

This document includes both the White Paper and the Working Group Papers for “Secularity and the Liberal Arts,” a Teagle Working Group from Bucknell University, Macalester College, Vassar College, and Williams College.

The **White Paper** is the first section of this document; the **Working Group Papers** are the second section of this document.



## White Paper

### Teagle Working Group on Secularity and the Liberal Arts Bucknell University, Macalester College, Vassar College, and Williams College

“I am arguing that ‘the secular’ should not be thought of as the space in which *real* human life gradually emancipates itself from the controlling power of ‘religion’ and thus achieves the latter’s relocation.”

—Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular*

“I don’t think that right now you could phrase secularity as a good or bad thing. Right now it’s a necessary thing. Our society and culture, both on our campus and on a more global scale, aren’t equipped with the skills to have a pluralistic, multi-faith dialogue. Until we have that, I don’t think any campus or institution can be anything but secular.”

—student in one of our campus’ focus groups

“Am I, as a teacher, being responsible, if I leave students in a state of perplexity, staring at an abyss, when it comes to questions that have a direct bearing on how they choose to live their lives?”

—Rachel Kitzinger, Classics Professor, Vassar College



## Executive Summary

This White Paper describes how four campuses with different Protestant histories developed conversations about their institutions' secular boundaries. Paying attention to and beginning to analyze what makes this conversation difficult helps educators and students see the conversation's promise—for student learning and civic life.

The first section of the paper describes the **background** and dilemmas that led up to this project; project organizers were responding to the stories they heard students, faculty and administrators tell about how stymied they felt trying to understand where and how the secular lines of campus life are drawn—in classrooms, office hours, campus observances, student activities, residence halls, and more. As leading scholars debate the pressures on secular ideals and their histories in the public realm, we brought these conversations to bear on campus discussions of whether and how the secular frames we provide for our learning communities are working.

The second section of the paper describes the **qualitative research** our Working Group implemented with a total of 119 faculty, students, and administrators across all four campuses. We studied whether and how secular assumptions structure students' questions of meaning and purpose. This paper gives an overview of key themes from our research—including where students engage their “big questions,” how they experience campus secularity as something both invisible and powerful, and the many different ways people define “secular.”

Section three describes **key findings** of this project: we learned contextually specific ways to ask a set of questions about secular boundaries that our campuses are not sure how to discuss. By turning potentially polarizing dilemmas—how secular assumptions affect students' education—into faculty-student research projects, study groups, Working Group writing projects, teaching and learning forums, and more, we established trustworthy distance on these politically charged questions and gave ourselves room to begin re-imagining the secular boundaries and practices of our campuses.

Section four outlines **future directions** our campuses are taking with this project. The final section of **appendices** includes definitions of key terms, abstracts for the “Varieties of Secular Experience” Working Group Essays and November 2008 conference that this White Paper seeks to introduce, and a schedule for the conference. In one of these Working Group Essays, a Protestant chaplain in our group distills both the process and goals of our project:

Our experience has shown us that elite, secular institutions like ours are almost allergic to these questions [about our secular borders]. . . But over time and with patience, almost all constituencies in our communities responded to approaching these questions from a de-pressurized, inquisitive educational perspective. Like the first introductions of race, gender, class or cultural categories as factors in student learning, redefining secularity as an intentional and flexible category will meet decreasing resistance as constituents trade politicized understandings for more nuanced ones. De-pressurizing our campus communities on these questions will take time, but will, in the end, both open liberal learning to now marginalized inputs and become a unifying factor in a liberal arts education for a large group of students.



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## Section I. Background

### *Project Beginnings*<sup>1</sup>

This project—“Secularity and the Liberal Arts”—developed out of a set of concerns related to students’ personal lives.<sup>2</sup> The participating campuses came to see that our support for the ways students integrate aspects of their personal lives into their education was inconsistent. The conversations began with a faculty-administrator group at Vassar College that was itself sparked by a lecture and ensuing discussion led at Vassar by Rebecca Chopp, President at Colgate University. Her talk, “Religion? Faith? Spirituality? and the Liberal Arts?” stimulated discussion about the ways the changing religious and spiritual landscape on college campuses is bringing new questions into the classroom. Each of our partner campuses came to this project asking questions like: What role is appropriate for faculty to play in helping students think through the intellectual side of such emerging questions? What are the pedagogical rewards and dangers involved in making room for personal commitments in the classroom? Is this an appropriate role for faculty, or is it what we expect our chaplains and religious life administrators to do? And do we expect our chaplains to be part of students’ intellectual lives or their private lives?

Each of our institutions values the dialectical work students do to integrate what they care about in their lives with what they are learning in their courses. On each of our campuses, innovative multi-disciplinary programs in a range of fields invite students to explore questions of personal identity and values in the classroom (e.g. Environmental Studies, Africana Studies, Asian Studies, Jewish Studies, Women’s, Gender, and Sexuality Studies). Such programs are understood as part of our institutions’ central commitments to diversity. What the people involved in organizing this project realized is that we need to pay better attention to the relationship of our diversity commitments to our assumed secularity. The impetus for this initiative developed out of experiences students, administrators, and faculty had feeling stymied about where and how the secular boundaries of campus life are defined—in classrooms, office hours, campus observances, student activities, residence halls, and more. Are questions about the religious and spiritual facets of personal identity ruled out of consideration in the secular classroom? Or do we have a different set of assumptions for how liberal arts campuses integrate religious or spiritual identity questions from how we integrate ethnic, or racial, or gender, or cultural identity questions? If secular boundaries do call for different understandings of how some identity questions are engaged, where do the lines get drawn, and under what circumstances are they permeable? In short, do we need to rethink whether and how the secular ideals we want for our whole campus are working—with implications for how we understand classroom learning, residential life, and even our mission as educational institutions?

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<sup>1</sup> Front Page Quotations: The Talal Asad quotation on the front page of this paper is from *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University, 2003), 191; italics his. The student quotation is from one of the campuses where we did qualitative research as part of this project, and it is cited in the Working Group Essays for this project (Chapter 1, Part I, A.6.). The Kitzinger quotation is from her essay, “Questioning the ‘Nature of Things,’” in the Working Group Essays (Chapter 3).

<sup>2</sup> Appendix II provides a brief overview of how we define key, if elusive, terms of our project: secularism and secularity, religious and spiritual.

*Why Secularism, Why Now?*<sup>3</sup>

One way we have used to introduce people to the current conversations surrounding higher education’s secular self-definition is to ask them to consider the debates about the “secularization thesis.” Most simply, this thesis is the notion, confidently accepted throughout much of the twentieth century, that as societies become more modern, they become less religious. While debates continue about what counts as evidence of changes in secularity or religiosity, not to mention in what it means to become more modern, there is widespread acceptance that religion has not gone away, especially in the U.S. where our colleges operate. The once confident thesis has certainly become a contested question, at least in the U.S., as scholars debate what aspects of the thesis are still tenable. As scholars try to revise the secularization thesis, we are asking ourselves as educators what revisions are called for in our understandings of the secular academy, given the role the academy has played in constructing the thesis, and shaping its institutional life according to it.

In our Working Group discussions, Clay Steinman helpfully distilled some of the cultural shifts that are at work in the felt need to revisit the secular definitions of campus life:

In the last mid-century, the question of religious diversity at liberal arts colleges, whether explicitly elite Protestant or culturally so, might have been framed as: *How open are these religiously grounded institutions to religious difference and indifference in their students?* Now, as our colleges have evolved into institutions of what might be called the consensus of elite secularity, rooted in liberal Protestantism, the questions of religious diversity might more accurately be framed as: *How open are these secular institutions to religious expression and experience in the classroom that falls outside the consensus? Should we teach in ways that encourages breaks with that consensus? What if any religious expression should be encouraged or discouraged?*

A number of the Working Group Essays for this project can be described as responses to the pedagogical questions Steinman raises. I place Steinman’s analysis in the foreground here not to suggest we have resolved his questions, but because his reframing of the issues from the crisis of belief and unbelief in modernity to the pressures on our “secular consensus” highlights considerations that have become central to our project: are these cultural shifts calling secular campuses to reconsider their secular borders? How do our institutions define and construct them? As Ian Oliver asks, how “porous” are these borders, and how can campuses “play with secular boundaries” as we look anew at where and how our students learn? Through our work on this project, we have come to appreciate that student identities are not formed by strict boundaries between the secular and the religious, but at their creatively changing borders.<sup>4</sup>

Finally, our discussions have repeatedly led us back to difficult questions about just what it is that constitutes the secular worldview. Do we make the same mistake in assuming a monolithic secularism that the non-religious often make when speaking univocally about religion? Is it possible that competing forms of secularism vie for a place in the culture of our campuses,

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<sup>3</sup> This is one of the questions Jonathon Kahn asks in the conference session on the “Politics of the Secular and the Religious.” See the Conference/Working Papers Abstracts below, Appendix IV.

<sup>4</sup> The insight about forming identities at boundaries is from Kathryn Tanner, *Theories of Culture: A New Agenda for Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 115.

rendering the problems of borders and boundaries even more difficult to understand, and to resolve?

### *Working Group and Campus Activities*

Our project consisted in a range of inter-institutional and campus activities, including four day-long Working Group meetings, a jointly designed qualitative research project, faculty-administrator study groups, Working Group papers, monthly conference calls, a range of public forums organized on each campus, and the design and planning of our concluding conference. The Working Group meetings were held on our different campuses each fall and spring of the grant period, and we also had three sub-group meetings attended by representatives from each campus—one to do final planning for our conference, and two to design and analyze the qualitative research project; student researchers from each campus attended one sub-group meeting and one Working Group meeting, adding perspectives we might have otherwise missed. The Working Group meetings were critical to the design of our project, providing needed opportunities to clarify our goals and objectives, and to reassess at each meeting where we wanted to arrive at the end of the grant, and how we would get there.<sup>5</sup>

Each of the four partner campuses organized faculty-administrator study groups that included readings and discussion—although the form each group took was quite different. The **Macalester** group focused more on scholarship than other campuses—they used a faculty reading seminar format, studying secular formations in the U.S. and other non-U.S. contexts, and they organized faculty-student summer research projects on questions related to our project. They observed how much their different perspectives in their debates reflected their different locations in the college—a theme that emerged in other campus groups as well. Macalester is the one campus in our group that has a denominational affiliation (with the Presbyterian Church, USA). The **Bucknell** group had more balance of faculty and student life administrators than other campuses, and their discussions focused on the different meanings the secular has for different people and different academic disciplines. Once it became clear to all involved that the project had an open-ended learning agenda, trust developed, and they had productive discussions of classroom situations, advising, curricular choices, science and religion issues, and, in the second year, a well-attended teaching development workshop. In its first year, the **Williams** group developed conversations around religion and science, bringing together faculty with campus and community clergy. In the second year, the qualitative research sparked faculty interest in extending the focus group discussions; their group then took a shape unlike the other campus groups: the chaplain convened two separate faculty conversations that met multiple times to consider more fully our research questions. The **Vassar** group pursued open-ended discussions and readings on secularity and campus life over three years (beginning one year prior to this Teagle grant). The group intentionally avoided a conventional seminar format as it tried to make room for participants to speak experientially about teaching and advising dilemmas in different parts of campus life. In the second year of the grant, the group organized public

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<sup>5</sup> Working Group members want to thank Jonathan VanAntwerpen, research fellow at the Social Science Research Council (SSRC), and program officer for SSRC projects on religion and the public sphere, for his support. VanAntwerpen provided us skillful consultation at three Working Group meetings, on numerous conference calls, and in individual meetings. We are also grateful to W. Robert Connor for introducing us to VanAntwerpen. Readers interested in this project will want to consult the SSRC blog, “The Immanent Frame: Secularism, Religion, and the Public Sphere,” [http://www.ssrc.org/blogs/immanent\\_frame/](http://www.ssrc.org/blogs/immanent_frame/).

roundtable discussions, including one panel of scholars engaged in current debates of secularism, and one student-led panel responding to the project’s qualitative research.

## Section II. Qualitative Research Summary

### *The Need to Start Descriptively*

While this investigation had a range of theoretical and critical hypotheses about the dynamics surrounding students’ engagement with what we broadly called their “big questions,”<sup>6</sup> we understood it was critical to our project to begin descriptively, not prescriptively. As we outlined in our qualitative research proposal, we “conduct[ed] our research to move beyond our informal and anecdotal grasp of the situation,” and to begin to uncover the conditions under which students, faculty, and administrators find themselves working on problems around finding meaning and purpose.<sup>7</sup> The research was designed collaboratively by Working Group members (with support from our campuses’ institutional researchers), and implemented individually on each campus.

As researchers, we particularly wanted to know what effect secular assumptions have on our campuses’ ability to help students pursue answers to their Big Questions. Underlying this investigation were a range of theoretical questions we brought to this project from the beginning, including: have unexamined secular assumptions become obstacles to the robust pluralism secular traditions seek to foster? And does secularity’s pursuit of a religiously neutral ethic block appeal to important dimensions of experience—including the affective and the visceral—that are critical to students’ identity formation, to their integration of learning and commitment? Although we did not reach consensus in our Working Group on any single definition of the secular, we defined the term for purposes of our research as the understanding that on our campuses religious commitments are private matters of personal choice and that most public campus discussions (in the classroom and beyond it) are best run without reference to God or some other ultimate reality.<sup>8</sup>

Our study revealed important disparities between educational goals and student experience. As Randolph Cornelius writes:

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<sup>6</sup> We share W. Robert Connor’s sense that the open-endedness (and deliberate vagueness) of the term “big questions” makes it a useful way to start conversation about how our students define what matters most to them as they consider their education and its relation to how they want to live. See W. Robert Connor, “The Right Time for Asking Big Questions,” *The Chronicle Review*, Vol. 52, No. 40, B8.

<sup>7</sup> In his helpful summary of current research on the changing shape of campus religious beliefs and practices, Damon Mayrl notes the lack of research that “isolate[s] the impact of college attendance” on the formation of student beliefs. “Amazingly,” Mayrl observes, “studies of this sort are virtually nonexistent.” See Damon Mayrl, “Introduction,” *The Religious Engagements of American Undergraduates*, Web Forum, Social Science Research Council (2007), <http://religion.ssrc.org/reforum/Mayrl.pdf> (accessed March 2, 2008).

<sup>8</sup> This definition of secular is what our research group settled on for the purposes of our institutional research, based on our sense of current secular perceptions that are under pressure; this definition is not what we decided upon as a Working Group, where we engaged more porous definitions of the term.

What the faculty and administrators wished for—campuses where students’ big questions are welcomed and valued—and what the students experienced, were often apparently quite different.

Our Working Papers begin with a more detailed description of this qualitative research, including distilled summaries of the research on each campus, and cross-campus analyses of data that surprised us, and data that confirmed expectations. I outline some of the significant findings that are described in more detail in Chapter 1 of our Working Group Essays. As the term qualitative research indicates, our study is not representative of our campus populations as a whole; our findings are suggestive, and provide an instrument for opening up conversation. Across all four campuses a total of 63 students, 29 faculty, and 27 administrators participated in our research.

*Where do students work on Big Questions?*

As Richard Spalding observes, the students we interviewed “prefer to articulate and define their questions of purpose, meaning, value, and destiny together in small, informal groups of peers, outside the classroom”—and the professors we interviewed also described seeing this student preference. Spalding writes:

In some instances students traced a particular compelling question to a class or a professor. But some faculty told us that it is often students, rather than they themselves, who deflect classroom discussions that stray near the perceived outer boundary of the secular.

Spalding further analyzes this trend among the students we interviewed, noting the secularizing shift it represents from an earlier era when the formation of student character was seen as part of our campuses’ missions:

If we expected that our institutions are using the instrument of secularity to pose big questions and to equip students to work on them, our research suggests that the connection between the institution and the questioning is more subtle and, in some cases, more tenuous than we might have supposed.

*Secularism’s Power and Invisibility*

As Ian Oliver notes, “certain key descriptors [in our research] turned up which seem to capture the power and invisibility of secularism.” The students we met affirmed the value of secular traditions more than they seemed to understand them. They accept religion’s privatization, concerned that it will get out of hand. As researchers we understand that questions of meaning and value should not be conflated with religious belief and practice. Yet some of the students we interviewed seem to understand secularism’s force to mean that questions of meaning and value are, in Randolph Cornelius’ observation, “impenetrably personal” and “aspects of a person’s identity that cannot and should not be questioned.” Responding to these assumptions uncovered in our research, Ian Oliver writes:

... religion was most often described as “private” and “volatile.” Expressing one’s religious beliefs was perceived by students as bringing down “peer judgment” and even

the judgment that one could not be both religious and smart. At one campus, students even said they were afraid to engage other’s religious beliefs for fear of destroying them. Clearly, some of those interviewed are afraid of breaching the secular boundary because they legitimately fear conflict which will undermine learning. But, does the definition of the liberal arts allow the luxury of such avoidance?

If part of secularity’s power is its invisibility, our research also revealed students and faculty are palpably aware of the ways secularity is an expression of power.<sup>9</sup> Cornelius notes that faculty we interviewed “had complex and conflicting views about whether or not they should make their commitments and views regarding questions of meaning and value known to their students.” Spalding draws out how much both faculty and students are aware of these delicate and highly charged dynamics:

...we have found that secularity introduces its own power dynamics into the classroom, and in its way confers a new kind of privilege. One student spoke of the way students’ membership in the secular intelligentsia trumps other allegiances, including religious identity. One faculty member explained, “We privilege rationality.” Students are keenly aware that their professors must hold a delicate balance between insufficient personal investment and too much personal disclosure. In some instances faculty are as aware as students of the ways in which the pressure of grades or the lure of charisma can distort the profile of a professor who chooses self-disclosure as part of the classroom strategy. And in some instances students are as aware as faculty of the dynamics of the tenure process, whereby the practice of academic freedom by junior ( untenured) faculty may be limited by the potential volatility of classroom encounters with some of the perspectives that secularity was meant to invite into the conversation as equal partners.

The essays in the pedagogy chapter of our Working Group Papers provide stories from three faculty members on two of our campuses as these teachers wrestle with the dilemmas of how professors most instructively use their authority to build students’ trust and their willingness to take risks in the classroom.

### *Campus Culture of “Busyness”*

Our research reveals time, or students’ felt lack of it, as one of the significant obstacles that students report as keeping them from engaging their “Big Questions” fully. Joseph Murray describes the dynamic on one campus that seems to be operative on all four of our partner campuses:

Students spoke of a culture of “busyness” that manifests itself not only in students’ tendency to over-commit their time, but in a commonly held belief that they should be

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<sup>9</sup> Linell Cady describes the powerful influence of the “secular liberal narrative” in the academy. She writes, “As Christian Smith puts it, the fact that secularization is theorized as ‘a natural evolutionary progression’ rather than ‘a contested revolutionary struggle’ points toward its paradigmatic status.” See Linell E. Cady, “Categories, Conflicts, and Conundrums: Ethics and the Religious/Secular Divide,” in *War and Border Crossings: Ethics When Cultures Clash*, ed. Peter A. French and Jason A. Short (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005), 148. Her reference is to Christian Smith, *The Secular Revolution: Power, Interest, and Conflict in the Secularization of American Public Life* (Berkeley: University of California, 2003), 1.

active at all times. This norm appears to be in part a product of both the competitive nature of the student body, and the emphasis that the administration places in campus activities.

A number of our campuses are examining cultural shifts in how people experience time, not only through the lens of Weberian notions of disenchanted time in modernity, but also through pragmatic analysis of the ways a “culture of busyness” impacts student learning and faculty responsibilities. As Ian Oliver notes, we also started to think together about measures that campuses can take “to convince our students that intellectual depth is what matters in college, not the number of majors or activities.”<sup>10</sup>

### *Varieties of Secular Definitions*

An initial goal of our project was to “develop a more robust and capacious definition of secularity” that we hoped to integrate into curricular and campus life. We learned quickly that an organizing force in modernity is not readily redefined. With a bit of chastened humility, our research revealed the need for developing leadership on our campuses that can simply help us better understand our secularity. Richard Spalding describes this dimension of our learning:

We might have expected – given the nearly unanimous affirmation, on each of the four campuses, of the secular nature of the institution – that a workable contemporary definition of secularity would lie close at hand. But we have found that a definition of secularity remains elusive enough so that it is not clear what this value is that guides our institutions. Data from several campuses suggests that the freedom to interpret what it means to be a secular institution is part of the value of the commitment.

## **Section III. Key Findings—Secularity and the Learning Agenda on our Campuses**

### *Widening the Conversation*

While we initially set out to develop new working definitions for secularity for our contexts, our qualitative research makes clear that our secular assumptions are too contested—and difficult to bring into view—for us to accomplish this goal.<sup>11</sup> What we have done is to develop contextually specific ways to ask a set of questions about secular boundaries that our campuses are not sure how to discuss. Discovering how to engage these questions on our campuses is one of the goals in our ongoing work. Our most important learning has been how to open a wider discussion of our campuses’ secular boundaries, and to consider the implications for pedagogy, for the

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<sup>10</sup> Cf. David Levy, “No Time to Think: Reflections on Information Technology and Contemplative Scholarship,” *Ethics and Information Technology* 9:4 (2007).

<sup>11</sup> Our interest in developing new working definitions for our contexts is not a naïve mission to somehow redefine what Charles Taylor has recently described as a “condition” of modernity—as “a matter of the whole context of understanding in which our moral, spiritual or religious experience and search takes place.” Rather, it is a pragmatic approach, based on our understanding, as Linell Cady argues, that secular forms take shape differently in different contexts. New working definitions of secularity will not remove conflicts over it, but, as Cady notes, they may help it to be less “resentfully received.” See Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA and London: Belknap Press of Harvard University, 2007), 3; and see Linell Cady, “Categories, Conflicts, and Conundrums,” 158.

political fault lines these discussions reveal, and for the mission of our institutions generally. A number of the papers describe the value of telling stories as a place to start. The measurable difference our work is making will come in future phases, such as the quantitative work we plan to do to build on this qualitative study.

Our anecdotal experience is that our campuses are not alone in experiencing the difficulties in finding clarity about what it means to call our institutions secular. Rather than claim to offer techniques for resolving these conflicts, we want to widen the conversation—through our readers’ engagement with our Working Papers, and the general audience we are inviting to attend our conference. And we hope to turn the conference proceedings into material that will promote attention by institutions of higher education to their secular assumptions. So our “key findings” have more to do with helping other campuses both anticipate the dilemmas they might expect in adapting these questions to their contexts, and also describe the educational value of such work.

### *Pressures on Campus Secularity*

While the religious history and current religious make-up of our institutions differ, our campuses share a set of common assumptions, specifically that our secularity reflects a degree of needed distancing from the role that Protestantism once played as an integral and unifying aspect of our educational mission. Thus our campuses see our self-identification as “secular” as a hard-won accomplishment, reflecting critical commitments to honor the integrity of the multiple worldviews, values, and cultural practices that we welcome on our increasingly cosmopolitan campuses.<sup>12</sup> Along these lines, historian David Hollinger has offered a lucid critique of complaints that “higher education has gone too far in a secular direction.” Hollinger argues that the real question at issue in such complaints “is *whether these imperfect academic communities can be improved by diminishing the critical distance from Christian cultural hegemony that they have achieved only after a long struggle*” [italics, his]. Most members in our Working Group, faculty and Christian and Jewish chaplains alike, would share Hollinger’s critique of those who lament the loss of Christian presumptions on campus. Yet the question we are trying to take up is not religion in higher education, but our campuses’ not very-well understood secular boundaries.

Paula Cooley, in describing shared insights from one of our campuses’ faculty groups, articulates well one of the motivating insights of our project: that secularism, “far from being religiously neutral and value free, reflects a faded form of Protestant Christianity as blended with European Enlightenment values.” As chaplains and faculty reflecting a range of religious and secular commitments, we have had to make clear, repeatedly and sometimes to ourselves, that our project is not a re-assertion of our institutions’ Christian past—but a response to the ways unexamined secular assumptions are also a continuation of a particular Western project. Yet now the shifting terrain of the “religious” and the “secular” in our time are revealing how much our secularly framed notions of religion—as a personal and private preference, and as a phenomenon

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<sup>12</sup> See David A. Hollinger, “Enough Already: Universities Do Not Need More Christianity,” in *Religion, Scholarship, and Higher Education: Perspectives, Models and Future Prospects, Essays from the Lilly Seminar on Religion in Higher Education*, ed. Andrea Sterk (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 2002), 40. Francis Oakley’s essay in this collection notes that one of the areas the three-year Lilly Seminar did not adequately address was what secular institutions really mean when they describe themselves as secular. See Oakley, “Concluding Reflections on the Lilly Seminar,” 233.



one can differentiate from its culture—are specific to a particular Protestant ethic, and a given moment in Western modernity, and thus how limited these assumptions are.<sup>13</sup> As Clay Steinman has observed, “we need clearly to differentiate our discussions of secularity as a concept, extensively theorized by others, and secularity as a range of practices on our campuses, which we are only beginning to understand.” We see these emerging insights about the limits of secularity as a concept as important not only to the classroom, but also to campus life generally, and the kind of education we provide for our diverse student bodies.

Khaldoun Samman’s essay offers a cautionary word to those who interpret the pressures on secularism as a call to let more religion in “our improved and more tolerant colleges and universities.” Samman challenges the academy to a more thorough-going analysis of the ways the coupling of modernity and secularity have constructed Western notions of the backward Muslim Other. Letting more religion in is not enough, Samman argues, if it simply leaves in place ongoing assumptions about the incompatibility of modernity and non-Western, Muslim traditions.

#### *Learning to talk at and about our secular boundaries*

Raising questions about campus secularity is polarizing and at times difficult, for many reasons we explore in more detail in our Working Group Essays. People from a range of political, religious, and secular commitments questioned whether we and/or the Teagle Foundation, had a political agenda in raising questions about secularity. At the beginning, and generally each time we engaged a new constituency on our campuses, religiously skeptical colleagues wondered if we were trying to impose religion on campus, or to undermine our college’s secular values, while some religiously committed constituencies seemed to hope we *were* attempting to dismantle the obstacles they perceived in our campuses’ secularity.<sup>14</sup>

These sometimes contested discussions have taught us to pay attention to the anxiety our project provokes—using it to open up conversation, rather than to shut it down. Because of the emerging nature of these discussions of secularity, our approach has been not so much to propose a pedagogy of “teaching the conflicts” as to conceptualize them, so that we can begin to teach them.<sup>15</sup> The pedagogical papers in our Working Group essays offer different faculty perspectives, but share an understanding that some students are looking for constructive ways to reflect on their religious commitments in the classroom. The “more pressing conversation,” as Jonathon Kahn observes in his Working Group Essay on “Jeffrey Stout’s Secular and the Liberal Arts,” is how to do this within a re-fashioned secular frame.

#### *Developing Analytics*

As we struggled with these dilemmas, we committed ourselves to developing leadership for the continuing analysis and discussion about the boundaries of secularism in higher education. How can we help our campuses—students, faculty, and administrators alike—better analyze the

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<sup>13</sup> Talal Asad has argued forcefully that notions of “religion” as a universal phenomenon are themselves constructions of a Western secular project. See Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University, 2003), 191-194.

<sup>14</sup> See Ian Oliver’s paper, Working Group Essays, Chapter 2.

<sup>15</sup> See Gerald Graff, *Beyond the Culture Wars: How Teaching the Conflicts Can Revitalize American Education* (New York and London: W.W. Norton, 1992).

confusing political, religious, and cultural forces at work in the polarizing effects and elusive nature of these questions? The dilemmas come from many different directions.

There are a host of challenges around developing understanding in our own contexts—for students, faculty, and student life administrators—of what anthropologist Talal Asad is talking about when he describes secularity as an organizing principle of public life in modern Western contexts, which some people experience as a cultural force that works to ensure religious practices and commitments are kept private. Asad notes that part of the challenge is that secularity is “so much a part of our modern life, it is not easy to grasp directly.”<sup>16</sup> Asad’s work sheds light on the challenges we experienced trying to develop new working definitions of secularity for our context. Organizing principles of social life are not simply redefined. Repeatedly we found it difficult to bring the workings of secular assumptions into view. Towards the end of the first full day of our discussions in our opening Working Group meeting, Jonathan VanAntwerpen observed how often we kept talking about religion, even though we said we were trying to talk about secularity. VanAntwerpen reminded us of Bourdieu’s analytically useful notion of *doxa*, which are those fundamental un-thought beliefs we hold to be self-evident.<sup>17</sup> As studies of race and ethnicity have worked to bring the construction of whiteness into view, now a range of disciplinary fields are working to bring secular assumptions and constructions into view.

