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Understanding and Promoting Religious Pluralism on College Campuses (1)

By Robert J. Nash

Professor and author on religious pluralism, Robert Nash, addresses the current religious illiteracy on American college campuses and in our larger society, challenging the higher education community to become multicultural pluralists through increased awareness of different faiths. Nash makes a case for promoting religious literacy among college students, staff, administrators, and faculty, most of whom do not reside in religious studies departments or in campus ministries, in order to move beyond religious ignorance to embrace our global citizenship as religious cosmopolites.

Religious Illiteracy on College Campuses

In my 40-year experience in higher education, I have found the level of religious knowledge among most campus constituencies to be abysmal. For decades, I have written, consulted, spoken, and conferenced throughout the country on the topic of religious pluralism. Wherever I go, and this includes several sectarian as well as secular institutions, I find that an informed understanding, let alone an appreciation, of the vastness of religious difference throughout the world is close to non-existent. All of us, and I include most faculty I have worked with, are shamefully illiterate when it comes to knowing anything about even the basics of the world's three monotheistic religions. I, also, think it safe to say that most of us remain in a state of near total ignorance, and/or benign neglect, regarding even a few of the world's other known 5,000 or so religions (2). Why this is so is complex, but the main reason is that nothing stirs the pot like religion, and few people on college campuses know much about it, let alone how to discuss it. The topic is just too hot to handle for most academicians, administrators, and campus leaders.

Some of us are more than ready to become advocates for the value of a personal spirituality (spirituality study is becoming fashionable in such applied disciplines as higher education administration and, also, in certain of the allied health fields). Nevertheless, we seem oblivious to the fact that formal religious affiliation of one kind or another (with or without an emphasis on personal spirituality) has been the common condition for the vast majority of approximately 120 billion people who have been born, lived, and died for the

last 3,000 years or so. Most of these people would never think of distinguishing between being spiritual or being religious. For them, there is no functional distinction, because spirituality is, at best, a byproduct of a formal religious commitment. Today, I would wager, for the seven billion people who presently inhabit this small planet called earth, it is probably safe to say that at least two-thirds of them count their institutional religious affiliations to be among their most important identities. Statistical evidence bears me out (3).

Current Religious Statistics

Here are some current, early third millennium, statistical reminders of how, globally, the religious world is radically changing: By the year 2025, India's population alone will reach 1.5 billion people, of whom 1.2 billion will be observant Hindus. By 2025, Muslims worldwide will outnumber Jews by over a hundred to one, and will even outnumber Christians. It is important to note that, unlike some Christians, there are few "nominal" Muslims among those who self-identify as believers in Islam. At the present time, Buddhism is the fourth largest religion in the world, at one time in its 20th century history claiming 20% of the world's people. By 2025, Buddhism will be the main religion of East and Southeast Asia, in such populous nations as China, Vietnam, and Thailand.

In the United States, by 2025, 100 million Americans will claim Hispanic origin, and upwards of 60 million citizens will claim Chicano descent. At the present time, 70% of Latinos are Catholic and 30% are Evangelical Protestants in the United States. Moreover, very conservative forms of Christianity are on the rise in Latin America. In European nations, the figures are quite different due to an increasing secularization. In Great Britain, 44% of the British claim no religious affiliation whatsoever. In France, only 8% of the population identifies as practicing Catholics. And in Italy, despite the hegemony of the Vatican, religious identity has declined steeply in recent years, as less than 10% of Italian Christians claim to be active practitioners of their faiths. Finally, in Africa at the present time, there is a stunning growth of Christianity, especially its most conservative, evangelical, and Pentecostal forms. Approximately, 8.5 million people on that continent convert to Christianity every year, an average of 23,000 a day.

Finally, it always shocks my students whenever I cite current statistics from a number of sources that roughly one-quarter to one-third of the world's population, perhaps one-and-a-half billion people, identifies as non-believers (4). And yet few of my colleagues, and even fewer of my students, can articulate the conceptual differences between and among secular humanists, scientific humanists, atheists, pantheists, agnostics, deists, pagans, wiccans, or free-thinkers. There is as much widespread illiteracy in higher education regarding the hundreds of non-religious belief systems as there is for religious belief systems. Ignorance of worldview diversity plays no favorites in higher education. I think it safe to say that Americans in general remain shockingly ignorant of a variety of worldviews dissimilar to their own.

