

Faith, Rebellion, Disbelief: The Bible on American College Campuses

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A few years ago, Alan Wolfe, the director of the Boisi Center for Religion and American Public Life at Boston College, wrote a provocative opening paragraph for his essay, “Faith and Diversity in American Religion,” which appeared in *The Chronicle Review of The Chronicle of Higher Education*. Wolfe states: “One would be hard pressed to find a private college or university in the United States that cannot trace its founding to a religious denomination. One would be equally hard pressed, at least as far as America’s elite universities are concerned, to find one that would identify faith as central to its current approaches to teaching, research, and student life. That is to say: No aspect of life is considered so important to Americans outside higher education, yet deemed so unimportant by the majority of those inside, as religion.”

I know that from the conversations that I have had with other college chaplains and deans of religious life, we hated this depiction of the unimportance of religious life on college campuses. We did not like it because this opinion stood against so much of what we believe and fight for, and we resented it because in a certain light, it was so apt, so true, so blazingly accurate. I have had the privilege of serving as the chaplain of three institutions of higher learning: Suffolk University, Skidmore College, and Endicott College. Suffolk only recently constructed a small chapel within its Student Center, Skidmore’s Wilson Chapel had not had regular ecumenical worship services at any time from when it was constructed until I became the head of religious life, and it had been over two decades since Endicott’s chapel served as a regular center for worship on campus. To be sure, these institutions are not unique. Even the great chapels of Williams, Middlebury, and Union Colleges now stand empty on Sunday mornings. If you were to enter any of these magisterial college chapels and hear the great organs chiming forth all the sounds of nature, chances are you have stumbled across a music professor practicing her craft, and not a worship service underway. For the many colleges that long ago gave up the religious affiliations upon which they were founded, that has left gaping holes: large chapels no longer used, chaplains’ offices without real definition, and forms of religious life so bland that they please almost no one. Furthermore, the composition of the student body has shifted, meaning that chaplains can no longer speak only one spiritual language. The difficulties raised by those changes have been compounded by yet another shift, which is the way that colleges have dealt with them.

This is an easy history to account for you. Most liberal arts colleges and private universities in the United States were founded by religious folk, and bear some sort of historical affiliation with some Christian denomination or another. At these colleges and universities, at the turn of the 19th to the 20th centuries, the presidents of these institutions of higher education more often than not were Protestant clergy, and one of the duties of being a president in those days was overseeing the operations of the college chapel. Around the 1920s, as colleges and universities sought presidents from more diverse backgrounds, academics who were more accustomed to raising funds that had been eaten up in the wake of the First World War, there began a new class of administrators on college campuses: College Chaplains and Deans of the Chapel, who in the stead of the president, were to provide pastoral care for the students, faculty, staff, administrators, and trustees of higher education. At almost every college and university, these chaplains and deans of the chapel reported directly to the President and were members of the President’s senior staff, which makes sense as their pastoral office had previously belonged to the President. Furthermore, many of the religious studies departments at private American colleges and universities were founded by the Chaplain, who either converted the theology department to one of religious studies, or who simply founded a department in the relatively new field of comparative religious studies, an outgrowth of the trends that had begun in the German universities during the late 1800’s. More often than not, the Chaplain was a tenured professor and the chair of the department. Another interesting dimension is that when the first ever meeting of

the National Association of College and University Chaplains occurred in 1948, the 84 individuals present were all male Protestant Christians. If you were to attend one of our annual meetings now, you would see that while it continues to attract Protestant Christians, our company also includes Jewish, Muslim, and Roman Catholic chaplains, and we are no longer exclusively, or even predominantly, male.