There are also a host of dilemmas surrounding the political fault lines exposed by discussions of secularity. As Jonathon Kahn notes, “critics of the notion of the secular come from all corners, from critics of vastly different political and religious commitments.” One of the sessions at our closing conference is designed to consider aspects of political analysis we need to develop by asking, with Kahn, “in what ways is higher education, in questioning the nature of secularism, engaging in larger national cultural wars on the same topic?”

One of the concerns we heard, both within our Working Group and from colleagues on our campuses, was whether we were sufficiently aware that our questioning of our campuses’ secular boundaries may unwittingly be welcoming fundamentalist epistemologies into our classrooms and campus life. These kinds of concerns point at the ways, as Neil Gross and Solon Simmons have observed, that educators “should expect continued conflict in the years to come between the forces of religious conservatism and the institution of the American university,” particularly as an increasingly vocal minority expresses their concern about the kind of environment campuses provide for students of faith. We have very much come to share Gross and Simmons’ conclusion that “Theoretical frameworks must be developed to help us make sense of this situation, and to identify the steps that can be taken, if any, to keep the conflict from derailing the vital educational and research missions served by America’s colleges and universities.”<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University, 2003), 16 and 13.

<sup>17</sup> See Pierre Bourdieu and Loïc J. D. Wacquant, *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1992), 73.

<sup>18</sup> Neil Gross and Solon Simmons, “How Religious Are America’s College and University Professors?,” Social Science Research Council Web Forum, [http://religion.ssrc.org/reforum/Gross\\_Simmons.pdf](http://religion.ssrc.org/reforum/Gross_Simmons.pdf) (accessed September 3, 2008), 10.

*Refashioning Secular Pedagogies*

The Working Group Essays of our project take up the pedagogical implications of Gross and Simmons’ concerns directly. Paul Macdonald and Jonathan Kahn argue, in different ways, that Jeffrey Stout’s work provides critical resources for rethinking the secular classroom, such that the openness to expression of religious commitments within it becomes a pedagogical goal. Both Macdonald and Kahn cite the distinction Stout makes between “secularized discourse” and “secularism,” where only secularism requires that religious commitments be kept personal and private. As Kahn notes in his chapter, Stout describes the freeing goal of secularized discourse as follows:

What makes a form of discourse secularized, according to my account, is not the tendency of the people participating in it to relinquish their religious beliefs or to refrain from employing them as reasons. The mark of secularization, as I use the term, is rather the fact that participants in a given discursive practice are not in a position to take for granted that their interlocutors are making the same religious assumptions they are. This is the sense in which public discourse in modern democracies tends to be secularized.<sup>19</sup>

For Macdonald, as long as the classroom is secular in this sense—that is, that “no one religious perspective is taken for granted by all those who participate in it”—then it becomes appropriate, and pedagogically more instructive, to see teaching Christian theology as helping students “to habituate the skills needed to speak, think, and ultimately reason like a Christian theologian . . . whether one claims [Christian] identity or not.” This approach to studying Christian theology not from a supposed objective standpoint, but from within the tradition, is a teaching method that would presumably apply to other traditions and worldviews. For, as Kahn’s paper argues, one of the implications of Stout’s work is that learning religious practices and habits of mind is akin to learning other languages. Stout’s work is helpful for re-thinking secular pedagogy—not because he restates now widely accepted critiques of “objectivity,” but because his understanding of “immanent criticism” provides a model for those outside of a tradition to learn the benefits and discipline of reasoning within it. Kahn draws out the ethical implications for liberal arts teaching: “What Stout’s secularization demands from its participants is that each thinks of his or her civic responsibility in terms of learning a moral, religious, historical, or philosophical language not his or her own.”<sup>20</sup>

Another way of learning about the diversity of personal views in matters of morality and religion in the secular classroom is to examine directly what is known about the process by which beliefs about such matters are formed and maintained. This approach is described by Ken Livingston in our Working Group Essays in his reflections on a course entitled, “The Psychology of Belief.” Livingston’s pedagogy simultaneously invited an open and confidential (to the class) discussion

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<sup>19</sup> Jeffrey Stout, *Democracy and Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 97. In her appreciative review of Stout’s book, Linell Cady asks if Stout’s account of the history of secularization does justice to the “narrative of secularization as a political struggle with winners and losers.” See Cady, “Secularism, Secularizing, and Secularization: Reflections on Stout’s *Democracy and Tradition*,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 73:3 (2005), 878.

<sup>20</sup> Along similar lines, Jürgen Habermas has recently outlined a theory and practice for “deliberative politics” where both religious and secular citizens engage in what he calls “complementary learning processes” of the other’s worldview. See Jürgen Habermas, “Religion in the Public Sphere,” *European Journal of Philosophy* 14:1 (2006).

of personal belief, side-by-side with an objective consideration of what neuroscientists, philosophers, theologians, and psychologists have to say about why people believe and practice as they do in the religious domain. The framework is explicitly secular in the sense that it presupposes a modern, analytical and data-driven approach to issues and questions, but it also attempts to walk the boundary with the personal and private in a way that invites frequent crossings. This approach seemed, for most students, to make the boundary between the course material and what they personally believe clearer and brighter, rather than less visible—with interesting and unanticipated consequences for what we might expect if we broaden our secular frame in ways we have described here.

While we work towards classrooms where the kind of lively discussion and debate described differently by Livingston, Macdonald, and Kahn is possible, a more agonistic approach is not always possible or instructive. There are those moments in classes where discussions become difficult, or fall silent. Part of trying to make space for students to engage their existential questions in the secular classroom includes bumping up against the felt difficulty of finding language for what one believes. Rachel Kitzinger’s essay on teaching Lucretius’s *The Way Things Are*, describes a classroom where she invited students to challenge Lucretius’ unsettling picture, as Kitzinger describes it, of “human powerlessness in the face of the randomness of impersonal forces.” She felt her students’ discontent with this worldview, but they could not provide alternatives. Her essay is a compelling example of the challenges of making the classroom a space where students can explore “questions that have a direct bearing on how they choose to live their lives.” Her essay provides a starting point for thinking critically about the limits and capacities of engaging the “big questions” in secular classrooms.

### *Focus on Student Learning*

Another central theme of our collaborations and Working Group Papers is student learning. Ian Oliver describes how the interest of nonparticipants in our project changed as people learned to trust that our agenda is student learning, and the ways it may be strengthened, as Oliver puts it, by making our secular boundaries “more porous and broad”:

The project set out to explore how being a “secular” university is defined and how that affects the educational work of the university. Through the project, we discovered that even raising the topic in today’s politically-charged climate excites anxious responses from religionist and secularist faculty/administrators alike, at first. “Secular” means many different things to different people. But as soon as faculty/administrators saw this is an open-ended discussion without a specific agenda, the conversation quickly turned to a positive discussion of classroom situations, advising, curricular choices, science/religion questions and a host of problematic issues at the “secular boundary” where disciplines, professor-student relationships, and advising meet.

How quickly suspicions of our agenda turned to trust varied across our campuses; yet as we complete the Teagle-funded phase of our project, each campus is seeking ways to continue the project because of growing interest in the educational questions posed by our drawing attention to the boundaries of “the secular.” Each campus developed a range of forums for bringing this conversation to a wider public, including faculty-administrator study groups, teaching development workshops, student panel discussions, and faculty-student research projects. From

the start, we knew we wanted to offer a conference that included presentation of our findings and a keynote address by a leading scholar or scholars in emerging discussions of secularity. Our concluding conference thus reflects our ongoing goal to engage more people in this conversation—not because we believe all of our students want to engage these questions (we saw clearly that they do not), but because we think engaging how we understand our secular boundaries has creative contributions to make to current discussions of pedagogy, student development, and even the mission of the liberal arts.

### *Stewards of the Secular*

A critical part of what we have learned is how to develop campus leadership to make the question of secularity part of learning. All of our campuses speak of liberal arts education’s goal of helping students integrate their curricular and co-curricular experiences, and all of our campuses experience the challenges of bringing faculty and administrators into substantive collaborations that make this integrative work concrete and visible. Secularization is part of the story of this dilemma. We have found that faculty and religious life administrators can work effectively together to ask questions about the secularizing story we tell ourselves, in ways that creatively unsettle received notions that faculty tend solely to students’ intellectual lives and student life administrators (the sphere where most chaplains work) tend solely to students’ personal lives.

Significant faculty-administrator partnerships on our campuses grew out of the qualitative research we did on all four campuses. Chaplains became institutional researchers with experienced faculty, and our faculty researchers became consultants to student life administrators and religious life administrators and students—all of whom wanted to learn about how individuals on our campuses describe their experience of our secular boundaries. By turning potentially polarizing dilemmas (in this case, how secular assumptions effect students’ education) into campus research projects, we established a trustworthy distance on the questions and gave ourselves room to begin re-imagining the secular boundaries of our campuses. Asking ourselves, as Richard Spalding put it, who are the “stewards of the secular” on our campuses makes secularity a question of hospitality, of the room we provide for students to experience the power of different worldviews. Asking ourselves who are the caretakers of the secular thus becomes a project of developing new discourses and practices for human life together, across the separations of personal and professional life, and community and intellectual life, that so many of our campuses are trying to re-integrate.

## **Section IV. Future Directions**

The questions opened up by asking ourselves who are the stewards of the secular in our campus communities have sufficiently taken hold so that each campus has plans for a range of continuing activities that promise to strengthen our faculty-administrator collaborations. These continuing activities include the following:

*Qualitative Research Presentations:*

As noted above, we are finding our qualitative research a helpful mechanism for extending conversation about the questions of our project. Our campuses have already presented the materials within our faculty-administrator groups, and student religious communities, and now plans are in the works for further presentations within academic affairs, a multi-cultural audit on one campus, in our learning and teacher centers, in residence halls, and more.

*Curricular Initiatives:*

Our campuses are also planning a wide range of curricular initiatives. One campus has already offered a teaching development workshop, attended by over forty faculty, and plans are in the works for similar initiatives at other campuses. One campus faculty study group wants to extend their work by implementing a clustered first year seminar; they have taken a first step towards this by making Talal Asad’s *On Suicide Bombing*, a shared text across three classes, and plan to invite him to campus as a lecturer. Another campus is planning a “college course,” designed specifically for exploratory pedagogies, to engage how students integrate their interests and learning as first year students, and then as seniors. Faculty in our group will continue to teach courses on secularity, drawing new course material from the work of this project.

*Scholarly Initiatives:*

A number of scholarly initiatives have developed out of this project as well. Our plans for quantitative faculty-student research include an honors thesis by the student researchers involved. Also faculty and administrators involved in the project are engaged in their own scholarship and writing on related questions. Khaldoun Samman (Sociology Department, Macalester College) is developing his paper into a book manuscript, "Clash of Modernities: Eurocentrism and the Rise and Decline of the ‘New’ Jew, Arab, and Turk and the Islamist Challenge," that will be published in late spring, 2009 by Paradigm Publishers. Paul Macdonald (Religion Department, Bucknell University) has written an article-length version of his Working Group Essay, and it is under review at a scholarly journal. Greg Krohn (Economics Department, Bucknell) has submitted a paper on secularity, religion and the teaching of economics. Chris Ellis (formerly in the Institutional Research Office, Bucknell University) prepared a report for Bucknell’s faculty-administrator study group on the data from the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE). Sam Speers’ (Religious and Spiritual Life, Vassar College) article, “The Secularization Thesis Revisited: Religious Life on the Secular College Campus Today,” is in the *Journal of College and Character* (Vol. X, No. 1, September, 2008). We also have plans for submitting an edited collection of essays for publication, based on the talks and discussions at our concluding conference.

*Quantitative Research:*

Our Working Group is preparing language now for a quantitative study building on our qualitative work that would be carried out by faculty researchers and student research assistants on two or more of our campuses. We noted especially, as Randolph Cornelius observes, marked differences in how engaged students were in our inquiry into the place of “big questions” in their educational experience, with some students “having a difficult time even understanding what we were getting at.” Cornelius continues:

... we need a much better sense of how much the experiences recounted by students in our focus groups are shared by other students. Being able, for example, to estimate the

percentages of students who feel left out in classroom discussions because of their value commitments will be of great value to anyone attempting to convince college administrators that the secular environment they assume their campus embodies is not the environment experienced by some of their students.

As part of our own quantitative study, we also want to do follow-up comparison studies of quantitative research from national surveys shared across the four institutions. The NSSE (National Survey of Student Engagement), CIRP Freshman Survey (Cooperative Institutional Research Program), and HEDS (Higher Education Data Sharing), and the CSBV (College Students’ Beliefs and Values) surveys all explore a variety of attitudes and topics relevant to this project. As Chris Ellis’s paper on NSSE data at Bucknell observes, these instruments can help our institutions begin to gather and develop data on the impact, both positive and negative, of spiritual and religious commitments on student learning on our campuses. This data can also provide new perspectives on secular assumptions. Measuring student learning is, as David Davis Van Atta notes, “something of the holy grail within higher education today,” given the difficulties of defining it and measuring it directly and reliably. “Still,” Van Atta argues, “tools are emerging.”<sup>21</sup> It would be especially helpful for our project if institutional researchers could work at developing measurements of the impact of more porous secular boundaries on student engagement. The NSSE, CIRP, and HEDS studies allow our campuses to track changes in student perspectives, and give options for local questions designed by the schools conducting the survey. Could the promising work of initiatives like the Wabash National Study take emerging questions about secularity into their measures of knowledge and learning in key areas? How might questions like, “is critique secular?” change how standardized instruments analyze “critical thinking”?<sup>22</sup>

#### *Coda*

*The conflicts at the border of religions and the secular that have emerged with a vengeance across the globe in recent decades pose fundamental challenges to the religious/secular configuration on which modern liberal democratic societies have been built.”*

*--Linell E. Cady<sup>23</sup>*

As we hope is clear from the above reflections, our project is not a rejection of the secular, not a veiled attempt to re-assert a religious past to which our institutions have worked imperfectly but commendably to relate differently. Rather it is an attempt to help our campuses begin to tell a different story about our secularity, re-working what Linell Cady calls the “religious/secular configuration” that has built liberal arts education. Our project shows that educators can play with their secular definitions, bringing together constituencies from all spheres of campus life, and using pragmatic approaches that build on emerging discussion of the ways secular forms take shape differently in different contexts. Secularism’s most thoughtful critics are not calling

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<sup>21</sup> David Davis Van Atta is Director of Institutional Research at Vassar College.

<sup>22</sup> “Is Critique Secular?” is the title of a day-long symposium organized by the Critical Theory Initiative, Townsend Center for the Humanities, University of California-Berkeley, October 19, 2007. For discussion of papers presented there, and other responses on the topic, see the SSRC Blog, “The Immanent Frame,” [http://www.ssrc.org/blogs/immanent\\_frame/category/is-critique-secular/](http://www.ssrc.org/blogs/immanent_frame/category/is-critique-secular/).

<sup>23</sup> Cady, “Categories, Conflicts, and Conundrums,” 157.

for its dismantlement, but its reworking. Liberal arts educators can take a leading role in this process, not only in scholarly debates, but also in their own institutions’ practices. As Ian Oliver describes in the forceful conclusion to his Working Group Essay, “Secularity, Meaning, and the Liberal Arts:”

Our experience has shown us that elite, secular institutions like ours are almost allergic to these questions [about our secular borders]. . . . But over time and with patience, almost all constituencies in our communities responded to approaching these questions from a de-pressurized, inquisitive educational perspective. Like the first introduction of race, gender, class, or cultural categories as factors in student learning, redefining secularity as an intentional and flexible category will meet decreasing resistance as constituents trade politicized understandings for more nuanced ones. De-pressurizing our campus communities on these questions will take time, but will, in the end, both open liberal learning to now marginalized inputs and become a unifying factor in a liberal arts education for a large group of students.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> I also cite this helpful distillation of our initiative’s goals and process in the opening Executive Summary above.



## **Appendix I - Secularity and the Liberal Arts Working Group Members**

- Dan Balik, Director of Institutional Research, Macalester College
- Rena Blumenthal, Assistant Director of Religious & Spiritual Life and Rachlin Advisor to Jewish Life, Vassar College
- Randolph Cornelius, Professor of Psychology, Vassar College
- Stuart Crampton, Barclay Jermain Professor of Natural Philosophy, Emeritus, Williams College
- Lucy Forster-Smith, Associate Dean for Religious and Spiritual Life and Chaplain, Macalester College
- Serena Fujita, Jewish Chaplain, Bucknell University
- Jonathon Kahn, Assistant Professor of Religion, Vassar College
- Kenneth Livingston, Professor of Psychology and Cognitive Science, Vassar College
- Paul Macdonald Jr., Assistant Professor of Religion, Bucknell University
- Joseph Murray, Associate Professor of Education, Director, College Student Personnel Program, Bucknell University
- Ian Oliver, Pastor to the University Church and Senior Associate Chaplain for Protestant Life at Yale University (prior to July 2008, Rev. Oliver served as University Chaplain, Bucknell University)
- Richard E. Spalding, Chaplain to the College and Coordinator of Community Service, Williams College
- Samuel Speers, Project Coordinator and Director of Religious and Spiritual Life, Vassar College
- Clay Steinman, Professor of Humanities and Media and Cultural Studies, Macalester College

Jonathan VanAntwerpen, Program Officer in Religion and the Public Sphere at the Social Science Research Council, served as a consultant to the project, attending Working Group meetings and participating in our conference calls and other planning.

Patricia Stickle and Dayle Rebelein provided invaluable administrative support for Working Group activities.

The following students served as research assistants for our qualitative research project during the summer, 2007, attending our fall semester 2007 Working Group meeting and assisting with on campus presentations of the research:

Jennifer C. Bees '08, Williams College  
Katy Bogart '08, Macalester College  
Daniel Hawthorne '09, Vassar College  
Jeffrey Manning '09, Bucknell University

## **Appendix II – Key Terms: Secularism and Secularity, Religious and Spiritual**

### *Secularism and Secularity*

One of the themes of this White Paper, and our project more generally, is how contested, and diverging, our understandings of the “secular” are—within our Working Group and on our campuses. That said, we settled on “secularity” as the operative term for our project’s interest, rather than “secularism,” for several reasons. To begin with, the “-ism” in secularism connotes a fixed and polarizing ideology; we value ideological critique, and we engage the differing political interests in different definitions, but we wanted our title to signal the exploratory nature of this project. Charles Taylor’s recent work on secularity as a “condition of belief” in modernity helps explain our use of terms (Taylor’s help here is in hindsight, as his massive *A Secular Age* had not been published yet as we began). Taylor presents his interest in three senses of the term secular: one is the sense of “separation” of spheres—which is the notion, still-contested, of how and how much to separate religion from public/political life, in order to preserve both religion and politics; the second sense is that of “decline,” which is the notion, still-contested (especially in comparing U.S. and European contexts) associating secularization with progress (crudely this means the more modern, the more “secular”—and the less “religious”); the third sense, and the new term Taylor introduces to debates, is his phenomenological interest in how it happened that secularity is now a “condition” of experience, what he calls “a new context in which all search and questioning about the moral and spiritual must proceed” (20). Taylor emphasizes what a far-reaching cultural change it is (within what he calls Latin Christendom) that belief in God has become one choice among others, and often the more contested choice. Of course this argument about belief in God as the more contested choice is itself contested—especially as a description of U.S. culture and politics. But our research and experience as educators is that this argument is a helpful description of the academy in the U.S., especially in the context of private, elite institutions. As institutions founded as Protestant but now in three of four cases no longer affiliated, we wanted to understand better how this modern shift—from “fate” to “choice” in Peter Berger’s terms—guides our contexts and how it might open new possibilities for us to help students navigate their moral, spiritual, and vocational choices more effectively. So the title of our project is meant to indicate this educational interest in “secularity” as a still unsettled concept.<sup>25</sup>

In our discussions we also noted, as David Gibson describes, how secularism has strong negative connotations for some people, including (for different reasons) Christian conservatives and Pope Benedict. In a brief overview that is helpful for people new to these debates, Gibson brings out how some definitions of “secularism” imply a sense of an organized political force—as in then Presidential candidate Mitt Romney’s speech on “the religion of secularism.” While we try to understand how such notions of secularism impact our campus culture, this is not what we were researching in our project.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> See Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University, 2007), 1-29. See also Peter L. Berger, “Religion in a Globalizing World,” *The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life*, December 4, 2006, <http://pewforum.org/events/index.php?EventID=136> (accessed, March 19, 2008).

<sup>26</sup> David Gibson, “Defining Secularism,” *New Jersey Star Ledger*, January 27, 2008.

### *Spiritual and Religious*

“Spiritual” and “religious” are also among the contested terms we use in this project that elude single definitions, including among members of our Working Group. That said, both chaplains and faculty in our group try to help students situate the changing meanings of these terms historically and contextually—in ways that work against their too easy polarization (to each other, and to the “secular”). As Courtney Bender has noted in another Teagle-funded project, religious and spiritual used to be understood as nearly synonymous; it is only a recent development that the terms have come to carry distinct meanings (where “spiritual” connotes personal and “religious” institutional). Bender helpfully outlines historian Catharine Albanese’s argument that spirituality is “the personal, experiential element in religion,” which has been expressed in the U.S. in a range of different, and longstanding traditions (including the Emersonian tradition of non-conformist self-reliance that is ironically in the background of popular notions of “spiritual but not religious” spirituality).<sup>27</sup>

Parts of what makes distinguishing the terms difficult are the different conclusions of current research. As Ian Oliver notes in his Working Group Essay, two recent national studies of slightly different age (and perhaps class) groups come to different conclusions about the prevalence of “spiritual but not religious” populations among young adults. According to Christian Smith’s study of U.S. youth under age eighteen, “very few [youth]...appear to be exposed to, interested in, or actively pursuing the kind of ‘spiritual but not religious’ personal quests of eclectic spiritual seeking about which we have been hearing so much lately.”<sup>28</sup>

In contrast to Smith’s study, the findings of the Higher Education Research Institute’s (HERI) national study of college-age students include that around 80 percent or more of students report that broad definitions of spirituality describe them. HERI confirms a correlation of spiritual and religious identity for students who identify themselves as religious, but it also indicates widespread patterns of broader understandings of spirituality: “Spirituality is much more closely associated with [the study’s indicators of] Spiritual Quest, Ethic of Caring, Compassionate Self-Concept, and Ecumenical Worldview than is either Religious Commitment or Religious Engagement.”<sup>29</sup> In the report of HERI’s initial findings, Alexander Astin defines spirituality as what “points to our *interiors*, by which I mean our subjective life (as contrasted to the objective domain of observable behavior and material objects that you can point to and measure directly).”<sup>30</sup> HERI’s operative use of the term spirituality seems to conflate it with interiority--a tendency in current discussions that we tried to avoid, if not always successfully (see discussion

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<sup>27</sup> See Courtney Bender, “Religion and Spirituality: History, Discourse, Measurement,” *The Religious Engagements of American Undergraduates*, Web Forum, Social Science Research Council (2007), <http://religion.ssrc.org/reforum/Bender.pdf> (accessed March 5, 2008).

<sup>28</sup> Christian Smith, with Melissa Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 260.

<sup>29</sup> “The Spiritual Life of College Students: A National Study of College Students’ Search for Meaning and Purpose, Executive Summary,” *Spirituality in Higher Education*, Higher Education Research Institute (Los Angeles: University of California, 2005), 4.

<sup>30</sup> On the definition of “spirituality,” see Alexander Astin, “Why Spirituality Deserves a Central Place in Higher Education,” *Spirituality in Higher Education Newsletter* 1, no. 1 (April 2004): 1, (accessed March 18, 2008) at [http://spirituality.ucla.edu/newsletter\\_new/past\\_pdf/volume\\_1/vol\\_1\\_issue\\_1/Astin.pdf](http://spirituality.ucla.edu/newsletter_new/past_pdf/volume_1/vol_1_issue_1/Astin.pdf). For the general website of HERI’s study, see <http://spirituality.ucla.edu/>.

below). The differences between Smith’s study and the HERI study, even taking into consideration the different age groups, highlight the need for further research on the impact of higher education on students’ religious beliefs and commitments.

Given these debates and the shifting terrain they reveal, we use both “religious” and “spiritual” in our work on this project to convey to students our interest in how *they* integrate their questions of meaning into their learning, whatever (sometimes unconsciously selected) traditions of thought and practice they may draw on to do this. Some campuses in this project found themselves working hard to clarify that we do not equate questions of meaning and purpose with “religion,” and we do not conflate spirituality and interiority; however, we did not always succeed in clarifying these differences, largely because the students we work with do not clearly distinguish them. Some of the most important “big questions” developmentally for the college students we interviewed are about vocation and career; as Ian Oliver notes, one can imagine that these students are thinking about such big questions with a mix of motivations, information, and influences that may include ethics and religion, but that are not parsed out easily. While we cannot conflate meaning/purpose/value and religion/spirituality, neither could we find a clear way to quarantine the religious/spiritual thinking of students from larger issues of meaning/purpose/value.

## **Appendix III - Table of Contents for “Varieties of Secular Experience” Working Papers**

### CHAPTER 1 - Varieties Of Secular Experience: Pedagogy, Politics, And Meaning In The Liberal Arts

#### PART I: Summary Of Qualitative Research

Authors: Richard E. Spalding (Williams College), Joseph L. Murray (Bucknell University), Randolph Cornelius (Vassar College), Lucy Forster-Smith (Macalester College), Dan Balik (Macalester College), Katie Bogart '08 (Macalester College)

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|------------------------|----------------------------|
| A. New England College | C. Mid-Atlantic University |
| B. Mid-Western College | D. Northeast College       |

#### PART II: Cross Campus Analysis

A. What did we learn from the qualitative research that surprised us?

Author: Richard Spalding (Williams College)

B. What did we learn that confirmed what we expected?

Author: Joseph Murray (Bucknell University)

C. How are the results of our Qualitative Research different from one another?

Author: Lucy Forster-Smith (Macalester College)

### CHAPTER 2 - Secularity, Meaning and the Liberal Arts

Author: Ian Oliver (Yale University (formerly Bucknell University))

### CHAPTER 3 – The Pedagogy Of Big Questions In Secular Education

#### PART I - Questioning the ‘Nature of Things’

Author: Rachel Kitzinger (Vassar College)

#### PART II - Studying Christian Theology In The Secular Liberal Arts Classroom

Author: Paul Macdonald (Bucknell University)

#### PART III – Psychology of Belief

Author: Kenneth Livingston (Vassar College)

### CHAPTER 4 – The Politics Of The Secular And The Religious

#### PART I - Jeffrey Stout’s Secular and the Liberal Arts

Author: Jonathon S. Kahn (Vassar College)

PART II - On Secularism And The Sheikh  
Author: Khaldoun Samman (Macalester College)

Appendix A: Notes on Methodologies for Qualitative Research

Appendix B: Current and Childhood Religious Identifications of the Participants

Appendix C: Faculty-Chaplain Study Group Reports

Appendix D: Combined Bibliography

## **Appendix IV - Abstracts and Organizing Groups for “Varieties of Secular Experience” Working Papers And Conference Sessions**

### **Chapter 1**

“Varieties of Secular Experience on our Campuses”  
A Summary of our Qualitative Research

Authors: Richard Spalding (Williams College), Randolph Cornelius (Vassar College), Joseph Murray (Bucknell University), Lucy Forster-Smith (Macalester College), Dan Balik (Macalester College), Katie Bogart '08 (Macalester College)

This chapter summarizes and analyzes the qualitative research each campus did with students, faculty, and student life administrators; our research examines whether and how secular assumptions frame the questions of meaning and purpose students engage in the classroom and beyond. The authors highlight the different themes that emerged on each campus, and offer cross-campus analyses of what surprised them, what findings confirmed expectations, and how the campuses differed.

