

Building a New Global Commons: Religious Diversity and the Challenge for Higher Education

By Victor Kazanjian, James P. Keen, and Peter Laurence

The article that follows is adapted from the introduction to the forthcoming book of the same name which analyzes the historical and theoretical underpinnings that have led to the multifaith revolution on college and university campuses across the country illustrated through a case study of the development of the religious and spiritual life program at Wellesley College. Much of this material was included in Victor Kazanjian's workshop at the Annual Conference of the National Association of College and University Chaplains in Durham, North Carolina.

Consider for a moment the earth as a “global commons,” a shared space in which limits on resources and the environment are planetary, economies as well as human systems are inextricably interconnected, and human diversity is ever more apparent among the occupants of this planetary home. By the time current human population growth trends are expected to peak at mid century, bringing with them cascading changes and dislocations, new generations of world citizens will be called upon to lead in addressing myriad challenges arising as we better learn to live together as humankind on the commons we know as earth.

The term “commons,” is derived from its ancient usage in the English countryside describing parcels of land that were used “in common” by the people of a village. The lives of the people of the village depended upon access to and use of a shared landscape that provided many necessities: grazing land, water, wood and fuel. Centuries later, in an increasingly globalized and interconnected (and yet deeply fragmented) world, “the commons” might also be thought of, as Richard Bocking writes in *Reclaiming the Commons* (May 2003), as those things that are essential to being members of the human community sharing the commons of the planet. In this context, the commons would include the air we breathe; the water we drink; the seas, forests, and mountains; the diversity of life itself, and also those things that humankind has created: language; scientific, cultural, and technical knowledge; and health, education, political and economic systems. The “commons,” then, is that which we must engage with together to sustain life and implies a shared commitment to community, cooperation, the respect for the rights of others and the corresponding responsibilities that we each share for life on this planet.

Liberal arts education has historically staked a claim to the commons on two dimensions: first as the shared ground in which we develop future cadres of leaders, citizens, scholars, professionals, and public servants, and second as being itself a microcosm of the larger universe of ideas, perspectives, and people who are engaged in the common life of a particular educational institution. In seeking to meet the challenges of the world, higher education aspires to be that place where diverse points of view are brought together in the common task of deepening understanding of self, other, and world. Here in places of learning, the commons can indeed be envisioned as a space that enables a unique kind of educational dialogue: “one that is not merely political or

polemical, but humanistic and ecumenical.” (David Bollier *The Commons as a Movement* in “On the Commons,” November 8, 2004). For higher education, the commons is not a place of particular ideology or theology but rather that place where diversity of viewpoints becomes the central ingredient of a vibrant intellectual community. Only on a college or university campus does such a diverse group of citizens of the world gather, and, while affirming their differences, pursue the distinctly common purpose of learning and living together. It is in such a unique environment that experiments can be (and perhaps must be) made as to how human beings whose identity is so often forged along lines of difference can take up responsibilities and craft together a common life in which all participate in a shared use of the commons.

In many ways we in higher education continue to fall short of this ideal. We struggle to engage diversity in all of its forms, and have yet to find adequate ways in which the philosophy, structures, and programs of our institutions can lead not to continued Balkanization but rather to a public square of conversations. Were we to move closer to our goal of a global educational community, we might then create a commons on our campuses where we would move from seeing difference as a barrier to difference as a resource, from seeing difference as a problem to difference as a promise. Too often the answer to this conundrum of engaging diversity has been to mute particularist voices in favor of a single normative identity, whether it be religious, nationalistic, or secular in nature. The ideas and processes that we explore seek to illustrate a different paradigm, one in which the educational enterprise offers students the experience of reconstructing themselves in ways that make them better at encountering difference and discovering ways that lead to collaboration rather than necessarily to conflict. Such an educational paradigm would invite the identity-forming narratives of each person into the commons where they are recognized in such a way that the space of the commons becomes a place of dialogue and interaction, of encounter and conversation, of essential conflict, but conflict that ultimately seeks a common cause. One dilemma that persists in higher education is the place of religion in college and university education and the challenges and opportunities posed by increasing religious diversity on campuses nationwide.