I served as the chaplain of Skidmore College for six years, and I have cherished a story when I first arrived there. Skidmore was never a religious school, though at one time it did have a mandatory chapel service on Sunday evenings, not on Sunday mornings. Professor Mary Lynn's research on Skidmore's history states that the real function of the mandatory chapel services on Sunday evenings was not so much to attend to the spiritual virtues of the young women of Skidmore College, but to ensure that they returned to campus from their boyfriends' universities or their weekend excursions to New York City in time for Monday morning classes. As far as I can tell, the last time that Skidmore College held mandatory chapel services was the inauguration ceremony for The Rev. Dr. Tom Davis, who served honorably as the College Chaplain at Skidmore from 1966-1996. By Tom's account, there were some 800 students in attendance there for his first Sunday as College Chaplain, for his first service. The following Sunday, at his second service preaching at Skidmore, the requirement to come for chapel services had been lifted, and there were fewer than thirty students there for the worship service. Able to look back at that event now with less ego investment than he had at the time, Tom went back and forth between wondering what he had said in his first sermon that had been so wrong, and then wondering how many of the twenty-some students who showed up for the second chapel service had not received the memo that chapel services were no longer required!

This switch toward non-mandatory chapel services occurred at colleges and universities throughout the United States during the 1960's and 1970's. The civil rights, anti-war, and feminist movements on American campuses certainly were led by prominent religious figures such as Abraham Joshua Heschel of the Jewish Theological Seminary, William Sloane Coffin of Yale University, Daniel Berrigan of Cornell University, and Beverly Harrison of the University of California at Berkeley. Yet, these movements also bolstered strong secularist sentiments, which in an age that demanded educational liberties, interpreted such liberties to include the end to mandatory worship services at colleges and universities. This transition made sense not only due to secularist tendencies among college radicals, but also in recognition of the deep changes that were happening in the composition of the student body on college campuses. No longer were the Ivy League, the Seven Sisters, and the great liberal arts colleges merely the academic strongholds of upper and middle class Protestants, but increasingly were enrolling first Catholics and Jews, and then African Americans and women in admissions processes that called less and less either for restrictions or for quotas. The religious diversity on college campuses, along with an increasingly secular spirit among the intelligencia, simply made mandatory college chapel services obsolete.

What is also important to note is that since the 1970's, there have been fundamental changes in the role of chaplains on college campuses. Further, many chaplaincies have become disassociated from their previously held tenure-line faculty tracks, and most chaplains now report to the dean of the college or the dean of students, rather than to the President, a situation that narrows and diminishes the scope previously entrusted to chaplains. At many schools, "chaplains" have been converted into "directors of religious life," and "deans of the chapel" have been changed to "deans of religious life." The result of this has been a greater emphasis on inclusivity among the diversity of religions represented on campus, but a lessening of pastoral care, which led to a disastrous and volatile situation on many college campuses in the wake of 9/11, when religious identity became a suddenly white hot issue in what had seemed a morass of secular higher education. It might be noted however, that there have been some significant recent appointments that reflect a new diversity among religious life professionals. Rabbi Susan Laemmlé was appointed the dean of religious life at the University of Southern California, the first rabbi at a non-Jewish university to be named the CRO, the Chief Religious Officer of a university. Upon her retirement, USC made another historic appointment in naming Varun Soni, a Hindu, their next Dean of Religious Life. At Tufts University, a historically Unitarian school, Father David O'Leary became the first Roman Catholic priest to oversee a non-Roman Catholic university's religious life programs, and Smith, Mt Holyoke, Princeton, Yale, and many other

colleges and universities have hired Muslim chaplains under the purview of their deans of religious life.

