


How Religious Should We Be?

And How Should We Be Religious?

BY RICHARD RICE



Enrollments Surge at Christian Colleges” proclaimed a headline in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* several years ago.¹ From 1990 to 1996, the article went on to say, undergraduate enrollment increased by 5 percent at private institutions and 4 percent at public colleges,

but by 24 percent at 90 U.S. evangelical institutions. Enrollment at some schools almost doubled during these years. At Indiana Wesleyan, the number of undergraduate students increased from 889 to 1,628. In 1993, the enrollment at California Baptist University in Riverside, California, was 829 students. Last year (2006-2007) it was 3,400.

The figures indicate dramatically increased interest in Christian education. More and more young people evidently want to spend their college years at institutions where learning is based on Christian principles and where student life reflects solid biblical values. And many of them are coming to Adventist campuses. At Loma Linda University, where I teach, about half the students are non-Adventists, although the proportion varies from school to school.

Although there is increasing interest in pursuing a college education in a religious environment, it is not always clear just what that environment should be. Increased diversity in the religious orientation of students on Adventist campuses raises questions that demand careful attention. Whether we see this development as a challenge or an opportunity, it requires us to re-think the role of religion at Adventist colleges and universities. Just how important is religion to our identity as institutions of higher learning? And just what role should religion play in college and university life? In other words, how religious should we be? And how should we be religious?

How Religious Should We Be?

Religion can be integrated into the life of a college or university in several different ways.

The purpose of certain institutions is indoctrination. They exist to promulgate a specific religious vision. At a Jewish yeshiva, a Roman Catholic seminary, or a fundamentalist Bible college, religion is not only central to the curriculum, in many ways it is the curriculum. The purpose of the institution is to study and preserve a specific tradition. Teachers and students embrace a common religious vision. Students pursue similar vocational goals.

Religion also plays a role in many secular institutions. Within the past few decades, the study of religion has come of age as an academic discipline. Community colleges, state universities, and private universities not only offer courses in religion, many of them offer majors and graduate degrees in religious studies.

Public institutions take a scholarly approach to religion. It is seen as an important aspect of human culture, but the institution as such takes no stand

for example, are known for the evangelical convictions of their teachers and students. Still other institutions have a close association with religion, although their students do not share a specific religious perspective. At places like Notre Dame University, there is considerable diversity among students (and faculty members) in their attitudes toward religion.

Do any of these profiles fit the Adventist college or university of today? The situation varies from one campus to another, but overall, the answer is No. For many years, the goal was clearly indoctrination. When I attended La Sierra College in the 1960s, non-Adventist students were rare. The campus provided a protective environment, with lots of required religious services and many social restrictions. Many of us planned on careers in ministry. And everyone seemed to agree that religious devotion would naturally lead

graduates are looking to the church for employment. Moreover, students today who choose to be religious—it's now a choice, not an expectation—express their commitment in various ways, not necessarily by attending traditional Adventist services. Whatever the future of religion at Adventist colleges, one thing is certain—it will be different from its past.

Where should we go from here? Some say it is time for us to modify our religious identity and dedicate ourselves to becoming the best private educational institutions we can be. We could have

