

## ***Faculty Priorities: Where Does Faith Fit***

***By R. Eugene Rice***

Thank you for inviting me to be part of this important endeavor and to present my take on the changing role of faculty and issues related to faith. Let me begin by expressing the appreciation of all of us for the extraordinary contribution that Sandy and Lena Astin are making to exploring the place of spirituality and religion in higher education – particularly as it relates to the learning and lives of students.

The distinguished philosopher and public intellectual Richard Rorty has written an essay entitled *Religion as Conversation-stopper*.<sup>1</sup> Although I have been a professor of sociology and religion for years, I have spent most of the past twenty years focusing on “faculty priorities” – everything from the meaning of scholarship to tenure. Now, as I turn back to religious concerns – this time with a focus on the religious implication of faculty work – I find that I am doing so with considerable trepidation. Rorty is right. In academic circles religion is a conversation-stopper. In fact, for many it is a hot-button issue that triggers deep-seated antagonisms, tensions, and intellectual rifts within what many of us still call a “community of scholars.” Addressing religious issues in the contemporary context also has the potential to further fray the sometimes fragile relationships that exist between the academy and the larger society. Despite these difficulties, however, these conversations can no longer be avoided. Silence is not an option.

### **Faith and Meaning**

In response to my own reticence, I have chosen to focus, not on religion, but on faith. Religion is increasingly understood to refer to organized religion and institutional dogma (belief) – sources of so much of the current strain. These more explicit religious issues need to be addressed; for example, the religious illiteracy evident in this culture is a national embarrassment. My primary focus, however, will be on faith.

I want to approach faith in its broadest and most inclusive form as the making of meaning – that activity in which all human beings engage. I take my lead here from William G. Perry, Jr., who’s *Forms of Ethical and Intellectual Development in the College Years* helped us understand the way college students make meaning of their

lives. His insights, many articulated a generation ago, are particularly germane as we struggle to address the widely expressed interest of contemporary students in making meaning of and with their lives. Faith, as I am describing it, is an umbrella term for this overall process of creating meaning in one's life, of nurturing a sense of connection with others and the world as a whole, and of developing a vision of reality that provides enough order, form, and significance for one to make decisions about life. Such faith is typically expressed in the stories, narratives, images, symbols, and concepts that give coherence to life, and those stories, narratives, images, symbols, and concepts can be framed in terms that are either explicitly religious or quite thoroughly secular.

In this session I want to make three points. First, I contend that teaching and learning now take place in a markedly different intellectual and social environment. The post-modern debates that have raged in and across many disciplines, the expanding global awareness, and the dramatic pedagogical changes that have taken place recently have not only made it possible to talk openly about the construction of meaning and purpose, but necessary. I go on to propose that when the questions of meaning and purpose are pressed to their deepest level – and raise what are ultimate concerns – they take on religious and spiritual implications, and that these are the issues on which students are now saying they want faculty to be approachable. In addition, I suggest ways of addressing religious and spiritual questions that avoid the pitfalls of both literalistic dogmatism and cynical reductionism. I will close by exploring how faculty might open themselves and their teaching to these larger questions and argue that there are professional boundaries in the process that ought to be considered.

## **The Changing Role of Faculty**

Recently, I participated in a Wingspread Conference sponsored by the Johnson Foundation on *Religion and Public Life: Engaging Higher Education*. Early in that meeting, a serious rift became evident between those pressing for greater faculty involvement with students' struggles to make sense of spiritual and religious questions and those, mostly senior faculty, who had reservations about that kind of direct involvement. In particular, several established professors of religious studies suggested that the key function of the professor is the pursuit of knowledge and the cultivation of the scholarly skills required to do that, unencumbered with responsibilities for either character development or civic engagement. They argued persuasively that the new breed of "change agents" emerging in the university and present at the conference ought to leave them free to pursue their subject matter that the open discussion of carefully chosen texts will raise the larger questions of meaning. They cited, as examples, Saul Bellow's *Seize the Day*, Augustine's *Confessions*, and Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, and they saw their job as helping students understand the questions posed by such texts. How students might or might not address the personal implications of those questions for themselves did not, however, fall within their conception of the faculty role. As one professor put it, "We don't want to be therapists or community organizers."

As that comment makes clear, there are important boundary issues dealing with faith and faculty work that need to be addressed. Do faculty have responsibilities in this area? If so, what are those responsibilities and what limits apply? How is the faculty role different from being a therapist, community organizer, or campus minister? In most of higher education, we are only just beginning to ask these questions.

## **The Processes of Modernization and Secularization**

A probing understanding of the place of faith in the lives and work of faculty requires that we review the assumptions – implicit and explicit – that have dominated their views of the processes of modernization and secularization in recent years. Most helpful in this is a recent *festschrift* published in honor of Robert Bellah entitled *Meaning and Modernization: Religion, Polity and Self*. The book is edited by the interdisciplinary scholars who worked with Bellah on the influential *Habits of the Heart*.

