

The American University in a Postsecular Age



EDITED BY

Douglas Jacobsen

Rhonda Hustedt Jacobsen

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RHONDA HUSTEDT JACOBSEN

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Introduction

For most of the twentieth century, and especially since the Second World War, higher education has been largely a secular enterprise. The goal of a college or university education has been to provide students with scholarly ways of understanding both themselves and the world around them that required little or no appeal to God, religion, or the sacred. The underlying assumption seemed to be that as research and rational reflection explained more and more of the world, religion would become an increasingly unnecessary part of human life. Higher education prepares students for the future, and religion was not particularly relevant for the future as it was envisioned at most universities.

Few scholars, and even fewer ordinary citizens, would make the same assumption today. Far from fading into oblivion, religion seems to be increasing its visibility and influence; secularization is no longer the default assumption. So, if religion is here to stay, at least for the foreseeable future, how should the university respond? What kind of attention does religion deserve in our newly postsecular age and what role or roles might religion play within the teaching and learning process?

This book explores those questions, especially as they relate to the academic side of college and university life: how faculty teach, how students learn, and how religion intersects with the scholarly endeavor in general. No one argues in this book that religion ought to be part of every classroom, or even of most, and there is no presumption

that the inclusion of religion in the educational process is always good or beneficial. Instead, the contributors to this book—who are all well known educators representing a wide variety of disciplines and institutional settings—wrestle with the many different ways in which religion might or might not be positively included in the work of higher education. There are no easy answers here, but the essays in this volume set the table for a rich conversation about religion's interaction with the core goals and purposes of higher education: critical thinking, self-awareness, the search for truth, cultural literacy, dealing with diversity, and commitment to the common good.

This book is not a jeremiad against the university. Unlike a variety of recent books, it does not bemoan the decline or the intellectual corruption of American higher education. The American university is not at the point of collapse and getting religion is not its salvation. But religion is a significant and enduring fact of life that American universities must engage. How can the university better prepare students for a future in which religion will continue to exercise significant influence in the world and in individual lives? In a world where religion continues to matter, can colleges and universities foster intelligent discourse about the positive and negative aspects of religion? What are the connections between faith and learning, rationality and religion, spirituality and the search for truth?

No single individual is able to address all of those questions, so this is an edited book by necessity. It seeks to season and advance a lively discussion that is already underway—a lively discussion that is also to some degree fragmented. In those fragmented conversations, participants sometimes seem unaware that they are using the same vocabulary to express quite contradictory meanings; sometimes different groups seem to be talking past one another rather than to each other. For example, some individuals and groups emphasize spirituality as opposed to religion, and they consider authentic meaning-making and “being centered” (i.e., spirituality) to be dissimilar in every way from the imposed dogmas and dictates of “organized religion.” Other participants in the conversation stress the social dimensions of religion, seeing faith and civic responsibility as intertwined virtues that make it possible to live peaceably with others in a religiously pluralistic world. Still other groups and individuals think it is crucial to help students maintain and deepen their religious connections to the historic communities of faith in which they have been reared.

This volume intentionally brings these divergent discussions into contact with each other, hoping to foster a more comprehensive and connected conversation that deals with religion in its entirety—including its personal and

social dimensions, values and ideas, subjective and objective characteristics, and potential for good and ill.

In terms of the layout of this book, the first chapter sets the stage for this grand conversation by reflecting on the new “postsecular” turn in American culture and how that shift is creating new challenges and opportunities for higher education as a whole. The concluding chapter proposes a modest framework for talking about religion that hopefully will make it easier for educators both to locate themselves in the broader conversation and to see how their concerns relate to the concerns of others.

The twelve chapters that form the core of this volume are organized into two sections. The first group of essays focus on the institutional context of religion in higher education and on faculty attitudes and roles. Neil Gross and Solon Simmons describe the results of a survey of religiosity within the professoriate. Robert Wuthnow then analyzes the broader dynamics of faith in the contemporary academy. The next two chapters discuss the role of religion in two very different settings. John J. DiIulio Jr. examines religion in an elite non-sectarian university (the University of Pennsylvania) and the editors discuss the history and ideals of church-related higher education. The two concluding essays in this section, one by Mark U. Edwards Jr. and the other by R. Eugene Rice, focus on the pressures faculty feel, on the one hand, to avoid any conversation about religion and, on the other hand, to respond to student concerns about faith and the making of meaning.