This corresponds with the reform of America's immigration laws in 1965, which brought about the arrival in the United States of religious believers from all over the world, bringing with them a tremendous diversity of religious and spiritual belief. Stephen Stein of Indiana University argues that there are four main forces which are at work, changing the shape and significance of religion in the United States. The first of these forces is a recognition that globalization radically reshaped American religious pluralism, with post-1965 immigrants bringing the traditions of Asia into the diverse religious mix at the same time that several truly indigenous communities, including the Mormons and the Jehovah's Witnesses, have grown exponentially. The Latino presence in the Roman Catholic Church is reorienting that huge community as well. The second force, privatization, has broken up the controlling interests of mainline denominations and redistributed religious commitments. The second half of the 20th century saw televangelists invade American homes, followed by the expanding impact of cable TV on religion, and now the explosion of alternative religious options on the Internet. New Age spirituality in its infinite expressions allows individuals to participate in virtual religious communities from the privacy of their homes. A third force is localization, whereby as loyalties to ecumenical, denominational, and even regional religious agencies diminish, Americans continue to support local congregations, parishes, synagogues, and temples in astonishingly high numbers given the low turnout for worship services. New kinds of local religious communities also are enjoying remarkable success. Mega-churches, comprising large, nondenominational Protestant congregations, are thriving as an expression of the primacy of the local, whereas traditional powerhouses such as the Roman Catholic Church, Presbyterians, Methodists, and Lutherans each year report the dwindling of congregations and members. The fourth force that Stein mentions is that of polarization, indicating the competition that always has been present among religious communities, often accompanied by overt hostility. For instance, sustained campaigns against Catholics, Mormons, Jews, and various so-called cults are well known, and Stein argues that residuals of these hostilities remain. But polarization between religious conservatives and religious liberals, without respect to denominational affiliation, has taken center stage. The divisive issues include abortion, homosexuality, gay marriage, prayer in the public schools, the role of women, the response to terrorism, and war.

Hasia Diner, professor of American Jewish History and director of the Goldstein-Goren Center for American Jewish History at New York University, has made an interesting case that in contemporary America, religion has separated into two extremes, veering off from what just a few decades ago seemed to be a liberal consensus, about both the nature of religion and its place in society, among Americans as a whole and within most faiths. She states that consensus, which reached its high point in the 1960s, assumed religion to be a progressive force that, despite clear denominational differences, united Americans through common values and shared ideas about progress and brotherhood. The liberal view of American religion accepted differences among *Protestant, Catholic, Jew*, the title of Will Herberg's famous 1955 book. Like him, Americans generally emphasized the connections among people across rigid divides. But in the final decades of the 20th century and into the early 21st, that widely accepted truth has been shattered.

On the one hand, Diner argues, the boundaries between denominations have blurred, and previously clear sectarian lines seem less well defined. Soaring intermarriage rates complicate previously accepted definitions of what constitutes the core of particular religions and what membership means. "Exotic" practices have found their way into the sanctuaries of once staid churches and synagogues. Congregations experiment in their sacred services with modes of spiritual expression borrowed from other religious systems and from New Age sources. Individuals sample from the motifs of many religious repertoires without feeling obliged to buy into total systems. Probably no popular example could trump that of the iconic pop singer Madonna, a Roman Catholic by upbringing, who now presents herself by her "Jewish" name, Esther, and has announced that she is a devotee of kabbalah, a mystical Judaic tradition that flourished at the end of the 13th century. Additionally, individuals who in the past had no access to public roles of authority in religious organizations, notably women and gay people, now

serve as members and the clergy and help shape forms of religious expression that challenge longstanding doctrines.

On the other hand, the hardening of religious orthodoxies among the most fervently committed Protestants, Catholics, Jews, and Muslims, and their increasing power within their respective faiths, has shaken mid-20th-century ideas about the basically benign similarities among religions. That triumph of orthodoxy reflects a deep reaction against blurring of boundaries, which had, in its turn, challenged the assumption that “natural” categories in difference existed. In essence, elements within each of the religious communities have come to stake out extreme positions, proclaiming certain incontrovertible fundamentals of their religions and lambasting anyone who questions doctrinal authority. To borrow from Diner again, within Judaism, the ultra-Orthodox who refer to themselves as “Torah true” have made modern Orthodox Judaism, long associated with the idea that faith and modernity could coexist, uncomfortable with accommodation. The latter now feel compelled to look to the right to make sure that they cannot be accused of being soft in matters of Jewish law as defined by the right. The purists tend to make no room for either moral relativism or creative fusions, wanting to erect thicker walls.