At their founding, the mission, values and founding principles of most colleges and universities were expressed in explicitly religious terms. Many colleges and universities trace their beginnings to particular religious roots (mostly Protestant Christian, fewer Roman Catholic or Jewish.) Although it was religiously-inspired motivation that led to the founding of many of the earliest colleges and universities in this country and shaped early educational philosophy and pedagogy, it is the assumption of a single, shared religious context and a common religious language to describe the educational ideals of higher education that forged a too small a container in the years that followed. The restrictions placed on belief and thought in colleges and universities by religious institutions led to the growing objections of many scholars who found their intellectual inquiry restricted by theological principles rather than educational ones. Gradually, secular scholarship won out; most colleges and universities severed ties with organized religion and replaced religious frameworks with secular ones for life on campus.

The secularization of higher education ushered in an era of academic freedom and the establishment of scientific rationalism as the standard by which intellectual

inquiry was measured. Whereas in earlier years religious claims that truth was to be found in scripture, and tradition and identification with certain forms of Christianity governed the norms of educational institutions, this was replaced by a claim that only what could be measured scientifically was legitimate for scholarly pursuits. The pendulum had swung, and an epistemological polarity was created with secularism on the one pole and religious faith on the other. It became increasingly difficult in the academy to conceive of an educational system in which both epistemological processes (the scientific, exploring that which can be measured, and the religious/philosophical, exploring that which cannot be measured) could coexist. One solution was to embrace the scholarly study of religion as a legitimate academic pursuit, but to also build an impenetrable wall between the study of religion and its practice. In doing so, a dichotomy developed between that which is considered knowledge and that which is considered belief or practice. This fragmentation served the purposes of both “fundamentalist” religionists and “fundamentalist” secularists, both of whom fought to establish exclusive claims on truth. What was missing from this split was the consideration that the mind is capable of experiencing and looking critically at both of these things, that which can be measured and that which cannot, and that belief might actually be more accurately described as the acceptance of and conviction in the truth, actuality, or validity of something. If defined in this way, both scientific inquiry and religious exploration are reflections of beliefs and therefore welcome on the campus commons in which the critical engagement of all beliefs is necessary to fulfill the promise of education. The failure of institutions of higher education to do so in the case of religion has tended to leave the realm of religious belief and practice to be defined by those not sharing the values of higher education to deepen one’s understanding of self, other, and world; those whose goals are perpetuating narrow and exclusive claims to truth.

On campuses, chapels and chaplaincies became the official places where the practice of religion was sanctioned and the presence of religious practitioners condoned. On these campuses, religious life ceased to be a part of the institution’s educational program and was instead relegated to one of a host of outside groups competing for student’s extracurricular attention. The religious and spiritual life of students (and faculty, alumni and staff) was no longer a matter of educational concern for the academy, but rather tolerated as a separate but related enterprise on campus. On some campuses, chaplaincies centered around historic congregations remained in an honored place, but many chaplaincy programs became outposts for clergy and religious professionals placed on campuses by outside sponsoring religious organizations with little more than cordial relationships with the institutions.

It should be recognized that the history of chaplaincies on college and university campuses is a distinguished one of men and women working within institutional limits to provide pastoral care for community members in times of joy and sorrow; organize spaces for discourse around moral and ethical issues of the day; design and lead community rituals such as convocation and baccalaureate services; and preside at funerals, memorials and weddings to enable campuses to mark significant moments in the life of the campus community. Chaplains historically were at the forefront of developing programs of community service on campuses and played leading roles in social justice efforts including women’s suffrage, anti-slavery, civil rights, and

antiapartheid, antiwar and environmental movements. It is important that alongside the critique of the problems associated with the structures of religious life that developed in the last century the importance and power of the work of chaplains is not lost.