The second group of essays focus on the place of religion in the curriculum and in student learning. Larry A. Braskamp’s lead piece is a data-driven description of the religious hopes and experiences of college students from matriculation to graduation. The next two chapters, one by Robert J. Nash and DeMethra LaSha Bradley and the other by Elizabeth J. Tisdell, discuss different ways that student spirituality can enter into the educational process. Essays by Warren A. Nord and by Amanda Porterfield address the curricular and classroom implications of religion as a subject of study. Finally, Lee S. Shulman reflects on the ways that religious dispositions can broadly shape styles of pedagogy.

The essays in this book represent the wide variety of opinion that exists within the academy concerning the place of religion within the life and work of higher education, but this book does not include any essays that explicitly reject the notion that religion might play some role in college and university education. Certainly there are many who would contest the wisdom of allowing religion into the American university, and it is important to listen to those critical voices. Sometimes, however, those critics are reacting to caricatures of

religion rather than to religion as it actually exists on college and university campuses today. The essays in this book undercut these stereotypes and are intended to stimulate constructive conversation among all who are seeking to discern the appropriate place of religion in the American university in our postsecular age.

The American University in a Postsecular Age

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I

Postsecular America: A New Context for Higher Education

Douglas Jacobsen and Rhonda Hustedt Jacobsen

The last two centuries have been a time of unprecedented change in human history, marked by an explosion in accumulated knowledge about the way the world is put together. Religion has been on the defensive as new intellectual insights cut deep and wide into realms that religion once dominated.

Consider human health. In the early 1800s the “germ theory” of disease had not yet been formulated, let alone accepted as a medical fact. When and why someone got sick was a mystery, and herbal remedies combined with procedures like bloodletting were the only treatments available. Modern medical science was not developed until well into the twentieth century. Penicillin was not discovered until 1928, and the use of antibiotics did not become commonplace until the 1940s. Before that, most diseases had to run their course, and medicine consisted largely of dealing with symptoms. Who lived and who died seemed to be a matter of either chance or God’s choosing, and given those options most people hoped God was involved in some way. They asked God to keep them healthy and they prayed for healing when sick, often confessing their moral failures in case an illness was God’s punishment for sin and promising new levels of religious devotion if cured. Health and religion seemed naturally connected.

That is no longer the case. We now understand disease differently, and most people would say we understand disease better. The existence of germs is no longer a conjecture, but a fact, and we

know that germs come in different forms like bacteria, viruses, fungi, and parasites. We know how to effectively treat many of the diseases caused by these infectious agents, and every day we are learning how to do that better. Modern medicine has not defeated every sickness—a cure for AIDS has not yet been developed, many cancers remain deadly, some flesh-eating bacteria are presently immune to treatment, the common cold continues to irritate us, and new viruses like bird flu alarm us—but we assume that medical science has the potential to help us manage all these ills eventually. People still pray for healing when they are sick, some extremists refuse medical treatment as a sign of their trust in God, and a few researchers are investigating whether faith might have any measurable impact on sickness and health. But for most of us, a visit to the doctor is our first (and often only) response to disease. The operating theaters for medicine and for religion have been separated, and in the process the role of religion has shrunk.

Our understanding of how the world came to be—the origins of life and the universe—is another arena where the significance of religion has declined notably during the last two hundred years. In 1800, what we now call “young earth creationism” would have been the standard view of how the world began. God spoke and things appeared: first the earth; then the sun, moon, and stars; then plants and animals of various sorts; and finally humankind. Calculating the age of the earth based on the biblical narrative, Archbishop James Ussher (who was head of the Protestant Church of Ireland from 1625 to 1656) determined that the world had sprung into existence at God’s command on a fine September morning 4,004 years before the birth of Christ. Two centuries ago, a majority of Europeans and Americans still thought Ussher had gotten things pretty much right. Then along came Darwin (and a host of other nineteenth-century geologists and biologists) and suddenly the world looked a whole lot older. Rather than being formed a few thousand years ago, the world appeared to be millions or even billions of years old; and rather than everything having been created by God all at once, life on earth seemed to have evolved slowly over time with “the survival of the fittest” serving as the stimulus for change and development. Here, too, religion seemed to be diminished as science grew in its influence and explanatory power.