Chapter/Session Organizing Group:  
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Randolph Cornelius, Session/Chapter Convener (Vassar College)  
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### **Chapter 2**

“Secularity, Meaning and the Liberal Arts”

Conference Session Abstract  
Ian Oliver, Yale University (during the grant period, Oliver was at Bucknell University)

A residential liberal arts education is, by definition, an all-encompassing course of study, inside and outside the classroom. But, in the experience of our students, what “big questions” give such an education focus and meaning? This session will focus on the conceptual and practical definitions of liberal arts education as “secular” and how bringing the multiple, complex and often unspoken understandings of secularity to consciousness and public discussion offers opportunities to enhance faculty, staff and student engagement with their educational work. In particular, we will ask whether problematizing secularity can be accomplished without abandoning its benefits, how and in what campus settings students most deeply engage the “big questions,” and how religious and spiritual arguments, aesthetics and ethics might (or might not) be integrated into our pedagogy, curricula and student development models.

Paper Abstract  
Ian Oliver, Yale University

Would students be more deeply engaged in their liberal arts education if the boundaries of the secular at their institutions were more porous and broad? Our qualitative research points to two co-existing student and faculty beliefs on our campuses: 1. that secularity is a critical foundation for the objectivity and openness of an academic community; and 2. that, for many, deeper discussion of spiritual and religious topics would motivate students to better integrate their learning and their identity. At first, this may seem to be a conflict, but is it? Our two-year experience with faculty and administrative study of these topics points to a more complex picture of the student experience than the extreme stories of “faith-killer” professors or uncontrollable proselytizing by students, which seem to be rare (if not non-existent) situations at our institutions. Rather, the experiences focused on a broad range of settings and encounters: from office-hour discussions to out-of-the classroom service learning to the exchange between professor and student over essays to faculty speakers at a convocation on the Virginia Tech shootings. Review of the research on undergraduate religious engagements shows that scholars still lack a common language to discuss these topics and that researchers often find in this realm whatever they presumed they would find. While the literature on “student engagement” prescribes institutional initiatives to create new engagement, what we have found is that, for a substantial group of students, engagement does not need to be created, but simply seized, with great care that the basic secular self-definition of our institutions be respected. But, we have also regularly been reminded that, developmentally, our traditionally-aged undergraduates will not resolve these questions in college; what we can do is give them intellectual equipment with which to do so five or ten years out of college. What is required is a new definition of secularity that invites students to respond to classroom (and out of the classroom) questions and experiences from within their complex identities (which randomly mix culture, religion, spirituality, politics and many other “identities”). But this new definition would challenge them to bridge the seemingly absolute boundary between subjective religious/spiritual truth claims and objective disciplinary study, to dig deeper into their traditions for sources, methods and arguments that support their claims and ways to “translate” their experiences and attitudes in ways others can understand. There is no one “model” of pedagogy or curricular structure that will create space for these encounters of student identity and academic study, but there are exemplary individual stories of how faculty and administrators have bridged this delicate divide in ways that substantially engaged individual students or classes.

Chapter/Session Organizing Group:

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### Chapter 3

#### “The Pedagogy of Big Questions in Secular Education”

Conference Session Abstract:

Kenneth Livingston (Session/Chapter Convener, Vassar College)

Finding ways to bring questions of meaning and purpose to the foreground in the classroom presents several challenges for faculty teaching in non-religious institutions. On the one hand, the secular tradition seeks to find a common ground for conversation that does not privilege any particular religious tradition. On the other hand, that same tradition may inhibit open discussion if it puts the religious perspectives of students and faculty out of bounds. The problem is further exacerbated in some academic disciplines by a shift to a post-modern secularism that calls into question the very idea that there might be definitive answers to questions about the meaning and purpose of life. How do we turn these challenges into opportunities in the classroom? What are the limits on those possibilities that stem from the youth and inexperience of many of our students? Are there skills or techniques we might use to help students discover good answers to Big Questions without seeming to impose our own answers upon them? Do such conversations belong in the classroom at all? Do they belong in some classrooms but not in others?

This session will begin with a brief framing of the issues to be discussed and will then break out into smaller groups for more intensive discussion of the experiences of the participants in the session, followed by a reconvening of the whole, where various answers to the questions posed above will be shared.

#### Paper Abstracts

Kenneth Livingston, “Psychology of Belief” (Vassar College)

Paul Macdonald, “Studying Christian Theology in the Secular Classroom” (Bucknell University)

Rachel Kitzinger, “Questioning the ‘Nature of Things’” (Professor, Department of Classics, and Dean of Planning and Academic Affairs, Vassar College)

One of the ironies of the move from a modern to a post-modern secular framework in the academy is that conversations about questions with deep importance to students have become far more difficult. The examination of the foundations of one’s moral and ethical ideas, for example, is too often replaced by a silent conspiracy between faculty and students to avoid such questions lest someone feel challenged or dismissed. The secular ideal of an environment in which freedom of thought and expression forms the backbone of shared academic endeavors has been sacrificed to the lesser ideal of avoiding the giving of offense. In service to this secondary goal, we too often fail to engage students in an examination of their own most deeply held beliefs, rendering education a much more superficial experience than it might otherwise have been. We present here three models of how to avoid this trap by directly confronting ideas and arguments too often taken off the table in contemporary education.

In the first of these models Rachel Kitzinger describes a technique for introducing students in the Classics to hard moral questions about the meaning and purpose of life by way of Lucretius’ *De Rerum Natura* (*The Way Things Are*). Since the Greeks and the Romans struggled to understand the place of human beings in the larger universe within the framework of a polytheistic religious system whose practices and beliefs have not survived, all students can view

the formulations that the Greeks and Romans offered from an equally estranged position. And because the religious assumptions of this polytheistic system made the questions about what it is to be and act as a human being particularly intense and difficult to answer, ancient Greek and Roman literature stimulates students to think about the nature of human suffering, or the moral character of human action, or the relationship of the human to the divine, or the finitude of human life, to give just a few examples, without any ready-made answers. The experience of teaching this material not only illustrates the power of confronting such issues directly, it also offers a specific set of challenges to the instructor of such a class, both of which are discussed.

In the second model Paul Macdonald describes an approach to the teaching of Christian theology that combines the objective perspective of the academic with an invitation to enter into the mind-set of the Christian thinker. Theology is defined on a basic level as the study of particular intellectual practices, or particular forms of reasoning, indigenous to or naturalized in Christianity. In teaching Christian theology, then, students are introduced to cultural forms of reasoning other than their own (in the same vein as an anthropologist, and assuming that the students are not already Christian). Students are also encouraged to think critically for themselves, to practice, at least in a rudimentary way, theological forms of reasoning whether they possess personal theological commitments or not. Second, building on a classical understanding of theology as "faith seeking understanding," students are confronted with the idea that personal "faith" commitments, or personal beliefs, broadly understood, both enable and enliven genuine, fruitful rational inquiry: hence they also enable and enliven the study of theology in the secular classroom. Thus, while teachers and students bear a special responsibility to voice their commitments respectfully and carefully in the secular classroom, they nevertheless should allow those commitments to inform and enrich the rational processes by which they instruct and learn.

In the third and final model Ken Livingston describes a course in which students are directly challenged to ask why people come to hold the beliefs they do about religious matters, taking themselves as well as the objectified other as the focus of this inquiry. Because everyone in the course, including the instructor, is on the record about what those core beliefs are, the enterprise is simultaneously a traditionally analytic academic experience and a personal confrontation with the fact that others believe differently. This makes it possible to raise questions about (1) the kind of framework or frameworks that make it possible for people to live and work together successfully given their differences in fundamental beliefs, and about (2) whether there are limits beyond which such differences become destructive rather than productive.

Taken together these essays suggest that at least some core secular ideas may be required to allow the close, detailed, and personal exploration of core questions about the meaning and purpose of one's life. At the same time it is clear that not all secular frameworks are equally effective for this purpose. It is equally clear that we need to be as careful to appreciate the varieties of secular experience as we are to recognize the varieties of religious experience if we are to establish an environment in which the student concerned with Big Questions can thrive.

—abstract prepared by Ken Livingston

**Chapter 4**  
“The Politics of the Secular and the Religious”

Conference Session Abstract  
Jonathon Kahn (Vassar College)

This session begins with an assumption: the current interest in the question of secularism reflects particular sets of contemporary political interests and conditions. The hopes of this session are to uncover those interests and conditions. What is it about this particular cultural and political moment that leads to questions about secularism and higher education? In other words, why secularism and why now? In what ways is higher education, in questioning the nature of secularism, engaging in larger national cultural wars on the same topic? How have conversations about secularism in liberal arts settings changed over time? In particular, we want to point out that critics of the notion of the secular come from all corners, from critics of vastly different political and religious commitments. In raising questions of secularism and the liberal arts, are college campuses fully aware of the varieties of agendas they engage? For example, to what degree do critics of the secular for pluralistic purposes acknowledge the possibility that they're doing the bidding of critics of the secular whose purposes are explicitly to spread foundational religious truths? Is there a way in which critical attempts to rethink secularism complicate the pat categories of the left and the right in American political discourse?

Paper Abstract: “Jeffrey Stout’s Secular and the Liberal Arts”  
Jonathon Kahn

The four campuses participating in the Teagle Study Group understand themselves as secular institutions and their mission statements present a distinct understanding of “secularity”: one that understands “reason” as a neutral tool that allows for appreciation without judgment. In contrast, the notion of secularity that emerges from the Teagle project *rejects* the idea of a common notion of reason, *rejects* the idea that religion is a discourse that should be subject to special rules restricting it, and *encourages* the expression of views *guided or governed by* religious commitments. This revalued concept of secularity finds lucid expression in the work of Jeffrey Stout whose account of secularization does not disarm citizens of their distinctive views but allows citizens to express them. This paper develops Stout’s notion of secularity to envision a model of liberal arts education that opens up the classroom to freer expression of religious commitments while not shying away from evaluating and judging them. This is a model that encourages confrontation and conflict. The challenges are in how to do this respectfully and civilly. From Stout we learn of the importance of taking and learning seriously the language of those with whom we disagree. This sort of commitment is not one that liberal arts education devotes itself to enough. Yet, in order for these campuses to become secular in the way the Teagle group understands secularity, ways need to be developed to speak the interlocutors’ philosophical, religious, and logical discourses—then let the arguments ensue.

Paper Abstract: "On Secularism and the Sheikh"  
Khalidoun Sammon (Associate Professor, Department of Sociology, Macalester College)

Khalidoun Sammon's essay describes and analyzes an encounter he had with a religious sheikh while performing the Hajj with his mother in Mecca. After experiencing a number of uncomfortable gender related scenarios with this Hajji guide, Sammon reflects on how a racialized “secular West” versus a “religious East” global discourse produced harmful effects on the imagination of the Muslim Other, what Sammon describes as an injured civilizational identity. The intellectual elites of Europe and the United States over the past two centuries constructed a historical narrative that placed themselves on top of the world and all Others “below” them, with secularism representing “advanced” civilizations and those more primitive and less civilized marked as being saturated by a religious ethos. But as this secularist hegemony seems to be entering a legitimacy crisis around the world, Sammon wants also to heed a word of caution to both sides of the debate on whether or not to permit “religion” and faith the luxury of entering our Temples of knowledge, showing that indeed the important issue is the role of colonial and postcolonial encounters and how that particular global experience informs how religion comes into the public domain in the United States and elsewhere. In a context in which the so-called West has recently been redefined as a “Judeo-Christian” civilization, the “Other”, particularly the Muslim, will continue to remain on the opposite side of the ontological divide even while many of us may claim that these Other religions can have their place in our improved and more tolerant colleges and universities. Thus it is more imperative we evaluate critically how we think and construct our binary informed discourses than whether or not to allow religion in, for by leaving the ontology unchanged we in fact will fall prey to new, although less secular, racialized institutions, with certain religions (Christianity and Judaism) defined as “our” “Western” civilization and Others (Islam, Confucianism...) as “Eastern” that need to be understood and tolerated.

Chapter/Session Organizing Group:  
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Serena Fujita (Bucknell University)  
Kenneth Livingston (Vassar College)  
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As Project Coordinator, Samuel Speers (Vassar College) worked with each Session Organizing Group and served as general editor of the Working Papers. J. Gary Brinn (Tanenbaum Inter-Religious Fellow, Office of Religious & Spiritual Life, Vassar College) provided editorial support for the Working Papers.

## Appendix V- Varieties of Secular Experience Conference Schedule

Day 1 - Thursday November 13	
8:00-9:00	<b>Registration and Conference Information</b> Room 237
9:00–9:30	<b>Welcome and Opening Remarks</b> Sam Speers, Vassar College
9:30-11:00	<b>Session I</b> “Varieties of Secular Experience:” a Student Roundtable 8 student panelists from four different campuses discuss how “big questions” of meaning and purpose are engaged on their campus Moderators: Randolph Cornelius, Vassar College and Richard Spalding, Williams College
12:00-1:00	<b>Lunch</b> Multi-Purpose Room
1:30-3:00	<b>Session II</b> “Politics of the Secular and the Religious” Uncovering the political interests and conditions of current discussions of secularity on campus Panelists: Jonathon Kahn, Vassar College; Mary-Jane Rubenstein, Wesleyan University; Amitava Kumar, Vassar College Moderator: Clay Steinman, Macalester College Respondents: Douglas Jacobsen and Rhonda Jacobsen, Messiah College and eds., The American University in a Post secular Age (Oxford, 2008)
3:30-5:30	<b>Session III</b> “Pedagogy of ‘Big Questions’ in Secular Education” Case study presentations on the capacities and limits of the “secular” classroom, including small group discussions Case study presenters: Paul Macdonald, Bucknell University; Ken Livingston, Vassar College; Rachel Kitzinger, Vassar College Moderator (following break-out group discussions): W. Robert Connor, President, Teagle Foundation
7:30-9:00	<b>Evening Address</b> “Secular, Not Secularist” Lecture by Jeffrey Stout, Professor of Religion, Princeton University, followed by audience discussion
9:00-10:00	<b>Reception</b>

Day 2 - Friday November 14	
9:00-10:30	<b>Session IV</b> “Secularity, Meaning and the Liberal Arts” Would focusing on and re-defining the secular nature of liberal arts education improve student engagement and learning? What are the dangers? What are the possible rewards? Lecture by Rebecca Chopp, President and Professor of Philosophy and Religion at Colgate University Respondents: Ian Oliver, Yale University; Joseph Murray, Bucknell University
11:00-12:30	<b>Closing Session</b> “Transforming ‘Secular’ Campus Life” What have we learned about the varieties of secular experience on our campuses? What changes in educational practices are suggested by our discussions? Moderator: Stephanie Paulsell, Associate Dean for Faculty and Curricular Affairs and Houghton Professor of the Practice of Ministry, Harvard Divinity School, will offer brief remarks; she will moderate discussion, along with Working Group members.

## **Appendix VI – Acknowledgements**

As this White Paper makes clear, this initiative draws on the insights and energy of many people on the four participating campuses. I cannot adequately thank the whole Working Group for their dedication to this project, in ways that have made our collaborations immensely enjoyable and productive. The entire Working Group read drafts of this White Paper, providing invaluable critical feedback, suggested changes, and editing recommendations. I thank especially Clay Steinman, Ian Oliver, Richard Spalding, Ken Livingston, and Paul Macdonald for their substantive and thoughtful responses; their suggestions have considerably strengthened the paper. I also want to thank two colleagues at Vassar College who provided a helpful outsider’s perspective on this paper: Amanda Thornton, Director of Grants Administration, and J. Gary Brinn, Tanenbaum Inter-Religious Fellow in the Office of Religious and Spiritual Life.

I know I join all of my colleagues in this project in thanking W. Robert Connor and Donna Heiland, and their remarkable colleagues at the Teagle Foundation. They have been an endless source of energizing support for our efforts throughout the grant period: introducing us to innovative leaders in the emerging conversations about secularity, trusting us to develop our own approach to Teagle’s creative initiatives in knowledge-based philanthropy, and always providing material and intellectual hospitality for our work.

Samuel Speers  
Project Coordinator  
“Secularity and the Liberal Arts” Working Group





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## **Chapter 1 – Varieties of Secular Experience: Pedagogy, Politics, and Meaning in the Liberal Arts**

This chapter summarizes and analyzes the qualitative research each campus did with students, faculty, and student life administrators; our research examines whether and how secular assumptions frame the “Big Questions” of meaning and purpose students engage in the classroom and beyond. In order to deemphasize the particularities of each campus, the names of the four institutions have been disguised in the presentation that follows. We use pseudonyms to draw readers’ attention more to the observations we are making about the place of “Big Questions” in our secular settings than to readers’ impressions of each of our campuses. Following the presentation of our qualitative findings, members of our Working Group offer cross-campus analyses of our research. As the term qualitative research indicates, our study is not representative of our campus populations as a whole; our findings are suggestive, and provide an instrument for opening up conversation. Across all four campuses a total of 63 students, 29 faculty, and 27 administrators participated in our research. Appendix A of these Working Group Papers provides background information about the methodologies for our research, and Appendix B describes the current and childhood religious identifications of the research participants.

### ***Part I: Summary of Qualitative Research***

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Working Group Conveners for Chapter 1: Richard E. Spalding and Randolph Cornelius

### **A. New England College**

Seven themes emerging from these conversations have been identified at this college:

- 1. The classroom is one available resource for students’ explorations of “big questions” – but students and faculty agree that it is not the primary resource.**

Though specific courses, scattered throughout the curriculum, tend to open up more synapses between academic themes and personal choices, few respondents find it consistently easy – or as easy as they might have expected it would be or should be – to make connections between classroom work and personal choices. One Philosophy major expressed frustration: “The reasons I was driven

to take these classes was not merely to have an intellectual grasping of the tradition and the trajectory of a set of ideas, but rather to struggle with the questions that they struggled with.”

In some classrooms, students who inquire about connections between the course material and religious perspectives (including their own) feel intellectually stigmatized or dismissed. Others find their classroom experiences to be helpful as points of embarkation for subsequent personal reflection or more candid conversation with peers. Most faculty cited office hours and other informal contacts as more conducive to helping students make these connections.

**2. The convictions, attitudes and methods of professors play a significant role in students’ perceptions of the relevance of academic study to their “big questions.”**

Faculty give considerable attention to the delicate balance between personal investment and personal disclosure *vis a vis* the material they teach. Most student respondents grasp the complexity of this challenge, and the power dynamic at work within. Several preferred the candor of disclosure, saying they felt capable of defending themselves against undue influence. Others prefer minimal professorial disclosure, out of concern that the pressure of grades or the allure of charisma may distort their growth as independent critical thinkers.

For their part, faculty describes a very conscientious process of setting boundaries that some students may experience as obstacles. “There is the danger of my voice and the text’s voice getting blurred; so I privilege the text,” said one professor in the Humanities.

**3. Among students, the preferred arena for exploration of “big questions” is conversations with peers that take place outside, but are often shaped by, the classroom.**

Administrators, like students, see peer relationships outside the academic sphere as more conducive by far to students’ work on important issues of meaning, purpose and values. Students clearly prefer the intimacy and informality of social conversation; some feel too vulnerable in the classroom to be as “real” in that setting as The Big Questions require. Some students credit religious communities and the friendships that grow out of them for creating a context that can raise the trust level, lower the threshold of vulnerability, and level the playing field with common values.

**4. These explorations tend to encounter limitations or obstacles in issues of trust, vulnerability, and social pressure.**

A number of factors appear to limit student engagement with The Big Questions. Socially: students and administrators cite the dense concentration of commitments and activities in students’ lives as a major contributor to the lack of sufficient time for reflection. Developmentally: the multi-layered transition from high school to college can entail dramatic changes in the most compelling questions and in the social environment in which those questions are pursued. The sometimes-charged topics, or the personal stakes that can attach to them, can give rise to a tendency to self-censor so as to avoid conflict or embarrassment, or to defuse the fear of being labeled or viewed as an extremist. Pedagogically: the discipline of holding topics at arm’s length for the sake of academic objectivity has costs as well as benefits – of which both students and faculty are aware. Some students describe feeling detached, not only from the subjects of their study, but also from opportunities to integrate those subjects into their continuing reflection.

For a few students and faculty, these limitations are a positive rather than a negative influence – in that they curtail investments of time in questions that cannot be answered, or in topics that dilute classroom focus.

**5. On this campus, religion is generally viewed as an important dimension of identity for a limited number of students – and as a facet of the College’s institutional profile – but one that is seldom discussed.**

Religion at this college can be a delicate subject. Students say that they worry about giving offense, provoking judgment, or shutting down conversation among their peers when it comes up. Students, faculty and administrators noted the perception that “[in] the culture on campus, and maybe in the larger world, being religious and being spiritual is just not compatible with being smart and educated.”

Students and administrators are in general agreement that, on this campus, people are assumed to be non-religious unless they identify themselves otherwise. One administrator observed that the subject of religious identity is as consistently avoided as the subject of socio-economic class.

Some faculty, mindful of the volatility of assumptions in the classroom, are less inclined to proceed from the point of departure of assuming that students are not religious. Some students believe that the absence of such assumptions allows them to define themselves and their beliefs as individuals; but others describe it as a kind of avoidance: “I think it’s easier to assume that people don’t have beliefs than to assume that they do. It’s both a way of being more sensitive and being lazy.”

As for their personal religious beliefs, most students feel that the spectrum of religious commitments they encounter on this campus expands their understanding of their own and other religious perspectives in a positive way. Some notice a tendency to grow away from inherited belief systems as the experience of college pushes the envelope, or simply usurps the time and energy that nourish faith.

**6. This college is perceived by students, faculty and administrators alike as a secular institution; many see secularity as an essential enabler of the desired educational environment.**

Definitions of the term ‘secular’ vary considerably – from “having no visible traces of religion” to “having no single affiliation” to “being open to many different religious perspectives in close proximity.” However defined, many see the institutional commitment to secularity as necessary or inevitable: they understand it to be a corollary of a learning environment that is intellectually open.

For some, secularity is a guarantor of ideological balance. For others it serves as a hedge separating the religious precepts of some students from the general campus culture (particularly *vis a vis* alcohol and sexuality). There is little evidence that students experience secularity as a form of hostility to religious observance. Clearly many students believe that the secularity of the college places the full responsibility for working on big questions in their hands; few expect overt help with them from their coursework, though some are conscious of its influence as they pursue their own questions – particularly as it forces them out of their “comfort zones” to encounter unfamiliar perspectives. One student wondered whether the college has the intellectual maturity for any commitment other than secularity: “I don’t think that right now you could phrase [secularity] as a

good or a bad thing. Right now it’s a necessary thing. Our society and a culture, both on our campus and on a more global scale, [aren’t] equipped with the skills to have a pluralistic, multi-faith dialogue. Until we have that, I don’t think any campus or any institution can be anything but secular.”

**7. For students, questions of vocation, purpose and identity are most pressing. Faculty and staff concur, noting the relative absence of issues of social justice or communally held values from students’ habitual reflections.**

In many different guises, and in both academic and social settings, questions of vocation clearly dominate the student agenda. Usually they are framed in personal, individual terms – “What should I do?” In only a few instances did the students’ formulations of big questions come with hints of personal anguish – though there is a general perception that such questions are sometimes linked to a sense of crisis about the purpose of being at college. One student noted that the question “Why am I here?” is prevalent among peers who are active in social justice work. Several faculty members understood their role to include pressing the same question. An administrator described the difficulty some students face in raising big questions: “This is not a place where you can raise your hand and say ‘I don’t know what’s going on.’ Students on all levels feel like they have to know all the answers, and if they don’t, somehow they don’t belong here.”

## **B. Mid-Western College**

Five themes were identified in the discussions held at this college:

**1. Addressing questions of purpose is an integral part of student life at this college**

Nearly all participants distinguished between secular Big Questions (purpose; non-religious values) and non-secular Big Questions (meaning of life in terms of a higher being or an afterlife; other religious concepts). Secular Big Questions come up frequently in classes - though certain courses are more likely to raise the questions than others. Faculty suggested that students tend to try to relate coursework to Big Questions by pulling course topics “in those directions that relate to their lives, to raise questions, ethical questions.”

Both student and faculty participants agreed that these issues are often touched on in conversations between them. Several students characterized this level of sharing with professors as a positive experience – though there is disagreement about whether it is helpful for faculty to disclose their own personal connections to the material. Some find that such interpersonal connections can make a learning experience particularly meaningful or memorable; for others, disclosure impedes learning by complicating relationships.

Beyond the classroom, students mentioned a number of programs offered by student affairs departments that provide opportunities to explore questions of purpose. These resources were also more likely than academic experiences to offer students the chance to explore organized religion and religious questions. A faculty member cited studying abroad as another genre of experience that is likely to raise profound questions for students.

**2. The college’s secular nature allows a pluralism of thought that enhances the student experience.**

The observation that being secular allows this institution to welcome individuals who bring with them a wide diversity of ideas was a recurring theme in all focus groups. One student described secularity as “the absence of something defined, which allows the people within it to define themselves in different ways.” There was general agreement among faculty and administrators that “our job is to create the biggest possible tent, and allow for as many competing visions of ethics and understanding.” Students most frequently explore and engage Big Questions outside the classroom in discussions with peers, which often broaden their own views.

The same plurality of beliefs can also have the effect of making the discussion of certain subjects more difficult. Students repeatedly mentioned that being open about religious identity “quickly opens doors to some types of conversation and closes door to others.” This may also contribute to the exclusion of religious topics from the classroom. A Catholic student said, “In a classroom setting I would never try to insert my beliefs openly just because I know we’re sort of a liberal college and you have people from different faith backgrounds. I personally wouldn’t want to offend anybody; so I keep my beliefs to myself.”

**3. Academics and organized religion do not mix well at this college.**

Participants suggested that the disciplinary methodologies employed at this college can hinder student engagement with Big Questions of a religious nature. It was widely agreed that the classroom is a realm where beliefs are examined at arm’s length and where reason and critical analysis are valued above all else. According to some, the student is expected to hold primary allegiance to disciplinary distance over religious belief. As one student claimed, it is assumed that “the average Joe is a member of the secular intelligentsia. He or she might have religious affiliations, but their membership belongs exclusively to the secular intelligentsia.” Students distance themselves from their values and beliefs and leave their personal views outside the classroom. One student observed that “the classroom space is not a religious space; I actually feel like there’s more anti-religious and assumingly atheist comments in the classroom than anywhere else in my life.”

Training in critical analysis, seen as the essence of an education at this college; some see religious views, rooted in subjectivity, as obstructing that goal. “You learn so well how to question everything at Mac that at some point in time it gets overwhelming.” One faculty member stated: I can’t recall a single conversation in the eleven years that I’ve been here about the meaning of life; or any even approaching the meaning of life.”

**4. There are widespread perceptions of a negative attitude about organized religion and religious individuals.**

Another common theme among students, faculty, and administrative staff was the presumption that students at this college are actively averse (as opposed to neutral) to organized religion. All noted anti-religious sentiment in the student body; several suggested that individuals at the college feel not only uncomfortable but also incapable of discussing organized religion in personal terms.

Students on this college make a strong distinction between spirituality and religion -- the former being acceptable, the latter suspect. Organized religion holds strong negative connotations for

students, who see in it a tendency to be suppressive. Student disdain for organized religion is such that many expect religious affiliations and commitments to be openly challenged; several used the word “hostility” to describe the atmosphere.

**5. There is an implicit code of ethics that has both positive and negative ramifications for individuals.**

It is widely acknowledged that there is an implicit code of ethics that guides interactions on this campus. The college community shares a common body of values (“social justice”, “multiculturalism”), goals (“saving the world”), and politics (“liberal”), and there is perceived pressure to act according to those values that extends beyond the undergraduate years to the choice of vocation.

Students feel they may be challenged about their political views as well as their religious views. On the other hand, for many members of the college community this collective code of values creates a sense of belonging: “‘Secular’ doesn’t do justice to the deep, deep sense of passion and commitment these students have to the common good and for humanity.”

## **C. Mid-Atlantic University**

Six themes emerged from the discussions at this university.

**1. Big questions permeate the undergraduate experience.**

Students, faculty, and staff alike spoke of multiple contexts in which students explore big questions. It appears that occasions for examination of big questions arise in all facets of students’ lives and involve all segments of the university community.

