



DOUGLAS JACOBSEN
RHONDA HUSTEDT JACOBSEN

NO LONGER INVISIBLE

RELIGION IN UNIVERSITY EDUCATION

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*Religion in
University Education*



DOUGLAS JACOBSEN

and

RHONDA HUSTEDT JACOBSEN

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Preface

THIS BOOK IS about religion and undergraduate education at America's thousands of colleges and universities. Its main argument can be stated simply: Paying attention to religion—which we define broadly to include traditional religion, spirituality in its many different forms, and life's big questions of meaning, purpose, character, hope, and ethics, whether or not they are formulated in religious language—has the potential to enhance student learning and to improve higher education as a whole. We also think that religion is educationally unavoidable. Religion is a part of the real world that demands objective analysis and critical study, and questions and concerns related to religion (defined broadly) appear in almost every academic field of study. There was a time, not very long ago, when religion was all but invisible in the educational programming of most colleges and universities. That time is past; religion is no longer invisible. This book provides a map of how colleges and universities across the country are re-engaging religion and how they can do that more intelligently and effectively. This is not a compendium of answers, but an invitation for educators to look more closely at a facet of life that is too big and important to ignore.

The two of us have been thinking and talking about religion in higher education for a long time. One of us studied psychology as an undergraduate and later went on for a doctorate in the social foundations of education from Temple University; the other earned an undergraduate degree in philosophy and then completed a doctorate in religious studies at the University of Chicago. Our first real disagreement—which took place long ago on a train from Belfast to Dublin in Ireland—was about which field of study, psychology or philosophy, had contributed more to the advancement of human understanding. We have now been married for thirty-five years, and we have been debating—and learning from each other—about matters of psychology, philosophy, religion, and education the entire time. We wrote our first joint essay on the topic of religion in higher education about twenty years ago, and ever since then we have been asking if and how religion can play a constructive role in advancing the work of higher education.

During the last four or five years, we have discussed this topic with literally hundreds of faculty, students, college administrators, student-life professionals, chaplains, and leaders of various national organizations dedicated to the support and improvement of higher education in America. This book is the result of what we have heard.

To some degree, the present volume is a sequel to our 2008 publication entitled *The American University in a Postsecular Age*. That earlier work was an edited volume illustrating the many different ways that educators are already thinking about religion and its connections with higher education. Contributors included sociologists like Robert Wuthnow from Princeton, political scientists like John DiIulio from the University of Pennsylvania, national higher educational leaders like Lee Shulman, then president of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, and religious studies scholars like Mark Edwards from Harvard and Amanda Porterfield from Florida State University. By bringing together the work of these experts, who represent a wide array of subject areas and viewpoints, that book was intended symbolically to set the table for “a more comprehensive and connected conversation [dealing] with religion in its entirety—including its personal and social dimensions, values and ideas, subjective and objective characteristics, and potential for good or ill.”¹

During the last several years, we have used *The American University in a Postsecular Age* as a starting point for conversations at dozens of colleges and universities. All told, we visited more than fifty campuses, ranging from Brown University to Brigham Young, Vassar College to Cal State Bakersfield, MIT to Ave Maria, Penn State to Pepperdine, the University of Miami to Pacific Lutheran, Yale to USC, and the United States Air Force Academy to Soka University (a Buddhist-influenced school in southern California).² The purpose of these visits was not to catalogue everything we saw—we are not anthropologists or sociological researchers—but to learn how people thought and talked about religion and its connections with higher education. Our methodology was to ask the best questions we could, to listen carefully to the responses we were given, and then to reformulate our own thinking so that our next round of conversations might be even more productive. And those subsequent conversations were often suggested by individuals at the last school we visited, who frequently told us quite clearly who we simply *had* to talk to next. Over time this process helped us learn how to ask better questions and to clarify our rhetoric in ways that facilitated meaningful discussion rather than fruitless, conceptually confused argument.

All of that trekking across the country obviously took considerable time and money, and we are grateful to the Lilly Endowment for providing the needed funds. We are also thankful that our liaison there, Christopher Coble, was sometimes willing to take on a role analogous to that of a baseball manager.