Another tremendous resource is the work of the Hinduism scholar Diana Eck of Harvard University, who through her influential Pluralism Project has chronicled this change in American religious diversity in her book *A New Religious America*, which in my opinion really should be required reading for college students, where religious identity has such obvious repercussions upon politics on the local, national, and global scales. Protestantism is no longer assumed to be the unofficial faith of America, nor of American college campuses. In fact, there are very few colleges in the US now where one would assert one official religious truth to the exclusion of other faiths. Religion, instead, tends to be understood as a broad and capacious phenomenon. There has been an advent of students making a distinction between being religious and spiritual, where the distinction seems to revolve around an openness to eclectic religious experience, a playing down of denominations, and an inclination toward passionate, personal religious experience. A few years ago, Alison Boden, Dean of Religious Life and the Chapel at Princeton University, related an experience to which most chaplains would nod their heads in agreement. Boden wrote, “If I were to advertise a program on campus dealing with religion, eight students would show. If I advertised that same program as dealing with spirituality, eighty students would turn up.”

To be sure, this turn toward spirituality over religion is not new. Robert Fuller of Bradley University relates this well in his book *Spiritual, but Not Religious*. He argues that many of America’s youths who reject religion do so not because they are atheists, but because their religious beliefs do not take traditionally organized forms. They tend to view religion as bureaucratic and formal, and spirituality as transcendent and individual. Fuller’s study estimated that roughly 20 percent of Americans, not American college students, but all Americans today hold such views, which would make the “spiritually inclined” one of America’s largest religious faiths. Furthermore, Fuller argues that such an a-religious spirituality has become so common that it has gradually established its own tradition, and that whether they know it or not, those who call themselves “spiritual but not religious” are now part of a movement.

Kelly Denton-Borhaug, who once served as the chaplain of Goucher College and as associate dean of religious life at Stanford University, made a more recent study of undergraduate religious practices which appeared in the journal *Religion and Education*. According to her survey, some 77 percent of students consider themselves to be “spiritual,” and yet less than a quarter of those surveyed connected their spirituality with a particular religious tradition. Further, only 16 percent surveyed participated in religious organizations on campus. Denton-Borhaug found that on her campus, the Goucher chapel was used rarely aside from weddings, lectures, and musical performances, and that few students even mentioned it when asked in the survey to describe their concept of a spiritual space. Denton-Borhaug affirmed that her experience is that students overwhelmingly wanted solitude and privacy in their spiritual experiences, and articulated the need for a flexible space on college campuses dedicated to spiritual concerns where students would find more solitude and which could accommodate more diverse needs. This is not surprising for students who grew up in the 1990’s, the era when Pat Buchanan proclaimed that America was being torn apart by a religious war, and aside from Bill Clinton, those who introduced religious

themes into their political rhetoric tended to be on the conservative bent of the political scene. Political scientists have done some fascinating analyses concerning these views. Robert Wuthnow, the prominent sociologist of religion at Princeton University, found that there was a near-perfect correlation between states that scored high on a scale of belief in America's being a Christian nation, a view favored by evangelicals and others who believe that Christianity is uniquely true, and states that voted for George W. Bush in 2000. John C. Green found similarly strong associations between religious traditionalism and political views during the 2004 election campaign. The surest indication that such divisions will continue comes from the emerging post-baby-boom generation, of which our current college students are a part. Adults in this age group are more divided than their counterparts in the early 1970s, with sharper divisions in beliefs and lifestyles between evangelical Protestants and those with no religious affiliations, and between those who attend religious services regularly and those who do not.

To be sure, this "spiritual, not religious" candor is something that I often feel called to push against, for an amorphous belief system that is inclined only toward personal religious experience, that is not accountable to anyone or anything, that does not believe so much as seek without direction or counsel, offers nothing outside of oneself and one's own imagination. There is no social action, no call for justice, no communal sense, no history to which one is bound to others and to one's sense of the divine that is involved in this sort of spiritual, but not religious life. And yet, while I push against this sort of belief, I also recognize that it is important for professionals in religious life to recognize that these are serious people who are trying to find their own spiritual paths. To be spiritual, not religious, is hardly a sign of religious immaturity, and indeed is a mark of someone who recognizes that many regular churchgoers and synagogue attendees may attend more out of habit than out of conviction, and that many who do not attend mosque or temple or chapel are still, nonetheless, searching for conviction.