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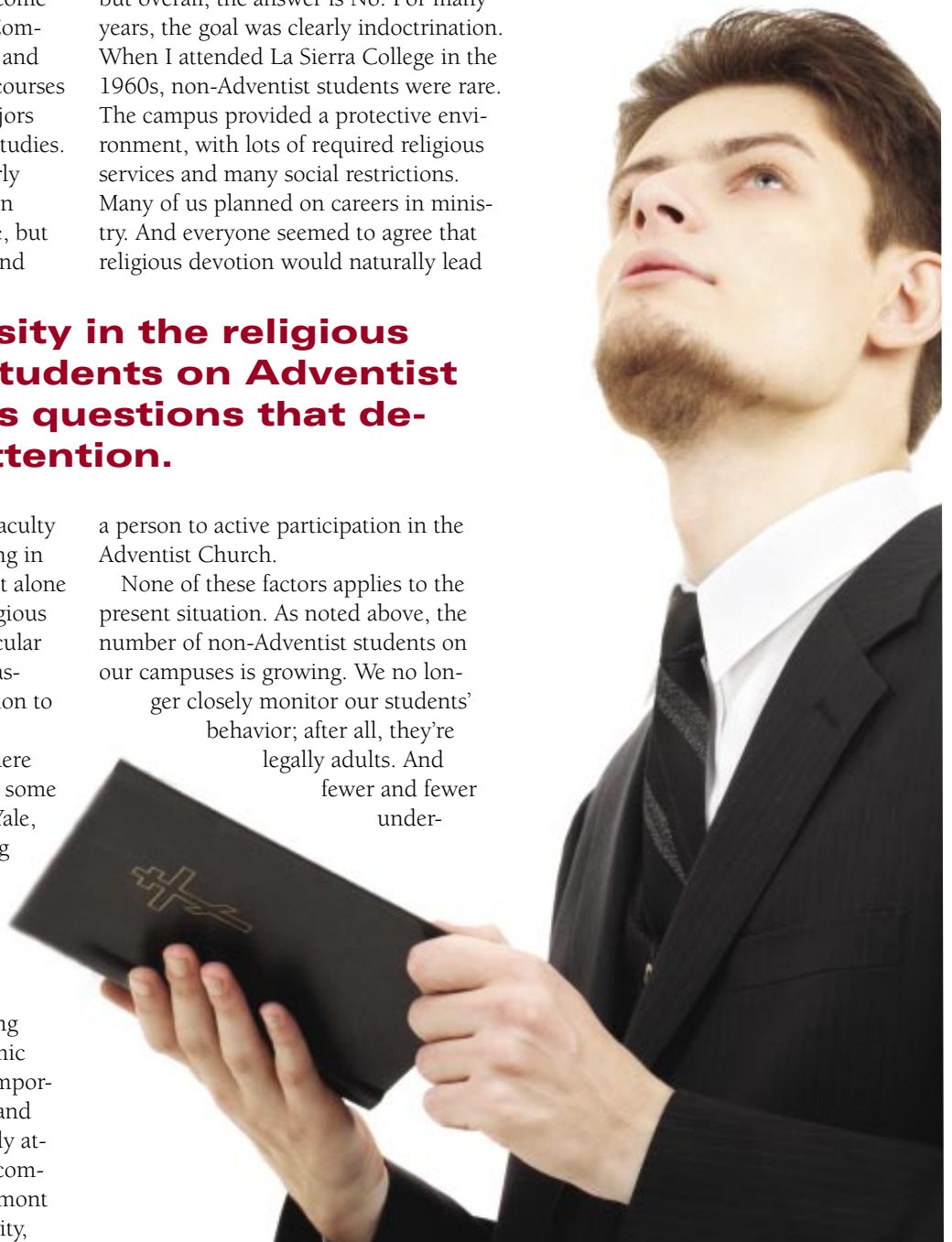
on religion. No one assumes that faculty members or students share anything in the way of religious convictions, let alone a common religious vocation. Religious organizations do exist on many secular campuses, but they are voluntary associations with no official connection to the institution.

Many institutions stand somewhere between these extremes, including some prestigious universities. Harvard, Yale, and Princeton all started as training schools for ministers, and they have divinity schools today. But nobody thinks of them as religious institutions anymore.

Other institutions emphasize their religious identity while striving for intellectual breadth and academic excellence. They give religion an important role in both their curriculum and their student life. And they typically attract students with deep religious commitments. Wheaton College, Westmont College, and Azusa Pacific University,

a person to active participation in the Adventist Church.

None of these factors applies to the present situation. As noted above, the number of non-Adventist students on our campuses is growing. We no longer closely monitor our students' behavior; after all, they're legally adults. And fewer and fewer under-



fine colleges and universities, they argue, without striving to maintain a distinctive religious orientation. Since we are no longer primarily a training ground for denominational workers or a refuge from surrounding society—geographically, intellectually, or socially—and since our students are no longer exclusively church members, it's time to leave our religious distinctives behind and relocate ourselves on the academic landscape.

