

Examining Religious Pluralism and Spirituality in Higher Education

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A vital aspect of any diversity movement is the careful examination of absent voices, hidden privileges, and underlying biases that can exclude and marginalize specific populations. Current diversity efforts to promote spirituality and religious pluralism within higher education – as seen by the growing number of books, articles, and conference themes devoted to these topics – require such an examination.

With some consideration it is easy to see that students who are non-believers or non-Christian are excluded and marginalized by these religious and spiritual efforts. But one must also consider more subtle forms of bias. For example, the role of spirituality for students of color is not addressed by the dominant faith development theories used by educators. Additionally, many gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) students have had mixed or painful experiences with religion – one student we know described his religious experiences as “spiritual violence” – yet many educators assume that religion is positive for all students. Our challenge is to examine and acknowledge those student populations that are marginalized, excluded, or disadvantaged by religious plurality and spirituality efforts.

Another way to surface unseen biases is to examine the underlying assumptions of the movements themselves. By not acknowledging the perspectives or existence of the non-religious and non-believers, national calls for increased attention to religion in higher education, such as *The Wingspread Declaration on Religion and Public Life*, demonstrate an assumption that religion is central to everyone’s life, even though this is not true for significant portions of the U.S. population. Similarly, pervasive calls for increased spirituality in higher education assume that religion or spirituality is the primary way to address the search for purpose and meaning, though most students are concerned with who they are, their purpose in life, and the development of values, regardless of whether they are spiritual, religious, or non-believing.

While the work of recognizing and moving beyond hidden biases can be difficult, it is vital if we are committed to the educational experience of all students in our diverse democracy. We suggest that campuses begin with the following actions:

- **Address absent voices.** Reflect on whether your perspective on religion is inclusive of Christians and non-Christians, believing and non-believing students, LGBT students, racial minority students, as well as others whose voices may be missing from the conversation. Every policy discussion about religion and spirituality on campus should include multiple perspectives in order to create inclusive dialogues that cross boundaries.
- **Examine definitions of religion and spirituality.** While the meaning of the two words continues to be conflated by many, there is a growing understanding that they may have different meanings for different people. Take time to explore those definitions and assumptions. Consider who they include and exclude. Discuss other phrases with complex and disputed meanings, such as “non-believers” or “the religious right.”

- **Help students recognize the role of Christian privilege as a hindrance to religious pluralism.** In examining whether Christians have advantages, discuss campus calendars, institutionalized prayer at campus events such as commencement or athletic games, and unspoken Christian assumptions when religion is included in the curriculum.
- **Provide inclusive opportunities for all students to have healthy dialogues about purpose, meaning, morals, and values.** The Teagle Foundation, for instance, advocates using “Big Questions” to provide students an opportunity to discuss values and life purpose without necessarily beginning from a religious perspective. Mark Edmundson in his book, *Why Read?*, also suggests including these elements in humanities courses.
- **Create forums to address religion and spirituality at the meta-level.** Contemporary culture often portrays religion in divisive and polarizing ways. Prevent students from perpetuating divisiveness on campus by facilitating opportunities to understand the complexities of topics such as morality, fundamentalism, religious pluralism, secularism, etc.
- **Increase the availability of research on diverse populations.** While existing research provides an overall picture of student beliefs, it does not provide details on “conditional” experiences of students of different ethnicities, non-Christians, LGBT students, non-believing students, etc., which could provide valuable insight into how to best approach religion and spirituality on campus.
- **Partner with others on campus.** Individuals working in student affairs and campus ministries have years of experience working on these topics. When undertaking efforts focused on religious pluralism or spirituality, partnerships with individuals of multiple perspectives have a greater likelihood of creating inclusive efforts.

The current focus on spirituality and religion on campus requires an exploration of hidden biases and the impact on diverse populations. This incarnation of the diversity movement must be inclusive and provide a place for all students to understand their authentic selves and place in the world. If diversity is higher education’s best guarantee for ensuring excellence, we must be willing to examine difficult topics and unrecognized biases in order to create a rich and inclusive educational experience for all.

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