A few months into the process, one of us started getting antsy to begin writing this book, and Chris told us to close our laptops and not even consider writing for at least two years. “Just listen,” he said. “Don’t jump to conclusions. Take your time.” So we did, and we learned a great deal more than we ever could have predicted.

One of the lessons we had to learn over and over again was how much our own religious dispositions and habits of thought shaped the way we saw things. Both of us are lifelong Protestants, but when we began our campus visits, we were quite confident that as scholars we could bracket any Protestant intellectual biases we might have. We quickly discovered, however, that our Protestant biases (or perhaps more accurately our Protestant habits of thought and practice) went deeper than we knew, and people pointed them out to us more often than we’d like to admit. Eventually, slowly, we became more religiously, spiritually, and secularly multilingual, but it took effort. We also realized we were not alone. Religious or secular convictions and ways of life haunt everyone’s thinking and acting, and that means any comprehension of the place of religion in higher education requires a heightened self-awareness from everyone, along with more sensitivity to the ways in which various religious or religion-like frames of cognition, affectivity, and action (of which we are often only partly conscious) shape us as individuals, educators, and students.

This book is divided into two sections. The first part describes the context of American higher education as a whole and the changing place of religion within it. The initial chapter discusses religion’s recent “return” to higher education, arguing that religion’s current visibility does not represent a movement back toward the past but is actually something quite new (which is why the word “return” is in quotes). Religion in America today is not the Protestant monolith it once was—it is much more diverse—and religion’s boundaries have become fuzzier than ever before, making it hard to differentiate between religious and nonreligious life stances. These changes make it impossible to keep religion out of higher education, even if that might be the preferred goal for some people. The second chapter is a historical overview of religion in American higher education that provides some of the background information necessary to grasp the uniqueness of the contemporary situation. The third chapter analyzes several “trail markers” that colleges and universities developed during the late twentieth century as religion was beginning to become more visible on campuses once again. We consider these trail markers to be important, although ultimately inadequate, ways of addressing the complexity of religion that exists within higher education today. The fourth chapter proposes a new and more comprehensive framework for understanding religion in the contemporary era, a framework for asking better questions about how religion and higher education are intertwined.

The second half of the book is organized around the six key topics or questions related to religion and higher learning—six sites of engagement where religion and higher learning overlap—that we think all colleges and universities need to address. These essays are not attempts to spell out what educators or institutions must do. Instead they are intended to help colleges and universities engage in more productive discussion, debate, planning, and assessment related to religion's presence—sometimes hidden, but increasingly visible—within the goals and practices of contemporary American higher education. In terms of specific topics, we start with what is perhaps least controversial—the need for religious literacy in a religiously diverse world—and then move on to discuss interfaith etiquette, religion and the framing of knowledge, religion and civic engagement, the place of convictions in the process of teaching and learning, and the practical concerns of character and vocation.

It should be clear by now that we are not arguing that higher education should somehow submit itself to the teachings of traditional religion. This book is not about the eternal truths of heaven; it is about the place of religion in the rough-and-tumble educational realities of the here and now. Our argument is educational, not religious: that giving more careful and nuanced attention to the religiosity (or spirituality) that is *already present within* the enterprise of higher learning will benefit colleges and universities and improve the education they offer to students.

No Longer Invisible

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PART ONE

*Religion in the Context
of University Education*

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No Longer Invisible

DRIVE NORTH FROM the Mason-Dixon Line past the Civil War fields of Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, and about two hours later you reach a place called “Happy Valley,” home of Pennsylvania State University. Penn State’s mammoth presence dominates the sparsely populated valley, and it offers nearly everything that one might expect from a fine public university: incredible facilities, world-class scholars, smart students, and an amazingly loyal body of alumni. Like every university, Penn State has its warts and blemishes. In 2009, for example, the university had the dubious honor of being listed in *The Princeton Review* as the number-one party school in the nation, and more recently the school’s reputation has been tarnished by an ongoing investigation into allegations of child sexual abuse by an assistant football coach—revelations that led to the dismissal of both the university president and Penn State’s longtime football coach, the late Joe Paterno, fondly referred to as “JoePa” by Penn State fans.

