faculty with interdisciplinary training; 4) faculty development and campus conversations on the role of religion in public life and its relevance to specific disciplines and to student learning in general (for the kinds of questions asked at Wingspread that could also be the basis for campus conversations, see Attachment B); 5) greater attention to civic education, including the study of the U.S. Constitution and First Amendment liberties; 6) co-curricular initiatives linked to residential and student life; 7) reaching out to K-12 educators and education programs to encourage teaching about religion in public schools.

A Call to a Broader Agenda: What is called for is a renewed examination of higher education's relationship with matters of religion, faith, and spirituality. We might start by recognizing and acknowledging some of the critiques of secular culture as well as the assumptions and anxieties about conservative religious practices and politics. Religious conservatives criticize the academy for its "values-neutral" stance, yet most faculty see themselves as principled individuals who care deeply about the personal and social development of their students. What many faculty have disciplined themselves to do, however, is bracket their own beliefs and assumptions so that their research and teaching is unfettered. Some view resurgent religion as a threat to intellectual standards, academic freedom, and even to the search for truth itself. And to the extent that religion is used to inflict harm, manipulate political power, and promote propaganda based on a literalistic interpretation of the Bible, scholarly concern about commingling religion and, for example, public policy, is even more acute. We can explore interdisciplinary ways to study and discuss religion on campus and to promote learning within and across disciplines about issues that have religious implications. We can test ways to be open to religious insights without succumbing to pressure to chill academic freedom or advance specific religious views. We can address the changing role of faculty in this regard. And we can make a genuine commitment to deliberative democracy, which means developing models of democratic discourse that work on our

campuses and in this changing society. Without some model of democratic discourse, the relationship between those motivated by religious beliefs and those motivated by other values will be defined by who is in the majority, who is in power – a rule that applies both in public life and on campus. What is becoming clear is that this impasse is unacceptable to both the nation and the academy.

¹ *Religion, faith, and spirituality* are related but not interchangeable terms. For the purpose of this paper and this Wingspread gathering, we will use the Webster's New World Dictionary definition of religion: "any specific system of belief or worship, often involving a code of ethics and a philosophy." The features that characterize the major religions, according to Kent Greenawalt at Columbia University School of Law, are "beliefs in a spiritual domain, a comprehensive view of the world and human purposes, ritual acts of worship, the use of sacred texts, and corporate aspects of religious practice." (*The Chronicle Review*, March 11, 2005, p. 27) *Faith* is a confident belief, one that might not rest on logical proof or tangible evidence, in the existence and trustworthiness of a deity or deities (adapted from The American Heritage Dictionary). *Spirituality* refers to the methods and practices by which a person cultivates a conscious spiritual dimension to one's life, one that affects one's *soul*. Spirituality might be manifested through religious practices, ritual, meditation, or celebration.

² Jay Tolson, "Divided We Stand," *U.S. News & World Report*, August 8, 2005, p45.

³ Speical Report: Exploring Religious American," *Religion & Ethics Newsweekly*, April 26, 2002, at <http://www.pbs.org/wnet/religionandethics/week534/specialreport.html>.

⁴ "Religion & Public Life: A Faith-Based Partisan Divide," Published by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, 2005, p4.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Milbank, Dana (2004), "For the President, a Vote of Full Faith and Credit," *The Washington Post*, November 7, 2004, pA07.

⁷ See, Thomas L. Friedman, "Two Nations Under God," *The New York Times*, November 4, 2004, pA25.

⁸ Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life

⁹ According to Political Research Associates and research by the Glenmary Research Center, "Protestant churches with socially conservative agendas, that also require a high level of participatory commitment, are the fastest growing sector of religion in the United States. For example, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (Mormons) increased its membership between 1990 and 2000 by 19.3 percent to a total of over 4.2 million. Following in order of growth are the Churches of Christ and the Christian Churches, both with 18.6 percent growth rates; the Pentecostal Assemblies of God with 18.5 percent; and the Roman Catholic Church with 16.2 percent. At the same time, traditionally more liberal denominations—such as the Presbyterian Church USA and the United Church of Christ—are losing membership. The Catholic Church is still the nation's largest single religious belief system, with over 62 million adherents in the year 2000 (some 22 percent of the population), but if all Protestant religious groups are combined, they number 66 million adherents (some 23 percent of the population)." Sources: Laurie Goodstein (2002) "Conservative Churches Grew Fastest in the 1990s, Report Says," *New York Times*, September 18, 2003, based on research by the Glenmary Research Center (www.glenmary.org) and Chip Berlet, "Religion and Politics in the United States: Nuances you Should Know," (www.publiceye.org) and *Public Eye Magazine*.

¹⁰ Jeffrey L. Sheler, "Faith in America," *U.S. News*, May 6, 2002 p. 42.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Michael Hout and Claude S. Fisher, "Why More Americans Have No Religious Preference: Politics and Generations," 67 *Sociological Rev.* 165 (2002)

¹³ Public Agenda Reports, January 23, 2005, available at http://www.publicagenda.org/research/pdfs/religion_2005.pdf.

¹⁴ Pew Research Center and the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life Poll, July 26, 2005, "Views of Muslim-Americans Hold Steady After London Bombings."

¹⁵ Public Agenda Special Edition on Terrorism, 2002 http://www.publicagenda.org/specials/terrorism/terror_pubopinion9.html.

¹⁶ Religion & Ethics NewsWeekly SPECIAL REPORT: Exploring Religious America (April 26, 2002; Episode no.534)

¹⁷ Pew Research Center and the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life Poll, July 26, 2005, "Views of Muslim-Americans Hold Steady After London Bombings."

¹⁸ *ibid.*

¹⁹ Pew Research Center and the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life Poll, August 2005.

²⁰ When asked how often they read the Bible, Koran, or other sacred text, most Americans responded once a week (12%), once or twice a month (11%), a few times a year (9%), seldom (16%) or never (17%). Only 20% claim they read the Bible daily. Princeton Survey Research Associates International/Newsweek Poll (August 2005).

²¹ *Teaching About Religion in Public Schools: Where do we go from here?* Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life and the First Amendment Center (2003), p. 8-9.

²² The old Protestant establishment included Presbyterian, Episcopalian, Methodist, Reformed, Lutheran, and many Baptist churches.

²³ Primarily evangelical, Pentecostal, and independent fundamentalist churches

²⁴ Peter L. Berger, *The Desecularization of the World: Resurgent Religion and World Politics*, Grand Rapids, MI, Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1999, back cover

²⁵ Higher Education Research Institute report, "Spirituality & Higher Education: A National Study of College Students' Search for Meaning and Purpose," (April 2005), available at <http://www.spirituality.ucla.edu/>.

²⁶ http://www.indiana.edu/~nsse/pdf/fsse_2004_total_grand_freq.pdf, p. 24

²⁷ *ibid.* at p 24. The Faculty Survey on Student Engagement asked, specifically, "To what extent do you structure your selected course section so that students learn and develop in the following areas?" "Developing a deepened sense of spirituality" and "developing a personal code of values or ethics" were among the areas to which nearly 20,000 faculty members responded.