RELIGION

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Religion in Liberal Arts Education

*By Troy Organ, Ph.D.**

The ideal of the liberal arts college is best expressed in the well-known vow of Thomas Jefferson, "I have sworn on the altar of God eternal hostility against every tyranny over the minds of men." A truly liberal arts education will strive to implement four freedoms:

(1) from ignorance, i.e., from knowing too little;
(2) from atrophy, i.e., from ceasing to grow;
(3) from dogmatism, i.e., from knowing with false security; and
(4) from intolerance, i.e., from closing the mind to other points of view.

If the principal aim of a liberal arts education is to free the minds of men, there must be conversation in all subject matters, and especially in those areas where ignorance, atrophy, dogmatism, and intolerance are most prevalent. Religion is one of these areas. Because religion deals with the things that matter most, religious people and religious institutions offer tremendous resistance to changes from fixed patterns of life and thought which have known values, to other patterns which have values not fully known. Liberal arts colleges, cognizant of the inherent conservatism of religious institutions, may hesitate to include religion in the conversation.

Yet when colleges do not make religion part of the conversation, they fail to complete their essential Socratic role as gadflies that arouse sluggish horses. It is probably in the area of religion that liberal arts colleges do their poorest job of freeing the mind—because of the fears of faculty members and administrators of becoming hopelessly involved in the emotionalities and irrationalities of religion. To quote John Ciardi: "Reason may hope to speak to reason on many topics, but I have seldom found religion to be one of them."[1] But when colleges avoid this area, the students, however well they may become educated in many other areas, remain scarcely literate in religion. And they will tend to write off religion as inconsequential, unintelligible, or—at the other extreme—inviolable. "The schools must take over the religious question," writes Henry Nelson Wieman, "if for no other reason than to enable the student to understand and appreciate the real significance of the answers in the back of the book, given to him in church and home."[2]

From the standpoint of the foregoing interpretation of the role of the liberal arts college, we may now turn to specifics in the defense of religion in liberal arts education.

Freedom from Ignorance

The most obvious reason for the inclusion of religion in liberal arts education is to foster accurate, unbiased information in this field. The ignorance of the average American about religions, including his own, is almost unbelievable. For example, in a widely-quoted poll conducted by the American Institute of Public Opinion in 1950 the question was asked: "Will you tell me the names of any of the first four books of the New Testament of the Bible—that is, the four Gospels?" Thirty-five percent named all four correctly; four percent named three; four percent named two; and fifty-three percent could not name any of them.

The churches are well aware of this situation and have tried to meet it by various means: Sunday Schools, parochial schools, "released time" from the public schools, vacation church schools, etc. The Sunday School still represents the most widespread pattern of instruction in Protestantism. Many dedicated people labor in this educational institution, but it suffers from almost overwhelming educational odds: piecemeal instruction given to poorly motivated pupils by inadequately trained teachers in half-hour classes at seven-day intervals. How successfully could algebra, French, or history be taught under such conditions? In addition, the instruction is given largely to children of the elementary school grades, hence it must be kept to the level of the child. The profounder aspects of religious thought and practice are not discussed. Recently some churches have turned to an approach to the adult mind which contains some promise: the publication of books and magazines on religion for the "layman." This is a noble venture, and no doubt is helping to dispel some ignorance about religion. The educator cannot refrain from noting

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[1] "Manner of Speaking," *Saturday Review*, September 22, 1962, p. 14.

[2] *Man's Ultimate Commitment*, Carbondale, Ill.: Southern Illinois University Press, 1958, p. 195.

that much of the so-called educational efforts of the churches might be classified more properly as propaganda rather than education. Even if it is granted that religious propaganda has a function, the liberal arts educator will claim that the existence of such propaganda makes more imperative the critical examination of religion at the college level.

It is also because man's religious quest is one of his richest human adventures that religion ought to be a part of the liberal arts curriculum. An education which does not include the study of some facets of religion misses one of man's noblest efforts to know himself and his world.

Finally, in the area of freedom from ignorance, the liberal arts college ought to include religion in order to assist young people in their own intellectual and moral development. Ignorance in religion results in atrophy, dogmatism, and intolerance because the person who is ignorant in this area of human endeavor is unaware of what it means to be mature religiously, of the weakness of his own opinions, and of possible alternative positions. For many a student the college class in religion represents the first time he has discussed religion at a mature level, witnessed an honest effort to understand a religion other than his own, and attempted to see his own faith in a context which includes other religions.