Following this proposal would put us in good company. It is the route taken by many fine centers of learning. Thus, the question is not whether this is a model that attracts students; clearly, it is. The question is whether this is the best model for us in Adventist academia. Given the distinctive resources and challenges of the present, should we respectfully leave our religious identity in the past and move in another direction? The answer, I believe, is No. We would lose a great deal if we sought to become small, well-run colleges and universities without a strong religious identity.

There are also practical reasons to preserve our identity. As we face the

challenge of an increasingly competitive academic market, we need to remain responsive to our natural constituency. In spite of the growing religious diversity of our students, most of them still come from Adventist families. Our constituents are rightly concerned about the religious environment of their children. Most parents want higher education to be a positive experience for their children both academically and religiously. We must continue to attract Adventist young people.

A strong religious identity will also make our campuses attractive to college-age young people generally. There is a growing appreciation in society today for spiritual and moral values. Educators and public figures are calling for more emphasis in American schools and colleges on ethical and religious matters.²

What role should religion play in college and university life?

Many of them want to give the inculcation of personal values a central place in education. We can do this most effectively at institutions with a strong religious identity. It would be ironic if we softened our religious profile when this is the very thing that could increase our attractiveness to prospective students.

The most important reason for affirming a strong religious identity is the essential purpose of higher education. While colleges and universities seek to stimulate intellectual growth and provide professional preparation, this is only part of their task. A more basic goal of higher education is to assist students in becoming well-balanced, fully mature human beings. As described by Sharon Parks, it consists in helping them on the difficult path to adult faith which she calls “meaning-making.”³

Contrary to popular belief, young people do not arrive on a college or university campus with a well-formed system of personal values and religious convictions. The young adult years are a period of im-



A choir sings on Sabbath morning at Adventist University Zurcher (Sambaina, Antsirabe, Madagascar), directed by Forsythia Galgao.



Students sing about working for the Lord at Solusi University (Bulawayo, Zimbabwe).

mense fluctuation and transition. This is when people make the commitments that guide them through life. And during this critical time, college professors play a very significant role.⁴

People often speak of the educational enterprise at church-related colleges and universities as a religious version of what is essentially a secular task. But if Parks is right, the converse is true. Non-religious institutions provide a secularized version of what is really a religious task—helping students make meaning in their lives. We can pursue this objective most effectively in a setting where religious values are implicitly affirmed and explicitly acknowledged.

So, how religious should Adventist colleges and universities be? The answer is “very religious.” Our religious identity should be a factor in every aspect of our plans and activities.

How Should We Be Religious?

Of course, it is one thing to call for a strong religious identity at our institutions and another to describe it with any precision. Exactly how should we be religious? If it is undesirable to move away from our historic religious identity but impossible to perpetuate the religious

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forms and styles of past decades, where does this leave us?

The ideal role of religion in our future differs from both alternatives mentioned earlier. It consists neither in seeking to indoctrinate our students nor in making religion an object of mere scholarly interest. Indoctrination is no longer an option because of the growing religious diversity of our students. They now come from a wide variety of religious backgrounds. Many are not members of the Adventist Church; a number follow traditions other than Christianity.

Just as significant, there is in our students a wide range of attitudes toward religion, particularly organized religion. Years ago, some connection with the church was a given in almost everyone’s life. Deeply religious students were closely connected to the church. The not-so-religious still saw themselves as part of the church. Today, religious commitment

does not necessarily equate with denominational loyalty. While many students are active in traditional organized religion, others with an interest in religion are not. Our approach to religion must take into account this sort of diversity, too.

At the same time, religion on Adventist campuses must be more than an object of scholarly examination. We want students to view religion as an important part of their personal lives, not just part of human life in general. And this calls for something more than dispassionate inquiry. The best way to describe it, I believe, is “recommending a religious perspective.” While we do not assume, or expect, a certain attitude toward religion from our students, neither do we treat religious values and beliefs as matters of purely private preference. Instead, we encourage students to think carefully

about their religious convictions, and we provide a framework of values and commitments for them to consider as they do so. This proposal calls for several concrete measures.