What most people don’t know about Penn State is that the school is also at the cutting edge of higher education’s new engagement with religion. The most visible symbol of this engagement is the massive Pasquerilla Spiritual Center (PSC), located prominently on the campus. Constructed in 2003 and funded entirely by private donations, the center has a 750-seat worship hall that can be reconfigured in minutes to suit the needs of any of the campus’s various religious communities, and the building includes office space for all of Penn State’s more than sixty student religious (and secular/ethical) organizations, including the Atheist/Agnostic Association. The programs of the PSC are overseen by the Center for Ethics and Religious Affairs (CERA), which says that its goal is to provide “a welcoming, safe, inclusive environment for the Penn State community to explore a multitude of faith traditions in a compassionate, open-minded setting,” an environment “that stretches beyond tolerance to a genuine appreciation of and respect for religious and spiritual diversity.” Proselytizing is explicitly forbidden, and all PSC-supported programs (whether student-led or university-sponsored) are supposed to “support students’ commitment to academics, to self, and to family.”¹

As a public institution, Penn State is committed to the separation of church and state, but no tension is assumed to exist between that commitment and the religious and ethical work of the PSC. There was a time in the past when Penn State, like many other public universities, had an ordained Christian chaplain on campus, but that office was eliminated in the 1960s. The PSC today is directed by Bob Smith, a non-ordained former social worker who defines his responsibility as making sure that everyone, regardless of their faith or lack of faith, feels at home and is treated equally, both at the PSC and on the campus as a whole. Smith sees the PSC as a bold experiment in public higher education, and he is not alone. In our conversations with directors of religious or spiritual life at colleges and universities all across the country, Penn State was repeatedly cited as among the vanguard when it comes to dealing with religion in public higher education.

Like many cutting-edge initiatives, it took significant efforts to get the PSC and CERA off the ground, and the one person who did more than anyone else to make it happen was Coach Joe Paterno. Paterno, a devout Catholic who was known for running a genuinely character-building football program, cajoled the president into approving the project, and he and his wife contributed more than a million dollars toward its construction. In a turn of events worthy of a Greek tragedy, the PSC also became one of the primary places where students congregated to sort through their confusion, disappointment, and anger about the sexual abuse scandal involving the former assistant football coach and the university's subsequent decision to fire Paterno along with the university president. The PSC helped to organize a massive candlelight vigil for the victims of the abuse, and when Paterno died of cancer three months later, the PSC, for the first time in its history, was the site of a funeral service. More than 40,000 Penn State students, staff, alumni, and friends filed through to pay their respects before the local Catholic bishop performed the actual service. According to Smith, many members of the campus community expressed their appreciation that the PSC was there to be a place of spiritual hope and healing during a troubled period in the school's history.²

Religion's New Visibility

Religion, as we discuss it in this book, encompasses all of the concerns and activities associated with the PSC at Penn State. It involves traditional religiosity such as that represented by the Catholic, Protestant, Jewish, and other student religious organizations housed in the center, but it also relates to "big questions" (questions of meaning and purpose) and deep moral concerns, whether these matters are expressed in explicitly religious language or not. Religion is about how people relate to God or the "higher power(s)" of the universe, but it is also about how people relate to each other, especially when words fail but sympathy

and support still need to be expressed. And religion is about the values that we live by as individuals and as groups. There was a time in the not-too-distant past when this whole jumble of concerns was metaphorically swept under the rug at most colleges and universities, which tended to operate on the assumption that religion was a purely personal concern that had little or nothing to do with higher education. That is, however, no longer the case. Religion has once again become visible on campuses, and colleges and universities, both public and private, are grappling with how to proceed.

Growing out of these developments, the question that has driven our research and reflection is this: How is religion present within higher learning, and how might educators maximize the cognitive, social, and personal dimensions of student learning by paying more attention to the inherently religious or spiritual dimensions of higher education? One of our earliest findings was that many educators do not know where to start when such a question is asked. Many people acknowledge that religion and spirituality are somehow relevant to educational processes, but most don't know how to talk about it. The conversation about such matters is dominated on many campuses by the extremes: by convinced believers championing traditional religion, on the one hand, and by emotivists of vague spirituality, on the other. Conversations with those in either camp tend to be not particularly fruitful. The first defines religion too narrowly to take into account the diversity of faith that exists within higher education; the second defines the topic so loosely and individualistically that there is little to do other than swap personal stories. The goal of this book is to chart a middle ground where religion can be discussed critically and intelligently (in other words, in the natural language of the academy) so that the multiple connections between religion and higher education can be identified and analyzed.