In the “secular” institutions (those that were not formally affiliated with Roman Catholic, Jewish or particular Protestant denominations or Evangelical movements) the dominant religious tradition nevertheless remained Protestant Christianity. The Dean of the Chapel or the College/University Chaplain was nearly always Protestant and served as religious host for the rest of the campus. While no longer under the formal control of religious institutions, a Protestant Christian ethos continued to permeate the institutional culture of most colleges and universities, as in American society. Although secularity was claimed to be the norm, college mission statements, crests, and rituals often retained and reinforced the primacy of the Protestant tradition. Just as the (Protestant) Chapel often was situated in the center of campus, so too was it the Protestant Dean of the Chapel or College/University chaplains who took center stage to welcome and bless at formal functions such as convocation, baccalaureate and commencement. Often the Protestant hosts played a gracious and compassionate role in reaching out to all community members and often advocating for the needs of other religious communities. But the effect of this structural problem was that those not Protestant were rendered as guests on a Protestant (although professedly secular) campus.

There is a long history of religious minorities organizing on college and university campuses in the United States. Beginning in the 1890’s, Catholics in normatively Protestant and secular campuses created Newman Centers to serve the needs of Catholic students. Starting in the 1920’s, the development of Hillels established a mechanism for nurturing the Jewish life and identity of students in a way that was deemed compatible with, albeit marginal to, the institution’s educational mission. Hillel and Newman Centers have played a crucial role in raising questions of religious diversity in higher education throughout the last century and continue to provide leadership nationally for interfaith efforts on campuses. Alternative Christian organizations such as Intervarsity Christian Fellowship, which began in England in 1877, traveled to Canada in the early 1900’s and arrived in the United States first on the university of Michigan campus in 1938, established an Evangelical presence on many secular campuses that has since been joined by rising numbers of Evangelical Christians connected to national or campus-specific organizations. In recent years a strong movement has developed in Evangelical Christian communities on campuses to participate fully in the democratic project of creating pluralism on campus, challenging the notion that so-called religious exclusivists are uninterested in or have antipathy towards discussions of religious diversity. Each of these stories and the more recent history of the emergence of Muslim, Buddhist, Secular, Humanist, Unitarian Universalist, Hindu and other chaplaincy programs on campuses is a narrative of great importance in understanding the impact of growing religious diversity on college and university campuses. But the situation of a central Protestant Chaplaincy and marginalized Jewish, new Evangelical and Roman Catholic organizations remained the shape of religious practice on campus until the increased immigration of the 1960s and 70s, documented by Diana Eck in *A New Religious America How a "Christian Country" Has Become the World's Most*

Religiously Diverse Nation (HarperOne 2002) created a new situation of increasing religious diversity. The growth of people practicing Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism in particular was considerable. The results began to show up on college campuses in the early 1980s and the presence of religious minorities other than those that were traditionally understood in the United States created a different kind of religious diversity on campus. During these years, chaplains at many institutions watched these changes and responded by trying to provide services to newcomer communities as best they could, offering hospitality and pastoral care to all regardless of tradition or practice. By the early 1990s the children of immigrants from the 1960s and 70s, representing increasing diversity of religious and spiritual practice, had reached such numbers that this began to push colleges and universities to reconsider questions of religion, spirituality and education. Muslim, Hindu, and Buddhist students began arriving at American colleges and universities with an expectation that the institutions would provide for their religious needs. In addition, other students from African, Jain, Native American, Sikh, Shinto, Wiccan, and Zoroastrian traditions began to find voice and organize groups on campus. On campuses nation-wide, past mono-religious and secular practices were colliding full-force with a growing multi-religious, multi-spiritual reality. This collision precipitated what for some was and remains a crisis but for others was an opportunity to deal with increasing religious diversity and address issues of religion, spirituality and higher education.

By the 1990s, inspired and led by a growing student movement on religious diversity, some campuses began to look for alternatives to the void created by diminished or confused religious life programs. Questions of services and space for particular religious groups emerged first. This was followed by uncertainty among administrators as to whose responsibility it was to respond to these needs and to incidents of conflict between religious groups. This phenomenon impacted all institutions, secular and religious alike, as even religiously affiliated institutions began to see a growth in the religious diversity of their student populations and acknowledged as part of their mission the preparing of students for life and leadership in a religiously diverse world. In addition to questions of religious practice, increasing numbers of students have been arriving on campus defining themselves as spiritual but not religious, and interested in spiritual practices such as yoga and meditation or co-curricular conversations about meaning and purpose in their lives and learning.

