

The soulless university: Universities need to reclaim a robust attention to the authenticity of religious convictions and practice

by [L. Gregory Jones](#) in the [January 11, 2005](#) issue

It was a few weeks after the election, and the question came at the conclusion of a report I had made to the university trustees. “We have been hearing a lot about red states and blue states, the role of religion in the election, and a lot of other things about religion in public life. There seems to be a lot of division. Could you offer some comments about where you see things?”

It wasn’t the first time I had been asked the question. But this time the context invited me to reflect not only on the status of religious commitment in American life, but also on the role higher education has played and might play in relation to it. Could it be that those of us in long-established institutions of higher education, especially those founded by religious traditions and impulses, have been more a part of the problem than the solution?

Raising the question in this way suggests the complicated predicament of what some have called “the secularization of the academy”—or, as the subtitle of George Marsden’s historical study describes the trajectory, a movement “from Protestant establishment to established nonbelief” (*The Soul of the American University*, 1996). To be sure, there are both Catholic and Protestant versions of the trajectory. What they have in common is that, over the course of the 20th century, too many church-related institutions have either neutralized or become hostile to the religious traditions that founded them.

This has not only happened formally at the institutional level; it has also affected what counts as “knowledge” and what goes on in the classroom. In *The Making of the Modern University: Intellectual Transformation and the Marginalization of*

Morality, Julie Reuben says that in a transformation of major research universities in the early 20th century, religion and ethics became marginalized. The movement tended to go something like this: liberal Protestants equated religion with morality; morality was identified with “emotional” or at least “nonscientific” work, and deemed not part of verifiable knowledge. Religion/morality was thus marginalized in the curriculum, and its home became either the religion department or the chaplain’s office. As religion departments became secularized (in part for legitimate reasons of diversifying attention to different faith traditions, but often out of the attempts of religious faculty to show themselves “objective” in their scholarship) and as chaplains became less important, the primary place for the discussion of ethics became the offices of student life.

As a result, attention to religious convictions was either confined to the chaplain’s realm or became largely invisible. In other words, many colleges and universities no longer provided intellectually rigorous, morally formative education in religious faith and practice.

For many years this failure was hidden by the widely held assumption that “civilization” was becoming irreversibly secularized. It didn’t matter that religion was increasingly marginalized in universities; it was likely, eventually, to disappear altogether. This is a view still held by many academics and elite leaders in American culture.

But there is also a surge of religious interest and passion among college students across the land who are yearning for a place to stand, something or someone to believe in. They are eager to discover a faith that is intellectually substantive, morally nourishing and spiritually deep.

Many influential colleges and universities are ill-equipped to help students deal with this yearning both critically and constructively, as part of a quest for formative knowledge and truth. As a result, students turn to places where their questions and yearnings are permitted and encouraged—religious organizations that exist on the edges of college campuses but which are not sponsored by the colleges themselves. Some of these organizations are intellectually vibrant and spiritually formative; others border on faddish foolishness or frightening fundamentalism. All of them exist outside the intellectual debates and discussions that shape the curriculum as well as the research and writing of scholars.

It is not difficult to find the analogies in our broader political culture. Many politicians have subscribed to a myth of secularization that has marginalized and increasingly ignored faith as a central means by which people search for truth, understand their lives and make judgments about directions they believe our nation should go. As a result, other politicians have been able to use people's faith for political gain.

I am as troubled by the faddish foolishness of spiritual narcissism and its dilution of religious doctrine as I am by the frightening fundamentalism of people who want to use political power to insert creationism into the teaching of biology. But the solution cannot be to continue to marginalize faith from public life—either in the public realm of universities or of politics.

Universities, especially those that retain connections to the traditions that founded them and that have divinity schools that train clergy, need to reclaim a robust attention to the authenticity of religious convictions and practice. To be sure, it cannot be a nostalgic return to “Protestant establishment”—it will have to be attentive and hospitable to the dynamics of other religious traditions while remaining grounded in its own. And who knows? As we pay attention to the interrelations of education and the personal quest for truth and knowledge, we may also offer significant resources for a more faithful and civil discourse in public life.