While class discussions were cited as only one context in which exploration of big questions occurs, it is clearly a very important context. To varying degrees, all disciplinary divisions were represented in examples of students’ classroom experiences with big questions. Nontraditional educational programs and activities were also seen as instrumental in students’ exploration of big questions. Programs that combine service activities with intercultural immersion were seen as a particularly powerful means by which students’ engagement with big questions is stimulated. International and service activities, in general, were also seen as having a similar effect.

Structured activities of a non-academic nature can also provide opportunities for examination of big questions. Student employment, athletics, religious life programs, counseling and advisory relationships, and student activities and organizations were all cited as contexts in which exploration of big questions can occur. Residential colleges were seen as offering opportunities for discussion of big questions to carry over from academic to non-academic settings. Finally, informal conversations provide opportunities for students to explore big questions. Although students see value in their conversations with faculty and staff, they overwhelmingly prefer to discuss big questions with their peers. Differences in age, power, and status appear to play a role in this pattern of preference. Students feel more comfortable in conversing with faculty and staff in situations where differences in status are minimized. Members of the administrative staff expressed some frustration with the limited opportunities for such interaction with students that their normal work activities afford them.



**2. Big questions are closely tied to identity development.**

The Big Questions that preoccupy students’ thoughts appear to be largely personal in nature. Students are curious about what the future holds for them, and they recognize the weight of the decisions that they are now making, with regard to their personal futures. Career decision-making, in general, is a major focus of students’ attention. The value judgments that underlie their decisions raise common patterns of dilemma. Students struggle with competing interests in material success versus meaning and purpose. Social pressure adds further strain to this dilemma.

Religion, spirituality, and values were also cited as areas of interest or concern. In particular, some students struggle to reconcile their religious perspectives with their emerging scientific perspectives. Questions about the purpose of humanity, the nature of reality, and the “problem of evil” were also raised as examples of big questions that were of concern to students. Students also expressed an interest in ethics, sexuality, and relationships.

While most of The Big Questions that students raised were of a personal nature, an array of social and political issues also emerged, including humanity’s relationship with the environment, the proper role of technology in contemporary life, international relations, cultural differences, poverty, and stem cell research.

**3. Life on campus is not fully conducive to deep reflection on big questions.**

Although students are confronted with big questions repeatedly and in multiple contexts, their engagement with these questions is sometimes superficial. Even conversations with peers on such matters, though frequent, tend to be brief. Barriers to deeper contemplation appear to be in part a product of both student characteristics and the culture of the campus.

Although some students recognize the value of big questions and the centrality of these questions to liberal education, they generally come to college with multiple educational goals, not all of which lend primacy to big questions. Students expressed an interest in gaining both content expertise and skills of argumentation. Their goals for specific courses sometimes vary by discipline. Within applied academic majors, students are often concerned primarily with the development of practical skills that will be of use to them in their future careers. Moreover, some students have no interest in the subject matter of certain courses, and are motivated solely by concern for their performance on tests. Faculty members noted that students often focus on the development of technical competency, rather than on personal insight. Members of the administrative staff observed that students sometimes hold an assumption that they will have the answers to all of life’s questions at the end of their four years of college, rather than viewing the process of inquiry as one that continues throughout life.

Beyond the limitations of their goals, students are sometimes inhibited by their emotions in their examination of big questions. Some big questions arouse feelings of anxiety or vulnerability in students. Others leave them feeling depressed or frustrated by a sense of powerlessness. In the classroom, students sometimes lack confidence in their command of the subject matter, and are consequently reluctant to share their opinions. Additionally, the number and complexity of big questions that demand students’ attention can leave them feeling overwhelmed. Social pressures place further constraints on students’ interpersonal dialogue concerning matters of meaning, value,

and purpose. Big questions often raise sensitive issues that are not generally considered to be topics of polite conversation at the societal level, and the campus culture is not immune to the influence of these broader social norms. Concern for “political correctness” was cited as one factor that diminishes candor in the discussion of controversial topics. Faculty and staff members also characterized the student culture as one in which individuals often feel that they are being judged.

Perhaps greater than the barriers to open discussion of big questions on campus are the obstacles to solitary reflection on such matters. On a very basic level, the limited availability of quiet spaces on campus was noted by participants. It was observed, as well, that the demands on students’ time leave little opportunity for them to engage deeply with philosophical questions. Students spoke of a culture of “busyness” that manifests itself not only in students’ tendency to over-commit their time, but also in a commonly held belief that they should be active at all times. This norm appears to be in part a product of both the competitive nature of the student body and the emphasis that the administration places on involvement in campus activities.

#### **4. Barriers to exploration of big questions are compounded in matters of religion and spirituality.**

While the aforementioned barriers to exploration of big questions apply generally, in matters of religion and spirituality, other unique concerns apply as well. In most instances, these issues exist at a societal level, and do not appear to stem directly from the secular nature of the institution.

Although distinctions between religion and spirituality appear to be common, variation exists in how the two terms are defined. A common definition of religious identity also appears to be elusive. Participants noted that religion is not always outwardly visible, that identification with a religion does not necessarily involve church attendance, that one need not identify directly with a church to be influenced by it, and that even students who question their faith may identify at some level with certain religions. Just as definitions of religion and spirituality vary widely, so too do attitudes toward such matters. Questions of religion are not universally seen by students as compelling, though such indifference is sometimes seen as a characteristic of youth.

Some students are especially hesitant to discuss religion in the classroom, believing that it simply should not be brought up in that context. Others believe that the appropriateness of the discussion is dependent upon its relevance to the topic of the course. Religion is not widely seen by students as a legitimate basis for opinions on academic matters, and students do not typically make appeals to religion in the course of debate. Additionally, many faculty members are perceived by students to be uncomfortable with discussion of religion in the classroom.

Ironically, members of the faculty group were generally not uncomfortable with discussion of religion in the classroom, provided that it is placed in the context of the subject matter of the course. It was noted that academic discourse provides an opportunity for students to learn about other people’s religions and to examine their own beliefs in a more analytical and detached fashion than would typically occur in daily life. It was emphasized, however, that the focus of the discussion should not be on the instructor’s religious beliefs.

Outside the classroom, it seems that some students find the campus to be a difficult place to be religious. Although religious student organizations can provide support for students, and are often

valued for both social and spiritual reasons, options for students whose religious or spiritual traditions are outside the mainstream of campus life have fewer sources of support.

**5. Different Contexts, Different Secularities: Secularity is affected by the culture of the campus.**

Discussions with faculty, staff, and students revealed that secularity is contextual. Actual institutional practices in managing religious diversity, and the meaning attached to those practices, are often more important than official policies are. Initial efforts to characterize the university in dichotomous terms produced no consensus. While some participants affirmed the secularity of the institution, others rejected it. Further discussion yielded more nuanced characterizations of the university, which took into account both the ways in which the institution is formally constituted and the realities of daily life on campus.

Although the university is recognized as secular in the sense that it does not identify with a particular religion, and is open to people of all faiths as students and faculty, active and visible faith communities on campus are seen as a part of its institutional identity. The religiosity of many students alone seems to have had the effect of diminishing the secularity of the institution in the eyes of the university community.

The variation in participants’ characterization of the institution as secular was mirrored in their responses to the proposition that members of the university community are assumed to be non-religious until proven otherwise. Some participants felt that individuals are assumed to be religious, or even that they are assumed to be Christian, until proven otherwise. Such assumptions appear to be based in part on the likelihood that the religiosity of the national culture would be reflected on campus and in part on visible manifestations of religiosity within the university community. Assumptions of non-religiosity appear to be based less on calculations of probability than on a recognition of the more difficult or problematic nature of the alternative assumption.

A further distinction that is noteworthy pertains to assumptions made about students versus faculty. While students are widely assumed to be religious, or even specifically Christian, faculty are often assumed to be non-religious, or even anti-religious, until proven otherwise.

One final observation pertaining to religious life on campus is that it tends to be decentralized. Students who are active in religious life on campus have shown little interest in interfaith dialogue.

**6. Secularity promotes liberal education.**

Secularity was fully embraced by members of the faculty, staff, and student body who participated in this study. The participants saw secularity as both inclusive and egalitarian. They also saw it as supportive of both the spiritual and the intellectual development of students.

Secularity was seen as compatible with the goals of liberal education, insofar as it promotes critical thinking about religion and allows open discussion and exploration of multiple perspectives. One faculty member raised concern that students should not be dismissive of religion, but that they should subject it to the same critical examination that they would apply to any other realm of thought. There appeared to be general agreement that secularity helps to create an environment in which such analysis can occur. The tensions between these generally positive responses to campus

secularity and the more ambivalent responses about how to make classroom discussion of religion instructive (see #4 above) bring out underlying questions about the adequacy of secular ideals on campus—and the need to give them further scrutiny.

## D. Northeast College

Five themes regarding the nature of students’ encounters with “The Big Questions” and their experience of secularity were identified on this campus:

### 1. **The college and campus environment provide *Scattered Resources and Uneven Access* for student encounters with the Big Questions.**

It was clear from the student discussions that the students in the sample can and do encounter places on campus in which to raise, discuss, and challenge questions of meaning, purpose, and value. While the classroom was mentioned as one of the places where this happens, the students in the sample seemed to feel that it was not the most inviting or comfortable milieu in which to discuss The Big Questions—although students, faculty, and administrators agreed it was an appropriate place to do so. Philosophy classes came up the most frequently as consistently playing host to discussions of The Big Questions. Students noted that questions about the meaning of life, the existence of God, and so on, were often directly confronted in philosophy courses. Cognitive Science and Psychology courses were also mentioned, but to a lesser extent. In these courses, consideration of The Big Questions was more indirect and the result of students’ thinking on their own about the implications of material covered in class. Few students mentioned Religion classes in this sample, and the few who did had mixed feelings about how The Big Questions were addressed in such classes. A common complaint involved the disappointment at discovering that a course on a particular religious tradition would never engage the tradition as a way of addressing The Big Questions in life but rather only as an historical or sociological phenomenon.

In general, it appeared as if the kind of classes in which big questions were discussed depended more on the professor than the discipline. Students reported finding some professors to be particularly open to discussing questions of meaning, value and purpose, apparently regardless of their discipline or the course they happened to be teaching. The faculty members in the sample concurred with this observation to some extent. Noting that while it was more natural for questions of meaning and purpose to be raised in some disciplines and courses than others, they agreed that some faculty members were more comfortable talking about The Big Questions than others and were more approachable by students in this regard.

Students in the discussion groups agreed that the places in which The Big Questions were most frequently encountered on campus were outside of the classroom. Students named discussions with the various chaplains, the director of religious and spiritual life and other administrators, programs run by the religious and spiritual life office such as the Interfaith Counsel, as well as religious services and meetings for religious observations as places they would most likely talk about questions of meaning and purpose. Students also mentioned discussions with professors outside of regular office hours and meetings with their pre-major advisors as contexts in which larger questions might be raised. Several of the students, faculty members, and administrators noted that The Big

Questions were particularly likely to be made salient and discussed when, as one student put it, the campus “paused,” after a tragedy.

**2. There is considerable *Ambivalence and Ambiguity* at the college regarding The Big Questions and how they should be experienced inside and outside of the classroom by both students and faculty.**

While everyone in the sample felt fairly strongly that questions of meaning and purpose are appropriate topics for the classroom, there was considerable discomfort about exactly *how* such questions should be raised within the classroom and without. When big questions are encountered in class, both professors and students are often ambivalent about talking about them and the result is a sense of ambiguity about how to address them in the classroom. There appear to be multiple sources of this ambivalence and ambiguity.

First of all, several students spoke of quite discomfiting classroom experiences in which they felt an instructor implicitly or explicitly disparaged them because of their religious views and commitments or otherwise froze them out of classroom discussion. Students also spoke of the unease they felt when instructors made their own religious commitments explicit. Second, the faculty members themselves had complex and conflicting views about whether or not they should make their commitments and views regarding questions of meaning and value known to their students. Third, at least some of the anxiety around the issue of whether and how questions of meaning and value should be raised in the classroom clearly comes from the larger social and political climate in which the students’ and faculty members’ lives are embedded. As several students observed, identifying oneself as a Christian in a liberal, secular institution such as this college can result in one immediately being labeled a *fundamentalist/evangelical* Christian whose political and social views are on the far right. Fourth, students described a kind of reciprocal anxiety about being put in any position in which they might inadvertently stereotype another student because of his or her views or commitments. Finally, related to this, students very often described their peers’ commitments regarding questions of meaning and value as being almost impenetrably personal (see below). One result of this is the belief that questions of meaning and purpose are difficult, if not impossible, to discuss.

**3. Students, faculty, and administrators are nevertheless *Comfortable with Secularity* as it is experienced at the college.**

Students, faculty, and administrators overwhelmingly agreed that the campus was secular, that they were quite comfortable with this, and would not necessarily want it to change. While the participants in the discussion groups offered a variety of definitions of “secular,” the definitions all converged on the notion that the college was secular because it welcomed and respected all religions and religious beliefs but favored none. Within this definition, however, considerable complexity and some discomfort could be discerned. Many, for example, noted that, while the college was obviously a secular institution, it had many quite salient non-secular spaces (e.g., the Chapel) and practices (e.g., hourly ringing of the Chapel bells, the Baccalaureate service). On the other hand, while the college has created space for religious experience and expression on campus, this has been outside of the classroom and for the most part outside of the residence halls.

Some of the students in the sample who had religious commitments reported that it was sometimes difficult for students with strongly held religious beliefs to feel at home at the college. Finally, while

discussing the complexity of their feelings toward the college as a secular institution and secularity in general, some of the students noted that welcoming all faiths sometimes means denying their particularity and then, in some ways, their existence. As one of the students observed, “secular is kind of where religious difference gets erased.”

**4. The Big Questions in life are *Personal and Private* and bringing them up for discussion or challenging others about them in some environments on campus is perceived as vexing and dangerous.**

Students in the sample strongly articulated the notion that The Big Questions in life, questions of meaning, value, and purpose, are about beliefs that are private and personal and so, as noted above, are very difficult to talk about in public settings (both formal and informal). This took two forms. First, the students reported that they found arguments about fundamental beliefs about questions of meaning and value to be frustrating and non-productive (in the sense of having a positive outcome) because beliefs about such things are “just opinions” and so there is no point discussing them, particularly in class. Second, the students argued that such beliefs are deeply personal and constitute aspects of a person’s identity that cannot and should not be questioned. Confronting another’s deeply personal beliefs is seen as tantamount to attacking that person’s identity. Although admitting that they may be somewhat responsible for this notion, the faculty expressed considerable chagrin at the ways in which some aspects of identity politics seem to have contributed to an atmosphere on campus in which students feel afraid to discuss and confront questions of meaning, value and faith.

**5. Although everyone in the sample inhabits *One Campus*, there are *Many Perspectives* on it, and if so, where it is appropriate to discuss The Big Questions in life, especially when they involve religion and religious values.**

It was clear that the faculty who were part of the discussions *wished* the campus to be a place in which it is easy for students to encounter The Big Questions in the classroom as well as outside of it, just the administrators in the sample described the campus as a place where all felt welcomed and valued. What the faculty and administrators wished for and what the students experienced were often apparently quite different, however. Perhaps it is not surprising that different stakeholders (students, faculty, administrators) at the college perceive the campus often quite differently with regard to questions of meaning, value, and secularity since the frames of experience and the tasks of each are so different. Administrators seem to think the most explicitly about students’ religious/spiritual experiences and needs since they are often involved in counseling students in this regard as well as providing for their religious needs. Faculty, because they are more focused on the demands of their courses and scholarly activities, are the least in touch with their students’ religious/spiritual needs and experiences, which is somewhat ironic given how they interact with students on a daily basis. Students have the widest diversity of experiences, both positive and negative, with regard to when and how questions of meaning and value are encountered on campus and, oftentimes, the clearest view of how such questions are discussed, confronted, erased, and dodged in the classroom and in other spaces on campus.

## ***Part II: Cross Campus Analysis***

### **A. What did we learn from the qualitative research that surprised us?**

*Richard Spalding*

The stated twin goals of our collaborative proposal to the Teagle Foundation were the development of “a more robust and capacious definition of secularity” and the gathering and analysis of data about “student attitudes about big questions” – including what some of The Big Questions are, and where they are and are not being addressed on our campuses.

Though many of the findings of the qualitative research phase of the project have confirmed some of the assumptions and expectations with which we embarked, there have been a few surprises.

1. We might have expected the focus of our search for a more ample contemporary definition of secularity to fall significantly on faculty, on the curriculum, or on institutional supports for students’ engagement with the most compelling “big questions” they identify. “Secular” is, after all, a modifier for the institution and its work – not necessarily for its constituents. Each campus has invested considerable energy to convening faculty discussions and reflecting on the structures that support student life, and our respective projects have given us valuable insights into how our institutions understand and live their commitments to secularity.

But much of the focus has fallen on students – particularly on the patterns, disciplines, limitations and evolution of work that they do on their questions, largely on their own. For the study sample on two of our campuses, students find that they can look to their classes for some reinforcement of their reflection; for the study sample on the other two campuses, classes apparently play a much more tangential role in fomenting work on The Big Questions. (If we assumed that the role of classes in students’ work on big questions was roughly comparable among our four schools, the data challenges that assumption.) In times past each of our institutions understood its mission to include significant responsibility for the formation of character, conscience, citizenship. In general our current students do not expect their courses or their professors to articulate or define their questions of purpose, meaning, value, destiny; in general they do not look to the institution for formation. They tell us (and their professors confirm) that they prefer to do much of this work together in small, informal groups of peers, outside the classroom. Many tell us that this work is more likely to be implicated in their planning for life after college than it is in their studies. In some instances students traced a particular compelling question to a class or a professor. But some faculty told us that it is often students, rather than they themselves, who deflect classroom discussions that stray near the perceived outer boundary of the secular. If we expected that our institutions are using the instrument of the commitment to secularity to pose big questions and to equip students to work on them, our research suggests that the connection between the institution and the questioning is more subtle and, in some cases, more tenuous than we might have supposed.

2. We might have expected that secularity would have provided our institutions with an instrument for leveling the field of the classroom, making it more possible to conduct an open discussion of meaning and values than it might have been in the sectarian climate in which they were founded. Secularity, we have continually affirmed, is an essential enabler of the pluralism that our era demands, and an important pre-condition of the diversity on which our communal conscience

insists. An important research question has been: how does secularity in fact contribute to the desired dynamic in the encounter between ideas in the classroom?

But we have found many instances on our campuses when students have experienced “the practice of secularity” to mean that expressing belief can be the equivalent of giving offense. In removing supports for any one religious perspective, it seems that some students have come to experience the removal of support for any religious perspective. On all four campuses, our research suggests that the commitment to secularity has done little to ease the great difficulty students have in bringing religious ideas to bear on their work on their big questions. What might have been intended as an open forum for inquiry becomes, in some instances, a minefield fraught with volatile possibilities. On at least three of the four campuses, the operative assumption is that students are presumed not to be religious unless and until they identify themselves otherwise;<sup>1</sup> but a student on one campus may have been speaking for many in saying that this assumption is in place, not so much because it may be accurate, but because it’s probably socially safer – because it’s less likely to be provocative.

3. We might have expected – given the nearly unanimous affirmation, on each of the four campuses, of the secular nature of the institution – that a workable contemporary definition of secularity would lay close at hand. Our important commitments to diversity, pluralism and civic engagement are closely connected to it; our research subjects endorsed it without hesitation and confirmed that, as a core value, secularity is indeed guiding the current mission of our institutions.

But we have found that a definition of secularity remains elusive enough so that it is not clear what this value is that guides our institutions. Is it primarily a way our institutions define themselves positively – does it point to things that they do or are? – or is it a negative descriptor – indicating things that they do not do or are not? Data from several campuses suggests that the freedom to interpret what it means to be a secular institution is part of the value of the commitment. One student described it as a way of being lazy – a way of avoiding the hard work of intellectually engaged coexistence; another student described it as a necessary interim community norm until we have more cultural practice with the daunting challenges of pluralism. It seems that part of the robustness and capaciousness of the secularity of our institutions lies in its divergent, rather than converging, meanings.

4. We might not have expected to find that the dynamics of power in the classroom play such an important role in the experience of secularity on the field where The Big Questions are engaged. The commitments of our institutions to this value were intended to level this field, and to make participants in the encounters there aware of the historical privilege that certain perspectives have carried among the intelligentsia of our culture, even as they divest of that privilege. Secularity might have been intended to clarify and perhaps even simplify the discourse by adjusting the dynamic of the classroom so that, as one campus put it, “differences in status are minimized.”

But we have found that secularity introduces its own power dynamics into the classroom, and in its way confers a new kind of privilege. One student spoke of the way students’ membership in the secular intelligentsia trumps other allegiances, including religious identity. One faculty member explained, “We privilege rationality.” Students are keenly aware that their professors must hold a

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<sup>1</sup> At Mid-Atlantic University, responses from the study sample and anecdotal evidence from Working Group members indicates that for students the operative presumption is that one may be assumed *religious* until identified otherwise, while for faculty one is presumed not to be religious.



delicate balance between insufficient personal investment and too much personal disclosure. In some instances faculty are as aware as students of the ways in which the pressure of grades or the lure of charisma can distort the profile of a professor who chooses self-disclosure as part of the classroom strategy. And in some instances students are as aware as faculty of the dynamics of the tenure process, whereby the practice of academic freedom by junior (untenured) faculty may be limited by the potential volatility of classroom encounters with some of the perspectives that secularity was meant to invite into the conversation as equal partners.

5. We might have expected that the nature of the time students spend in college would be such as to open many avenues for reflection on meaning, purpose, values. Few other seasons in life are as available to extended consideration of the questions, issues, challenges that matter most; and no other season in life coincides with the ripe and highly formative time from which adult identity emerges. If college is not the season of The Big Questions – then when is that season?

But we have found that, for many students, time is one of the most limited resources available to this work. Time available for reflection in young adulthood is a finite and non-renewable resource; but students, administrators and faculty alike have told us that, in the current campus culture, time is consumed voraciously. For secularity to function effectively as an enabler of engagement in The Big Questions, it may be that the transformative reaction between the commitment to secularity and the compelling importance of big questions can only take place in the presence of the catalyst of time for reflection. Yet current patterns and habits divert almost all available time in students’ lives to other purposes. As long as the volume of “the culture of busyness” (as it’s known on one campus) expands to fill the available time, engagement with The Big Questions will be limited, perhaps severely.

## **B. What did we learn that confirmed what we expected?**

*Joseph L. Murray*

Because the study was exploratory in nature, preconceived notions were kept to a minimum. As is typical in qualitative research, our study was guided by broad and open-ended questions, as opposed to narrowly constructed hypotheses. Nevertheless, some findings surprised us more than others. Several findings were so consistent with current understandings of the nature of secularity and the undergraduate experience that they actually surprised us very little.

For example, the personal nature of The Big Questions that were seen by students as most compelling was entirely consistent with current understandings of psychosocial development in college, which emphasize the significance of identity formation during this stage of students’ lives.<sup>2</sup> The college years have been characterized in the literature as a period during which students seek to clarify who they are as individuals, and what their place in the adult world will be, themes that emerged in our discussions with both students and administrative staff members. In particular, the concerns that student participants expressed, with regard to the establishment of a coherent philosophy of life and alignment of work and other life activities with this philosophy, exemplified Chickering and Reiser’s concept of integrity, which is a key element of personal identity.<sup>3</sup> Arnett

<sup>2</sup> Arnett, J. J., *Emerging adulthood: The winding road from the late teens through the twenties*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004). Chickering, A. W. & Reisser, L., *Education and identity* (2nd ed.). (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1993).

<sup>3</sup> Chickering, A. W. & Reisser, L., *Education and identity* (2nd ed.). (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1993).

also recognized career decision-making as a central element of psychosocial development during emerging adulthood, the life stage that includes the traditional age for college attendance.<sup>4</sup>

In light of the personal nature of students’ big questions, the fact that exploration of these questions was found to occur largely outside the classroom was understandable. On several campuses, participants indicated that even topics of potentially deep personal significance tended to be discussed in impersonal terms within the classroom. As one participant noted, “The Big Questions in the classroom are often treated as topics of intellectual curiosity, rather than points of human importance and engagement and drama.” While such detachment may seem incongruous with typical patterns of emotional response, it is not inconsistent with an academic culture in which intellectual objectivity tends to be prized above all else.

Faculty members, in particular, have been found to favor what Bergquist and Pawlak have termed the collegial academic culture, which emphasizes traditional scholarly discourse.<sup>5</sup> The authors contrasted this culture with five others that typically exist concurrently on the college or university campus, each dominating the perspective of a particular segment of the campus community. This pattern emerged in our own findings, not only in the tendency for big questions to be intellectualized in the classroom, but in the tendency for faculty members to place greater weight on the academic program as a context for exploration of big questions than did either students or administrative staff members.

To the extent that academic coursework was seen as a vehicle for exploration of The Big Questions, it should come as no surprise that the humanities were most often cited as disciplines in which conversations about The Big Questions were occurring. Within the traditional disciplinary taxonomies of Biglan<sup>6</sup> and Thompson, Hawkes, and Avery<sup>7</sup>, the absence of a highly structured system of inquiry was cited as a distinguishing characteristic of the humanities. More recently, Donald used the phrase, “criticism and creativity,” to capture the primary cognitive strategies employed in the humanities.<sup>8</sup> Both the general openness of the humanities and their focus on matters of value might predictably result in classroom agendas that are less structured and more accommodating of students’ own big questions than those found in disciplines with more strictly defined bodies of content and systems of inquiry. This quality of the humanities, as well as some social science disciplines, might also account for the greater openness to exploration of religion that some of the participants in our research observed. As Edwards recently noted, “in the wild free-for-all that is the humanities and the humanistic social sciences, overtly religious assumptions may not be at home but they are nevertheless not automatically disqualified as self-evidently beyond the pale.”<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Arnett, J. J., *Emerging adulthood: The winding road from the late teens through the twenties*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).

<sup>5</sup> Bergquist, W. H. & Pawlak, K. *Engaging the six cultures of the academy: Revised and expanded edition of the four cultures of the academy*. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2007).

<sup>6</sup> Biglan, A., The characteristics of subject matter in different academic areas. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, Volume 57 (1973) pp. 195-203.

<sup>7</sup> Thompson, J. D., Hawkes, R. W., & Avery, R. W. Truth strategies and university organization. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, Volume 5, Number 2 (1969) pp. 4-25.

<sup>8</sup> Donald, J. G., *Learning to think: Disciplinary perspectives*. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2002). p. 232.

<sup>9</sup> Edwards, M. U., Jr., *Religion on campus: A professor’s guide to communities, conflicts, and promising conversations*. (New York: Palgrave, 2006), p. 53.

To varying degrees, all four campuses manifested a compartmentalization of religion that was consistent with prevailing understandings of secularity. According to Taylor, secularity can be understood in three senses: (1) a separation of religion from public life, (2) a diminished interest or commitment to religion among the members of a society, and (3) a social condition under which religious belief is regarded as only one possibility among many and may not be seen as equally desirable relative to other options.<sup>10</sup> Although the institutions included in this study varied widely in the prevalence of religion on their campuses, none could be characterized as completely lacking in student religious life. However, even on the campus where student religious activity was most visible, there were those who felt it was not an easy place for students to be religious. Comments expressed at all four institutions reflected a greater degree of discomfort with religion in more public realms of campus activity than in the more private aspects of students’ lives. Discussion of religion in the classroom was especially controversial and there were many who believed that religion and academic life were fundamentally incompatible.

On balance, participants in the study overwhelmingly found the secularity of their institutions to be advantageous. This finding was not surprising in that all of the participants had freely chosen to affiliate with institutions that publicly identified themselves as secular. Moreover, the benefits of secularity that the participants cited were consistent with emerging goals of higher education, as reflected in the professional literature. In particular, Nash has called for greater attention to religious pluralism, as an aspect of the contemporary diversity movement within American higher education.<sup>11</sup> Accommodation of diverse religious perspectives was one of the most frequently cited benefits of secularity, across multiple campuses and constituent groups. In addition to serving a broader range of students, participants in this study believed that secularity enhanced the educational opportunities of individual students by exposing them to diverse perspectives and challenging them to critically examine their own assumptions.

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<sup>10</sup> Taylor, C., *A Secular Age*. (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 2007).