In the last two decades, multifaith religious and spiritual life programs that not only provide services for a rapidly diversifying student, staff and faculty populations but also seek to contribute to their institution's global and multicultural educational programs have begun to emerge on campuses across the country. Among the first to experiment with a multifaith model was Wellesley College, a liberal arts college for women in Wellesley, Massachusetts. Convening a consultation on the religious and spiritual life of the college involving trustees, students, faculty and senior administrators in 1991, the college devised a plan to renew its commitment to religious and spiritual life through a multi-faith program that was to serve the needs of a diversifying student population, create opportunities for spiritual growth for all community members, and offer an educational program on interreligious understanding and dialogue. In 1992, Wellesley inaugurated the Office of Religious and Spiritual Life. Wellesley's first act was to create the new position of Dean of Religious and Spiritual Life, the role of which was

not to represent any one religious community but to be a spiritual leader, educator and senior administrator who would design and oversee the new structure. The initial charge to the dean, chaplains and multifaith student council was to reconsider the relationship between religion/spirituality and higher education, and move religious and spiritual life from the margins of the institution to be a more integrated part of college's educational program. Wellesley's journey of experimentation with issues of religious diversity over the next two decades is one story among a number colleges and universities who in the 1990s saw that there was a deep confusion on campuses between a mono-religious institutional history and a multi-religious contemporary college community and set out on a journey to explore new models for religious life on campus. The Wellesley story and an analysis of the historical and theoretical underpinnings that have led to the multifaith revolution on college and university campuses across the country will comprise the bulk of *Building a New Global Commons: Religious Diversity and the Challenge for Higher Education*, Kazanjian, Keen and Laurence, expected in 2011.

Through the work of Education as Transformation, Inc. an organization based at Wellesley which works with campuses nationally around issues of religious diversity and spirituality, an institutional change process has been developed and implemented on many campuses based on the principle that a pluralistic approach to engaging religious diversity is an *educational* imperative (rather than a religious one) for institutions of higher education wishing to prepare students to be global citizens. Although they observe that issues of religion are increasingly crucial to understanding the vast complexity of social issues facing this country and the world, most colleges and universities still have difficulty determining where these programs fit in their educational agendas. In speaking of Religious Life or Chaplaincy programs, the following statements are often reportedly heard on campuses: Religious and Spiritual Life/Chaplaincy programs are: "a remnant from a long gone era," "marginal to the educational mission of colleges and universities," "irrelevant in the context of an epistemology defined by rational inquiry," "contrary to a secular institution," "an unnecessary drain on scarce institutional resources," "redundant now that we have community service and counseling centers," "making too many demands on issues such as unreasonable space, and food needs," "attracting 'unwelcome' outside groups on campus." Too often those responsible for religious and spiritual life programs have in the past adopted one of the following stances in response: 1) Remain on the margins and hope that no one notices us 2) Whine a lot and hope that people will take pity on us, or 3) Fight "the good fight" to hang onto our precious resources and marginalized status. But increasingly campus leaders (including chaplains, students, faculty and student life staff) are choosing to engage in a process of self-reflection, critical analysis, and the rearticulation of the role of religious and spiritual life on their campus. At Wellesley College and other campuses, this process has led to the development of four principles upon which the work is based.

1. The role of religious and spiritual life programs must be primarily about education.

Religious and Spiritual Life/Chaplaincy programs must be connected to the educational missions of colleges and universities, clearly articulated as an aspect of student

development, integrated into the students' educational program, and embedded within the institutional structures in both student life and academic realms. In such a program the role of Religious Life professionals/Chaplains must be that of spiritual leaders – often grounded in a particular tradition, belief system, or practice, but committed to a multifaith educational context – educators articulating the educational theory and practice behind interreligious dialogue and understanding, and student life professionals well versed in student development theory and questions of religious identity and spiritual growth.

2. A pluralistic approach to religious and spiritual life is the most consonant with the educational values of secular higher education.