First of all, it will affect the way we teach religion. To recommend a religious perspective, we will require students to take religion classes in several different areas, and we will explore our religious tradition “from within” as well as “from without.” In other words, we will teach as representatives of a religious community, not merely as historians, literary scholars, sociologists, anthropologists, or philosophers. This doesn’t mean that we avoid looking at religion as a phenomenon that deserves scholarly investigation, nor that we uncritically recite traditional doctrinal formulas. To the contrary, we are not averse to the rigorous exploration of religious ideas, institutions, and practices. But the goal is to help students reflect carefully on the claims of Christianity.

To recommend a religious perspec-

tive means bringing Christian ideas and values into conversation with the beliefs and values reflected in all the disciplines we offer. This involves the entire faculty, not just religion teachers. It does not mean that faculty members must hold identical religious views or avoid raising serious questions about religious issues. It does call for faculty members to be sensitive to students’ religious needs. And it invites them to share their own convictions with students both inside and outside the classroom.

To recommend a religious perspective, we must attend to the public side of religion, too. And this has implications for student life. Students need to learn something about the perspective we’re recommending in settings other than the classroom. Religious universities across the spectrum—Jewish, Catholic, and Protestant—expect

their students to attend religious services. It’s part of the educational experience such institutions provide. For this reason, we will require students to attend religious services on Adventist campuses. To show that we are serious about this aspect of religion, we will provide programs of the highest quality, whatever the cost.⁵ In addition to various required activities, students should also have plenty of opportunity to express and explore religion in informal settings. We will also express our commitment to a Christian ethic by encouraging students to participate in community service.

Clearly, recommending a religious perspective requires us to resist developments that would relegate religion to the private, individual sphere of our students’ lives. We must avoid the notion that seri-

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Sabbath school at Avondale College (Cooranbong, New South Wales, Australia).



ous academic work approaches religion from outside but never from inside a religious tradition, and that instructors should refrain from expressing their personal religious convictions in the setting of the classroom. We must also avoid the tendency to emphasize the emotional and downplay the intellectual aspects of religion; to elevate private above public expressions of religion. Both approaches rest on the assumption that serious academic inquiry and formal religion have little to do with personal religious experience. But a religious perspective is more than personal preference and private experience. Christianity, and its Adventist expression, involve shared beliefs, values, and experiences—in other words, tradition and community. And our stu-

dents need to appreciate these aspects of religion, too.

Finally, recommending a religious perspective means bringing Christian beliefs and values into conversation with all academic disciplines and with all human concerns. One of the most important things we can communicate to our students is an expansive vision of Christian scholarship. They need to believe that a Christian commitment summons them to high intellectual endeavor. They need the confidence that Christian beliefs and values give them a secure basis for pursuing any avenue of human inquiry and interacting with bright minds wherever they meet them.

Several years ago, my daughter attended one of the summer seminars at

Notre Dame University sponsored by the Pew Foundation. Its purpose was to encourage religious young people to pursue careers in academia as their Christian vocation. She found it inspiring to study with world-class scholars from some of America's greatest universities who were not the least bit defensive about their Christian beliefs. In fact, rather than apologizing for Christianity, they felt that the burden of proof rested on those who were not believers. I was glad she was exposed to that attitude, and I hope the students in Adventist schools find in their teachers the same combination of scholarly excellence and Christian confidence.

In *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind*,⁶ Mark A. Noll challenges believers to “think like a Christian” in every area of life. This means taking “seriously the sovereignty of God over the world he created, the lordship of Christ over the world he died to redeem, and the power of the Holy Spirit over the world he sustains each and every moment.” This is the kind of thinking we must encourage our students to do. ✍



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NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. March 5, 1999, p. A42. I have in mind in this discussion Adventist institutions in North America.
2. Among recent publications that illustrate this are *The Book of Virtues* by William Bennett, former U.S. Secretary of Education (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1993) and *The Culture of Disbelief* by Stephen L. Carter (New York: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1994).
3. Sharen Dudley Parks, *The Critical Years: The Young Adult Search for a Faith to Live By* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991).
4. Parks's book convinced me that if I could send my children to an Adventist school for only four years of their lives, it should be for college.
5. We should abandon the oxymoron “required worship.” If worship is the soul's free response to God, it cannot, by definition, be required.
6. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1994).