Another element that I reflect on as I interact with our college students today is to look at the popular culture around them, remembering that religious and secular entertainers borrow from one another in a dance between the sacred and the secular. Look at the recent simultaneous growth in popularity of reality television programs and the charismatic-style worship of nondenominational congregations filled with the Starbucks-drinking, Internet-surfing, therapy-seeking, and thrill-seeking Generation X and Generation Y crowds. The personal is no longer private. Both the personal and the sacred have gone public in a big way. People believe that others want to know about their deepest feelings and recent experiences, including their religious experiences, blogging away on the internet in a public act of religious confession so that anyone, anywhere in the world might be able to witness one's personal reflections about their religious identity and spiritual experience. And many do. And I wonder at the health of such practices, in which there is present profound doses of both narcissism and voyeurism. When I was the chaplain of Suffolk University, I worked with four other college and university chaplains in the Boston area to create the first ever online chapel for college students. I have wondered every day since what sort of damage I wrought in so doing as I watched the interactions that went on in the forums of that "chapel" be ones defined by their self-centeredness, their lack of care for how their religious beliefs were connected to anything outside of themselves, and their lack of willingness to have those self-invented religious beliefs be challenged by anything or anyone external to themselves. Of course, this was in the days before Facebook or MySpace or blogging, and today's students are much more adept at expressing themselves through electronic media than was my generation, for whom email began to be widely accepted only in 1993.

One other important point that Fuller makes is that a reason Americans so often describe themselves as spiritual rather than religious is that they have increasingly been introduced to religions outside of the Judeo-Christian traditions, many of which emphasize the more spiritual aspects of faith. American institutions of higher education, for their part, have responded to that expanded ecumenical and interreligious sensibility. It is rare to find a Roman Catholic university now where the theology department would think of confining its mission to Catholic apologetics. There are plenty of colleges where the courses on Buddhism are taught by a practicing Buddhist, which makes clear that an approach of active engagement is valued alongside the standard academic practice of scholarly detachment. It is nearly impossible, on the

contemporary college campus, to be a student who goes to classes, lives among other students, and who is active in the community, without being introduced to religions other than the ones that they had grown up with. American students slowly but surely are understanding, in the wake of 9/11, that Islam is not a radically foreign religion, but one that is born out of Judaism and Christianity and that in its ecumenical and practical application calls upon its adherents to love and respect “the people of the book,” meaning not just Muslims, but Jews and Christians as well.

Another emergence that comes from this new adherence to spiritual, not religious, and from the increasing religious diversity on college campuses, is that young college-educated people are likely to set the future course of religion in America. What is interesting is that young people on college campuses are far more likely to hold fast to an increasingly general sense of religious tolerance, rather than to the larger American sentiment to be increasingly closed off to religious diversity which has been demonstrated in the reawakening of the religious right in American politics and popular sentiment. While there were all sorts of hate crimes that occurred across America in the aftermath of 9/11, on most college campuses, it was inconceivable that one would engage in hate crimes against people whose faith was not Christian or Jewish.

A question asked by Alan Wolfe, who I quoted at the beginning of the speech, is this: “Are we better off when religion is as broad, but also as thin, as the kinds of faith one finds on American college campuses today?” Certainly, one can appreciate the ways that religion on college campuses have changed, for there certainly were days in our not-so-distant past of Christian dogmatism, anti-Semitism, hostility toward science, and a lack of respect for nonbelievers. Certainly America’s institutions of higher learning are better off in that respect. And yet, religious students are very much like nonreligious students in their efforts to personalize knowledge, to avoid difficult and controversial positions that might cause anger in others, and to insist that, if we just try hard enough, everyone can get along with everyone else. One might argue that religion has returned to American campuses, not as an alternative to the value relativism and personal seeking associated with the often quite secular 1960s, but as the logical extension of the cultural revolution first glimpsed at that time.