But it wasn’t just modern science that challenged religion. Society itself was changing in ways that often pushed religion farther and farther toward the fringes of life. While once church and state had ruled together, the new reality, at least in America, was separation of church and state. This did not mean that religion was automatically removed from the political domain. In the nineteenth century, for example, religious revivalism played a significant role in shaping politics. Preachers and politicians told the converted to vote in ways attuned to

God's will. But democracy cannot provide religion with a guarantee of influence, and through most of the twentieth century, religion seemed to be losing its grip on the political process.

Beyond politics, the daily routines of life became more complex. The invention of the electric light bulb allowed people to work all night as well as all day, and the natural rhythm of life changed. Automobiles and paved roads—both of which were extremely rare until after 1900—slowly turned ordinary people into commuters who spent more time in their cars than they ever spent in church. New forms of entertainment (radio, the movies, television, and video games) filled additional hours, time previously available for personal devotions and religious services. The religious calendar that had once determined the flow of the year as well as the structure of each week slowly gave way to new national holidays, the calendar of the public school system, living for the weekend, and taking kids to endless rounds of soccer or band practice. With the modern time squeeze, people felt they had less and less time to devote to formal religious activities.

Taken together, these trends, which seem to catalog the lessening of religion's influence in society and individual lives, eventually came to be called secularization. The founders of the discipline of sociology (most notably Émile Durkheim and Max Weber) define secularization as the slow erosion of religion's power and influence as modernity grows and flourishes. In particular, they deem the supernaturalist claims and premodern practices of religion to be contrary to the rationality of modern society and its ways of thought. For the most part, these early scholars of secularization had no antireligious axes to grind. Their goal was neither to support nor to undercut religious faith and life, but merely to describe what they saw happening around them. But what both they and many other ordinary folks thought they were observing (at least in western Europe, the source of almost all their data) was religion's slow but inevitable demise. Whether one liked what was happening or not, secularization seemed to be a simple fact of life. Religion was no longer as important as it had once been, and it seemed generally on the wane. Some people thought that it might eventually disappear altogether.

Responses to Secularization

People responded in different ways to the ostensibly empirical analysis that predicted religion's decline. Some religious groups were troubled, and they tried to resist or reverse the process of secularization. During the early years of the twentieth century, some of these resisters came to be called fundamentalists.

And the name stuck. These early fundamentalists were not religious radicals, but were instead old-fashioned believers who mourned religion's decline and who sorrowed because the modern world undercut the teachings and values of traditional faith. They were especially opposed to the new science of evolution because, in their eyes, it did away with both the idea of God as creator and the moral values of the Golden Rule (since the ethical implications of "survival of the fittest" contradicted Christ's injunction to love others in the same way we love ourselves). From the fundamentalist perspective, secularization was not an inevitable social process, but a temporary religious recession that needed to be reversed.

Not all religious people became fundamentalists, however. At the opposite end of the spectrum, some liberal religious leaders contended that the rise of modern science would help people understand that religion was never intended to be about facts. Science, not religion, was the domain of facts, and scientific explanations like the new evolutionary account of the origins of life ought to be accepted as true. What, then, was the role of religion? Religious modernists generally asserted that the stories of the Bible and other religious texts were about meaning and values, but not about truth in the sense of empirically testable hypotheses and propositions. Modernists hoped that the process of secularization would guide religions to give up their outworn and unnecessary metaphysical claims and to focus on what they really could contribute: moral guidance for life in an ever more complex world.

The views of many believers, probably most, fell somewhere in the continuum between religious fundamentalism and modernism. These moderates saw secularization, at least in small doses, as a welcome antidote to the magical thinking of individuals who pictured God as a powerful wonder-worker in the sky who was there to miraculously do their bidding. Moderates did not want religion to be restricted solely to the realm of meaning and values, as modernists argued, but they also thought that fundamentalism's stand-and-fight mentality did a disservice to religion. Their views of both faith and the world were more nuanced than either extreme, and moderates tried to accommodate modern developments while reaffirming the central tenets of faith.

Secularism

A fourth group of people had a different response to secularization and its prediction of religion's demise. They were skeptics who had no interest whatsoever in trying to salvage religion. Quite the contrary, they welcomed secularization as the fulfillment of their dreams. They wanted religion to disappear.