The period between roughly 1957 and 1974 was a time of major transformation in American higher education – on many fronts. Pressed by the post-World War II baby-boom and the GI Bill, the demand for a college and university education escalated rapidly. University systems in states such as California, New York, and Illinois grew and expanded dramatically. The success of the USSR dramatized in the launching of Sputnik in 1957 generated a “Cold War” that fueled the funding for science and technology. The conception of scholarship that had been defined broadly and more inclusive narrowed, placing priority on scientific inquiry and the products of technical, quantitative pursuits. Money poured into chemistry and physics departments and schools of engineering expanded. The land-grant colleges became state universities with their own scientific research foundations and direct connections to the centers of money and power in Washington, D.C.

Rational, scientific inquiry ruled the day and faculty gained in status – particularly those in the sciences. This is what Jenks and Riesman were pointing to in the *Academic Revolution*, which appeared in 1968. This positivistic vision of the power of objective, value-free rational inquiry gained strength and prestige during this period of affluence and expansion. The modern professionalization of the social sciences in this growing market promised more than it delivered. In addition to rational inquiry, the positivists called for freedom – moral and political as well as intellectual emancipation. What was delivered was what is suggested in Max Weber’s famous image of the “iron cage,” populated, in his words, by “specialists without spirit, sensualists without heart.” The accomplishments of the science and technology of the period were in fact remarkable, but connections to any concrete sense of identity, meaning, or purpose were diminished. Moral considerations, spiritual interests, and religion – the whole normative dimensions of social life – were either disregarded or explained away as the result of more important or more “real” factors.

By the end of the 1960s the environment that had inspired the positivistic confidence in rational analysis, scientific inquiry, and technological productivity was beginning to seriously erode. The universal claims that provided the underpinnings for theories of modernization were being challenged and the reason versus faith debate took a dramatic turn.

## **The Impact of the Post-Modern Era**

Post-modernism as an intellectual movement hit the campuses and the faculty at a time of serious cultural, social and political turmoil. The Vietnam War was escalating and the protests were spreading across colleges and universities. Most institutions were losing their authority – family, church, corporations, government, and, universities, including the faculty. The Civil Rights Movement that had begun as a moral call for social justice and inclusion led by revered religious leaders also raised questions of identity and how one's social location shaped one's understanding of the world.

Following a similar pattern, feminist leaders began to talk about “women's ways of knowing” as distinct and different from much of the thinking that flourished in the then still male-dominated academy. These were all legitimate concerns, and the demand that group differences and divergent ways of thought be respected eventually came together in the call for multiculturalism in the classroom.

At its radical edge post-modernism joined with Nietzsche and ended with nihilism, dismantling not only the values that sustain Christianity, but the values that define modernity itself: reason, freedom, and the autonomous self. Some post-modernists went so far as to argue that the positivist university exists primarily to support the established structures of power, especially in the areas of race, gender, and class. On the other hand, post-modernism also opened the door to a new recognition and appreciation of the particularity of a wide range of cultural traditions, including the long established religious views that had earlier been discounted. Nietzsche's nihilism was not the only response to the limitations of modernity. In opening the academy to a diversity of approaches to inquiry and new ways of knowing, opportunities for rethinking the place of faith in the academy and the options for faculty were introduced.

## **Symbolic Realism: A Different Approach to the Interpretation of Faith**

Early on in his wide-ranging career, Robert Bellah was struggling with the limits of the modernization process, including the impact of secularization. He not only confronted the dilemmas of modernity, and built on the insights that would later be identified as post-modernist, but persuasively articulated an alternative; he called it “symbolic realism.” As a student in his classes, I remember his quoting the poet Wallace Stevens with some frequency: “The final belief is to believe in a fiction, which you know to be a fiction, there being nothing else. The exquisite truth is to know that it is a fiction and that you believe in it willingly.” As a student with an evangelical Christian background, I was

both provoked and disturbed by the term “fiction.” Bellah was not a relativist, but the reference to the term reflected, not his disrespect for the power of religious and spiritual symbols, but the seriousness with which he took our human limitations. Bellah agrees with the poet Stevens that the patterns of meaning by which we choose to order our lives are social and cultural constructions – “the final belief is to believe in a fiction.” He goes on, however, to contend that religious and faith symbols created by communities and individuals as ways of grasping what is ultimate about human existence could have a reality of their own – transcendent meanings – that are powerful enough to serve as anchors for human life and to provide a sense of moral order – reflected in the last part of the Stevens’ quotation: “The exquisite truth is that you know it is a fiction and you believe in it willingly.”