At the same time, there are certain challenges to the life and vocation of college chaplains and those engaged in campus religious life. There often is a sense of frustration that one feels in the face of fulfilling one’s mandate to enable spiritual growth on campus, and then encounter intense individualism and anti-institutionalism among the students, a lack of interest in building inter-religious community among student religious groups, and a denial of the place of ethical and religious reflection within the institution at large. This makes the work of college chaplains and religious life professionals somewhat less than obvious. Furthermore, it has become commonplace in recent years to talk about diversity on campus. You can hear about it at orientation, in residence halls, in general education settings. And yet, all too often in Student Affairs on the nationwide scale, when we talk of diversity, we tend to mean ethnicity, gender, sexual identity, and possibly socio-economic background, and all too often there is little to no talk about religious or spiritual diversity.

I believe that it is vital for us, and for anyone doing this work of religious and spiritual life on a college campus, to be rooted in a particular religious tradition. It is only then that we can feel in our bones the urgency and non-negotiability of committed practice. In addition, it is equally vital to be a religious pluralist. When asked about why I love my work, I point to the theory and practice of religious pluralism as the source of its unending interest. For me, the theory is best expressed in a metaphor like “all paths leading to the same central point,” and the practice calls for constant oscillation between openness and drawing boundaries, between respect and rootedness. In that respect, it is important to support students from faiths who do not have a formal presence on campus. How do we then support students from minority religious traditions on campus, who are Buddhist, Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, Jain, pagan, and Wiccan? I would advocate that we offer them practical support. Offices of Religious Life need to continue to provide that kind of support from groups which are struggling to secure assistance from their wider religious tradition, or that represent a religious presence not otherwise existing on campus. Furthermore, let me add that we are still trying to find ways of catering to students who define themselves as “spiritual but not religious,” which may implicitly mean that they do not want to belong to any organized group. This new expressed interest in spirituality among students does not always

translate into action or involvement that we know how to support or sustain in any effective way. We also seek to find students where they are, amidst the commitments that they bring to campus.

I spoke before of the frustrations of being a college chaplain, where one does not have the traditional signs of accomplishment that come in parish ministry or the rabbinical life. I know that a number of my colleagues have posted up on their walls the following quote from Donna Schaper's article on the role of college chaplains that appeared this past November in the Chronicle of Higher Education:

“Chaplains make space on our campuses for all we neglect, all that we can't put a price or an evaluation on. They offer a grace that is rare in a graded atmosphere. They save us from the intensity of campus life, when tenure or examinations weigh us down. In a world where function rules, chaplains help us be well, rather than just perform well... They help us deal with failure as well as with success. College chaplains befriend the kid who drank too much, the faculty member who has cancer, and the one facing a divorce. They show up when waters get deep. When a student commits suicide, it's still the chaplain who helps inform the family and counsel the roommate, and perhaps even conducts the funeral. It's not unusual for chaplains to follow up with grieving families for years, helping them through birthdays and anniversaries. Chaplains work not just with the bereaved, but with the whole institution when it tries to fathom a terrible chance or accident. In the days after September 11, college chaplains around the country put together teams of religious advisers from Hillel, the Newman Center, and the other denominations.”

In past decades, university chaplaincies fulfilled traditional functions such as offering blessings at and sometimes taking responsibility for ritual occasions, providing spiritual and other counseling, handling intersections of religious holy days with the university calendar, providing for the needs of particular religious groups, and encouraging interreligious cooperation. In addition to performing all of those functions, offices of religious and spiritual life also engage in important new initiatives: helping to start new student religious groups where holes exist in the multi-faith landscape, assuming leadership for communitarian responses to crisis events like 9/11, and creating programs that juxtapose classic academic approaches to spiritual and moral ones. These new roles require added nuance and creativity. The campus response or commemoration of an event like 9/11 cannot be built simply on a solid, traditional religious base, not even a Judeo-Christian, or Abrahamic, or purely God-focused base. There may be Psalms and other scriptural readings, but here, as often elsewhere under the new religious life paradigm, God will be in the attitude of awe, in the silence, and in the range of faces. A program on religion and science can no longer assume that professors fall into one camp or the other, nor can it afford to neglect the arts as yet a third mode of inquiry and meaning-making.