Are We Really Multicultural Pluralists?

We in higher education claim to be open-minded, multicultural pluralists. At least on the surface, we strive to teach, and endorse, cultural difference of all kinds. We support the cause of social justice. We work hard in so many areas of higher education to engender respect, recognition, and understanding of cultural difference. But we do little to help students examine, and understand, their own, and others', *religious* backgrounds (or lack of them). I believe that an appreciation of religious pluralism begins with an understanding that the religious world is radically diverse and constantly changing. Moreover, I contend that, for those of us who live and work on college campuses, to be ignorant of the expanding, diverse religious landscape throughout the world is to court international disaster in the decades ahead.

Closer to home, religious illiteracy is leading to an alarming growth of religious stereotyping on some college campuses. Fortunately, incidents of outright religious bigotry are not widespread, at least not at the present time. However, the sad lesson of history is that anti-religious bigotry (like all bigotry) starts small before it grows tall. Stereotyping (no matter how trivial) frequently breeds counter stereotyping, born out of defensiveness and anger. Anger sometimes results in separation. Separation easily grows into separatism and isolation. Balkanization, in turn, can lead to a defiant exclusionism. Exclusionism can fuel an arrogant triumphalism. In addition, as religious history has demonstrated time and time again, triumphalism often gives way to a period of aggressive proselytizing, forced attempts at conversion, and even violence.

Even now, on many campuses, members of minority religious groups are asserting their rights to autonomy, and, in some cases, complete separation. Many Eastern religious groups demand their own faith centers instead of having to worship in formerly Christian chapels. Muslim students are angry because they do not have a prayer space of their own. They are tired of sharing space with Christians or Jews. They want prayer rugs not pews. So, too, Buddhists want a separate location for a meditation room. Jews want their own chapel sites complete with Torah scrolls. On some Catholic campuses, representatives of non-Christian religions are insisting on autonomous spaces for the full expression of their own devotions. In fact, several groups of evangelical Christians in secular universities are feeling ghettoized because their own worship areas are contracting in size, given the escalating demands for space by other religious groups (5).

My worry is that unless these separate groups are able to come together to dialogue openly in designated, multi-faith, dialogue spaces, in classrooms, residence halls, and cafeterias, then religious Balkanization, and the triumphalism and suspicion of others that are its inevitable byproducts, will sooner or later threaten to fragment entire campuses. Since the immigration boom of the 1960s, to mention only a few examples, there are presently 10 million Muslims, three to five million Buddhists, and two million Hindus in the United States. Their numbers are continuing to grow dramatically, and their children have reached college age.

Also, the number of evangelical Christians has increased almost exponentially, not just in the United States but throughout the world, constituting in some parts of the globe one-fourth of the adult population, and, in this country, nearly one-third of all religious believers. The conclusion is inescapable, if only we are willing to recognize it: *real pluralism on college campuses today is religious*, and this phenomenon presents all of us with an educational opportunity that is unique. Left untapped and misunderstood, the phenomenon can only bring us unmitigated grief.

Some Religious "Facts" Regarding the Five Major Religions

For example, in all my work in higher education, I have found very few students, faculty, or administrators who know the following religious "facts." I mention only a few of these facts in relation to the world's *five major religions* because these religions have the largest number of adherents. Actually, there are thousands of such facts for hundreds of the world's lesser-known religious narratives that will forever remain a mystery to most of us. In the United States alone, there are anywhere from 1,500 to 2,000 so-called "alternative religions," many of which are derivatives of one kind or another of the five major world religions. Keep in mind that for many believers throughout the world, these "facts" can be a matter of religious life or death, both figuratively and literally. Also, keep in mind that barring guided opportunities on college campuses to reach a mutual understanding of religious difference via unbounded, inclusive dialogue and moral conversation, the likelihood is great that campuses could someday become free fire zones for a variety of religious xenophobics (6).