Skeptics of varying kinds had been actively working for the eradication of religion since at least the time of the Enlightenment in the eighteenth century, well before any significant diminution of religion's role in society was apparent. Some of these individuals were brilliant, including the famous French thinker Voltaire, who signed many of his letters "Ecrasez l'infame!" Eradicate the infamous thing. He was incensed by the two centuries of European warring that had followed the Reformation and by the religious zealots of his own day who were defending the corrupt regime of a reactionary monarch. Voltaire thought ill of most forms of Christianity, particularly loathing the Catholic Church while managing a smidgen of grudging respect for pacifists like the Anabaptists and for "the religion of the learned in China."¹

Voltaire and other like-minded antireligious skeptics lodged three major complaints against religion. First, religion promotes fanaticism, and fanaticism inevitably gives rise to violence. Second, religion justifies injustice, especially injustices perpetrated by the state. Third, religion perpetuates superstition and magical beliefs, which inhibit the rational, scientific examination of the world. And, to be honest, the skeptics had a point: religion has at times done all of these things. Religion has also played a number of much more positive roles in human life and history, but it is easy to see how someone who focused only on these three concerns could wish that all religion would simply go away.

What is important to note, however, is that the attitude described—Voltaire-style antireligious skepticism—is a different entity than *secularization*. Secularization is a neutral notion, a description of empirically verifiable events. Voltaire's position—positive embrace of religion's decline and desire to hasten that decline—is something else. That something else is generally called *secularism*, and its proponents are known as *secularists*. Rather than being a mere description of the world, secularism is an ideology promoted by devotees who encourage free-thinking people everywhere to work for religion's demise.² It is a worldview that actively opposes religion, rather than a neutral description of the world as a place where the influence of religion happens to have lessened.

Secularism as a worldview has a very old lineage and comes in many different forms. The ancient Greek thinkers Euhemerus and Lucretius, who might be considered the founders of religious skepticism and secularism, both believed religion was nothing more than humanity's projection of its own hopes and values onto the beyond.³ In more recent times, Andrew Dickson White, the first president of Cornell University, offered a different metaphor, likening the relationship between science and theology to a state of war in which one side or the other has to win and there is no possibility of compromise or adjudicated truce.⁴ Marx and Engels—and Lenin and Stalin and Mao—were secularists of a different kind who saw religion as a disease that had infected

humanity and that needed to be eliminated as rapidly as possible, even if doing so required massive violence. The modern history of Russia, China, and various other Communist states gives ample evidence that secularism in its most extreme forms can be as disastrous as the most fanatical forms of religion.

In the same way that all religion should not be judged by the excesses of a few extreme groups, secularism as a whole should not be judged by the behavior of its relatively few violent proponents. Far from the right-wing stereotype that portrays secularists as uniformly bent on destroying the moral and religious underpinnings of society, most secularists have been genuinely moral individuals motivated to oppose religion largely because they see religion as exercising a deeply immoral influence within the world. According to them, religion judges and divides people where no division is necessary, it heightens already existing tensions in the world by making relative differences absolute, and it draws people's attention away from many of the fixable problems of society by redirecting their energy toward personal salvation and future life in heaven. This last point is especially noteworthy. In its original Latin meaning, the word *secular* simply denotes the flow of time and events in this world, the here and now, and to be secular means to pay attention to ordinary life in the present. Secularism, in other words, need not be negatively antireligious. It can also take the form (and often does) of being a positive moral position that asks everyone to join together to make this world—the world in which all of us presently live alongside one another—a better place for everyone regardless of gender, ethnicity, nationality, or especially religion.

Secularization and Secularism in Higher Education

In the big scheme of things, universities have almost always located themselves on the secular, skeptical, and speculative side of society. Even in the Middle Ages, the Catholic universities of Europe were often viewed as seedbeds of radical ideas, heresy, and possible sedition, and both church and state kept a careful eye on what was sprouting in these schools. The same dynamic is observable today. The histories of many church-affiliated schools, in particular, are replete with stories of individuals who from the very moment of the institution's founding were able to detect secularizing tendencies that needed to be kept in check. Still, most religious leaders know that colleges and universities have an important role to play in society—exploring new ideas, discovering new truths about the world, educating new generations of leaders, and critiquing the old orthodoxies of the past, whether those orthodoxies are academic or religious in nature—and they have no qualms about that. Most religious leaders would

also agree that the focus of higher education should generally be on the “secular” world (i.e., the present world in which we all live), pondering questions raised by the sciences, the arts and humanities, and various fields of professional study. Even among the most devout, few if any would expect or desire higher education to make religion its central or primary concern. Colleges and universities are not seminaries.