Freedom from Atrophy

In biology "atrophy" means stoppage of the normal development of an organism or part of an organism. The term may be applied to expressing a danger which college instruction in religion is designed to alleviate. A proper function of the liberal arts college is to provide for its students the opportunity to grow in their appreciation of the best in art, music, literature, etc. Students should be enabled to examine politics free from party interests, economics free from commitments to a particular economic system, and religion free from sectarianism. The college years are the time when many young people make their greatest strides into maturity. For the churched person it is a time to develop in the understanding of his own religion as one of the ways in which men try to be at home in the universe. Unfortunately, in the highly emotional context of religion both its supporters and its detractors often tend to display atrophy—the former by their reluctance to examine religion objectively, the latter by their unwillingness to consider religion sympathetically. An atrophied intellect is one which resists passage into maturity; it prefers to hold to the values of immaturity. Perhaps the following statements adequately epitomize the mature person: He asserts his individuality and recognizes the individuality of every other person; he accepts the limitations and the advantages of living in a physical environment; he assumes responsibilities as a member of human society; he strives to contribute to the creative world of values in both ever broadening appreciations and improved participation; and he recognizes and accepts the limitation of human mortality.

The last mark of maturity listed is one to which a sympathetic yet critical study of religion in the liberal arts college can make a significant contribution—to an understanding of the transitoriness of all things human, a willingness to accept the fact of death. An otherwise adequate philosophy of life is many times wrecked by the omission of a philosophy of death. An honest consideration of the religious concepts of God and immortality can contribute much to the maturity of young men and women and give a dimension to life without which people must live either on the edge of despair or in a never-never land of childish fancies.

Freedom from Dogmatism

Dogmatism is the holding of opinions about either matters of belief or matters of practice in a way divorced from the correcting influence of fresh evidence. A dogma is an opinion that correlates with an allegedly established fact. Dogmas are entertained, not because of the warrant of the overwhelming weight of empirical and/or rational evidence, but because a person, a group of persons, or institution desires that certain beliefs be true or certain practices be right. A creed is a collection of dogmas designed as a formula to protect religious faith from intellectual errors.

Religion should be studied in the liberal arts colleges, not to refute the creeds and dogmas of any church, but to point out the serious limitations and dangers of dogmatism. The way of the dogmatist is the brittle way. In dogmatism change is possible only through the violent wrenching of the dogmatist's own being. For him, change is a form of suicide. The liberal arts college can help students discover that dogmatic certainty in human affairs, including religion, is an exhibition of foolishness. To introduce doubt into religious beliefs and practices is not easy; it is an educational task which is often misinterpreted by the layman. To examine the evidence for belief without intentionally destroying belief requires the utmost patience and tact.

Freedom from Intolerance

Dogmatism is closely related to intolerance, the closing of one's mind to other points of view. There is much confusion in statements made about tolerance. Part of the reason for the confusion is a failure to distinguish two forms of tolerance. We may call them "Tolerance A" and "Tolerance B." The former can be defined as "consent or sanction that is not explicit but is implied by a lack of interference or the nonenforcement of a prohibition."[3] It is passive or tacit permission, and is expressed by such sentences as "He remains here on sufferance" and "We endured his presence." Here is a laissez-faire attitude in human relationships. A person who takes this point of view is tolerant only in the sense that he is not intolerant. Tolerance A is forbearance which may grow out of indifference or even despair. This kind of tolerance may be called "sufferance." It is often accompanied by dogmatism, e.g., "I have the truth already, but I will let you say what is on your mind, since your errors cannot contaminate my truth."

Tolerance B is active rather than passive; it springs from concern rather than from indifference; it is not a sterile letting alone, but involves a creative search for truth and value. This tolerance is not expressed as, "Go ahead and speak; it makes no difference anyway," but rather, "Because all men profit when others speak their minds, and all men suffer when others are forbidden to speak, you must speak and I must listen."

Both forms of tolerance are needed today—in religion, politics, economics, and other areas of human life. In simpler times, Tolerance A may have been sufficient. By the early part of this century, some Americans had come to recognize that the laissez-faire form of tolerance is not enough. Woodrow Wilson said in 1913, "Freedom today is something more than being let alone." Laissez-faire liberalism mistook neutrality for tolerance. Tolerance of opinion does not require refusing to take any side. According to Karl Mannheim, "The meaning of tolerance is that everybody should have a fair chance to present his case, but not that nobody should ardently believe in his cause."[4]

Tolerance B is the ideal form, yet it is not always possible, neither is it always desirable. Thus should a medieval schoolman somehow appear to us and attempt a disquisition on the number of angels that can dance on the head of a pin, we might show tolerance A, but we could not show tolerance B, simply

[3] *Webster's New International Dictionary.*

[4] Diagnosis of Our Time. New York. Oxford Univ. Press. 1943. P. 7.

because we are not concerned with that problem. This points to a final—and most important—feature of Tolerance B: This form of tolerance is possible *only from a point of view.* Only when we are sufficiently concerned about a matter to have an opinion on it will we welcome the illumination which may come from listening to an alternative opinion. This means that in the teaching of religion the college instructor must always keep in mind that some of his students will already possess the *sine qua non* of Tolerance B, i.e., commitment to a position, whereas others will hold to, or pretend to hold to, a neutrality which makes Tolerance B impossible. Hence, one of the first tasks of the teacher is to convert students, not to a religious position, but to the *reasonableness* of taking a religious position.