• *Evangelical, Pentecostal, and Fundamentalist Christians are not all the same*. Evangelicals emphasize the spreading of the "good news" in the Gospels through overt missionary activity. For them, eternal salvation is won mainly by faith and not by good works or through the sacraments alone. Fundamentalists believe in a literal interpretation of the Bible, particularly as this applies to matters of faith and morals. And Pentecostals stress direct inspiration from the Holy Spirit as the key to God's Kingdom. In some areas, all three groups of Christians are in agreement, in some they are not. At the very least, their religious *emphases* are different. Christianity is not a religious monolith, and neither is any other religious belief system. Intramural religious diversity rules the day everywhere in the world. Christianity is a mansion containing innumerable rooms that house conservatives, moderates, liberals, and radicals, each of whom differs—some substantially—on matters of faith, doctrine, practice, and morals. In fact, there is as much difference *within* Christianity as there is *between* Christianity and all the other world religions.

• *So, too, Judaism is a diverse belief system*. Not all religious Jews are Zionists, for example. Zionism is a political, not a religious, movement to establish and develop a Jewish national homeland in the land of Israel. Often, though, commentators in the media, who disapprove of the policies of the Israeli government against the Palestinians, paint all Jews to be pro-Israel, anti-Arab, political and religious zealots. This is inaccurate. Noam Chomsky, for example, is an outspoken Jewish critic of Zionism and a non-believer. Unfortunately, the damage is done in the minds of much of the public. Sadly, if the popular-

culture stereotype rings true for many people that *all* Jews are Zionists, then, for them, all Jews, whether they are religious or not, really have only one major agenda—strengthening the homeland of Israel, regardless of who is harmed along the way, particularly if they are Palestinian or Lebanese Muslims.

Not only are all Jews *not* Zionists, but neither are they all Conservative, Orthodox, or Reform believers in Judaism. Some are secular humanists, and some have even founded new religious movements. In fact, there is a movement within Judaism called "Reconstructionism," created in the 20th century by Mordecai Kaplan, an American rabbi, theologian, educator, and innovator. This movement attempts to be responsive to the reality of constant change in Jewish life. It thinks of Judaism as primarily social and cultural and not religious. Thus, it emphasizes the values of democracy, social action, and Jewish continuity over strictly theological matters. Reconstructionism even rejects some core Jewish religious ideas, such as the belief that the Bible is the word of God. Kaplan taught that God is neither supernatural nor transcendent. In contrast, God is immanent, located within the believer and the social order. Kaplan also rejected the notion of Jews as God's chosen people, thinking this claim to be arrogant and exclusivist.

• *There is not a single passage in the Qur'an that equates the term "jihad" with "holy war" or "terrorism."* These are gross distortions of the word. *Jihad* actually means "effort, excellence, and exertion" in behalf of an individual's becoming stronger in Islamic spirituality and moral behavior. Muslims are urged by their sacred scriptures to wage *jihad* with the *Qur'an*, not with weapons of destruction, mass or otherwise (except in self-defense and fighting against oppression, much like just war theory in Christianity). A genuine, Muslim jihadist works on himself first and foremost. In actuality, the world's leading terrorists today are not Muslim extremists. They are the Tamil Tigers in Sri Lanka, a secular, Marxist-Leninist group with Hindu roots.

Furthermore, Muslim women are not always and everywhere collectively subjugated and subordinated in the name of a "misogynistic" religion that confers all power on men. Islam does not encourage the mutilation of a woman's clitoris. In actuality, excision, infibulation, and female genital mutilation have nothing whatever to do with Islam. (Clitoridectomy is a practice common in some African tribes, especially in Somalia.) The *Qur'an* neither sanctions or encourages any of these practices. In fact, it frowns upon them. Some Muslim scholars actually argue that, in many ways, women's rights are respected more in the Muslim world than in parts of the Christian world.