We are not suggesting that colleges and universities need to *add* religion to the already overloaded list of concerns they are supposed to address. Religious and spiritual matters are already embedded in the work that colleges and universities do. The goal is to become more aware of and attuned to what is already going on, and the potential gains are enormous. Giving more careful attention to religion (broadly construed) has the possibility of enhancing the work of higher education in untold ways, because religion is inextricably blended into the key dispositions that drive learning itself—the mixing of critical thinking with hope, the awareness of difference, the ability to wonder and to see the world in new ways, the skill of focusing on one thing at a time, and the blending of the personal with the impersonal. Attending to religion can enliven all of these dimensions of higher learning; ignoring religion undermines them.

That said, we are not at all suggesting that religion itself is somehow above criticism. At colleges and universities, religion should be subjected to the same critical inquiry that is directed at every other topic of study in the academy. Religion is

not an unmitigated good; it can be a repository of evil as well. But that is precisely why religion needs attention. It has too much power to be ignored, and it is too enmeshed in life to be treated as irrelevant to the choices people make and the ways in which societies organize themselves.

If any particular event signaled a sea change regarding the place of religion in university education, it was a conference that took place at Wellesley College in September of 1998. The theme of the meeting was “Education as Transformation: Religious Pluralism, Spirituality, and Higher Education,” and the organizers assumed that it would be a relatively modest gathering of administrators and academicians. That assumption was mistaken. More than 800 people showed up, representing 350 institutions of higher learning, including the Ivy League, some of the nation’s most elite liberal arts colleges, and a variety of research universities. The hypothesis of the conference was that religion and spirituality are inseparable from learning. Education itself, the conference proclaimed, is a spiritual journey, an inherently transformative experience.

Just as religion was beginning to re-emerge as a significant concern within higher education, it also resurfaced with deadly violence in society as a whole when religiously motivated terrorists attacked the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on September 11, 2001. Across the nation, people asked how this could have happened. How could the American government and its intelligence-gathering organizations have so completely misunderstood the world situation? How could the negative consequences of religion have been so overlooked? Religion could no longer be ignored—not by politicians or the military, and not by the academy. Although many scholars had dismissed religion as tangential to the quest for geopolitical understanding, that attitude was changed in a day. Like everyone else in the nation, educators had received an unwelcome wakeup call. It was time to start taking religion more seriously, and it was time to learn how to “manage” religion on campus more effectively. This was a matter of national security and political necessity; it had to be done. What might have been a gradual process of re-engaging religion on campus suddenly became a matter of grave urgency.

The recent “return” of religion to higher education—in both the Wellesley sense and in response to 9/11—is a complex phenomenon. On the one hand, the return of religion simply means that religion is more visible, less private, and more integrated into the learning process than it has been for years. It now pops up regularly in the courses and academic journals of history, anthropology, sociology, psychology, politics, science, literature, and virtually every kind of professional study. Religion is now the hottest topic of research for the American Historical Association, nudging out “cultural history” for first place,³ and the American Psychological Association recently stated that it wants more attention given to religion and spirituality, because these factors “are under-examined in psychological research both in terms of their prevalence within various research populations

and in terms of their possible relevance as influential variables.”⁴ The same kinds of developments are evident in other disciplines as well.

It is important to note, however, that the religion that is “returning” to university life and learning is not the old religion of the past. The word “return” accordingly needs to be used with care. Religion in America has undergone a significant transformation in the last ten to fifteen years, and the primary difference is that it has become much more diverse, so diverse that we prefer to use the term “pluriformity” to underscore the expansiveness of current options. This pluriformity has two sides. One side represents traditional, “organized” religion, and the main change here is that the range of organized religions in America has increased exponentially. College and university students now attend classes not just with Catholics, Jews, and Protestants (and many different kinds of secular individuals), but with Muslims, Hindus, Jains, Buddhists, Zoroastrians, Wiccans, Sikhs, and members of other religious communities and subcommunities. This development alone would call for rewriting the rules of engagement with religion on campus.