Conclusion

If we are correct in defining the role of the liberal arts college as the freeing of men from ignorance, atrophy, dogmatism, and intolerance, it follows that the college must include the emotionally charged area of religion in the conversational means by which it seeks to achieve these ends. The scholarly study of this dimension of human life may be for some students the most liberating part of their college education.

Kansas School of Religion, 1963-64*

I. Introduction

It is in order to begin this report with a quotation from Dr. George Anderson, the head of the history department of The University of Kansas.

The role of the School of Religion in The University of Kansas is to provide the opportunity to study that body of subject matter which is usually comprehended in the word "religion." Opportunity to study is here defined in a broad sense to include upperclass as well as underclass courses and to envision the possibility of interdepartmental programs and instruction at the graduate level. The intent of the broad interpretation of the phrase "opportunity to study" is to claim for the School of Religion the responsibility of presenting religious knowledge at the University level in a nonsectarian, but special way.

The phrase "special way" is intended to emphasize the point that religious knowledge which was at one time viewed as part of the discipline of theology and is still regarded as potentially the best integrating element in a university education shall be offered in such a manner as to emphasize its unique significance, namely, on entirely private, voluntary and religious premises. The intent here is to forestall the development of the idea that religion is just another subject matter field like sociology, like history, or like philosophy. In direct terms, the purpose of this statement is to accent the ideal nature of the present arrangement for teaching religion at The University of Kansas because it allows for the maximum freedom of teaching without on the one hand subjecting the study of religion to the secularizing and de-religionizing consequences of treating it as just another subject matter discipline in a state-supported program, or on the other hand confining it to narrow sectarian limits.

Dr. Anderson made this statement in the Student Union in the winter of 1960–61 at one of a series of board meetings set up to study the school's situation and make proposals for its future. The study sessions concluded with the adoption of a plan for growth in the following areas:

1. Increase in number of cooperating religious bodies.
2. Deeper involvement of participating denominations.
3. A suitable method of financing.
4. More full-time teachers on the faculty.
5. An adequate library.
6. A new building to house the school.

II. Achievements

1. Religious bodies in the Kansas School of Religion Corporation.

When the expansion program was adopted, there were seven in the corporation. There are now ten. The Jews, who had had rather tenuous connections with the school, became identified with it fully in 1961. The R.L.D.S. group joined in 1962. Within this school year—actually last November—the Evangelical United Brethren Church became the tenth in the ecumenical partnership.

2. Deeper involvement.

This has been achieved in such a variety of ways that it is not possible to summarize simply and briefly what has occurred. Certainly all the religious bodies in the corporation now are related to the school in responsible ways through their denominational structures in the state. Formerly in some instances the only tie Kansas School of Religion had with a denomination was through a congregation of that denomination in Lawrence.

3. Financing

At its annual meeting two years ago the board of Kansas School of Religion adopted a plan for financing the operation of the school that would have each denomination contribute support on the basis of the number of students it has enrolled in The University of Kansas You will be interested to know that three groups are this year contributing at least twice as much as the financial plan requires and one religious body not yet in the corporation has paid the school $500 "because we believe in the cause," as its leading church official put it.

The following figures indicate the growth in financial support for the operation (secretary, office supplies, utilities, library service and books, etc.) provided by all of the cooperating groups excluding the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), whose support has been and still is far in excess of its proportinate share.

1960–61	$ 600.00
1961–62	1,738.00
1962–63	3,982.00
1963–64	6,000.00

4. Faculty

Traditionally the school has had a faculty of one full-time teacher and from six to eight part-time men. In 1961 the goal was set of four full-time teachers by 1965. It was assumed that in the enlarged program there would still be a place for part-time teachers.

Within this school year the following developments have occurred:

(1) A Lutheran scholar, Paul M. Hasvold, specializing in theology and philosophy of religion, began as a full-time teacher last September.

(2) An Episcopalian, John Macauley, was endorsed as a teacher by the dean of the Liberal Arts College and by the Chancellor of The University of Kansas, and arrangements have been completed for him to begin teaching in September, 1964. He is in the process of finishing his doctorate at The University of Cambridge in the field of church history.

(3) The process for acquiring a full-time Methodist teacher was advanced to the point where we have started the search for the right man, especially trained in the field of Christian ethics, to join the faculty in September, 1965.

5. Library

There is a small but highly useful library in Myers Hall. In 1959–60 only about $100 was expended for new books. The amount has been increased every year since and this year, thanks to the financial resources now being provided by the cooperating denominations, we will spend about $1,000 on new books and periodicals. We should make more extensive purchases next year.