For example, Islamic doctrine teaches that men and women were created equally, from the same, single "soul" (Surah 4:1). Thus, their rights, and responsibilities, are equal to men's. Both men *and* women can initiate divorce proceedings in most Islamic countries. Furthermore, women, even female orphans, are granted strong financial rights in divorce and inheritance settlements everywhere. Muslim women are able to own property, accumulate financial wealth, and be fully self-supporting, if they so choose. Muhammad's first wife, Khadijah, was a successful and wealthy business woman, who was actually Muhammad's employer before they married.

Another little known fact is that Islam does not advocate hunting down unbelievers and, then, torturing and killing them, unless they either recant or convert. The passage usually taken out of its full, historical context (and mistranslated) in the *Qur'an* (9:5) and often used to justify this stereotype is: "Slay the unbelievers wherever you find them, and take them captives and besiege them and lie in wait for them in every ambush." The Arabic word for "unbelievers" is more accurately translated as "idolaters." Thus, the entire passage (9:1-6) goes on to explain that the idolaters are actually a group of pagan warriors who violated a peace treaty with the Muslims. It is a specific instruction for Muslims, subject to all the rules for just war, who find themselves unfairly attacked by an enemy. The passage commands that a four-month warning period be given to the enemy before war commences. And it allows the military opponent to renounce the fight and seek help, with no precondition requiring a conversion to Islam.

• *Hindus are not of one mind in supporting a caste system*. To reduce Hinduism, and Indian society in general, too simplistic caste-depictions is really the product of a prejudicial, Western Orientalism. Orientalism is the view that the United States constructed a fictional narrative of so-called "Oriental" beliefs and practices in order to justify Western imperialism in the Middle East and in Southeast Asia. Castes in large, urban sectors of Indian society are actually breaking down.

In fact, "caste" as an institution in India will most likely become more of an historical anomaly and an embarrassing curiosity, much as the institution of slavery has become in the United States. Progressive Hindus, such as Arya Samaj, Gandhi, and Ambhedkar, repudiated the principle of caste discrimination in India, based on a person's *varna* (color), which is a social, not a religious, category. Later, Gandhi's India Constitution outlawed it. The "untouchables" *(dalits*) were those human beings who were considered inferior because of their color, birth, and occupation. To this day, some discrimination still exists against these men and women, even though Gandhi described this prejudice as a "crime against humanity."

Moreover, *not all Hindus are polytheists who believe in hundreds of thousands of gods*. For Hindus, there is, in theory, an infinity of possible *representations* of the Divine. Thus, for a majority of Westerners who might be prone to stereotypes based on misinformation and/or ignorance, this proves that Hindus must be polytheists. In response, most Hindus would assert that the Divine cannot be pinned down, because the Ultimate Godhead is beyond gender, number, or human comprehension. Thus, an endless array of manifestations of this God is necessary. There are, throughout India, thousands of unique temples and shrines, as well as countless public and private sites that display colorful and imaginative icons representing a multiplicity of deities.

Hindus, in contrast to Western stereotypes, believe in One Ultimate Godhead, but they also believe there are innumerable ways of depicting this Divinity. This variety of manifestations of pan-Hindu gods and goddesses springs from a profound sense of respect and awe, as well as from an awareness that naming the ineffable always ends up distorting, and limiting, the eternal mystery of the Divine Being. Hindus, unlike the vast majority of Western believers, know their limitations when dealing with a Supreme Being.

Therefore, they seek a variety of indirect relationships, via a plethora of deities and sub-deities, with the Ultimate Godhead.

• *Not all Buddhists are atheists*. Theravadins, for example, insist to this day that the Buddha is not a god, and that there are no deities in Buddhism. All attempts to honor the Buddha, therefore, are never meant to be acts of divine worship. Instead, they function to remind the believer that the Buddha had virtues worth emulating, and these are necessary in order to gain enlightenment. For some Theravadins, honoring the Buddha might even help them to gain release from the repetitive karmic cycle of birth, death, and rebirth.