But careful and critical investigation of the ordinary “secular” world is not the same as secularist education. In the twentieth century, the forces of secularization and secularism intertwined, and as a result higher education was reshaped in new and dramatic ways. The story has been told numerous times⁵ with a basic narrative describing the way that many colleges and universities that had formerly been either supportive of religious faith or neutral with regard to matters of religion became more secularist in attitude and orientation (i.e., actively antireligious), eventually relegating religion to the edges of the academic domain.

At first, the process of higher education’s secularization moved relatively slowly. As late as the mid-twentieth century, religion was still part and parcel of the educational experience at many of the nation’s leading colleges and universities. In 1951, when the young Catholic graduate William F. Buckley wrote *God and Man at Yale*,⁶ a blistering critique of how religion was marginalized and mocked at his Ivy League alma mater, the Yale leadership defended the school, at least in part, with public affirmations of the school’s enduringly Christian and religious character. No one was suggesting that Yale was a bastion of old-time religion—religion at Yale was clearly on the progressive side of the continuum—but it is equally evident that as late as the early 1950s the administration did not feel comfortable describing Yale as a secular institution.⁷

But in the 1960s the lay of the land changed at most mainstream colleges and universities in the United States. These institutions shifted from being quietly secular institutions like Buckley’s Yale to being more visibly secularist institutions where religion was intentionally pushed to the side. This increasingly secular character of American higher education seemed perfectly sensible to most people. If the world was becoming secularized, why be concerned about religion? If religion really was wielding less and less influence in society and might soon effectively disappear, why study religion at all? The best counterarguments were based on the fact that religion was not yet entirely dead and that religion had played a significant part in human history for millennia. Those arguments were convincing enough to allow a number of religious studies departments to survive and for religion to continue to be a subject for analysis in some history, anthropology, and sociology departments. Religion as

a source of inspiration or insight concerning human life and thought was rejected, however, and when religion was studied it was typically treated as a natural phenomenon that was best explained reductionistically in terms of something else. Thus religion could be discussed as wish fulfillment or as a masked form of power or as a coping mechanism for the oppressed, but it was not to be discussed as an encounter with God or a source of transcendent values.

By the late 1970s, religion as a matter of living faith and practice had essentially been bleached from the goals and purposes of higher education at the nation's major universities. Higher education was about public knowledge, and public knowledge was defined in purely secular terms. Given that the goal of the university is to educate students for the future and given the assumption that religion was making its last curtain call, there seemed to be no reason for university education to take either God or religion seriously as an aspect of higher learning. Students, if they were so inclined, could hold onto their religious beliefs in private, but those personal religious beliefs and practices were considered to have scant connection with the public knowledge that was being developed and disseminated in the classroom.

The Emergence of the Postsecular Age

A generation later, the religious landscape in America has changed once again. Rather than disappearing, the power and influence of religion seems to be growing. Sociologists are still sorting through the data and they do not all agree,⁸ but a cultural consensus has emerged: religion will likely exercise a significant role in human affairs for a long time to come. If secularization means that the world is getting a little less religious every day, then we live in a postsecular world.

Putting a "post-" in front of any word often signals a complex redefinition of the subject under discussion, but that is not what we have in mind. What we mean by the term *postsecular* is the simple fact that secularization as a theory about the future of human society seems increasingly out of touch with realities on the ground. To speak, as we do, about the emergence of a postsecular age is not a veiled attempt to foster and encourage religion's resurgence. Nor is it a claim that more religion is better for the world than less. *Postsecular* is used merely as a descriptive term.

Religion is not disappearing. We have entered an era when secularization is not in the ascendancy and when secularists are feeling challenged. It is no wonder that people like Richard Dawkins, Daniel C. Dennett, Sam Harris, and

Christopher Hitchens have recently published hyperbolically critical accounts of religion and its dangers. They sense that the tide has changed, so they are working feverishly to hold back the influence of religion and to reinvigorate the secularist cause.⁹ As those writers attest, acknowledging that our age is post-secular has powerful implications for how we see the world and comport ourselves in it. While it may have made sense to ignore religion when everyone thought it was fading away, that stance is no longer viable. Whether one likes religion or not, it is time to take it seriously and address issues of religion head-on.