The other side of today’s religious pluriformity, however, makes things even more complex and confusing: The boundary line between what is and what is not religion has become thoroughly blurred. If secularity is like freshwater and religion is like saltwater, life in America is now thoroughly brackish. More and more people are cobbling together their own unique combinations of religious ideas, practices, experiences, and core values from a variety of religious and nonreligious sources. The term “spirituality” is sometimes used to describe this new do-it-yourself style of faith. Some people who consider themselves “spiritual” are also traditionally religious, but many of them are atheists, agnostics, or self-proclaimed skeptics. To be spiritual, understood in this sense, is to have deeply held convictions, and anyone can have those kinds of heartfelt allegiances. This new ambiguity about what counts as religion or spirituality makes it virtually impossible to keep religion out of higher education, because no one knows exactly where to draw the line indicating that one person’s convictions count as religion while those of someone else do not. To say that religion has “returned” to higher education is thus something like saying that dinosaurs have returned to earth in the form of birds. Birds are the evolutionary descendants of dinosaurs, but they are hardly the same animals, and American religion today is a very different animal than it was in the past.

Three Stories from Boston

The multifaceted and complicated character of religion in higher education today can be illustrated by stories from three universities in the academically rich and culturally diverse city of Boston. The first comes from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. MIT was begun in 1861 as a polytechnic institute, and founder William Barton Rogers defined the school’s purpose somewhat inelegantly as

“the teaching, not of the minute details and manipulations of the arts, which can be done only in the workshop, but the inculcation of those scientific principles which form the basis and explanation of them, their leading processes and operations in connection with physical laws.”⁵ MIT is a practical, scientific place where religion, while never being entirely ignored, has never been central. The campus is graced with a beautiful prayer chapel, and religion courses have been taught for decades, most notably by the prolific author and spiritually eclectic Huston Smith who chaired the philosophy department from 1958 to 1973. But the university has no formal religious connections, and it never had any officially designated overseer of religious life on campus until the fall of 2007 when it appointed Robert Randolph to be “chaplain of the institute.”

MIT, like most universities, is awash in students of faith, and the main administrative task of the new chaplain is to coordinate the work of the twenty-two unpaid associate chaplains who serve the religious needs of the student body, representing all of the world’s major religions and a dozen different versions of Christianity. But since MIT always had religious students on campus, why appoint a chaplain in 2007? In short, MIT needed a chaplain because meeting the religious needs of individual students—something religious volunteers could do—was no longer enough. What matters now is helping students learn how to conduct themselves in a world inhabited by many different kinds of secular and religious people. Randolph explains; “The biggest challenge . . . is simply keeping people talking to each other, so that the stereotypes that operate, and have operated for far too long out there, are not allowed to reimpose themselves.” Randolph says that getting Muslims and Jews and Hindus and Christians and everyone else to be comfortable with each other is the most important religious work he does. He notes: “In [twenty-five] years [these students] are going to be decision-makers in wider worlds than we can imagine. And having some appreciation and understanding of these different religious communities and traditions will serve them well. That’s the goal; that’s what we’re trying to do.”⁶ In Randolph’s opinion, the very future of the world may hinge on the interfaith friendships that are born at MIT and the skills of religious etiquette that are developed there.

A second story: The same year that MIT appointed its first official chaplain, an interesting debate about religion and education was taking place next door at Harvard University. The focus at Harvard was on the classroom, and specifically on general education requirements, the package of courses that every student is required to take in order to graduate. A faculty task force, chaired by the Pulitzer Prize-winning literary scholar Louis Menand, recommended the addition of a new general education requirement in an area of study the committee called “reason and faith.” The rationale was straightforward: “Religion is a fact of twenty-first-century life,” and a Harvard education should recognize its presence. The committee noted that 94 percent of Harvard’s incoming students say they