Mahayanans, on the other hand, teach that those who are enlightened, and thus released from the cycle of reincarnation, can be treated as deities. These are "celestial bodhisattvas" or "celestial Buddhas." They work miracles, and they intervene in the affairs of the world. One of the famous Mahayanan gods is Avalokiteshvara ("Lord Who Looks Down on Us"). In actuality, there are a number of celestial Buddhas in the Mahayana tradition. Another well-known celestial Buddha is Amitabha ("Infinite Light") who is said to have created a paradise for enlightened Buddhists after their deaths.
Whether or not Buddhists are atheists or theists depends on their membership in particular sects in particular parts of the world. The fact is that there have always been Buddhists who revere local deities and spirits. And there have always been others who do not. It is important to note, however, that few Eastern Buddhists would ever call themselves "atheists." This is a Western term, and it is largely beside the point.

Also, *the Buddhist emphasis on impermanence and suffering does not translate to a hatred for living and a love for suffering and dying*. Buddhists believe that what is ultimately perishable must be cherished, and loved, while it lasts. For the Buddhist, the fact that our lives are finite and short, like the flickering lamp, ought to motivate us to be more mindful of the present moment, to wring as much joy and happiness out of our passing lives as we can. As in suffering, an awareness of our impermanence has the potential to make life sweeter.

To this purpose, Zen Buddhists, among others, practice mindfulness, the ability to be here and now, and to observe everything that happens in the moment. Mindfulness entails remaining positive at all times. It means ridding the mind of negativism and striving for equilibrium. It means being tuned in to our own propensity to continue to crave and grasp the ultimate cause of all our suffering. Above all, however, it means that we need to respect all of life and to engage it compassionately and tenderly. And, on a personal level, it urges us to embrace and kiss our joys as they fly, even as we experience the inevitability of our suffering and dying.

Beyond Religious Illiteracy: Becoming Religious Cosmopolites

The reason I mention but a small sample of these unknown religious "facts" is to emphasize that not only do most Americans know very little about their own religions, they know even less about others. This pandemic illiteracy about the beliefs that motivate most inhabitants of our planet is a near-certain predictor of disaster for living in a world, and

studying in a higher education system, that is becoming increasingly more cosmopolitan and religiously diverse. Kwame Anthony Appiah, the Ghanean scholar, has attempted in his writing to rescue the concept of "cosmopolitanism" from the sneering elites who use it primarily to put down what they disdainfully call "provincialism." For Appiah, cosmopolitanism is the awareness that each of us is not only a member of a particular community of belonging, but each of us is also a citizen of the world. Therefore, each one of us needs to have a profound sense of our obligations to others beyond our kith and kin (7).

This means, among other things, that we need to take the trouble to understand the cultural practices and beliefs of particular human lives everywhere, including, primarily, their religious rituals and beliefs. We need to become what I would call "religious cosmopolites." This also entails that we develop a sense of obligation to be kind, even hospitable, to these "religious strangers" so that we might learn from them. One way of doing this is to explore in depth, and with an open mind, what others might hold to be religious truth. It is in their religious narratives, according to Appiah, that we can best make a real human contact with the strangers in our midst. I could not agree more strongly. And this is the reason why I have spent the last two decades of my professional career writing, speaking, and teaching about ways to bring "religious strangers" into our higher education communities, and to learn how to understand and accept them warmly and respectfully.

As a growing reaction to religious strife throughout the globe, long before what happened on September 11, 2001 when three airplanes became deadly missiles, I had become convinced of the necessity of experiencing ourselves as interconnected, cosmopolitan citizens of the world. No longer, I felt, could any of us continue to think of religions outside the Judeo-Christian axis to be unimportant, or inferior, in the global scheme of things. No longer could we be content to ignore the need for religious and spiritual understandings on our college campuses. No longer could we, as professors, administrators, and campus leaders, afford merely to intellectualize religious and spiritual differences in a bemused, dismissive, or detached manner; or to adopt an approach of simple religious tolerance wherein we do some superficial ceremonial "sharing"; or even be content to mention religious differences only in passing, if we bother to do so at all. In the global society we live in, we no longer have the luxury of thinking about religion as merely a private affair, something best left to the home, church, synagogue, mosque, ashram, or temple. Religion has long since gone public, in some places with a whimper, and in other places with a bang. Finally, no longer can we marginalize the centrality of religious difference in our colleges and universities, because it is here where educators are best able to foster an informed sense of pluralism.