The resources in the Myers Hall library and in the religion section in Watson are substantial supports for the undergraduate study of religion and are even adequate for graduate study in certain areas.

6. A new building

From its beginning the interdenomina-

* Report of the Dean at the Annual Meeting of the Board of Directors on May 29, 1964.

tional Kansas School of Religion has been housed in a building, Myers Hall, owned by the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). This denomination for its part in the Kansas School of Religion program agreed to assume the major responsibility for raising the funds to replace Myers Hall with a new structure, provided the other groups in the corporation furnished the full-time teachers and the resources necessary for the enlarged program.

The new building for Kansas School of Religion has been adopted as a capital cause by the Christian Churches of Kansas, and they provide a steady, continuing income for the building fund. In addition it is necessary for us to procure large gifts from affluent individuals, corporations, foundations, etc. For many months we have been looking for a competent person to solicit these large contributions. I am happy to report that we think we have found the right man in Paul N. Shivel, who as of June 1 begins his work as Director of Development.

We should have the new building by 1966.

III. Teachers and Classes This Year

The single clear reason for the existence of Kansas School of Religion is to conduct credit courses in religion for students of The University of Kansas.

The teaching this year has been done by two full-time-teachers, Paul Hasvold and myself, and seven part-time men. Those who are not full-time teachers serve on our faculty without salary. This ought not to be interpreted to mean that the quality of their teaching is inferior. Actually they are well-trained—not one has had less than three years of graduate study in religion—and they work with industry and dedication at their teaching responsibilities.

The following courses have been taught this year:

21 and 21H (Honors) Life and Teachings of Jesus (3 hours), both semesters.
25 Religion (3 hours), three sections, both semesters.
42 Old Testament Literature (3 hours), both semesters.
44 New Testament Literature (3 hours), both semesters.
47 Ideas and Men in the History of Christian Thought I (2 hours), first semester.
48 Ideas and Men in the History of Christian Thought II (2 hours), second semester.
51 Life and Teachings of Jesus (3 hours), two sections, both semesters.
56 History of the Hebrews I (2 hours), both semesters.
62 History of the Church I (2 hours), first semester.
83 Christianity and Modern Thought (3 hours), second semester.
91 History of the World's Living Religions (3 hours), two sections, both semesters.

IV. The Periodical

This year we succeeded in putting the Kansas School of Religion quarterly, RELIGION, into orbit. There was some intense activity at the launching pad in the fall of 1962, but technical difficulties, of a financial nature mainly, prevented us from getting it off the ground at that time.

The response to the periodical has been extremely enthusiastic, especially to Vol. 1, No. 3 containing the article "On Teaching Religion at the State University," produced by Kansas School of Religion's Committee on Religion and Public Higher Education. Some of the responses indicate that many who receive the periodical pass it on to their friends, and we have had many requests, in some instances from outside Kansas, from people who want to be on our regular mailing list.

V. The Coming Year

The faculty will be strengthened by the addition of John Macauley in September. With three full-time teachers, Kansas School of Religion will look more like a regular department, and the faculty will be able to function more like a normal faculty than has been the case. We need these fine part-time teachers, but there is work that is ordinarily done by men outside of their teaching duties—such as functioning on committees necessary for the operation of a department—that we cannot turn over to men who receive no financial compensation for their labors.

With our faculty stronger we should be able next year to take steps towards setting up classes in lay theology and also to handle some correspondence teaching.

Beginning in September our junior and senior courses will have a new status in the university curriculum. While all our courses carry university credit, they have up till now been in a very restricted area of electives and consequently have been of limited use to students in their degree programs. Because of developments that are occurring in our expansion program and that have already strengthened the school academically, I asked the faculty of the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences to let our junior and senior courses (with one exception) be used to satisfy A.B. degree requirements in the field of Humanities. On December 17, 1963 the Liberal Arts faculty voted approval of this proposal, and this decision will be effective beginning in September. This will give Kansas School of Religion courses a larger role in the university than they have had up till now.

VI. Finally

In RELIGION, Vol. 1, No. 1 I described Kansas School of Religion in terms of cooperation.

> In Kansas School of Religion in an atmosphere of mutual trust and good will church and state join hands in a common task basic to the well-being of both institutions." (P. 3.)

It is also an illustration of cooperation between religious groups that in some instances are widely divergent. In church circles in these days there is much talk about ecumenicity. In Kansas School of Religion the churches practice ecumenicity, doing together the good work that they could not accomplish separately. As an illustration of ecumenicity where it really counts, let me remind you that this year in order to ensure the calling of a second full-time teacher two of our member bodies, the Christian Church and the Episcopal Church, pledged and paid $1,000 each on the salary of the Lutheran, Paul Hasvold. In Kansas School of Religion lofty generalities expressed in ecumenical assemblies become concrete and specific.

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