<sup>11</sup> Nash, R. J., *Religious pluralism in the academy: Opening the dialogue*. (New York: Lang, 2001).

### **C. How are the results of our Qualitative Research different from one another?**

*Lucy Forster-Smith*

One of the remarkable opportunities that emerged with the Teagle Secularity collaborative effort among campuses was recognizing commonalities and marveling at the differences in our campus cultures and practices. As stated in the previous essays, the qualitative research delivered many surprises and it confirmed much of the current research on developmental issues of college students. It is evident that there are distinct differences in the ways our participants experience the secularity of their campus communities, including differing assumptions about the outcomes of liberal arts education, their understanding of the content of big questions of meaning and purpose, the hospitality to self-disclosure on these questions, and—when these questions are avoided—the range of perceived reasons for this side-stepping. Though we are keenly aware that the research was conducted with a very small sample of students, faculty and staff from our campuses, these distinctions among campuses arose as charged but subtle in their impact. Attending to some of the differences provides a window into how different campus culture is from one institution to another—we began to recognize how institutions as organic entities develop nuanced understandings in their search for “a robust and capacious definition of secularity.” In addition the voices of the student participants in our study bring out these institutional proclivities in their own experience and attitudes when engaging big questions, particularly where they are addressed or silenced on their campuses.

#### **1. Though all of the campuses consider themselves liberal arts institutions, the assumptions about the purpose of a college education and the way that the common culture privileges some educational outcomes and diminishes others differed among the respondents in our study.**

The stated educational mission for students at one college was focused primarily on preparing and securing a career. A stated goal at another college was to get a degree, get good grades and become a part of the “secular intelligentsia.” A third set of responses from a third college assumed that a major goal of one’s education is to become “an independent critical thinker.” And students at the fourth college articulated the aim as “covering the material.” These differences may be a factor in the importance or value given to devoting time to take up The Big Questions and also may influence the types of questions that are privileged both in and out of the classroom.

Not only was the meaning and purpose of a college education different among the institutions but also the ethos of each campus was described in distinguishing ways. Our research participants on one campus described its ethos as a “fact-oriented, scientific atmosphere.” Another group of respondents described the pervasiveness at their institution of studies being detached from larger life-purpose or meaning. Another campus was described as a culture with a high degree of conformity to the values of social justice, multiculturalism and “saving the world;” the students at this college stated that there is such a strong cultural allegiance to these values that those who do not adhere to them risk of isolation in the community.

#### **2. There were significant differences among our campuses about what Big Questions of meaning and purpose are and where they are discussed.**

We found little commonality among campus respondents about the content of the Big Question except that there was agreement that religious questions fell in this category. However when The Big Questions included religious content the research participants noted distinct ways their campuses responded in monitoring the context and content of such discussions. When asked a question about how they experienced discussion of meaning and purpose questions, one campus group distinguished between “meaning” questions and “purpose” questions. The difference for these students was that “purpose” questions were aligned with non-religious values and “meaning” questions were understood “in terms of higher being or an afterlife or other religious concepts.” The students in this group agreed that it is more comfortable to engage the “purpose” questions, such as the purpose of one’s life, than it is to bring up “meaning” question that bring in religious concepts. For these students, one is an appropriate topic for discussion and the other not. Other campuses groups distinguished between religious big-questions and non-religious ones. Another campus group drew a distinction between big questions, both religious and non-religious, where some that seemed more personal and those that were public or global in scope.

Was there a difference among the campus responses about where these questions are discussed, *if* they are discussed? All of the groups reported discomfort with discussing religious and spiritual questions both in and out of the classroom. A spectrum of distinctions is noteworthy. On one end of the spectrum are two of the colleges where students stated that their faculty members welcome discussion of religious questions in the classroom with the proviso that the discussion is relevant to the course material. When the classroom discussion veers off in a direction of personal religious insight or conviction, then it is determined to be a feeling or subjective opinion, which is out of bounds in the classroom. But even within the student sample are more absolute boundaries when it comes to introducing religion into classroom discussion. One student stated it simply, “Religion and intellectual rigor don’t mix.” Others at the same college said, “Religion is quaint and irrelevant to life.” At another college a similar view was stated: “Religion is opposed to education,” and there is hostility to religion, especially Christianity, in and out of the classroom. On the other end of this rather short spectrum is the college respondent group that reported willingness to engage these questions in and out of the classroom, where one strategy for handling differences of opinions and avoiding conflict was to keep religion in the abstract or propositional.

### **3. Participants perceived different approaches to integrating personal disclosure with learning.**

If a strategy proposed in introducing “a more robust and capacious definition of secularity” is to allow religious questions to be posed in the classroom as abstract principles, this raises a question of whether a campus culture holds the way open for personal disclosure and probing of these questions, and whether students perceived that their campuses welcomed or inhibited personal disclosure. Again, there were differences among those involved in our study.

For two schools in our study the stated perspective was that the only appropriate place for personal disclosure and exploration of big questions is outside of the classroom. The classroom is an important place to prompt for Big Questions but students must transport the discussion of these questions into other settings. For two schools, it appeared that there is a place for students to talk personally about issues in the classroom. However, there are costs to students’ personal disclosure in the classroom as it leads to the possibility of being judged (personally) by others and also concern that one might be graded on personal opinion and that is seen as inappropriate. If such discussion does take place in the classroom, participants at one college resolved the power inequity between faculty and students by having faculty members disclose their own resolution about Big Questions if such self-disclosure was asked of students. This was seen as a “matter of fairness.” One campus indicated some openness to discussion of Big Questions in and out of the classroom. However there

were necessary boundaries on how much time should be devoted to them with the pressures of course requirements. A faculty member stated it this way, “...there would be no way of efficiently incorporating questions of meaning and religion into the process of getting a college degree at this college, unless we instituted yet another graduation requirement, like a course called Meaning of Life...”

#### **4. Different reasons were given for the avoidance of Big Questions**

Except in the limited cases stated above, there was common agreement among campus groups that generally Big Questions of meaning and purpose were avoided both within and outside of the classroom. However, our campuses differed in the reasons people gave for this avoidance. Strikingly, for three of the campus groups the avoidance of discussions of Big Questions had to do with not wanting to offend other people. Two campus groups posited that these issues are volatile—at one of these campuses participants said these issues lead to verbal attacks and therefore should be avoided. These two groups also noted how campuses are intimate places and therefore pose many challenges in dealing with conflict—there is avoidance of questions that strain the environment. Another campus group stated that they avoid these questions because if it is true that these questions cannot be resolved that is a good reason not to bring them up. Two campuses indicated their hesitancy to deal with big questions is a simple matter of being too busy.

Conflict avoidance, harboring personal disclosure, campus hospitality to big questions, and the perceived institutional cultural drivers that direct the energy of students and the rest of the academic community—all of these factors take their place in distinguishing the perceived secular environments of our four institutions and how they engage Big Questions of meaning and purpose. We were especially interested in whether the one church-related institution among the four would report markedly different responses to our questions. Overall, this institution’s respondents indicated a hyper-vigilance in insuring a secular frame for discussion of religious issues both in and out of the classroom. The sense from student participants here is that secularity trumps religious affiliation; it actually seems to create wariness among the students, as if religiousness haunts the place and students must stand guard in all quarters to make sure that religious questions and ideas remain dormant or tucked out of sight.

## Chapter 2 – Secularity, Meaning and the Liberal Arts

*Ian Oliver*

Would students be more deeply engaged in their liberal arts education if the boundaries of the secular at their institutions were more porous and broad? Again and again through our two-year experience, we confronted the fact that our institutions’ beliefs and practices in defining the boundaries of their own secularity are not clearly thought out. Often, classroom practice is based on legend-like anecdotes about anti-religious faculty or irrational students. In extra-curricular religious life programs, current direction seems often to be based on what administrators and constituents disliked most about the previous chaplain or director. Rarely is the issue of secularity addressed as an educational issue; usually it is an issue of campus or cultural politics.

Liberal arts institutions, by definition, have a role in offering knowledge, methods and perspectives that “liberate” young adults from beliefs in authorities that limit their ability to perform the rational, social and creative tasks that define citizenship. Religious “dogma” (as defined in the popular culture, not the Church) is legitimately one such authority from which students might need liberation, and, historically, our institutions have taken up that task. After the dismantling of the institutions of the Protestant establishment on campus in the 1970s, our institutions wandered, sometimes holding onto vestiges of the old established order, sometimes relegating anything raising questions of religion or spirituality to the margins. The 1980’s and 90’s saw a diversification of the student population and the beginnings of demands for recognition and resources from Catholic, Jewish and other student, faculty and staff groups. In the last decade, much of the remaining baggage of the Protestant establishment (even on campuses which were not officially Protestant) has been swept away, as institutions have recognized that they cannot invite the kind of diversity they value without recognizing that genuine religious diversity follows with it.

Our institutions have an undeniable history of religious privilege and intolerance that lead some constituents to urge absolute secularity, which often provokes constituents at the opposite extreme to yearn for re-establishment. Our institutions should continue the slow process of learning and telling the truth about institutional practices that have been anti-Semitic, anti-evangelical, or have often simply ignored the needs of smaller religious minorities. But a “learning-centered” approach to the liberal arts<sup>12</sup> asks all parties to put the student learning experience before even the politics of religion and diversity. In the case of secularity, this will necessarily mean bringing together curricular and extra-curricular initiatives, playing with secular boundaries, and asking hard questions not only about what secularity excludes, but what are the dangers and rewards of inclusion. At the same time, as members of our planning group have consistently pointed out, issues of religious and spiritual diversity are not somehow separate from other issues of campus diversity, such as race or culture, and our discussions of secularity would profit from reference to how those conversations are (or are not) happening on our campuses.

What brought many of us to this project was hearing from groups of students and faculty who kept bumping up against a seemingly invisible barrier called “secularism” as they sought to include their religious, spiritual and often cultural perspectives in their overall learning experience. As they asked

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<sup>12</sup> Cf. Richard P. Keeling, et al., *Learning Reconsidered: a campus-wide focus on the student experience*, ACPA/NASPA, 2004, or [http://www.naspa.org/membership/leader\\_ex\\_pdf/lr\\_long.pdf](http://www.naspa.org/membership/leader_ex_pdf/lr_long.pdf).

questions about this barrier, they often got more emotional than rational responses. But in our study of students who are highly motivated by religious and spiritual issues, we were also reminded that there is a large and growing segment of our student bodies who are not and will not be motivated by these concerns, and that all our efforts must recognize that such students also have the right to exploration of their identity without religious or spiritual frames being forced on them.

In the qualitative research we conducted on all four campuses, among faculty, students and administrators, certain key descriptors turned up which seem to capture the power and invisibility of secularism. In particular, religion was most often described as “private” and “volatile.” Expressing one’s religious beliefs was perceived by students as bringing down “peer judgment” and even the judgment that one could not be both religious and smart. At one campus, students even said they were afraid to engage others’ religious beliefs for fear of destroying them. Clearly, some of those interviewed are afraid of breaching the secular boundary because they legitimately fear conflict that will undermine learning. But, does the definition of the liberal arts allow the luxury of such avoidance?

Our discussions also revealed that off-campus (and sometimes on-campus) politics, especially the direct pressure tactics of some of the Christian right targeted at educational institutions, made dispassionate discussion of education and secularity difficult. Incidents of religious intolerance like those at the U.S. Air Force Academy colored peoples’ perceptions. Some in religious minorities felt embattled. Some in evangelical Christian groups felt misunderstood and marginalized. Clearly, there are issues of power relations at work, as secularists resist the power of what they see as activist Christians and many Christians resist what they see as the irrational exclusion of religion from public discourse. We found it important to recognize the impact of these “culture wars” on campus, but also to distinguish clearly between larger cultural issues and what is actually happening on our campuses. Too often, outside forces want to make campus a battleground for these political conflicts in ways that misrepresent or manipulate genuine campus needs.

But our research also showed, even without outside political heat, that there are still pressured moments in the classroom when a student or professor approaches the secular boundaries. But as one faculty member put it, where there is fear there is power. If both faculty and students are highly motivated to avoid a topic, there must be something there that has the potential to divide or embarrass, but which also might be turned to a positive educational purpose. Anyone who has taught a class where discussion sidles up to the established secular boundaries knows that a significant number of students suddenly seem to wake up and pay attention. As a class approaches that point where one student’s religious or moral belief is about to be critiqued by another, everyone is nervous and watching the professor to see whether this will devolve into screaming, will be quickly nipped in the bud and shelved, or, perhaps, will be explored as an opportunity to learn about how and why people believe different things.

Our qualitative research points to two co-existing student and faculty beliefs on our campuses: on the one hand, secularity is a critical foundation for the objectivity and openness of an academic community; on the other hand, deeper discussion of spiritual and religious topics would motivate a good number of students to better integrate their learning and their identity. At first, these beliefs appear to be in conflict, but are they? Our two-year experience with faculty and administrative study of these topics points to a more complex picture of the student experience than the extreme stories of “faith-killer” professors or uncontrollable proselytizing by students, which seem to be rare (if not non-existent) situations at our institutions. There is a range of experiences at the secular boundary



where the personal meets the universal, where the emotional meets the rational, and where the roles of teacher and student sometimes get fuzzy. The stories we heard focused on a broad range of settings and encounters: from office-hour discussions to out-of-the classroom service learning to the exchange between professor and student over essays to faculty speakers at a convocation after the Virginia Tech shootings. As George Kuh and many others have argued<sup>13</sup>, it is exactly these experiences—face-to-face, experiential, often outside the formal curriculum, that create student “engagement” in their education and can help students overcome peer pressures to compartmentalize academic work and “the rest of life.”

In our study groups on each campus, we found that even faculty who denied there was any religious or spiritual content to their courses (i.e., that they were strictly focused on disciplinary knowledge alone) would, after some time, begin telling stories. The stories were often about what happened around the edges of the course: when a disaster or tragedy was in the news, when students asked “why” rather than “how” questions about the discipline or its ethics, when a personal issue arose for a student, or a student asked a professor directly about his/her beliefs. Even in engaging disciplinary work, faculty spoke of some of their most engaging classes revolving around that point where their own “wonder” or “fascination” with the discipline needed to be explained.

While the literature on “student engagement” prescribes institutional initiatives to create new engagement, what we have found is that, for a substantial group of students, engagement does not need to be created, but simply seized, with great care that the basic secular self-definition of our institutions be respected. Fairly simple, though politically complex steps, such as involving faculty of particular religious traditions in extra-curricular religious life programs, promise great rewards when students can see models of integrating rational reflection and religious practice. Because of the delicacy of campus diversity, even-handedness requires that anything that even looks like re-establishment or favoritism to religion should be avoided. But the big step will be on the opposite end, which is re-opening the question of how the historic task of liberal arts institutions to combine personal faculty-student relationships, moral self-awareness, and global responsibility can legitimately be re-imagined in a post-establishment age.

But, we have also regularly been reminded that, developmentally, our traditionally-aged undergraduates will not resolve these questions within these four years; what we can do is give them intellectual equipment with which to do so five or ten years out of college. Marcia Baxter-Magolda’s description of how the college students she studied moved through four epistemological stages (absolute knowing, transitional knowing, independent knowing and contextual knowing) may not be normative, but it is descriptive of a process many liberal arts students go through as they learn that knowledge and answers are not given by external authority but are created and owned by the individual in community.<sup>14</sup> As a recent graduate now doing graduate work abroad wrote one of us about this post-graduate epiphany:

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<sup>13</sup> Cf. George Kuh, et. al. *Involving Colleges: Successful Approaches to Fostering Student Learning and Development Outside the Classroom*, Jossey-Bass, 1991, and *Student Success in College: Creating Conditions that Matter*, Jossey-Bass, 2005.

<sup>14</sup> Marcia B. Baxter Magolda, *Making Their Own Way: Narratives for Transforming Higher Education to Promote Self-Development*, Stylus, 2001. We add “in community” here because one of the key issues we did not have the opportunity to fully explore is the relationship between being part of a major religious tradition (e.g. Roman Catholicism) and the individualism implied in many definitions of the liberal arts. How do religious groups who see identity formation as more a group function than an individual one understand the liberal arts? Cf. the work of William D. Dinges and others in *Young Adult Catholics: Religion in the Culture of Choice*, University of Notre Dame Press, 2001.

There are things that I care about and things that I want to invest myself in, and other things that, frankly, I just don't. The fact that something is there is no longer a reason for me to try to be good at it. Certainly if I have a reason to do it, I am going to do it well— but lacking that reason? There are better uses for my time. And this, I suppose, is true not just of my academic life, but of my personal life as well. There is so much out there, and so little time— why spend it with people and ideas that don't leave you grinning, with your heart pounding?

Baxter-Magolda's research shows that for her research subjects, the goals we often hear on campus—taking charge of one's own education, responsibility for self and others, making choices rather than trying to “do it all”—are realized in students' lives, but usually one to five years out of college. So, we can introduce students to the “Big Questions,” we can model what it looks like to be engaged (heart-pounding and grinning?), but we should not plan to succeed fully with traditionally-aged 18-22 year-old students. Though “life-long learning” is too often a cliché on our campuses, for many of the serious developmental goals we have for young adults, all we can do is equip them with the intellectual tools to make informed decisions later in life.

Our qualitative research (and comparison to quantitative surveys) showed that the Big Question for many of our students is the question of meaning and vocation. At Bucknell, students spoke about needing to choose between an economically secure profession and a life of personal meaning and purpose. This may seem much too pragmatic to some scholars to merit discussion, but this is where The Big Questions hit in this age group. The question is: where on campus will a student find a mentor or mentors that might help them through this dilemma in a way that not only uses the education they have acquired, but also asks them to reflect on who they are, what is meaningful to them, and who they imagine themselves becoming? For many students, the only language they have to address these issues in this integrated way is religious or spiritual.

Review of the research on undergraduate religious engagements shows that scholars still lack a common language to discuss these topics and that researchers often find in this realm whatever they presumed they would find. Much further research is required as well as common parameters for studying personal meaning, values, ethics, spirituality and religion as they affect the undergraduate experience. As Tim Clydesdale points out, research on undergraduate religious engagement itself seems to come to wildly different conclusions depending on who is asking the questions<sup>15</sup>. Even in wider research on religion and youth, one can see the widely divergent approaches of Christian Smith and Alexander Astin.<sup>16</sup> On our own campuses, different instruments can show as few as 10 percent of students are motivated by questions at the secular boundary, while other instruments put it at 60 percent or higher. Often, we do not even know how many students are involved in extra-curricular religious or spiritual activities. But, again, we must keep in mind the fluidity and flexibility of 18-22 year old students, and the changing demographics that make students with two parents of the same historic religious tradition an increasing rarity on our campuses.

But initial reviews of quantitative research on our campuses, such as the National Survey for Student Engagement, found a complex picture of spirituality and religious life on our campuses. On the one

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<sup>15</sup> Tim Clydesdale, *Abandoned, Pursued or Safely Stowed?* Essay Forum on the Religious Engagements of American Undergraduates, Social Science Research Council web-forum: <http://religion.ssrc.org/reforum/Clydesdale.pdf>

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Christian Smith, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers*. Oxford University Press, 2005, and Alexander Astin, et. al., *Spirituality in Higher Education: A National Study of College Students' Search for Meaning and Purpose*, <http://spirituality.ucla.edu/>. Smith and Astin, studying somewhat different age cohorts with different methods, come to divergent results with regard to the prevalence of “spiritual but not religious” populations among youth and young adults.

hand, we did not find the full flowering of spiritual exploration among students sometimes implied in reviews of the College Student Beliefs and Values survey administered nationally by the Higher Education Research Institute (HERI).<sup>17</sup> But, on the other hand, neither did we find only a tiny minority of exceptionally courageous religious students able to break free from the peer-enforced “identity lockbox” described by Tim Clydesdale. There were certainly elements of both, but our initial review of the broader survey results showed the kind of developmental fluidity and contradiction we would expect if we take student development theory into account. We found students who are traditionally religious in practice but not thoughtful about their individual “religious quest.” We found students who are deeply involved in social action, but have not begun to think through possible spiritual or religious implications. We found some students who are deeply involved in religious practice, but seem to make few connections to academics. We also found students who thought deeply about religious and spiritual ideas, but could not find a way to integrate that with religious practice or community.<sup>18</sup> Combining what we know about student development of traditionally 18-22 year old college students with what we see on campus, we would hypothesize a “developmental lockbox” along the lines of Tim Clydesdale’s concept, but rather than a total exclusion of religious identity questions during students’ college years, we see a spectrum of responses among our admittedly highly-selective group of students. This spectrum ranges from students who quite happily merge into campus party culture and never give their religious background a thought, to students who show remarkable development of depth and knowledge of not only their own religious tradition and its internal diversity, but also appreciation of commonalities and differences between traditions. But the vast majority of our students are moving targets somewhere in between.

One of the most valuable lessons of this two-year project is that faculty, student life administrators and religious life administrators can work together to explore questions of secularity. Because of the developmental complexity and changeability of students, no one aspect of students’ lives can adequately address the whole of students’ educational experience at these traditional, residential campuses. The value of our conversations came when a chaplain could explain to a professor what is going on in the campus Catholic community that might be motivating student questions in class, or when a professor can raise concerns with a religious director about a student from an underserved religious minority. Liberal arts institutions would profit from having faculty and administrative advisory boards for religious and spiritual life that could keep a broad, diverse and educational perspective on both curricular and co-curricular questions.

But what is most important for pursuing these questions is a new, public and confident definition of secularity for our institutions that invites students to respond to classroom (and out of the classroom) questions and experiences from within their complex identities (which mix culture, religion, spirituality, politics, sexuality and many other “identities”). This new definition would challenge faculty and students to bridge the seemingly absolute boundary between subjective religious/spiritual truth claims and objective disciplinary study, to dig deeper into their traditions for sources, methods and arguments that support their claims and ways to “translate” their experiences and attitudes in ways others can understand. The Rawls/Rorty prescription that religiously-motivated scholars and students must always be able to translate their experience and arguments into totally non-religious

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<sup>17</sup> HERI sponsored the national study by Astin et al., cited in the footnote above.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. ongoing research by Chris Ellis from the Institutional Research Office at Bucknell University, especially his draft project: *Spirituality, student engagement and student development*.

language<sup>19</sup> presumes self-awareness and awareness of boundaries that does not seem to fit what we observe on campus. For many students and scholars religion is tied up with culture, family, morality, ethnicity, even nationality—so much so, even, that the lines between them are hard to find. Add to this the religious illiteracy based on society’s confusions about the separation of church and state and the inability of religious institutions to provide basic religious education, and what we see are students who have no idea how to engage a difficult topic of personal difference like religion or spirituality, or even where such issues really lie.<sup>20</sup> So, the whole topic and anything related to it is separated and sealed, not because most religionists have made a conscious decision to impose their terms on the discussion, but because they have no idea where to begin bridging these worldviews.

What our exceptional students seem to want is room to explore the somewhat diverse factors they describe as composing their identity in a critical and rational way. They want faculty (and administrative) guidance that helps them set new boundaries for discussion that are permeable or porous, but not non-existent. Even students in strongly-bounded religious traditions want to understand better what counts as evidence in rational argument, and how some kinds of spiritual arguments, based entirely on subjective states, might not count as much as another kind of religious argument based on a religio-philosophical tradition hundreds of years old. Students need places both in the classroom and in extra-curricular religious programs where they are asked why they believe what they do, and given the resources to dig deeper. A liberal arts education is about giving reasons, critiquing evidence, and learning that there are different forms of knowledge. It is fair to expect students to be rational and creative in their exploration of all other aspects of their identity; so why not at the level of meaning, value and religion?

Martha Nussbaum writes that learning facts about other peoples or cultures does not prepare students fully for citizenship, but, citing Marcus Aurelius, “...we must also cultivate in ourselves a capacity for sympathetic imagination that will enable us to comprehend the motives and choices of people different from ourselves, seeing them not as forbiddingly alien and other, but as sharing many problems and possibilities with us.”<sup>21</sup> A more porous definition of our institution’s secular identity would create space for the multiple spiritual-religious-cultural-ethical identities of our students to enter the classroom (and extra-curricular programs) and be treated with the same critical perspective all other “motives and choices” receive. When a student can tell his or her own story of identity and meaning it allows for other students to do the same, and, perhaps, for them to begin to see commonalities to their tasks and challenges in life.

Separating out questions that lie at the boundary of secularity shows a lack of confidence in the liberal arts themselves to create an ethos, a method and tone (in the classroom and outside of it) that can tame the volatility many fear. With “volatility” comes the possibility of educational engagement at the level of students’ own self-definition and identity. Students need (and seem to want) ways to analyze their own broader commitments and critique those of others. As the disestablishment of our institutions occurred in recent decades, it seems that some of these “personal,” “volatile,” areas have been left up to students to work out for themselves, and even when students ask for help, we have not responded. In our qualitative research students said that the questions were “left in their hands,”

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<sup>19</sup> Cf. Daniel A. Dombrowski, *Rawls and Religion: The Case for Political Liberalism*, SUNY Press, 2001. See also Richard Rorty, “Religion in the Public Square: A Reconsideration,” *Journal of Religious Ethics* 31.1: 141-149.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. Stephen Prothero, *Religious Literacy – What Every American Needs to Know – and Doesn’t*, Harper, 2007.

<sup>21</sup> *Cultivating Humanity: A Classical Defense of Reform in Liberal Education*, Harvard, 1997, p. 85, as referred to in Rebecca Chopp’s lecture *Living Lives of Integrity and Truth*, *Journal of College and Character*, Volume 7, No. 6 (July 2006).

and that “there is not much help with integration.” In an age of global religious conflict, bracketing every issue that approaches the boundary of secularity seems to be abdicating a part of what the liberal arts are supposed to do.

Our qualitative research showed that many students are most comfortable taking on issues of meaning and identity with self-selected peers, partly because they could not be “wrong” in asserting their identity among peers. We discussed the perfectionism and sometimes hypersensitivity of this generation of students that makes them fearful of exposure in the classroom, and whether, as educators, we should adapt to our students or work to change them. We concluded that what is needed is a consistent campus ethos that never lets students (and faculty and administrators) off the hook for both honest self-appraisal and critical thinking. Even the late-night “bull session”<sup>22</sup> in a residence hall is open to educational re-framing by residence hall staff and by overall expectations for rigor and civility expressed by the institution.

There are many pitfalls. Heavy-handed or literalistic approaches to secular boundaries in and out of the classroom will most probably offend or manipulate. There is no one “model” of pedagogy or curricular structure that will create space for these encounters of student identity and academic study<sup>23</sup>, but there are exemplary individual stories of how faculty and administrators have bridged this delicate divide in ways that substantially engaged individual students or classes, which are referred to in the chapter on pedagogy.

A kind of cultural change is also needed. Our students, by their own good efforts (and those of their parents) have been trained to be professionally busy. Busyness got them into our elite institutions and it is the only strategy for success they know. In our qualitative research, many students said there simply was no time in their schedule to reflect or consider “big questions,” especially when those questions require the rethinking of familiar boundaries or the introduction of ambiguity into areas formerly certain. Students even said they were not interested in The Big Questions because there were no easy answers. Spaces, times, and forums for the discussion of these issues and a re-valuing of reflection and nuanced engagement are needed. We also need to recognize that the competitive college admissions process has changed our culture, and that, at the very least, we should work to convince our students that intellectual depth is what matters in college, not the number of majors or activities.

There are also administrative issues. Faculty need to know that they will be supported if their appropriate engagement of spiritual or religious identity questions brings down the wrath of parents, trustees, or even national political groups. Chaplains and religious life directors need to take seriously their role in both supporting religious life equitably and also helping set boundaries around it. Too often religious life programs are a hodgepodge of random student groups that have popped up over history rather than a programmatic effort to respond to student needs. Too often, religious life offices are much too lax or much too strict in regulating the behavior of religious and spiritual groups, without a clear sense of the underlying educational values expected of student groups on a private college campus. Too often, majority religious groups are marginalized and minority groups

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<sup>22</sup> Our overall research shows that the image of the late night “bull session” may be an anachronism. Given our students’ busyness, the idea of hanging around the hall with a diverse group may be more ideal than real.