Robert J. Nash has been a professor in the College of Education and Social Services, University of Vermont, Burlington for 38 years. He specializes in philosophy of education, ethics, higher education, and religion, spirituality, and education. Nash holds graduate degrees in English, Theology/Religious Studies, Applied Ethics and Liberal Studies, and Philosophy/Educational Philosophy. Currently, he administers the Interdisciplinary Master's Program, and teaches ethics, religion, higher education, and philosophy of education courses, as well as scholarly personal narrative writing seminars across four programs in the college. He also serves on the editorial board for the Journal of Religion & Education. Since 1996, Nash has published eight books, including Teaching About Religion in American Schools and Colleges, Religious Pluralism in the Academy: Opening the Dialogue, and Teaching Adolescents Religious Literacy in a Post-9/11 World: Extending the Reach of Multiculturalism.

Endnotes

(1) This essay summarizes a number of pieces I have written on the topic of religious pluralism. Here are a few examples: Robert J. Nash, Faith, Hype, and Clarity: Teaching about Religion in American Schools and Colleges (New York: Teachers College Press, Columbia University, 1999); Religious Pluralism in the Academy: Opening the Dialogue (New York: Peter Lang, 2001); Spirituality, Ethics, Religion and Teaching: A Professor's Journey (New York: Peter Lang, 2002). Also, see Robert J. Nash and Sue M. Baskette, "Teaching About Religious and Spiritual Pluralism in a Professional Education Course," in Miriam Diamond, ed. Encountering Faith in the Secular Classroom (Sterling, VA: Stylus, 2007); Robert J. Nash and DeMethra LaSha Bradley, "The Different Spiritualities of the Students We Teach," in Douglas Jacobsen and Rhonda Hustedt Jacobsen, eds. The American University in a Postsecular Age: Religion and the Academy (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

(2) See Jonathan Z. Smith and William Scott Green, eds. The HarperCollins Dictionary of Religion (New York: HarperCollins, 1995) for all the statistical facts one needs to know about many of the world's better- and lesser-known religions. Also, see Mircea Eliade and Ioan P. Coulliano, The HarperCollins Concise Guide to World Religions (New York: HarperCollins, 1991), for a brief, very accessible, encyclopedia for non-experts in religious studies. Also, see Stephen Prothero, Religious Literacy: What Every American Needs To Know—And Doesn't (San Francisco: Harper SanFrancisco, 2007), for the most recent argument based on the need for a "background knowledge" perspective. Most of Porthero's book is what he calls a "dictionary of religious literacy."

(3) See the website www.religionfacts.com and www.adherents.com for a summary of the statistical data I present in this section. Also, see Phillip P. Jenkins, The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), for further elaboration on all the data.

(4) See Robert J. Nash, "Inviting atheists to the table: A modest proposal for higher education," in *Religion & Education* 30/1 (Spring 2003): 1-23, for an extensive examination of a variety of non-belief worldviews, and their implications for higher education throughout the United States.

(5) See two important analyses of the state of religious belief and non-belief on college campuses: Conrad Cherry, Bettty A. DeBerg, Amanda Porterfield, Religion on Campus (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2001); Naomi Schaefer Riley, God on the Quad: How Religious Colleges and the Missionary Generation Are Changing America (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2005).

(6) For a wonderful, very readable, content overview of the world's major religious wisdom traditions, see Huston Smith's classic work, The World's Religions. (San Francisco, CA: Harper 1991). This is a book that has sold in the millions since its initial publication in 1958. It was written for a non-professional, as well as a professional, audience, which explains, in part, its great popularity. One other extremely accessible introduction to the enormous growth of religious diversity in the United States is Diana L. Eck's A New Religious America: How A "Christian Country" Has Become the World's Most Religiously Diverse Nation. (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2001). Also, see the forthcoming Robert J. Nash and Penny A. Bishop, Teaching Adolescents Religious Literacy in a Post-9/11 World (out for review).

(7) Kwame Anthony Appiah, Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers. (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2006).