By “decentering” the historically normative, usually Protestant Christian, traditions and creating a dynamic, pluralistic program in which all traditions and practices of belief are equally valued as part of a world community, Religious and Spiritual Life/Chaplaincy programs can contribute to the global/multicultural educational agenda of their institution by offering programming on interreligious understanding, dialogue and conflict transformation, and increasing the literacy and competencies of community members in areas of religious diversity and spiritual practice

3. Including everyone at the table means sharing the conversation and including more food

A pluralistic approach to engaging religious diversity requires the decentering of the normative group(s) and the creation of a shared circle of conversation. This means that equity of voice is crucial. Experimenting with new models of dialogue requires that traditionally marginalized voices be fully included. An equal representational model more like the United States Senate (rather than the proportional model of the House of Representatives) is essential to this process. Institutions that incorporate religious diversity programming into their educational agenda must also provide resources to support this aspect of their educational program. Such programs must be embraced at all levels of the institutions, and support given to addressing issues of staffing, programming, and space. Justifying this as a priority for colleges and universities requires less polemic from chaplains and more reference to educational theory and quality research on the growth of religious diversity and spirituality on campuses and its educational import.

4. Everything flows from the moments of community connection and individual care

Ritual gatherings in which community members celebrate their lives together or mark crucial life moments (like the death of a community member, or national or global crises) remain central to understanding the role of religious and spiritual life/chaplaincy programs. Even as we adapt to a more educational focus in forging new partnerships with educators on campus, the pastoral care of the community remains the foundation

of the work on campus. No one doubts the essential role of religious professionals on campus in moments of crisis.

With these principles in mind, we have developed an institutional change process with which we engage colleges and universities in the work of reenvisioning the role of religious and spiritual life on campus. We begin by using the following steps in helping campus teams of leaders including administrators, faculty, student life staff, religious professionals/chaplains, students, alumnae and trustees to develop a multifaith educational model appropriate to their campus.

I Identifying the Mission

- *What is the mission of your institution?*

II Acknowledging our history (ies)

- *What is the journey that has brought your institution to this moment?*
- *How has religion factored in that history?*

III Understanding the Context

- *What are the structures religious/spiritual life structures that you have inherited?*
- *What are the systems in which the work of religious/spiritual life is embedded?*
- *In which division(s) is your program situated?*
- *To whom do you report?*
- *How is your program funded?*
- *What relationships exist with other departments/divisions in your institution?*
- *What relationships exist with external organizations, religious/spiritual/ethical communities, educational and community organizations, and global partners?*

IV Articulating a Vision

- *How does your envisioned Religious and Spiritual Life/Chaplaincy program help fulfil the mission of your institution?*
- *What aspects of the history of religion at your institution are important to preserve?*
- *What past practices are in need of transformation?*
- *What is your desired structure that best enables you to be an effective part of achieving your institution's educational goals?*
- *What are your desired outcomes?*

V Developing a Strategy

- *Who are your partners in this work?*
 1. *Create cross constituency conversations which lead to the development of statements of mission, philosophy and goals*

- *What structural change is necessary?*
 1. *Deconstruct old structures that inhibit achieving these goals*
 2. *Build new structures in collaboration with administrators, faculty, staff, students, alumnae, trustees, and external organizations that reflect your mission, philosophy and goals*

VI Reflect and Redefine

- *What are you learning from your change process?*
 1. *Develop mechanisms for periodically evaluating your programs and responding to the need to growth and redesign*

Conclusion

People on campuses across the country are heeding the call to engage religious diversity by transforming their Religious and Spiritual Life/Chaplaincy programs to better reflect the educational principles and practices of the colleges and universities in which they serve. As such, these individuals and institutions are responding to the plea for higher education to help build a pluralistic American society and world by transforming ignorance about religious and philosophical differences into multifaith understanding and interfaith cooperation through education. College and university campuses are indeed microcosms of the global commons, using the tools of education to challenge extremism and ignorance about that religious perspectives and spiritual practices of the peoples of this planet. In meeting the challenges posed by religious diversity, these campuses are becoming spaces where inter-religious understanding and respect, cooperation and interdependence are the new norm, proving that the development of peaceful and pluralistic communities comprised of people of a myriad of different religious, cultural and ethical perspectives is possible and providing a place where the global commons is a reality.