Much of the world's renewed awareness of and interest in religion is motivated by fear. The rise of violent religious extremism—most visibly present within Islam, but also evident in other religious traditions—has galvanized world consciousness, leading scholars like Samuel P. Huntington to postulate that the future of the world will be driven by conflicts of culture that are largely religious in character. His book *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of the World Order* argues that the most significant conflicts around the globe in the years ahead will no longer be battles between nation-states, but skirmishes between various geographic culture blocs that embody different values and very different ways of understanding the world. All nine of the groups he mentions—Western, Latin American, African, Islamic, Sinic [Chinese], Hindu, Orthodox, Buddhist, and Japanese—are defined by the religious traditions that have shaped their histories and that continue to inform their cultural habits of thought and life.¹⁰

When Huntington first published his views, many politicians and policy wonks opined that Huntington was mistaken. In their modern, secular world, international politics pertained to economics and the power positioning of nations. If and when religion mattered, its significance was at best slight, mere froth on top of, or code words for, the more important issues of diplomacy, military planning, and trade negotiations. But many have since changed their minds—even if they continue to take issue with Huntington's specific scenario of future events—and they are now willing to consider religion as an independent variable in their analyses of foreign affairs.

Madeleine Albright, secretary of state during the Clinton administration, reflects this sea change when she describes in her book *The Mighty and the Almighty* how she had to adjust her views to take religion into account after the terrorist attacks on New York and Washington:

The 1990s had been a decade of globalization and spectacular technological gains; the information revolution altered our lifestyle, transformed the workplace, and fostered the development of a whole

new vocabulary. There was, however, another force at work. Almost everywhere, religious movements are thriving. . . . What does one make of this phenomenon? For those who design and implement U.S. foreign policy, what does it mean? How can we best manage events in a world in which there are many religions, with belief systems that flatly contradict one another at key points? How do we deal with the threat posed by extremists who, acting in the name of God, try to impose their will on others?¹¹

Albright's posture with regard to religion is shaped by worries about international relations and national security—how do we keep the irrational forces of faith in check?—but the resurgence of religion in our postsecular world is not only about terrorism and fear, it is also about humanity's ongoing search for meaning, purpose, and comfort in a world where life is not always easy. Take, for example, the well documented revival of religion in Russia that has occurred during the last twenty-five years. During the heyday of Communism only about 25 percent of the Russian population said they believed in God. By 1991 that figure had risen to 45 percent, and by 1998 it was 60 percent. This is a remarkable pattern of growth, and it has virtually nothing to do with violence, terrorism, or political posturing. Russians are looking for a God who is concerned about their personal lives and for a religion that can serve as both "a binding force to hold their marriages together and a heritage to pass on to their children."¹² After years of being forced to swallow the thin gruel of Communism, they are hoping religion will provide sustenance for their souls.

Similar trends in religious growth and vitality are evident around the world. In Latin America, Pentecostal churches are multiplying at a phenomenal rate. In Africa, a dramatic Christian expansion is occurring in the south, simultaneous with revitalization of Islam in the north. In Asia, Hinduism and Buddhism, each taking myriad different forms, are flourishing and sometimes flexing their political muscles. Around the world the Catholic Church has risen in stature, partly because of the rock star power of the late Pope John Paul II. In the United States, too, religion is more visible. While the so-called mainline religious groups have been losing members for several decades (a trend that contributed to the predictions of secularization theory), many conservative religious movements and organizations have been growing, not just in number but also in simple visibility. Religious subject matter is now standard fare on television, in the movies, on the radio, and on the Internet. Religion is no longer a subject to be avoided in coffee shops or at cocktail parties. Quite the contrary, questions about religion or spirituality can now be broached in polite conversation without embarrassment.

A Rearview Look at Secularization

The new postsecular vantage point makes it easier to look back at the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s and discover that religion was more robust in those decades than was previously assumed. Yes, this was the time when a host of theologians were talking about the “death of God” and reflecting on what religion might look like in a thoroughly “secular city,”¹³ but these were also the years when Billy Graham was first gaining popularity and when the evangelical movement (which now claims 20–25 percent of the American population) was starting to coalesce. Hippies and others were exploring a wide new range of non-Christian religious options, many imported from Asia, with Zen Buddhism and Hare Krishna leading the way. And New Age spirituality was just beginning to dawn.

