

Interfaith: The New Campus Movement

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When I was in college in the early 1990s, all we talked about was identity. Mostly, actually, we complained about it.

Where were writers of color in the high school English curriculum? Why didn't the Academy give the Oscar to Denzel Washington for his amazing performance in Spike Lee's *Malcolm X*? When would women finally earn the same money for the same work as men?

We read bell hooks and Gloria Anzaldúa in sociology classes and stayed up late at night in our dorm rooms dreaming about what a truly multicultural campus and country might look like.

When I went home for the holidays, I always gave my father a healthy serving of my recent reading in the field. He was sympathetic to my point of view, if not the grating edge in my voice. After all, he had been in the extreme minority for much of his life—as an Indian at Notre Dame University in the 1970s and in corporate advertising in the 1980s.

But he also thought that my understanding of multiculturalism was too narrow. "Turn on the evening news," he would tell me, "or glance at the front pages of the newspaper. The identity that is driving global politics is religion—in the Balkans, the Middle East, Northern Ireland, South Asia. And you never talk about that."

He was right. In my college conversations on multiculturalism, religious identity might have come up five times. That's it.

It was a glaring absence in our education.

The 1990s was, after all, a decade of growing religious consciousness—the growth of the Evangelical movement in America, the beginnings of the religious revival in the Middle East, the election of the Hindu-nationalist BJP in India.

In classes, we learned almost nothing about it. In dorm discussions, it barely came up. Moreover, the lack of conversation about religion revealed one of the hypocrisies of identity politics. If multiculturalism was about being able to bring your whole self to the table—your race, your ethnicity, your gender, etc—but talking about your faith was frowned upon, then the conversation was artificially narrow.

Thankfully, things are changing on college campuses. Several new movements are afoot that are converging in ways that will finally engage religious identity and diversity positively and proactively. Remarkably, Florida State University, a school known mostly for football and sunshine, is gearing up to be a leader in this area.

Florida State's faculty and staff in the fields of spiritual development, leadership studies, civic education and international learning are nationally recognized. Each of those units, seemingly independently, is eager to engage religion in both their curricular and co-curricular activities.

I speak at college campuses all the time, but what struck me about my trip to Florida State was how prepared senior members of the faculty and administration were to organize a holistic approach to engaging religious diversity on campus, and leading a movement to do this across the field of higher education. Private universities like Georgetown, Princeton, USC and Wellesley have been building interfaith programs for a while, but when a large state school is preparing to be a leader in this field, you get the sense that something big is happening.

A faculty member in the education department told me that he had been writing about the need to teach about religion on college campuses, and engage religious diversity more proactively. His interest in the area had been piqued as a Peace Corps volunteer in

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an area of the Philippines where there is severe Muslim-Christian tension.

The Vice Chancellor for Student Affairs told me that religious student groups on campus were booming.

Monsignor William Kerr of the Claude Pepper Center is taking the lead on building an international network of universities dedicated to the vision of the United Nations' Alliance of Civilizations.

Jon Dalton, Pam Crosby and others at the Journal of College and Character – a leading journal in higher education studies – are insisting that campuses find ways and places to engage the spiritual discussions that students continually tell researchers they want to have.

Bill Moeller and Laura Osteen at the Center for Leadership and Civic Education want to help students learn

the skills to be leaders in a religiously diverse society. What's more – several dozens students at Florida State came to the presentations I gave, illustrating that they are eager to learn and apply such skills.

I believe American campuses should engage the issue of religious diversity with the same energy that they devoted to race. Campuses are models of democratic civil society in America, not only training the next generation of leaders but also offering a positive example to the rest of the nation. We live in a far more racially tolerant society because of the efforts that campuses made in that arena. I believe campuses can do the same for religion.

Who knew that the Seminoles of Tallahassee would be leading the way.