<sup>23</sup> Robert Nash’s “moral conversation” is one model (cf. his *Religious Pluralism in the Academy: opening the dialogue*, Peter Lang, 2001), but as we learned, because the secular boundary issues come up not in the curriculum as much as in the pedagogy or even ethos of the classroom, the approach to these issues must fit well with the individual faculty member’s personality and philosophy and probably cannot be prescribed.

exoticized without consideration of how to lead advisors and student leaders to see their work in the context of a liberal arts education.

Our experience has shown us that elite, secular institutions like ours are almost allergic to these questions. Our efforts in this project were usually misperceived due to the highly-charged political and religious climate in America today. Secularists perceived our work as dangerously promoting religion. Religionists perceived our work as dangerously promoting secularism. Often, mention of the project prompted no response at all, simply a nervous silence. But, over time and with patience, almost all constituencies in our communities responded to approaching these questions from a de-pressurized, inquisitive educational perspective. Like the first introduction of race, gender, class, or cultural categories as factors in student learning, redefining secularity as an intentional and flexible category will meet decreasing resistance as constituents trade politicized understandings for more nuanced ones. De-pressurizing our campus communities on these questions will take time, but will, in the end, both open liberal learning to now marginalized inputs and become a unifying factor in a liberal arts education for a large group of students.

## Chapter 3 – The Pedagogy of Big Questions in Secular Education

*Kenneth Livingston, Paul Macdonald, and Rachel Kitlinger*

*One of the ironies of the move from a modern to a post-modern secular framework in the academy is that conversations about questions with deep importance to students have become far more difficult. The examination of the foundations of one’s moral and ethical ideas, for example, is too often replaced by a silent conspiracy between faculty and students to avoid such questions lest someone feel challenged or dismissed. The secular ideal of an environment in which freedom of thought and expression forms the backbone of shared academic endeavors has been sacrificed to the lesser ideal of avoiding the giving of offense. In service to this secondary goal, we too often fail to engage students in an examination of their own most deeply held beliefs, rendering education a much more superficial experience than it might otherwise have been. We are especially likely to avoid discussion of those beliefs that have roots in various religious traditions, in spite of the fact that these are often central to how we understand what makes our lives meaningful. Each of the authors has experimented with ways of highlighting these foundational issues for students, each of us in a very different pedagogical context. We offer these brief summaries of our experiences in the hope that others will be motivated to try their own experiments in asking big questions. –KL*

### ***Questioning the ‘Nature of Things’***

*Rachel Kitlinger*

Teaching ancient Greek and Roman literature provides a rich opportunity to consider significant moral and ethical questions outside the religious traditions of any of the students in the class. Since the Greeks and the Romans struggled to understand the place of human beings in the larger universe within the framework of a polytheistic religious system whose practices and beliefs have not survived, all students can view the formulations that the Greeks and Romans offered from an equally estranged position. And because the religious assumptions of this polytheistic system made the questions about what it is to be and act as a human being particularly intense and difficult to answer, ancient Greek and Roman literature stimulates students to think about the nature of human suffering, or the moral character of human action, or the relationship of the human to the divine, or the finitude of human life, to give just a few examples, without any ready-made answers. In my years of teaching this literature, I have found students are invariably eager to explore these questions and, in doing so, often confront their own lack of a framework to think about them. Or students with strong beliefs, shaped by a variety of religious traditions, discover the opportunity to hold those beliefs up against a completely different way of looking at the world, a skeptical exploration of which will offend no one. The classics provide a safe ground on which to explore, confront, and challenge the very questions for which religious belief seeks answers. The problem that this richness poses for me as a teacher, however, is the situation we put our students in by raising these central and difficult questions and not offering any answers. It is a truism of teaching in a liberal arts context that our job as teachers is to do this—show students what the important questions are and how to think about them but not to provide answers. But I have found it difficult, when we are exploring questions that go to the heart of what it is to be a human being, and when students feel an urgency, a hunger, for some kind of certainty or solid base, to leave them with nothing but the complexity and open-endedness of the question. Am I, as a teacher, being responsible, if I leave students in a state of perplexity, staring

at an abyss, when it comes to questions that have a direct bearing on how they choose to live their lives?

I can illustrate this perplexity I feel as a teacher by describing an experience I had when teaching Lucretius' *De Rerum Natura* to a class of 25 students, mainly freshmen. The course had the explicit goal of allowing students to reflect on the way the assumptions they make because they live in the 21st century in America get in the way of their understanding ancient literature and then of allowing the texts they read to explore those assumptions. Lucretius presents to them a world shaped by random and impersonal forces in which the best thing a human being can do is to explore and understand those forces, so that he or she need not fear them; he explicitly wants to free humans from the fear of death and of angry and vengeful gods. And his tool for creating that understanding is a fascinating account of *The Way Things Are (De Rerum Natura)* that describes all matter as the random coming together of atoms and death as simply the dissolution of those atomic bonds, which are created by the random swerve of an atom, allowing it to connect to another. This beautifully written poem leaves its readers to discover that the highest goal one can have is an understanding of human powerlessness in the face of the randomness of impersonal forces.

The students were fascinated and amazed by what they perceived as Lucretius' "modernity." It was perhaps the ease with which they could understand the text, at least superficially, its contradictory strangeness and familiarity, that allowed them to express their almost unanimous sense that the possibilities that Lucretius opens up for human beings were, to them, completely unsatisfying. How could a random swerve create a world with any meaning? How could freedom from fear be the apex of human intellectual or emotional achievement? Again and again they echoed each other's sentiment: there must be something more.

Having brought them to this point, of realizing their discontent, I asked them to articulate what, for them, the "more" might be. If they found Lucretius' vision unsatisfying, what alternatives made sense to them? What struck me initially was that not one of the students offered his or her own religious beliefs as an alternative vision. I don't know if that's because they weren't willing to bring them into public view or because no one in the room experienced belief as such an alternative. Since I was not asking them to speak from personal experience necessarily, only asking them to imagine alternatives, it was striking that faith -- even if not their own -- didn't occur to them as even a potential answer. Speaking about what their culture offered them, they named "money" and they named "ambition." Most of them -- though not all -- didn't feel that money or ambition could fill the void Lucretius had opened up for them. We were drawing to the end of the class period. The assignment on the syllabus for the following class was to begin the *Aeneid*. It was one of those moments where, as a teacher, you have a choice. I was confronted in a palpable way with my students' need to find some answers to the questions they were raising. I could have spontaneously given them an assignment for the following class to write a page pursuing the question we were struggling with in any way that made sense to them and then bring it to the next class to share. I could have made space for them to struggle with finding an answer and then allowing the conversation to continue. I didn't. I said we'd start discussing the *Aeneid* next time and ended the class with the feeling of perplexity heavy in the air.

I can't say for sure why. Perhaps it was my own sense that perplexity was the most we could achieve together. Not that I was satisfied but felt that, realistically, we'd reached a limit. Or perhaps I felt that it was now a private matter for each student, and we had set the stage for work each one would have to choose to take up in his or her own way. Or perhaps, since I myself had no answers beyond



what Lucretius offers, I felt I couldn't guide the discussion any further. If I had my own answers, should I as a teacher offer them as a model for the students of how someone can create meaning for herself? Does my role as a teacher lend my point of view too much weight? These are some of the questions that I ask myself as I think about that class. For me the experience gave clarity to the difficulty of determining the limits of what we should or can try to achieve in the classroom, when it comes to the "big questions."

*Rachel Kitzinger's experience reveals the rich complexity of ideas that can emerge when questions about purpose are raised from outside the system of beliefs generally shared by the members of a class. The challenges to both students and instructor are not easily met when the material suddenly and surprisingly succeeds in breaking through the pervasive barriers in campus culture that make it feel inappropriate to probe such issues too deeply in the classroom. Nevertheless, her example shows what is possible when one is willing to be open to such challenges and looks for opportunities to create them within one's established course material.*

*Another approach to bridging the barriers to discussion of such issues is to design entire courses that are explicitly structured to do just that. Our next two examples describe two quite different efforts of this kind, with interesting differences in pedagogical focus. – KL*

## ***The Psychology of Belief***

*Ken Livingston*

If psychologists were to study the thoughts, feelings, and actions of people in proportion to their significance in the lives people actually lead, then the psychology of religion would be one of the largest and most well funded sub-areas in the field. In fact it is one of the smallest, in no small measure because major figures in the field, including especially Sigmund Freud and B. F. Skinner, marked religion as neurosis or superstition that could be eliminated with the right therapeutic outlook or conditioning. In recent years, however, multidisciplinary work, especially in cognitive science, has integrated material from anthropologists, neuroscientists, and others so as to acknowledge at last the pervasive and influential role of religious cognition in the lives of people across time and culture. This new multidisciplinary approach has generated a wide spectrum of genuinely new ideas about the origins and maintenance of religious thought and practice, which makes this the perfect moment to reintroduce the theme within the context of a course in psychology.

The standard approach to teaching psychology is, appropriately, an objective one. Most academic psychologists do their best to operate according to the practices of the broader scientific community, and we take great pains to explain to students that the generalizations that emerge from our research apply only probabilistically to any given individual, including the student him or her self. It was thus with some trepidation that I decided to modify this traditional objective approach to include an explicit acknowledgement of the personal religious perspectives of both students and instructor.

I had two major reasons for introducing this usually absent perspective into the mix. The first was simply to acknowledge the five hundred pound gorilla that was inevitably going to be in the room. Many topics in psychology raise questions for the student about whether or how the findings under discussion might apply to his own case, but the objective review of findings about why people believe or practice as they do has the potential to offend by suggesting that the belief or practice

reduces to something other than the very important and powerful thing it is experienced to be by the believer or practitioner. Better to at least recognize the issue by making it public for everyone.

The second reason for introducing a first person point of view to complement the third person view we could all share was multifaceted and more explicitly pedagogical. I wanted to make sure that it was possible for us to take advantage of the diversity of experience and knowledge of particular traditions that were almost certain to exist within the class. This would not be possible if people were secretly on the defensive about their own beliefs. A very important corollary here was to provide a context in which students could practice the skill, vital for members of any open, democratic culture, of discussing these difficult and potentially conflict-ridden issues without the inhibitions that have come to characterize the modern academic culture. I also wanted to encourage an attitude of self-examination. It is one thing to quietly consider whether or how a set of findings might apply to one’s own case, but it is another thing all together to make such questions a part of the explicit discussion in a classroom. Finally, I wanted to make an important theoretical point, related to some of my own work, about the role of religious experience in establishing and maintaining one’s beliefs and practices about religious matters. I could make that point with far more impact if the issue was taken up from both a first and a third person point of view.

Having decided that there were good reasons to bring the first person point of view into a setting normally reserved for the third person perspective, the next question was how to actually make that happen. My first decision was to design the course as a senior seminar. This guarantees a relatively small group (15 students) of students with strong backgrounds either in psychology, neuroscience, or cognitive science, students also likely to possess the additional maturity that so clearly marks the differences between a senior and a freshman. On the other hand, this meant a group with three-plus years of acclimation to the culture of silence that generally surrounds the issues we would address. Simply encouraging self-disclosure and hoping it would happen in the right moments seemed unlikely to produce the sustained integration of the two perspectives I hoped to achieve. Two other desiderata seemed crucial to me, and at first glance they seem antithetical. I wanted to establish this dual perspective immediately, and to do so in a way that left us committed to it as a group. I also wanted our initial conversation to be deep and thoughtful, something not easy to achieve without time to reflect on the perspective I wanted to introduce.

The solution I hit upon, and there may well be others just as effective, was not to wait for the first class meeting to contact the students enrolled in the seminar. Instead I let them know a week before the first class meeting that I would expect each of them to make a five-minute presentation describing one experience that had been most critical to establishing his or her personal perspective on matters of religious belief and practice. The experience could be extended in time or place, and there were no restrictions on what might be discussed. I also told them that I would ask each of them to promise to the rest of the class that nothing that was disclosed during these presentations would *ever* be revealed by anyone other than the speaker outside our classroom. One could also choose not to make a presentation, but the promise to maintain confidentiality was a condition of remaining in the room for the other presentations in any case. I also promised that I would also tell them my personal story as the last presentation, with all the same conditions. There would be no distinctions among us on this point. People were allowed to ask questions of clarification if they wished, but not until the person indicated that the presentation was complete.

I have been able to offer this course only twice thus far, but I can say that the opening 90 minutes of this class have been both the longest and shortest 90 minutes I have ever experienced in a classroom.

The anxiety level in the room is simply off the charts as we begin, and it does not diminish because it quickly becomes clear that nearly every story is deeply felt and only partially understood by the speaker. The uncertainty expressed about the origins and meanings of these experiences was one of the things that surprised me most about the stories. Many students reveal that they have never spoken with anyone about the events they recount. Throughout this process the room feels like a crucible; we emerge as a very different kind of group from the typical seminar class. We spend the last half of the class by starting our more traditional academic work, worrying about questions like what makes a belief or practice religious, reading and arguing about definitions of religion provided by thinkers ranging from St. Augustine to George Bernard Shaw, and preparing to take up the topics to be addressed in the weeks to come, but with our shared first person stories giving our work a very different character from that of the traditional third-person-only classroom.

The costs and benefits of this approach take time to emerge, and many are too subtle for brief exposition, but on balance I cannot imagine attempting to address this topic without bringing the first person point of view into the mix. Among the benefits was the discovery of just how varied are the backgrounds of our fellow travelers on campus. It is telling that many people who had shared classes or even lived in the same dormitories expressed surprise on discovering that people they call friends had deep commitments to particular religious traditions, or to no tradition at all. The material covered was non-overlapping to a large degree across the two iterations of the course because our conversations evolved so differently around the perspectives of the students in the class. In order to further push students to integrate these perspectives I set aside five days during the semester for presentations by the students themselves on topics of their choosing. Students were encouraged to choose an issue or theme that manifested at the heart of the student’s personal revelations on our first day. One testament to the importance of the first person perspective in our work in the seminar is that the one student who declined to make a presentation on that first day later asked to tell his story to the group in order to better explain a particular line of argument he wanted to develop during a discussion of the conceptual structures by means of which people understand their gods.

Of course it wasn’t all smooth sailing. In the early days of the class it took some very pointed and explicit probing of first person perspectives to prevent knowledge of my own atheism from inhibiting certain contributions, which was very uncomfortable until it became an accepted part of the class culture. Tensions did develop, and people did become defensive, but these often produced some of the most memorable and productive conversations. Only once did things go so off the rails that I had one of those uncanny moments of paralysis when I really needed time to think about what to do or say. Yet even that became a very educational experience, even for the bystanders to the explosion. We discovered that at the core of people’s beliefs about how the world works there are metaphysical presuppositions, with all of their epistemological entailments, that function axiomatically and cannot be challenged without challenging who one is. Like it or not, life in a pluralistic society requires that one find ways to continue to live and work with people with whom one can never share a fundamental world view. The psychology of mastering that skill is no doubt worthy of its own distinct course.

*Ken Livingston’s pedagogical approach makes the first person perspective an explicit part of a course devoted to a topic closely related to questions of personal meaning and purpose, but the armature around which the course is sculpted remains the typical objective, analytic perspective of contemporary scientific psychology. Students are invited to discuss and examine their own beliefs in the context of a theoretical and empirical examination of belief in general. Paul Macdonald explores an even more radical approach in his course on Christian theology in*

*which the traditional teaching of Christian theology is combined with an invitation to enter into the mind-set of the Christian thinker. – KL*

### ***Studying Christian Theology in the Secular Classroom***

*Paul Macdonald*

I. My main goal in this part of the chapter is to show how Christian theology (hereafter just “theology”) occupies both a coherent and advantageous place in the secular classroom. First, I discuss how the study of theology can engender knowledge; I also consider what it means to study theology in a secular academic environment. Second, I discuss the role faith commitments, whether theologically laden or not, play in the study of theology in the secular classroom.

II. I have discovered that while many of my undergraduate students have a cursory knowledge of Christianity, gained through their upbringing in any number of Christian traditions (or through their education, religious or secular), they have little or no acquaintance with Christian *theology* or any facet of it: that is, its history, its central issues, or its main figures and schools of interpretation. In fact, I think many students are genuinely surprised to discover that Christianity *has* a theology. From their point of view, Christianity, as a species of “religion,” consists of “opinions” (that’s the word they often use) grounded in “faith,” which they understand to be something primarily affective rather than cognitive—a range of feelings or emotions rather than a set of reasoned beliefs. As my students quickly discover, however, the study of theology, like the study of any other discipline at the university, is thoroughly academic and intellectual: it requires learning not only about what Christians believe but also why they believe it, or how Christians understand and argue for what it is they believe, using the modes of critical reasoning that are available to them for conducting genuine intellectual inquiry. In my department, we call this the “history of Christian thought,” which I was hired to teach. But in my view, the history of Christian thought is really the history of theological reasoning, or various modes of critical reasoning about the Christian God and Christian beliefs, which in turn consists of various forms of critical assessment of what Christians believe as well as critical inquiry into the truth-claims that Christians make.

So understood, I think theology can be understood as engendering *knowledge* for those who study it, a knowledge that is not only factual (learning what Christians actually believe and what they have argued about what they believe) but also critical, since those who study theology learn *how* to reason theologically. But studying theology requires more than merely observing how Christians reason; it also requires *practicing* how they reason—that is, reasoning along *with* actual theologians, both past and present. Like a foreign language (which it is for many students in my classes), theology consists of its own distinct vocabulary and set of grammatical rules, or rules of rational discourse, that can be learned through classroom study rather than native upbringing. To study Christian theology, then, is to habituate the skills needed to speak, think, and ultimately reason like a Christian theologian—that is, to think, speak, and reason like a native, whether one claims native identity or not.<sup>24</sup> Consequently, practicing theology does not require that one also practice Christianity: while being a Christian may require baptism, studying theology most certainly does not. The ultimate goal of practicing Christian theology in the secular classroom is to employ the skills of critical reasoning

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<sup>24</sup> I am influenced in part here by Eugene Rogers’ claim that “theology is a skill that can be taught, gained by practice rather than conversion” (Eugene F. Rogers, Jr., “Theology in the Curriculum of a Secular Religious Studies Department,” *Crosscurrents* [Summer 2006], 364-74, and in particular 370).

one has gained through practice in various levels of critical assessment. And critical assessment can take many forms: I require my students to compare and contrast different approaches and arguments within theology, to evaluate the merits of those approaches and arguments in terms of coherency, persuasiveness, and explanatory power, and even to begin to analyze the Christian worldview, including its major truth-claims, as a whole.

I of course readily acknowledge that there is a central difference between studying theology in a secular academic environment, such as the secular liberal arts college or university, as opposed to a sectarian academic environment, such as the Christian college, university, seminary, and divinity school.<sup>25</sup> My students and I inhabit a diverse, pluralistic academic environment, where no particular religion or set of religious beliefs are assumed or proposed to be true. In this sense, I understand “secular” simply to mean “religiously neutral,” or perhaps better, “religiously diverse;” thus, the “secular classroom” within the secular liberal arts college is religiously neutral or diverse in the sense that its inhabitants—professors and students—possess any number of religious positions or no religious position in particular. Intellectual discourse in the classroom is “secular” in the sense that it is not framed by any one religious perspective that is taken for granted by all those who participate in it.<sup>26</sup>

But studying theology in a religiously neutral or diverse academic environment certainly does not also require eschewing Christian particularity entirely, or assuming an “objective” standpoint that transcends as far as possible the various “subjective” standpoints assumed by those who inhabit the Christian worldview. I suspect that a purely “objective” conception would try to explain how Christian belief and thought is shaped by various historical, social, psychological, and political influences; perhaps it would focus primarily on the broader intellectual context and sources from which such belief and thought emerges and on which it is based. But how *informative* of theology would such a conception really be; what sort of knowledge would it yield? A perspective on the study of theology that seeks to transcend as far as possible the particular perspectives of actual theological practitioners, including their own personal beliefs and truth-claims, ends up *losing* its critical “grip” rather than strengthening it. And how could it be otherwise, since it is *within* particular theological perspectives that the beliefs and patterns of thought one is seeking to study are already in play and “in view” for genuine examination and analysis? On my view, obtaining the *best* view of what Christians believe and how they think, precisely in order to gain genuine theological knowledge, requires exploring particular theological perspectives, as well as the Christian worldview *rit large, from the inside*: that is, allowing one’s academic study to take one through those perspectives rather than above or around them.<sup>27</sup>

III. The secular study of theology may also seem to require bracketing personal faith commitments, or at least not voicing those commitments in secular classroom discourse. But I think we need to

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25 I am not using the term “sectarian” in a pejorative sense, but only as a way to denote specifically religious academic environments and contexts.

26 I am adapting this conception of the secular classroom from Jeffrey Stout, who makes a distinction between “secularized discourse” and “secularism:” only the latter denies theological assumptions and expels theological expression from the public sphere. See chapter four, “Secularization and Resentment,” in Stout’s *Democracy and Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), in particular 93.

27 James Stoner puts this point nicely: “Adequate scholarly interpretation requires that one enter, at least provisionally, into another thought-world and allow one’s understanding to range within its borders” (James R. Stoner, Jr., “The ‘Naked’ University: What If Theology Is Knowledge, Not Belief?” *Theology Today* 62 [2006]: 515-27, in particular 519).

question this assumption as well. Far from stymieing rational inquiry, faith commitments, whether theologically laden or not, actually can enable and inspire rational inquiry by providing a critical framework in which such inquiry can take place. The classical model for this in theology is “faith seeking understanding,” which I think can be practiced in the secular classroom by both teachers and students of theology to varying degrees.<sup>28</sup> First, I believe that I have been at my best as a teacher of theology when I not only have presented theological reasoning to my students but also actually conducted theological reasoning for my students, often in response to student questions and discussion. And while I have not yet made my own theological commitments entirely explicit in the classroom, I certainly have drawn on those commitments in reasoning for and with my students about various theological subject matters. Thus, these commitments not only have informed and driven my own work and research in theology; they also continue to inform and drive how I teach theology. I find that the more I drive for personal understanding of what I believe, I also am able to achieve better understanding of what other theologians (past and present) believe; and the more understanding I achieve of theology’s subject matter the better equipped I am to teach it to my students.

In addition, my best classes in theology (or at least the best moments in those classes) have been the ones in which students respectfully but also willingly and candidly have brought their own faith commitments—again, theological or not—into classroom discourse and their individual work. In those classes, I believe students discovered that the study of theology, so informed by their commitments, not only was enjoyable but also fruitful in terms of the knowledge they gained. I also submit that my students’ study of theology was *more* enjoyable and fruitful than it would have been had I required that they check their commitments at the classroom door, or if I had made the classroom a faith-free zone.

We can see how this works in reflecting briefly on theology’s broader subject matter. Taken holistically, theology offers a sweeping narrative about divine action in human history, from creation to redemption to the final end of human history and the world. In telling this sweeping narrative—however differently they tell it (which are really different variations on the same theme)—theologians also raise and address perennial “big” questions about God (or “ultimate reality,” if you prefer), the human condition, the nature of good and evil, as well as the meaning and purpose of human history and the world. These questions, which by no means are limited to theology, are inescapably value-laden, and thus are extremely difficult to address from within a neutral critical framework or with total critical as well as personal distance. “Faith,” again taken more holistically as including basic, background beliefs about God (or “ultimate reality”), the human person, and the world, thus inevitably informs the study of theology at the secular university insofar as it provides a critical framework for properly addressing these value-laden questions. Again, the study of theology does not stop at critical summary or even critical assessment but also inevitably leads the rational inquirer, whether theologically oriented or not, to consider the coherency, persuasiveness, and overall explanatory power of the Christian narrative or worldview (as I often call it) as a whole, however it is articulated or conceived.

And yet, at this heightened level of analysis, and in seeking this heightened level of understanding, one’s own overarching narrative or worldview inevitably comes into play: how can one test, challenge, or endorse a particular narrative or worldview without comparing it, on some critical level, with one’s own? The study of theology, and the knowledge it seeks to engender, is therefore also inescapably *personal*. And by “personal” I do not mean subjective or partisan or non-academic.

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<sup>28</sup> This method of doing theology is usually attributed to Anselm; but its roots lie with Augustine.

One cannot properly answer the “big” questions that theology raises without having undergone serious theological study; and when one does answer these questions, even if only provisionally, one critically informs and expands one’s own overarching narrative or worldview.

IV. I realize that the claims I have advanced and defended briefly here are controversial, but they are important claims to consider. Since Christian theology is, as a matter of fact, studied in the secular classroom, it behooves all members of the academy, in both secular and sectarian contexts, to inquire further about the viability of theology as a secular academic discipline and the secular classroom as a viable medium in which the study of theology, in all of its richness, can continue to take place.

*Taken together these essays suggest that at least some core secular ideas may be required to allow the close, detailed, and personal exploration of questions about the meaning and purpose of one’s life. Without a commitment to the view that each individual’s life is his own to live conversations like those described here cannot take place. One need only imagine discussion of these issues in a well-regulated theocracy (one might even find places in the world where the experience can be had and not just imagined) to appreciate the value of a certain kind of secular framework for personal exploration of life’s meaning and purpose. At the same time it is clear that not all secular frameworks are equally effective for this purpose. For example, a framework that elevates the importance of not giving offense or not challenging personal belief over the value of challenging and questioning requires a very different kind of pedagogy. And certainly there are historical examples of secular perspectives just as discouraging of personal exploration as the most enthusiastic theocratic culture. One has only to read the history of the Soviet Union’s attempt to promote scientism as the state religion to appreciate this fact. It is therefore imperative that we be just as careful to appreciate the varieties of secular experience as we are to recognize the varieties of religious experience if we are to establish an environment in which the student concerned with Big Questions can thrive. – KL*

## Chapter 4 – The Politics of the Secular and the Religious

### *Part I - On Secularism and the Sheikh*

*Khaldoun Samman*

This is an essay that provides more of a caution than a statement about concrete policy and administrative suggestions. In our efforts to reform our secular colleges and universities to accommodate the need for meeting our students’ desires to seek important spiritual and religious questions, we need to remain cautious that in doing so we do not reproduce the architectural binaries I discuss below. I describe and analyze an encounter I had with a religious sheikh while performing the Hajj with my mother in Mecca—so as to reflect on the problematic nature of the secular/religious divide. After experiencing a number of uncomfortable gender related scenarios with this Hajji guide, I analyze how a racialized “secular West” versus a “religious East” global discourse produced harmful effects on the imagination of the Muslim Other, what I describe as an injured civilizational identity. The intellectual elites of Europe and the United States over the past two centuries constructed a historical narrative that placed themselves on top of the world and all Others “below” them, with secularism representing “advanced” civilizations and those more primitive and less civilized as marked as being saturated by a religious ethos. But as this secularist hegemony seems to be entering a legitimacy crisis around the world, I would also like to speak a word of caution to both sides of the debate on whether or not to permit “religion” and faith the luxury of entering our temples of knowledge, showing that what we need to keep in mind at all times is the important issue of the role of colonial and postcolonial encounters and how these particular global experiences inform how religion comes into the public domain in the United States and elsewhere. In a context in which the so-called West has recently been redefined as a “Judeo-Christian” civilization, where Jews were allowed to cross the bridge into the Christian and secular civilized West, the “Other”—particularly the Muslim—will continue to remain on the opposite side of the ontological divide even while many of us may claim that these Other religions can have their place in our improved and more tolerant colleges and universities. Thus how we evaluate our binary informed discourses critically is more important than whether or not we allow religion to play a bigger role in our educational settings; for by leaving the ontology unchanged we in fact will fall prey to new, although less secular, racialized institutions, with certain religions (Christianity and Judaism) defined as “our” “Western” civilization and Others (Islam, Confucianism...) as “Eastern” that need to be understood, loved and tolerated.

Indeed, colleges and universities could easily fall prey to replacing the secular/religious binary with the Judeo-Christian/Muslim or any Other one. In not recognizing the ontological stability between the two, we will continue to articulate essentialist notions of Self and Other in such a way as to continue to *produce* social subjects on behalf of dominant political powers.<sup>29</sup> Understanding a “civilization” as being “Judeo-Christian” fails to comprehend the rhetorical power of this dominant political project behind which stands the making of this identity, which forces all Others to interact as separate and subordinate pegs.<sup>30</sup> The fact that such framing has been constructed around cultural or religious ontologies of difference can be seen as yet another discursive political act, one in which

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<sup>29</sup> Wendy Brown, *Regulating Aversion: Tolerance in the Age of Identity and Empire* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006), 10.