There is no question that religion was being squeezed out of some parts of the culture during those decades, but elsewhere it was flourishing. Classic secularization theory said religion’s loss of significance would be most keen in the political realm, yet the civil rights movement of the 1960s—one of the most important social movements in American history—was deeply grounded in Christian faith. The more radical black nationalist movement, led by people like Malcolm X, had religious roots in the Islamic tradition. Many of those who were opposed to the war in Vietnam were motivated by religious faith, including individuals like the Berrigan brothers and Thomas Merton, all of them Roman Catholic priests. One of the era’s most articulate economic analyses also was Catholic in origin: the American bishops’ pastoral letter *Economic Justice for All: Catholic Social Teaching and the United States Economy* (1986), which presciently warned of growing disparity between the wealthy and the poor in the nation. And it was in the 1970s, that the Christian Right first began to formally organize as a religiously motivated conservative opposition force in American politics.

If religion was playing this kind of pivotal role in American culture even in the heyday of secularization, then surely it is a force that deserves attention today. To say our age is postsecular is, in some sense, simply to point out that America remains the religion-soaked nation that it has always been.

Implications for Higher Education

Today religion is everywhere, and it may be more visible at colleges and universities than anywhere else. The religious diversity of literally the whole world is on display on many campuses, including various forms of Hinduism,

Buddhism, and Islam, every imaginable variety of Christianity and Judaism, and religions so new that they were not in existence a century ago. Recent survey data indicate that roughly four out of every five college students describe themselves as “spiritual” and that more than half of all professors say they believe in God (with that number jumping to almost three-quarters if belief in “a Higher Power of some kind” is included).¹⁴

Religion’s increased visibility on campuses mirrors the resurgence of visible religion in the culture at large. *Newsweek* and *Time* regularly feature cover stories on subjects like the Bible, Islam, and Jesus; musical performers and sports professionals thank God publicly for their successes; and “values voters” have become a potent political force within the nation. The best-selling nonfiction book of the last decade was *The Purpose Driven Life*, written by the evangelical pastor Rick Warren, and the fiction blockbuster was Dan Brown’s novel *The Da Vinci Code*, with its central plot premised on an ancient Gnostic version of Christianity in which Jesus marries Mary Magdalene. Religion has made a comeback both in the culture at large and on college and university campuses in particular.

In many ways it was easier for universities back in the heyday of secularization when religion was unobtrusive. A university could presume that studying religion was a bit like paying attention to monarchical theories of government made irrelevant by democracy, to pre-Linnean classifications of animal life made obsolete by Darwin, or to the “science” of phrenology debunked by advances in psychology and physiology. Religion could be considered a bit anachronistic, yet still maintain a place in the curriculum. Scholars have never disputed its immense historical influence, nor have they questioned that ancient and contemporary religious texts and practices contribute to the social, economic, and political structures of a given culture. But treating religion as a subject that might appeal to someone’s historical or social scientific curiosity is far different from seeing religion as a valid source of human meaning, as a driving force in scholarly research, or as a core concern for higher education.

It’s not easy to navigate this new terrain. For example, a faculty committee at Harvard University recently drafted a report recommending that all undergraduate students complete one or another course in a category called “reason and faith.” That proposal set off a storm on campus and beyond, and in the end the task force substituted a “culture and belief” requirement, clarifying that “religious beliefs and practices are topics that some courses in this category should address.” The course requirement was ratcheted down, but the Harvard report still strongly defends the inclusion of religion in the curriculum. It declares, “Religion has historically been, and continues to be, a force shaping

identity and behavior throughout the world. Harvard is a secular institution, but religion is an important part of our students' lives. When they get to college, students often struggle to sort out the relationship between their own beliefs and practices and those of fellow students, and the relationship of religious belief to the resolutely secular world of the academy."¹⁵

The university is indeed "resolutely secular"—it studies the world as it really exists. But it is not a place dedicated to secularism, to the removal of religion from the hallowed halls of learning or from the world at large. The university studies the world as it is. And we now live in a postsecular world, or, perhaps more accurately, a *postsecularist* world. Religion—religion in all its grand and gracious as well as its vain and violent incarnations—is part of that reality. This postsecular perspective is new, and it presents higher education with significant challenges as well as opportunities.