Specifically with regard to the Bible, all of these shifts and changes means that the Bible has a profoundly different place and status on American university campuses for this generation than it did for previous generations. While the parents of the current students were a generational vanguard which often rebelled against organized religion on college campuses in the 1970s and 1980s, they nonetheless predominantly had been raised within a religious tradition that they knew well. They understood the Catholic or Methodist or Presbyterian tradition of their family background well enough to choose against it. So, while that was the generation that began this long pilgrimage away from the church, they nonetheless spoke religious language understanding what they were saying. When they spoke about “an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth,” or “faith, not works,” they recognized that rhetoric as flowing out of the Bible and into their common parlance. That is not the case with our current generation of college students. While certainly there are students out there in droves in groups like InterVarsity Christian Fellowship or Fellowship of Christian Athletes, the grand majority of our students are largely unchurched. They are legitimately the first utterly secular generation, having been raised outside of the church and with little to no knowledge of what the religious tradition of their forefathers and foremothers has brought to society. There is a profound and dangerous ignorance of religion on university campuses today, students feeling a deep mistrust and even anger toward organized religion, but not having any sort of grasp of what exactly it is that they are rejecting.

Faith is suspect, and if today's student owns one, their Bible is getting dusty. At one school where I taught, the English department regularly coordinated with me when I was teaching my courses on New Testament or the History of Christian Theology, required their English majors to take the courses, and then the next semester, the English professors taught their courses on Dante and Milton. The English department found that without that sort of basic understanding of the Christian tradition that came through the classroom experience, that the current generation of students had so little knowledge of Biblical and theological references that they wouldn't get Dante or Milton at all.

One of my experiences that I return to again and again involved a young woman who was the new president of the evangelical Christian student group on the campus where I was then chaplain. She had come to my office, angry and disturbed that I was helping to organize opportunities for Zen meditation in the chapel. She thought that my work as a college chaplain which sought to provide opportunities for those from a variety of religious faiths was simply incompatible with my vocation as a Christian minister, and she came to my office because she wanted to offer me a chance to confess. She wanted me to confess to her that, in becoming a college chaplain, I was no longer a Christian, and that if I made this confession, maybe Jesus could then find his way back into my heart. I remember in the course of that conversation, talking with her about Paul and his ministry, and this young Christian, who saw herself as a paragon of Christian virtue on our campus, said to me, "I don't know who this fancy Ivy League theologian is that you are talking about, but I'm talking about Jesus." She did not know who Paul of Tarsus was. This woman who was so certain in her understanding of the Christian faith had never read anything past the Gospels. Unlearned conviction is a frightening path toward religious violence, and I have never forgotten the terrible conviction of that student who had so little knowledge of her own religious tradition, and yet wielded that ignorance like a sword.

So what do we do with this first secular generation? We cannot assume that they know anything about the faith, but we can be missionaries with them and for them. We can go to these young women and men and offer a religious perspective which embodies hospitality rather than adorned with judgment and retribution. We can explore with them the wonderful themes of theological ideas which inform the art, music, literature, and film which sustains them and is the ground upon which they undertake their own quests for meaning. They do not even know that those themes are there; they cannot recognize them. And so this is a holy task: taking the Bible to a secular generation and offering it to them in ways that are affirming and new, respecting their distrust, offering compassion and not arrogance in the face of discomforting ignorance, and helping them to see a narrative, a story, a music video, a blog about the relationship between God and humanity that began in the very beginning, when the Word was with God and the Word was God, when that Word had not yet been uttered into the magnificence of "Let there be light," when God created all and proclaimed it to be good, a relationship that has spanned heartbreak and rebellion, leading to this moment, this present, imperfect moment, and knowing that through the Bible, one might have a more fulsome understanding of what God would have us be and what God would have us do today.