<sup>30</sup> I do not mean to accept the conflating of Jewish and Christian traditions and cultures represented by the term “Judeo-Christian”—but I am arguing that Muslim is the perceived Other to these traditions in U.S. educational contexts.



new dividing social pegs are now being created. Indeed, what makes this particular divide come together is not cultural contact between the recently constructed Judeo-Christian civilization with that of Muslim and Other groups per se, but the intervention of a new political discourse that places “Muslims” in opposition to “Judeo-Christian” culture. Of course, unlike many who favor “prayers in school” we will do it in a polite and tolerant fashion, but difference and identity remains clearly marked by this binary in both liberal and conservative efforts and it is obvious who is host (Christians/Jews) and who is guest (Muslims). Please keep this in mind when reading my critique of secularism.

### **Why the Discourse of Keeping Religion Out of Public Life May be Viewed as part of the Modern Colonial Encounter**

After an extremely exhaustive yet spiritually rewarding day of completing a Hajj ritual in Mecca in January of 2004, my mother and I went outside of the great mosque in search of our American group of Hajjis. Upon finding them, I took the first available seat to rest, with my mother finding an empty seat beside me. At that moment our senior American sheikh from NJ got up and insisted that my mother remove herself from the company of men to sit in the “women’s area.” After a number of days of experiencing similar scenarios, I was no longer able to keep silent, and decided to confront the sheikh in front of many other Hajjis. I insisted that my mother and I are exhausted and she would remain here with me, telling the sheikh that “I do not appreciate your policing of rigid gender segregation.” He responded just as forcefully, claiming that “since we are in Mecca we have to practice our religion in its proper form, not what suits us at the time.” After it became obvious to him that my mother was not about to move, he looked towards me and became quite disturbed, adding, “you are obviously Westernized. The problem with much of your young generation is that you have lost your true religion and have imitated the culture of the West by losing sight of proper Islam.” Insulted by being branded “Western” and not wanting to be outdone, I returned fire: “It is you who has been Westernized, for the prophet Muhammad did not invent these gender divisions. It was only much later in history, indeed in our modern era, first originating in the West and then accepted by men like yourself that such rigid understandings of gender came into being.” We then continued this debate for some thirty minutes, with the sheikh trying to demonstrate to me and the other men around us the textual evidence for this gender division while I, likewise, attempted to provide a completely different interpretation of those very same texts.

But what became obvious to me was the creeping feeling that this debate was not simply about hermeneutics, or who had the most persuasive argument. Instead, what troubled the sheikh most was that he interpreted this challenge as between two men representing two radically antithetical civilizations. The fact is that he thought of himself as representing authentic Islam while I, on the other hand, was to him nothing more than a spokesperson for the West, regurgitating something exterior to the true religion, in a sense belonging to a secular culture somewhere “West” of Islam.

I saw this played out several weeks earlier in another major pilgrimage center in central Florida: Disney World. Here you can roam the four major theme parks, including *Epcot Center*. The latter is organized by two central themes, with science, technology, and progress on one side called “Future World” containing science exhibits and rides like *Spaceship Earth*, while on the other side of the park you’ll find the World’s Showcases where you can visit many “traditional civilizations.” The first thing you notice is that Morocco, a “traditional civilization,” is showcased in a Mosque, where you can shop and experience the Orient, meeting great figures like *Aladdin* while listening to Arabic music and observing the sensuous belly dancers. In Future World, on the other hand, you will find a

“developed” civilization, where science and technology reign. On the “West side” of Epcot, you can take a ride on *Spaceship Earth* where you travel through time “from the dawn of man to the future.” Here Europe and the US represent the civilizational location where science, philosophy, and secularism were invented and now thrive. Only in the “Dark Ages” did Islamic or any other civilization lend a hand. But even then this civilization only held the torch of progress in a time of Western civilizational illness, just long enough until the West recuperated from its mid-life crisis, whereupon Islam simply gave back the torch, unchanged, to its rightful owner. Of particular notice is how, in Disney’s Epcot Center, the industrial, modern, scientific-rational Self is distanced from the Other, both spatially and temporally. Although non-Western and Western civilizations exist on the planet simultaneously, they are constructed as living in different historical times and spaces. The Muslims, in the case of Epcot, live in the time of old Danish and German folk culture, before the latter moved into modernity and evolved into a mature civilization. The Muslims, the Native Americans, and all Others are frozen in time while the West takes off into space. The Other thus is distanced from the West, although it exists simultaneously with it. The implication is that Western civilization, in past epochs, once lived in a developmental stage similar to that of Other races and cultures, which are indeed seen as live examples of a prior Self that has become Other. However, having evolved and matured into a highly developed human species, the West is understood to have progressed forward in time, crossing the bridge to the other, more scientific and mature, side.<sup>31</sup> In short, this form of representation “has the explicit purpose of distancing those who are observed from the time of the observer, a denial of coeval time.”<sup>32</sup> This distancing between the modern and non-modern becomes a measuring rod for how far Western Civilization has evolved in comparison to the stagnant, religious Others.

The sheikh’s criticism of me had to do with this humiliating context, a feeling of defeat at the hands of the West that many Muslims face. My connection to gender critique was understood by the sheikh as coming from the West, fueling his anger against me. My remarks were interpreted as another judgmental intervention by the West, where the latter placed itself at the center of world history, demanding the rest of the world to bow before the shrine of progress that it best represented. But to bow to this shrine is a painful insult to your own God, acting as “hidden injuries of civilizational discourse,” to use an analogy coined by Richard Sennett and Jonathan Cobb when discussing the humiliating impact of upper class discourses of merit on the poor.<sup>33</sup> Indeed, if you look at the discourses of class, race, gender and civilization from the point of view of those who hold power, you will find in all of them a similar pattern of forcing the subaltern to pay respect to a small sector of the world population in the most humiliating and disrespectful manner.

But rather than simply being victims of modernity than creative users of it, religious folks of the subaltern classes invented new versions of modernity that challenged the norms of Western notions of progress. That is, Islamists had to create alternative symbols in which they dressed themselves with competing badges of dignity. Their alternative versions of modernity in the form of Islamic cultural performances were informed by their knowledge of a world-system hierarchy of civilizations. In other words, by being fed a version of modernity that was ultimately racist, Islamists were forced to reject Western-sanctioned notions of proper modernity for that of a perceived authentic religion.

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<sup>31</sup> This analysis is borrowed from Joseph Massad’s study of Jordanian nationalism (2001: 77-78). Massad’s analysis is an adaptation of Johannes Fabian’s, *Time and the Other* (1983).

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 78.

<sup>33</sup> See Richard Sennett and Jonathan Cobb, *The Hidden Injuries of Class* (New York: Vintage Books, Sennett, 1993).

Given the history of our modern racially stratified world, including the activities of many of its secular social movements, the sheikh’s view of me is not surprising, I may even say understandable. His understanding of “Islam” as religious and the “West” as secular, after all, runs deep in the way the modern world is constructed, as the late Edward Said has shown so effectively in his writings. Indeed, browsing the shelves of any bookstore, it is clear that many contemporary scholars make the assertion that religion is the main culprit of the current world disorder, with a large number of publications with boasting titles such as Christopher Hitchens’s *God Is Not Great*, Hector Avalos’s *Fighting Words: The Origins of Religious Violence*, Steve Bruce’s *God Is Dead: Secularization in the West*, and Sam Harris’s *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror, and the Future of Reason*. Such accounts often pose an underlying assumption that religion has become static within a modern social context, thus wavering “between a sterile conservation of its pre-modern characteristics and a self-effacing assimilation to the secularized world.”<sup>34</sup> The linear, narrative model of history that modern scholars use lends itself to the notion that modern and secular identities have replaced obsolete and dangerous religious systems that belong to a “pre-modern” world. In this view, religion and modernity, as Anthony Smith illustrates, “figure as two terms in the conventional distinction between tradition and modernity, and in an evolutionary framework that sees an inevitable movement—whether liberating or destructive—from the one to the other.”<sup>35</sup> Such a reading of modernity is thus one of increasing rationality and progress, heralding an age of secularism, while simultaneously replacing the old and decrepit politics of religion. In turn, religious social dynamics are understood as preceding those of a secular modernity insofar that the former characterizes “the ‘traditional society’ from which the transition to modernity began and [modern] nations later emerged.”<sup>36</sup> The logical conclusion of this view, in which religion becomes inherently antithetical to modernity, is that only secular and rational scholars can legitimately resolve conflicts that are based upon irrational scriptures. As Hector Avalos forcefully proclaims: “Our final mission, as scholars of these scriptures, must be to help humanity close the book on a long chapter of human misery.” And further: “A sound foreign policy...must include an educational program that convinces world citizens that violence about resources that do not exist [namely religious], or that cannot be verified to exist, is against their own interest.”<sup>37</sup>

In Edward Said’s view, such binary construction of “Islam” and the “West” is inextricably tied to the colonial experience.<sup>38</sup> That is, binaries of this sort allow colonial powers to portray themselves, in the words of Peter van der Veer and Hartmut Lehmann, as “an enlightened and rational race of rulers who had to lead and develop the [colonized], who were steeped in ancient prejudices and communal violence.”<sup>39</sup> Perhaps the crudity of this binary is most clearly expressed by Sam Harris: “It is not merely that we are at war with an otherwise peaceful religion that has been ‘hijacked’ by extremists. We are at war with precisely the vision of life that is prescribed to all Muslims in the Koran...”<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Peter Van der Veer and Hartmut Lehmann, *Nation and Religion: Perspectives on Europe and Asia* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1999), 10.

<sup>35</sup> Anthony Smith, *Chosen Peoples* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 9.

<sup>36</sup> Anthony Smith, *Chosen Peoples* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 10.

<sup>37</sup> Hector Avalos, *Fighting Words: The Origins of Religious Violence* (Amherst, New York: Prometheus Books, 2005), 378. The cited text in the previous sentence is from the same page.

<sup>38</sup> Said, 1979.

<sup>39</sup> Van der Veer and Lehmann, 1999: 10.

<sup>40</sup> Sam Harris, *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror, and the Future of Reason* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2005), 106.

I believe this is the paradox that progressives must deal with. The fact is that progressive discourses unfortunately have been – maybe incorrectly – perceived by many today as emanating from the West. Even though I hold the belief that our political identities are more consequential than our locational grounding in our stratified world-system, we have to find ways to speak to injustice in a manner that allows us to negate the equation of our (secular) politics with that of “the West.” The fact that historically many on the left, including Marxists, used modernist secularist discourses of progress in ways that were similar to liberal and conservative discourses is still haunting us today. Even after genuine effort by many in the New Left to remove this ugly past from our political projects, the aftershock of the old social movements remain, and their institutions are still in the process of crumbling even as we begin to build new ones. But even though we are constructing new and improved political projects, we have a long way to go before we can convince others that we have shed the skin of our ancestors. This will take serious work on our part, rethinking our ideological collusion with some of the racist strains of enlightenment thought. The past intellectual and political allegiances of these secular social movements—with the ethos of a racialized construct of “the religious” in enlightenment thought—weighs heavily on the living subaltern’s consciousness.

Sayyid Qutb, a leading figure in Islamist politics, is a reminder of this political reality we find ourselves in today. In 1906, Qutb was born in the rural town of Musha, located within the Asyut Province, some two hundred miles south of Cairo, where he witnessed firsthand the demise of liberal, as well as socialist Egyptian regimes. During the seven decades of his life, he transformed from a fairly secular and successful literary figure into a radical Islamist, and he would become best known for his writings of 1949 onward, which assumed the latter tone. His intellectual influence on the Islamist movement remains unparalleled. He quickly sized up secularism’s weaknesses, capturing well the problems of the old social movements as early as 1964: “The communists failed. The nationalist leaders failed. The secularists totally failed. Now the field is empty of all ideologies – except Islam... Now at this most critical time when turmoil and confusion reign, it is the turn of Islam, of the *Umma* to play its role. Islam’s time has come.”

While Turkish Kemalists and Arab nationalists rationalized secularization as an important step in the direction of modernizing the nation in their effort to emulate Western developmentalist discourse, Sayyid Qutb understood such discourses as an assault on Islam. Paraphrasing Qutb, Abu-Rabi states, “the white man exploits us to the fullest, and any mention of modernization by the colonizer and his numerous ‘intellectual slaves’ is a travesty of justice”.<sup>41</sup> In this view, far from moving humanity forward, such projects were understood as disastrous and antithetical to human development and progress: “Mankind today is on the brink of a precipice, not because of the danger of complete annihilation which is hanging over its head – this being just a symptom and not the real disease – but because humanity is devoid of those vital values for its healthy development and real progress”.<sup>42</sup>

Further, Qutb insisted that the only system capable of meaningful progress was the *din* of Islam.<sup>43</sup> He was especially repulsed by elites who purported to represent the Muslim world with agendas of “reforming” Islam to meet the requirements of the modern world. Indeed, Qutb replaced the standard ideal of Western progress with that of Qur’anic vision, calling for a return to the rightly guided Islam, which, in his view, had long established a way of life far superior to what secular regimes proposed: “[Islam] has come to change *jahiliyyah*, not to continue it, to elevate mankind from its depravity, and not to bless its manifestations masked under the euphemism of “civilization”... We

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<sup>41</sup> Abu-Rabi 1996: 134

<sup>42</sup> Qutb, 1990: 5

<sup>43</sup> Qutb, 1990: 6

reject all [*jahili* systems], as indeed they are retrogressive and in opposition to the direction toward which Islam is leading”.<sup>44</sup> Obvious in this short discussion is that Qutb’s perception of the post-colonial condition hinged upon a notion that the historical remnants of Western colonialism and Western penetration had outlived direct colonialism. What made his argument legitimate was the underlying ontological construction of a racialized civilizational discourse that had long preceded him in Europe and elsewhere.

I believe that our future success depends on our awareness of our past mistake of equating modernity with progress and secularism while placing religion at the lowest level of humanity barely above the devil himself. We have to include non-secular voices, people that can speak to power while simultaneously calling on Allah to dismantle the shrines of the powerful. The chanting of *Allahu Akhbar* is not the sole property of Islamists, nor is progressive politics the sole property of our secular shrines. The New Left must build a movement that has a truly universalistic mosque/party if we are to finally break free from the East/West binaries to which the Old Left worldview held us hostage. There are many religious voices out there that stand close to our own ideals of social justice. The new social movements have to open their doors wide—with respect—and invite them in as true and equal members in our construction of a new and improved world-system. Otherwise prepare yourself for a world Left that has never truly shed the racist skin of its past, comprised mainly of elitist intellectuals who find themselves sitting on the margins while a subaltern class of people develop their own badges of dignity and who are too busy resisting the Darth Vaders of this world to give a damn about our secular shrines.

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<sup>44</sup> Qutb, 1990: 118. *Jahiliyyah* is a central term in Qutb’s work. As William Sheperd argues, *Jahiliyyah* is generally translated as “The Age of Ignorance,” and understood to refer to the time before Muhammad; Qutb radicalizes the term, describing it as “the rule of humans by humans.” As Sheperd writes, the “defining characteristic of *ja’ hiliyya* [for Qutb] is that it rejects divine authority for human authority.” See William E. Sheperd, “Sayyid Qutb’s Doctrine of Jahiliyyah,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* (2003), 35: 522, 524.

## ***Part II - Jeffrey Stout's Secular and the Liberal Arts***

*Jonathon S. Kahn*

For the last three years, four liberal arts schools—Bucknell University and Macalester, Williams and Vassar colleges—have participated in a Teagle Foundation study entitled “Secularity and the Liberal Arts.” On my view, it is an unfortunate title for this study. Understanding why gets at the heart not only of the deep lessons of the study, but also at some larger pressing concerns about the status of terms like “secularity” and “secularism” in contemporary American society.

Let’s say you knew nothing of the conversations and research that the scholars and students from these four liberal arts institutions engaged in during the Teagle study. Let’s say all you knew of the project was the title, “Secularity and the Liberal Arts.” And let’s say you did some further slight research, and found the mission statements of the four participating liberal arts institutions. On reading those mission statements, you would find that only one, Williams College, mentions the word religion—once—and no where, of course, is a specific religion mentioned. Indeed, the mission statements of all four liberal arts institutions bristle with hallmark phrases of liberal pluralism. Take Vassar College’s for example. The values and pedagogical perspectives that Vassar holds dear are notions like: “respect for diversity,” “diversity of perspectives,” “diverse intellectual interests of students,” “recognition of different types of knowledge,” “a willingness to engage in ethical debate in a spirit of reasonable compromise,” and “the achievement of balance between emotional engagement and intellectual detachment.”

On their face, these are certainly noble and wonderful values. They promise students the ability to appreciate (to “respect” and “recognize”) without judging differing viewpoints; and they promise that students will be equipped with a type of reason and critical modulation in order to achieve these ends. All of these embody what many of us reflexively understand as a secular worldview. The terms of this secular liberalism allow for personal religious commitment, yet work fast to delimit its reach when it comes into conflict with other “types of knowledge.” Reading more closely, it seems not too much to suggest that these liberal arts institutions come close to renouncing the possibility that a student’s engagements either in or out of the classroom might be *guided* or *governed* by a single religious perspective. Finally, there is little mention that part of a liberal arts education might be well used to build commitments to a single religious perspective or tradition. In these mission statements, religion is, as Stanley Hauerwas might say, fairly well policed.

Knowing this—knowing only the title of the study, “Secularity and the Liberal Arts” and hearing of the place that religious commitment has in these institutions’ mission statements—it seems utterly reasonable to conclude that the “secularity” of the Teagle Foundation study is committed to building some version of a wall-of-separation between the pedagogical goods of a liberal arts education and religious commitment. This is the secularism of the “naked public square” where common “reasonable” assumptions flourish and reasons particular to religion are disallowed. To be sure, where to build that wall will require some discussion. But a wall must be built.

Assuming this about “Secularity and the Liberal Arts” would be extremely unfortunate. For what we have been doing—in our study groups, in our fieldwork, and in our conference planning—has been to resolutely question the idea that religion is something that needs or can justifiably be regulated or cordoned off in liberal arts settings. In other words, what we have been doing is questioning the very validity of a secularism conceived of as common reason shorn of religious viewpoints. First, most of

us have come through the fires of post-modern criticisms of Enlightenment reason to agree that no discourse exists without interests, purposes, and perspectives. This holds for “reason” as much as any discourse. Thus, when reason no longer has access to clarifying klieg lights, the secularity of the naked public square is epistemologically dead. Second, part of what all of us (re)learned about liberal arts education is its deep and abiding commitment to the virtues of free expression. The virtues of free expression for our campuses represent not only a politico-legal embrace of the First-Amendment. We also heard voices among us extolling the virtues of free expression in terms that Foucault might call the “care of the self.” That is, part of what liberal arts colleges do is allow students to become who they are by having the room to search and interrogate their commitments, especially religious commitments, in public ways. Above all, we found, this includes the desire to make religious views known in the classroom.

The irony here is critical. If the title “Secularity and the Liberal Arts” is to be at all self-descriptive, then clearly what the participants in the Teagle project mean by secularity is actually quite different from the notion of secularity embodied in these same institutions’ mission statements. In other words, the notion of secularity that emerges from the Teagle project *rejects* the idea of a common notion of reason, *rejects* the idea that religion is a discourse that should be subject to special rules restricting it, and *encourages* the expression of views *guided or governed by* religious commitments. In short, the notion of secularity that emerges from the Teagle project is at odds with secularism conventionally or commonly understood. What I think we saw in our project was an organic emergence of a *revalued* conception of secularity for liberal arts campuses. On these terms, a more evocative title for the project might be something like, “The Liberal Arts and the Transformation of the Secular.”

### Jeffrey Stout’s Secular

Wither this conception of the secular? There is no theorist more crucial to this discussion than Jeffrey Stout. His recent large work *Democracy and Tradition* and shorter works such as “The Folly of Secularism” represent, to my mind, full-bodied attempts at a Nietzschean reevaluation of the very idea of secularity. In essence, Stout is trying to convince democratically minded citizens of all stripes—religious or not—that it is possible to be committed to a type of *secularization* that is not synonymous with an “unrestricted” *secularism* devoted to “minimiz[ing] the influence of religion on all aspects of human life.”<sup>45</sup> Stout’s distinction between “secularization” and “secularism” is central to his work; the terms function as terms of art to mark out different models of discourse:

What makes a form of discourse secularized, according to my account, is not the tendency of the people participating in it to relinquish their religious beliefs or to refrain from employing them as reasons. The mark of secularization, as I use the term, is rather the fact that participants in a given discursive practice are not in a position to take for granted that their interlocutors are making the same religious assumptions they are. This is the sense in which public discourse in modern democracies tends to be secularized.<sup>46</sup>

The heart of Stout’s secularization is his insistence on becoming conscious of the real and ineliminable differences between full-fledged democratic citizens. Stout’s secularization does not intend to disarm these citizens of their religious commitments because “citizens who hold one or another set of religious commitments could be rationally entitled to those commitments.”<sup>47</sup> Under

<sup>45</sup> Jeffrey Stout, “The Folly of Secularism,” Presidential Address, American Academy of Religion, November 2007.

<sup>46</sup> Jeffrey Stout, *Democracy and Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 97.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 99.

secularization, it is *reasonable* to be religious. And under secularization, it is the duty of all democratic citizens to consider how one’s own commitments might be heard by citizens with differing commitments.

Stout’s work represents a decisive intervention in discussions of American religion and public politics. Stout pushes the discursive terrain away from debates between “wall of separation” secularists who want to censor all traces of religiosity from public affairs and Christian political theologians who want to turn America into a theocratic state. Instead, Stout points us toward a promising discussion between religious and non-religious citizens who are acutely aware that the demands of secularized democratic life require an extraordinary balance between prizing and cherishing one’s own convictions and the awareness that these same prized and cherished convictions at times may act as a bludgeon against other democratic citizens. By pragmatically eliminating the need to discuss whether we should be talking about religion in public—for Stout there is no other way—Stout initiates us into a more pressing conversation: how are we to have this discussion between differing theological perspectives. Here is where work remains.

### **Stout’s Secularization and the Liberal Arts**

I want to suggest that the efforts of our study “Secularity and the Liberal Arts” might be seen as working through Stout’s distinction between secularism and secularization. If we are to be honest with ourselves, we might allow that many of us began as secularists, committed to what many of us thought of as a sense of fairness in policing religious convictions. This is a notion of the college, university, and the liberal arts that Alasdair MacIntyre attributes to the “Ninth Edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*” in which the “Encyclopaedia would have displaced the Bible as the canonical book, or set of books, of the culture.”<sup>48</sup> For the liberal arts to make this move—to exclude the Bible and religious thought as a viable type of cultural knowledge—would be to separate itself from American culture, not prepare its students for life in American culture, and perhaps move liberal arts education toward cultural irrelevance. Under secularization, no such move is warranted.

What Stout’s secularization demands from its participants is that each thinks of his or her civic responsibility in terms of learning a moral, religious, historical, or philosophical language not his or her own. That is, for Stout, the way to begin having discussions between different theological perspectives is to begin to learn the terms and syntax of different theological perspectives. On this view, a liberal arts institution as a whole might conceive of itself, first, as teaching “languages” in all its departments. And second, a liberal arts institution would also teach its students to engage in what Stout calls “immanent criticism” in which I would “make a concerted attempt to show how *your* idiosyncratic premises give *you* reason to accept my conclusions.”<sup>49</sup> For Stout, immanent criticism signals a “real respect for others” in “tak[ing] seriously the distinctive point of view *each* other occupies.”<sup>50</sup> To be sure, learning the language of another does demonstrate real respect. But I also don’t want to minimize the combativeness in Stout’s model. For Stout, the purposes of immanent criticism are to change the minds of those whom you disagree with by arguing why by their very own terms they should think differently.

We need to see that this model of respect is wholly different from the notion of respect in, say, Vassar’s mission statement. There “respect” and “recognition” for different viewpoints seems to be

<sup>48</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre, *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry: Encyclopaedia, Genealogy, and Tradition* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990), 19.

<sup>49</sup> Stout, *Democracy and Tradition*, 72, emphasis original.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 73, emphasis original.



in the service of simply acknowledging that these viewpoints exist. There is nothing in the Vassar mission statement that in any way speaks of trying to argue with this different language. This notion of respect offers no way of qualitatively assessing different viewpoints.

Stout’s immanent criticism explicitly puts argument at the heart of the liberal arts education—the key, though, is that we need to learn to argue on terms different from our own. On this view liberal arts education is not a mannered affair; its mission is not to allay hostilities. Immanent criticism stokes differences, though not by having people yell at each other from across the room in their home languages, but by insisting that objections be phrased in the language of those to whom they object.<sup>51</sup> In fact, Stout speaks of a vision of liberal arts education that ironically, given their many other disagreements, resembles MacIntyre’s, who conceives of “the university as a place of constrained disagreement, of imposed participation in conflict, in which a central responsibility of higher education would be to initiate students into conflict.”<sup>52</sup> Stout’s “secularization” produces a model of liberal arts education that has its own form of “constrained disagreement”; Stout’s “constraints” actually force participants to learn and take the terms of one’s interlocutor very seriously.<sup>53</sup>

While Stout’s model of respect—immanent criticism—is one that liberal arts campuses would do well to consider, I do want to raise some questions about its terms. Stout’s immanent criticism seems to assume that its goal is to bring our interlocutors to a position that resembles our own, just in their terms. Perhaps I am wrong on this, but it appears that Stout’s immanent criticism is underwritten by the certainty that we are right and they are wrong, and all we need to do is to figure out a way to make their wrongness convincingly clear to them. Yet, we all can’t be Socrates, which is to say that as we begin to argue on others’ premises, we may well find that we cannot convince them of our view because their view is in fact rational given their premises. If immanent criticism is restricted to convincing others that their position is wrong, we need to consider the possibility of immanent criticism failing.

Here we might adjust the terms of immanent criticism. We would want to note that the potential of learning to speak another language might redound back on our own, for when we speak in another tongue we might find out what is wrong with ours. I’ve had that experience “speaking with” Christian pacifists texts: I’m neither a Christian nor a pacifist, but their language has made me rethink my norms of force and violence. We might also want to change the terms of immanent criticism by borrowing from Anthony Appiah’s “cosmopolitanism.” Appiah argues that effects of publicly exchanging reasons is not so much in the quality of the reasons than in the practice of exchange; learning about the reasons others hold helps because we “get used to each other” and not

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<sup>51</sup> For example, Stout is tremendously compelled by Eugene Rogers work on homosexuality and Christianity because Rogers provides theologically rigorous Christian arguments that license same-sex marriage; this gives Stout tools with which to talk immanently to conservative Christians about homosexuality Stout writes: “If this conclusion can be made in plausible terms on an intramural basis, it can also be made to serve the purposes of immanent criticism by interested fellow citizens who would like to see same-sex marriage legally recognized for their own non-religious reasons.” See Jeffrey Stout, “How Charity Transcends the Culture Wars: Eugene Rogers and Others on Same-Sex Marriage,” *Journal of Religious Ethics* 31:2 (2003): 180.

<sup>52</sup> See MacIntyre’s essay, “Reconceiving the University as an Institution and the Lecture as Genre” in *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry*, 230-31. Stout’s disagreements and respect for MacIntyre run deep. See Stout’s *Ethics After Babel* and *Democracy and Tradition* for his critique of MacIntyre’s caricature of democratic liberalism as lacking coherence and norms of tradition.

<sup>53</sup> MacIntyre does not explore this. Where MacIntyre and Stout differ sharply is on Stout’s insistence that participating in evaluative conversation demands learning multiple languages. MacIntyre envisions conversations in which both sides continue to speak in and on their own terms. I am not sure, on this model, how conflict is either judged or resolved.

because we come to cognitive agreement.<sup>54</sup> On this model, immanent criticism still remains evaluative, but we might stop thinking of its success in terms of whether we can persuade our interlocutors of our rectitude.