Bellah’s work has important implications for aligning faculty priorities with student needs in a postsecular age. He provides a vision of religion that avoids both the literalism of fundamentalist faith and the smugness that so often accompanies the suggestion that religion is nothing more than a human creation and thus lacks any authoritative standing in the struggle to make meaning of human life. Bellah is an anti-reductionist who years ago made the claim that “the radical split between knowledge and commitment that exists in our culture and in our universities is not ultimately tenable. Differentiation has gone about as far as it can go. It is time for a new integration.” His insight remains helpful today. Both the reductionism of the positivists and the nihilism of some postmodernists have proved untenable, just as Bellah predicted. What is emerging in their place is a deep spiritual hunger and quest for meaning, which is finding voice among college and university students across the nation. Higher education and the faculty need to respond.

## **A Pedagogical Revolution**

In American colleges and universities there has been a widespread shift from a focus on faculty – who they are and what they know – to a focus on learning. What has been apparent in this shift to learning is that the learning that takes place depends in large measure on the way in which the student constructs meaning from what is presented in the lecture, structured in the laboratory experiment, or other strategy aimed at enhancing learning. The contribution of the professor – or instructional team, as the case may be – is important but primarily as it structures the context facilitating learning. In a very real sense, we have experienced a pedagogical revolution. It manifests itself in a variety of ways. I have identified three that I regard as particularly influential: relational learning, which includes collaboration with others, particularly with peers, (e.g. learning communities); active learning (e.g. service learning, community based research, undergraduate research); and technologically enhanced learning where the acquiring of information is democratized and faculty contribute by transforming information into knowledge.

In all of these relatively new approaches to learning, the priority is placed on the making of meaning. And, that depends in large measure on what the student brings to the learning occasion – their personal, social, and cultural situation. This requires that faculty become acquainted with the backgrounds of their students, including the ethnic, spiritual, and religious cultures out of which they come. Teaching and learning becomes a reciprocal process and is no longer a one-way street.

In her important book *Big Questions, Worthy Dreams*, Sharon Daloz Parks has proposed an alternative epistemology that builds on the assumptions of a postmodern academy, recognizing that every perspective is rooted in particular, personal, social and cultural conditions. This different approach to knowing – to the search for truth – realigns the relationship between the academy and issues of transcendent meaning. This alternative perspective, as Parks puts it, “invites faculty and students to bring the competence of contemporary scholarship to the search for critically composed and worthy forms of faith within a relativized world” – a world where every human perspective is incomplete and certainly not value-free. This alternative perspective gives voice not just to racial, ethnic, gendered, and class perspectives that have been marginalized by the dominant approach to knowing, but also recognizes the legitimacy and importance of the spiritual and religious dimensions of knowing – the power of community and commitment in the lives of all of us.

### **Faculty as Boundary Crashers**

Faculty, particularly those influenced by the expansionist, rebellious 1960s, see themselves as boundary crashers. Academic freedom is at the heart of the profession. In the dominant perception, progress is made by challenging established ideas, discipline-defined paradigms are broken open, and new conceptions advance the field. The professional vision, of “standing on the shoulders of giants” involves building on the best that has gone before, but innovation, break-throughs, and making your own contributions on the cutting edge of a field shape professorial priorities.

In addressing the responsibility of faculty for being open to the students’ exploration of questions of meaning and the larger purposes of life, I have made the argument that the raising of critical questions is not enough. Max Weber’s dictum: “The moral obligation of the teacher is to ask inconvenient questions” is important, but not sufficient. Faculty are more than boundary crashers. The cultivation of critical rationality is not enough. Students need to be exposed to other approaches to knowing and sensitivity to the process of making meaning needs to be built into the teaching/ learning process. This should to be done with care, however, making sure that the teacher’s spiritual and religious views not be imposed.

Religious indoctrination has no place in the university and college classroom. Being open to exploring the larger questions of meaning is essential, but this needs to be done in a way that respects the personhood of the students, their fundamental right and responsibility to construct their own meaning without external coercion.

Developmentally this makes sense. Faculty who are open to the exploration of larger questions related to life's purposes need to be especially attentive to the differences in status and power in their relationships with students. Faculty enjoy broad authority in the classroom over what is regarded as sound opinion in the discipline and need to be careful not to use that authority inappropriately in discussions related to spiritual and religious matters.

Let me close by suggesting that we spend some of our time together at this meeting discussing, not only the inviting challenges of opening our campuses to spiritual and religious questions, but also addressing the boundaries around our work in this important arena. I look forward to our exchange over the next couple of days.

*R. Eugene Rice recently became Senior Scholar at the Association of American Colleges and Universities and accepted an appointment in the new Ph.D. Program in Leadership and Change at Antioch University. For ten years he served as Director of the Forum on Faculty Roles and Rewards and the New Pathways projects at the American Association for Higher Education. In Change magazine's survey of leadership in American Higher Education, Gene Rice is recognized as one of a small group of "idea leaders" whose work has made a difference nationally.*

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