Nevertheless, we need here in the liberal arts to take Stout’s reevaluation of “secularization” and run with it. We need to rise to its adjurations to speak multiple philosophical, moral, and religious discourses. We need to see disagreements between discourses as opportunities to learn how to speak more fluently in unfamiliar languages. Indeed, we very well also might see those disagreements as Socratic, leading our disputants to conclusions closer to our own. At the same time we need to do a better job of responding to the deep dialogical nature of immanent criticism by letting it affect our own discourses where it can. Finally, perhaps we need to spend more time attending to the terms of the debate. Might it be useful to insist on a distinction between “secularism” and “secularity” where we would make secularity our own? In the fullness of time, with on-going devoted efforts to becoming secularized, liberal arts education might affect the larger culture—so that when that culture hears the title, “Secularity and the Liberal Arts,” it thinks: Religion and democracy live within those gates.

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<sup>54</sup> See Kwame Anthony Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers* (New York: Norton, 2006), 72-78.

## **Appendix A – Notes on Methodologies for Qualitative Research**

At Williams College, the Teagle “Big Questions/Secularity” project conducted four student focus groups during the spring and summer of this year; twenty-six students participated in all. Additionally, five staff members participated this fall in a focus group for administrators working in various student services capacities. Each of these sessions lasted one hour and fifteen minutes. Fourteen faculty members preferred the setting of a continuing discussion group, working with the same questions that were put to the focus groups; the faculty group met five times through the fall for a total of seven and a half hours.

Six focus groups, four student groups, one faculty group, and one administrator/staff group, were conducted at Vassar. A total of 17 students, 15 women and two men, participated in the discussions. The faculty group consisted of two women and two men while the administrator/staff group consisted of four women and three men. Each focus group discussion lasted between an hour and a half and two hours. All of the discussions were videotaped. The videotapes were later transcribed and formed the basis of the data analysis described below.

## Appendix B – Current and Childhood Religious Identifications of the Participants

### Mid-Atlantic University

Tables 1 and 2 respectively present information on the current and childhood religious identifications of students and Tables 3 and 4 provide comparable information on members of the faculty and staff. Students reported holding their current religious identifications for 3 to 41 years, with a mean of 13.4. For members of the faculty and staff, the figures ranged from 3 to 55 years, with a mean of 22.3.

Table 1: Current Religious Identifications of Student Participants

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Religious Identification	Frequency
Christian	3 (25%)
None	3 (25%)
Catholic	2 (16.7%)
Evangelical Christian	1 (8.3%)
Jewish	1 (8.3%)
Muslim	1 (8.3%)
Presbyterian	1 (8.3%)

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Table 2: Childhood Religious Identifications of Student Participants

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Religious Identification	Frequency
Catholic	4 (33.3%)
Presbyterian	2 (16.7%)
Evangelical Christian	1 (8.3%)
Jewish	1 (8.3%)
Lutheran	1 (8.3%)
Multiple	1 (8.3%)
Muslim	1 (8.3%)
None	1 (8.3%)

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Table 3: Current Religious Identifications of Faculty & Staff Participants

Religious Identification	Frequency
Unitarian Universalist	3 (25%)
Catholic	2 (16.7%)
None	2 (16.7%)
Jewish	1 (8.3%)
Methodist	1 (8.3%)
Multiple	1 (8.3%)
Presbyterian	1(8.3%)
Secular Humanist	1 (8.3%)

Table 4: Childhood Religious Identifications of Faculty & Staff Participants

Religious Identification	Frequency
Catholic	5 (41.6%)
Multiple	2 (1.7%)
Baptist	1 (8.3%)
Jewish	1 (8.3%)
Lutheran	1 (8.3%)
Methodist	1 (8.3%)
Presbyterian	1(8.3%)

**Northeast College**

Tables 5 and 6 present the childhood and current religious identifications of the student sample at Northeast College, respectively. Tables 7 and 8 present the childhood and current religious identification for members of the faculty and administrators/staff groups at Northeast College, respectively.

Table 5: Childhood Religious Identifications of Northeast College Student Participants

Religious Identification	Frequency
Jewish	4 (23.5%)
Catholic	3 (17.6%)

Quaker	2 (11.7%)
Christian Orthodox	2 (11.7%)
Christian	2 (11.7%)
Hindu	1 (5.8%)
Chinese Buddhist	1 (5.8%)
Tao/Buddhist	1 (5.8%)
Agnostic	1 (5.8%)

Table 6: Current Religious Identifications of Northeast College Student Participants

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Religious Identification	Frequency
No longer practicing	5 (29.4%)
Jewish	2 (11.7%)
Orthodox Christian	2 (11.7%)
Christian*	2 (11.7%)
Quaker	1 (5.8%)
Hindu	1 (5.8%)
Buddhist	1 (5.8%)
Tibetan Buddhist	1 (5.8%)
Atheist	1 (5.8%)
Agnostic	1 (5.8%)

\* Reported as “Non-Denominational” and “Non-Affiliated.”

Table 7: Childhood Religious Identifications of Northeast College Faculty & Administrator/Staff Participants

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Religious Identification	Frequency
Catholic	7 (63.6%)
Atheist	2 (18.2%)
Baptist	1 (9.2%)
Congregationalist	1 (9.2%)

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Table 8: Current Religious Identifications of Northeast College Faculty & Administrator/Staff Participants

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Religious Identification	Frequency
Atheist	3 (27.2%)
Catholic	2 (18.2%)
Congregationalist	1 (9.2%)
Baptist	1 (9.2%)
Episcopalian	1 (9.2%)
Christian*	1 (9.2%)
Buddhist	1 (9.2%)
None	1 (9.2%)

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## Appendix C – Faculty-Chaplain Study Groups

1. **Program:** Faculty-Administrator Study Group

2. **Campus:** Bucknell University

3. **Group Membership:** Members of the study group included: the Assistant Dean of Students, the Director of International Student Services, the Asst. Director of Institutional Research and Assessment, three members of the University Chaplaincy, and faculty from the following disciplines: Management, Anthropology, Economics, Religion, Education, and Physics. The group also conducted a faculty workshop attended by 40 faculty.

4. **Activities:** Our primary activity has continued to be convening regular monthly meetings of our faculty and administration study group.

Professor Joseph Murray and his research student Jeff Manning completed the qualitative focus groups and produced a significant written and Powerpoint presentation, which was presented to the faculty/administration study group and the Religious Group Advisors and student leaders.

In addition, the faculty/administration study group, working with the new Teaching and Learning Center, held a well-attended faculty workshop on “Secularism, Religion, Teaching and Student Engagement” on November 2, 2007.

Members of the study group are also engaged in individual projects. Prof. Paul Macdonald has submitted a paper to a major journal on the role of the teaching of theology in a secular liberal arts setting, and Prof. Greg Krohn has submitted a paper on secularity, religion and the teaching of economics.

Readings included: Association of American Colleges and Universities *Liberal Education* issue for Spring 2007; sections from Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*; articles by Jürgen Habermas and José Casanova.

5. **Significant Learnings:** The project set out to explore how being a “secular” university is defined and how that affects the educational work of the university. Through the project, we discovered that even raising the topic in today’s politically-charged climate excites anxious responses from religionist and secularist faculty/administrators alike, at first. “Secular” means many different things to different people. But as soon as faculty/administrators saw this as an open-ended discussion without a specific agenda, the conversation quickly turned to a positive discussion of classroom situations, advising, curricular choices, science/religion questions and a host of problematic issues at the “secular boundary” where disciplines, professor-student relationships, and advising meet.

Our research affirmed that Bucknell was different from Macalester, Vassar and Williams. For example, Bucknell students, faculty and administrators said that at Bucknell the presumption is that one is religious, while the other three said the presumption on their campuses was that you were not. Generally, Bucknell students were more open to traditional religious expression and less likely to be individualist spiritual “seekers.” But, Bucknell students were also less likely to make connections between religion and community service, global issues, personal morality, etc. The profile is fascinating, but is more complex than the stereotypes of Bucknell students.

Through our research, we found clear signs that faculty and students affirm the secular nature of Bucknell’s educational program as essential to the neutrality and openness of academic work, but



many wonder if we are doing a good job of educating students to engage in difficult conversations about religion, politics, race, etc. if we avoid the issues. Generally, we found that students, faculty and administrators were confused about where the secular boundary lay and this encouraged anxiety and silence. But, our studies also affirmed that there is significant potential for deepening the discussion of “big questions” when the secular boundary is discussed with students and treated as a subject of academic study and pedagogical experiment itself. We found that many students come at the “big questions” of truth, justice, meaning and happiness through their religious and spiritual traditions, and need guidance at the points where academic study and personal values intersect if education is to have an impact on their world-view. We also believe that consciously engaging these issues in the curriculum and pedagogy of the university would better prepare students for citizenship in a diverse society.

**6. Challenges:** Time has been the main challenge, but our faculty and administrators have been wonderful and flexible. Also, we’ve had to recognize that our original idea of a unified Bucknell approach to these questions wasn’t realistic. We need to approach the community carefully, and approach faculty more with stories of different ways faculty engage these issues than with the deeper theory or a one-size-fits-all model.

**7. Continuing Activities/Concluding Reflections:** The faculty and administration study group has enthusiastically decided to keep meeting next year. They would like to work with Academic Affairs to develop a series of ideas: presentations of the grant project research results to faculty and administrative groups, a possible survey of courses that emphasize “big questions” content, new “Integrated Perspectives” course proposals, new Foundation Seminar proposals, more faculty workshops on “big questions” and secularity with the Teaching and Learning Center, follow-up comparison studies of quantitative research from the NSSE, CSBV, and HERI first year and senior surveys across the four institutions, a possible honors thesis for Jeff Manning next year on “big questions” research, keeping in touch with the other four institutions and pursuing further grants for continued exploration, and many other ideas to be coordinated with the Provost’s Office.

*Prepared by: Ian Oliver*

1. **Program:** Faculty Study Group

2. **Campus:** Macalester College

3. **Group Membership:** Our faculty members included professors from Sociology, German, Political Science, Religious Studies, Humanities, Media and Cultural Studies, and French and an administrator from Religious and Spiritual Life (the Associate Dean and College Chaplain).

4. **Activities:** This academic year we continued our monthly meetings centered on readings and on-going questions, but the focus of the questions shifted more often and more explicitly to issues of pedagogy and course development, with special attention to whether and how to co-teach common issues across disciplines. We returned again and again to the idea of cluster teaching, but were stymied as to how to pull it off, given our differing leave schedules and the needs of our discipline-defined departments. What follows is a brief summary of the kinds of readings and the issues we raised in response to them with a conclusion focused on one specific plan we have for next year.

The Macalester group also organized the following faculty-student research projects during the summer, 2007:

Anne Johnson, *Outgrowing Secularity?: A Non-Partisan Solution for the Liberal Arts* (Senior, Double Major: Anthropology and International Studies)

Chen-Yu Wu, *From the Sacred to the Secular: Redefining the Role of Religion in the Liberal Arts Curriculum* (Senior, Major: Sociology)

Urvashi Watal, *Secularization of the Liberal Arts College: A Dilemma for Free Inquiry* (Senior, Double Major: Economics and International Studies)

Katie Harger, *Enlightenment and Equivocation: How Global Citizenship Reconnects Religion and the Liberal Arts* (Senior, Double Major: German and Humanities, Media and Cultural Studies)

5. **Significant Learnings:** This year we began with articles that addressed the so-called secularism thesis, that is, that secularism in Europe and North America, however differently it takes shape in specific nation-states, far from being religiously neutral and value free, reflects a faded form of Protestant Christianity as blended with European Enlightenment values. We concluded unanimously that the religion/secular binary is a mystification that reinforces the authority of the State, in that no government is free of values and practices “untainted” by a religious history, specifically Christianity in the West, and that conversely no religious institution remains unshaped by secularism and its formations. We then made the easy transition to examining the different forms secularism takes across specific nation-states. We examined these differences in the contexts of the conflicts they generated between religious and state institutions and practices. We focused at some length on France and its current governmental policy prohibiting *hijab* in particular and religious garb (unless it is a small cross worn round the neck) in general (see Wallace, *The Politics of the Veil*). We then shifted to governmental policy toward religious practices in the United States. We read, among other things, Sommerville’s *The Decline of the Secular University*, and Asad’s *On Suicide Bombing*—two contrasting views on the relation between religious and political practices in American government, American higher education, and throughout American daily life.

6. **Challenges:** Throughout the year we engaged in heated debated not only with our authors, but also with one another. In part because we serve different student constituencies—differing across discipline-defined majors, differing across levels of course work, and differing between curricular and co-curricular needs, expectations, and desires on the part of students—we saw the college itself, its stated purposes, its actual make-up, and student life itself in highly variable, sometimes conflicting ways. We tended to agree, however, that no system or world-view is value-free and that our shared role was to render transparent the workings of values and power in relation to lived existence, with deep respect for religious and cultural differences. We tended to agree that our shared job was to enrich our students’ lives and empower them to define and address the issues we all face, if there is to be a human future. Toward the end of the spring semester most of us realized that we did not want the seminar to end, that the questions that we asked were themselves “big questions” that were by nature ongoing in the making of socio-cultural, political, economic, and religious life. Over the course of the year, we actually met three extra times—once in the fall and twice in the spring. Most of us concurred that we needed this kind of intellectual struggle, nurture, trust, and companionship, some of us noting that this was in fact part of why we had entered academia to begin with.

7. **Continuing Activities:** We still hold out hope for the clustered first-year seminar, that is, that a group of us will agree to teach courses from our disciplinary perspectives that share common themes, overlapping assignments, and jointly sponsored events. This coming year we are trying to make a small step in this direction. Three of us have agreed to share a single text, the Asad text, *On Suicide Bombing*, and to try to put together the funds to bring Asad to campus. We hope to invite him to give a general lecture and to hold a small faculty seminar the next day. The main difficulty to overcome, as always, is to find the faculty time to do the work it takes to raise the funds and to bring the speaker. We shall see.

In conclusion, speaking only for myself, I find that this seminar further confirmed to me that the idea that somehow on college campuses faculty separate secularism and values to the extent that students are prohibited from asking the so-called big questions is utterly misconceived and potentially damaging to what faculty at colleges like Macalester accomplish. I do think that we need to make as clear as possible why we do what we do the way we do it—why we question so much what others take for granted and hold dear, why we do it in so relentless and thoroughgoing a fashion, why we expect our students ultimately to do the same in an analytical manner. I personally think that we who teach, when we are at our best, are a lively, contentious bunch who inspire our students to think and do far more than they previously imagined possible, with great care, creativity, and passion.

*Prepared by: Paula M. Coeey*

1. **Program:** Faculty Study Group

2. **Campus:** Williams College

3. **Group Membership:** In the fall of 2007 fourteen members of the faculty gathered for five 75-minute sessions of collegial conversation about the meaning of “secular” as a descriptor of the institution, its pedagogies and its culture of campus life. The Chaplain to the College convened the group, extending invitations to faculty members who had previously expressed interest in the Teagle project or in the growing sense of pluralism on our campus. Both tenured and junior faculty responded, representing disciplines from fine arts, language and literature to history, social and natural sciences and mathematics.

4. **Activities:** As the conversations began, we were fresh from the process of collating qualitative data from five focus groups, convened over the preceding spring and summer: four groups of students (26 in all) and one group of six student life administrators. The preliminary summary of this data proved to be a provocative point of departure for the conversation.

In the first session, faculty participants responded to the goals outlined in the Teagle project description. Conversation began with a first round of probing of the word “secular” – and then quickly turned to reflection on matters of pedagogy. A key moment in the conversation came when one English professor invited his colleagues to think about a moment in class when a discussion suddenly seemed to arrive at a threshold on the other side of which conversation would enter the realm of “big questions” and the personal commitments of faith and conscience (on the part of students, the professor, or both) they sometimes provoke – and to describe their own strategizing in the moment. One commented, “we privilege rationality;” another, “when there is a danger of my voice and the text’s voice getting blurred, I privilege the text.” One scientist noted how seldom, in his classes, he directs attention to the question, “*why* are we doing this?”

The focal point of the second session was the basic goal of the project of teaching. Conversation touched on guiding students to essential information, the inculcation of critical thinking skills, character formation and citizenship, and the nature of pedagogical authority. One wondered whether teaching critical thinking by asking the “big question” “What do you stand for - what’s your thesis?” is a form of character development. Much of this session was devoted to describing strategies for deflecting students’ attempts to project onto them the explicit task of character development; one explained, “I try to take any authority I may have and destroy it; I don’t want that much power.” Another urged his colleagues “not to over-estimate the impact that we have.”

In the third session, attention turned to issues of “self-disclosure” as an ethical and strategic issue in pedagogy. One touchstone for this conversation was a series of recent widely reported incidents of egregious behavior on the part of a few current students; the episodes provoked reflection on whether, and when, a professor might “unveil” his or her own judgments about such matters of public discourse. A difference was noted between talking in class about one’s own experience and unpacking one’s own views; “I use my field experience all the time,” one social scientist noted. A lively contrast was sketched between the fear that self-disclosure will preclude students working out their own thinking and choices, on the one-hand, and the view that Williams students are intellectually competent and independent enough to resist the instinct to parrot a professor’s views.

Participants requested that, in the fourth session, we attempt to identify what, exactly, we mean by “big questions” in the Williams context. The anthology of quotations from the four student focus groups was a focal point. Several participants noted that few of The Big Questions voiced in the transcripts go beyond the personal; most tended to focus on vocation as a singular rather than a communal discernment. For one, the task of teaching is the transformation of a student’s question “what should I do?” into the question “why work – what is work?” Another noted a tendency among students to compartmentalize: “They don’t see what happens in the classroom as part of their lives. I try to show them that these are matters of life and death. Why should ‘The Big Questions’ not include what we’re up to in the classroom?”

The final session, on November 29, began with some notes on the developmental work of young adulthood. One participant noted the evolution proposed by Perry, in Intellectual Development of the College Student, from dualism to relativism to commitment. Another observed that classes in the earlier years are essentially gatherings of individuals; only toward the end of the college project are many students able to move easily between the private and the public realms. And another faculty member acknowledged that he, too, has become more candid about his own values as he teaches than he was at earlier stages in his career. He asked, “When *do* senior members of the faculty and administration stand up and express strongly held beliefs?” There was general agreement that this happens infrequently.

**5. Significant Learnings and Challenges:** Faculty participants agreed that opportunities for cross-disciplinary collegial discussion of pedagogical strategies and challenges in conjunction with issues of values and commitments are rare and valuable. The pattern of student focus on questions of personal vocation at the exclusion of public good was noted. Though a working definition of “secular” remained elusive, it seems clear both that an institutional commitment to secularity is a necessary pre-condition for teaching in our context – and also that the increasingly pluralistic culture of our campus makes any simplistic boundary-drawing that excludes students’ own religious identity and commitments threatens to undermine the cultural diversity that is also an essential pre-condition for learning in our era.

The boundary between chaplaincy and pedagogy remains an elusive but important influence on conversations about secularity in our context. Yet in students’ lives the intellectual and spiritual dimensions of their explorations and learning are not easily teased apart.

**6. Continuing Activities:** Several junior faculty members, upon hearing about the fall 2008 discussion group, have expressed the hope for a sequel – now planned for the winter/spring of 2009. This group will have the advantage of the insights framed in the conclusion of the two-year Teagle-funded project.

### **7. Other Related Activities:**

#### Exhibition of Objects and Artifacts in the Williams College Museum of Art

Amanda Hawley-Hellman, a second-year graduate student in the Williams master’s degree program in art history, created an exhibition of objects from the college’s collection of paintings, sculpture and books and manuscripts focused on the implicit religious questions posed by each object: “The exhibition presents a selection of art objects from the museum’s collection and pairs them with questions to constitute a kind of theological exercise. Theologies are ways of responding to the essential questions around which people build religions. These objects were originally created to

engage devotees of diverse religions, not only during ritual, ceremony, and liturgy, but also mindfulness in everyday life. Art can serve as a vehicle by which we can ask bigger questions about meaning through the lens of different disciplines, such as theology. This presentation considers how art can work upon us theologically. A visual comparison of the art objects extends to the fundamental questions that animate human spirituality and around which religious practices coalesce.”

#### Student Discussion Groups

The Teagle project helped to spawn two continuing student discussion groups, each of which takes a weekly run at some of the "big questions" and the matter of whether, and how, their educational experience helps their work on them. "GodTalk" involves about a dozen students in theological conversation over dinner, based on a Christian platform, wrestling with the points of faith and practice that are the most challenging to integrate into their college experience. "BeanSorters," a group of students who decline to identify themselves with any religious tradition, works on "big questions" in an explicitly "doctrine-free zone"; the purpose is to consider the nature of spirituality, and its place in young adult life.

#### Religion and Science Programs

In conjunction with a project for the Metanexus Foundation, the Chaplain and a Professor of Physics collaborated to produce a series of programs concurrently with the Teagle project. In each of the two years a “Community Seminar” drew on the unique environment of a small college town to bring together local clergy together with scientists in their own congregations to consider key moments in the turbulent history of the relationship between science and religion. Cosmologist Michael Dowd was a guest speaker during this series. In the first year, the group was composed entirely of practicing Christians; in the second year three local Jewish congregations were included as well. And, in the second spring of the Teagle project, a five-session public series of talks “In Celebration of Evolution from a Religious Perspective” brought a biologist, a chemist and a physicist an opportunity to present their work in relationship to religious ideas such as grace, forgiveness and wonder.

*Prepared by the Rev. Richard E. Spalding*

1. **Program:** Faculty-Administrator Study Group

2. **Campus:** Vassar College

3. **Group Membership:** Faculty members from Psychology, Religion, Political Science, English, Biology, Geology, Jewish Studies, Computer Science, Classics, Cognitive Science, and Philosophy; Administration members included the Dean of the College, Dean of Planning and Academic Affairs, two Associate Deans (from the Dean of Faculty Office), and the Director and Assistant Director of the Office of Religious and Spiritual Life; the administrative deans all also serve as faculty members. The group began as an initiative of the Dean of Faculty and Director of Religious and Spiritual Life for a year of dinner conversations prior to the grant period.

4. **Activities:** Across the three years, we met about three times a semester, usually over dinner, with a member of the group taking responsibility for opening the discussion. We worked to link discussions, by assessing what we learned each evening, and deciding what new questions our discussions provoked for future conversations. What we mean by secularity has been a recurrent theme of the project, and we realized early (and often) that secularity is a multi-faceted idea and practice. Figuring out how to understand the many ways in which this set of ideas affects conversations on campus became a major challenge throughout the grant period. We are grateful that W. Robert Connor, President of the Teagle Foundation, was one of our presenters, opening up a lively conversation on his question, “what are the developmental imperatives of our students?” Connor’s question stayed with us in the ways we have tried to articulate developmental models for how students engage their “Big Questions” over the four years of their college career. In the first year, we engaged dilemmas about how to make the theoretical questions of secularity and learning concrete by asking questions of teaching practice. Specifically, we considered the capacities and limits of the secular classroom for examining questions of meaning and purpose (see, for example, the papers above by Ken Livingston and Rachel Kitzinger, which were developed from presentations they made to our group). In the second year we organized a range of discussions to engage a wider campus audience: In the fall semester we offered a public panel on “Secularity, Religion, and Higher Education;” the panel was co-sponsored with the Social Science Research Council, and featured leading scholars in contemporary debates about secularity: senior scholar Rajeev Bhargava, Director of the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies in Delhi, and junior scholars Courtney Bender (Columbia University) and Neil Gross (Harvard University). In the spring semester, we organized a series of conversations with students, sharing the results of our qualitative research, and offering a student roundtable attended by seventy people. Readings discussed included Charles Taylor, “Modes of Secularism,” in *Secularism and its Critics*, ed. Rajeev Bhargava; Lucretius, *De Rerum Natura (The Way Things Are)*; William Connolly, *Why I am Not a Secularist*; Laurel Johnson Black, “Stupid Rich Bastards,” in *This Fine Place So Far From Home: Voices of Academics from the Working Class*, ed. L. Barney and Carolyn Leste Law; Nicholas Wolterstorff, “An Engagement with Rorty.” *Journal of Religious Ethics* 31, no. 1 (2003): 129-139; Richard Rorty, “Religion in the Public Square: A Reconsideration,” *Journal of Religious Ethics* 31, no. 1 (2003): 141-149.

5. **Significant Learnings:** We learned how much asking questions about the “secular” borders of campus life provokes lively and urgent discussions about the structure and practice of liberal arts education. Given our interest in how secular assumptions affect student learning and the “Big Questions” students are (and are not) asking, we learned how to help students see what is at stake in questions that sometimes sound abstract to them, disconnected from their personal lives.

In the last year of the grant, we offered public forums designed to open up conversation (and reveal differences) about what people mean when they describe campus life as “secular.” The opening discussion with leading scholars in the fall provided a helpful overview of current debates, but did not necessarily advance our contextual understanding at Vassar of our students’ experience of secularity or of our own as it relates to our students. What was missing was a sense of what secularity means to students in their everyday interactions on campus with their peers and professors. The focus group discussions we held the previous year in our qualitative research gave us several glimpses into students’ encounters with secularity, of course, but the discussions raised more questions than they answered. What we realized we needed was a deeper and more nuanced examination of the meaning of secularity from our students’ perspective, one that captured their experiences in their own voices. To that end, in the spring, we gathered together a group of students, some of whom had participated in the focus group discussions, and asked them to respond to the question, “At Vassar, are you presumed to be non-religious unless proven otherwise?” The actual roundtable was preceded by a meeting between the students and several of the faculty involved in the project which itself provided a great deal of insight into what secularity means to students and how they must sometimes struggle to reconcile their experiences in the classroom and in their residence halls with what they value and how they value it.

The spring semester student panel thus provided us with valuable contextual analysis and discussion of students’ experiences and dilemmas trying to integrate their religious identities into their education—in the classroom, as well as in the residence halls and other peer communities—and we began to get a much better sense of how secularity is *lived* by students. At the roundtable, we expected the focus would be on students’ classroom experience, but they wanted especially to talk about presumptions of non-religiosity beyond the classroom. Our move to engage student perspectives in the last year of the grant had the effect of anchoring our theoretical interests in student experience in a much more concrete way. As we provide more such forums for privatized religious life to be part of public discussions, we move closer to Jonathon Kahn’s challenge (in his essay above) to see the secular liberal arts as a context for democratic, secular, and religious discourses and debates to thrive.

**6. Challenges:** An important part of what we learned, and found challenging, is how much we need to take care in framing these questions for the larger campus community. One of our early attempts to do this—for student life administrators—gave the impression to some that our project was suggesting that religion or the religious perspective is the only (or best, or primary) path to a full discussion of Big Questions about meaning and purpose in life. Each time we introduced the project to a new campus audience, we found ourselves needing to clarify to people that we do not mean to conflate religion and Big Questions—religions are not the only traditions to engage Big Questions, and religions cannot and should not be reduced to Big Questions. We also found ourselves needing to clarify this project was not an attempt to re-assert the college’s religious (Protestant) past, but to better understand its lingering but not very well considered history.

We also learned clearly that there are some features of campus culture that make serious engagement of Big Questions daunting. The high value placed on avoiding the appearance of giving offence or being uncivil paralyzes students and faculty alike. Uncertainties about where the boundaries are, and whether they are stable, exacerbate the problem. The qualitative research component of the project does seem to provide a way to help the conversation become unstuck—the “research” provides an opening for talking about the integration of experience and coursework our project seeks to enable.



**7. Continuing Activities:** We are organizing a fall workshop in partnership with our Learning, Teaching, and Research Center; we are particularly interested in engaging both faculty and students in conversation about what commitments they feel they must leave at the door when they enter the classroom, and why. We also plan further student roundtables using the question from our qualitative research, “are you presumed to be non-religious unless proven otherwise?” We also plan presentations of our research to student life administrators, the student Inter-Religious Council, and the Inclusion and Excellence Committee as part of its multi-cultural audit.

We are working with our new Office of Institutional Research to better understand what we know from existing survey instruments about the positive and negative impact of spiritual and religious commitments on student learning. We plan to build on our qualitative studies, working with students to develop faculty-student research projects. We also plan to develop a new class, through the “college course” program that is designed for new curricula, to support students integrating their passions and learning across their four years at Vassar. Finally, in conjunction with partners from our grant Working Group, we will prepare an edited collection of essays from the project to submit for publication.

*Prepared by Randolph Cornelius, Ken Livingston, and Samuel Speers*

## Appendix D – Combined Bibliography

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