

SHOULD ADVENTIST COLLEGES REQUIRE RELIGION CLASSES?

It is not unusual for incoming freshmen, when looking over the general-education requirements at a Seventh-day Adventist college or university, to exclaim:

“Eighteen quarter credits [or 12 semester credits] in religion! Why do I have to take more Bible classes? I took Bible in academy. I came here to prepare for a career.”

And it isn't just students who are prone to ask such questions.

Several years ago, Pacific Union College (PUC), in Angwin, California, where I taught when this article was written, was revising its general-education program. This stimulated a great deal of discussion. Which classes from each discipline should be required? How could the school ensure that students received a quality liberal-arts education? It became clear during these discussions that not all faculty members outside the Religion Department were equally committed to maintain-

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ing a sizable religion requirement in the general-education program. Some of them expressed the same doubt as the hypothetical student, “Why must we require so many credits in religion?”

Now in fairness to those who pose this question, there is no precept in the Decalogue mandating that a tithe of general-education classes be devoted to biblical and theological studies, though religion professors might

wish that were the case!

Religion teachers may wonder why anyone would ask such a question, since the answer seems so self-evident (at least to us). We may be tempted to fall back on tradition—asserting that the college has always required this number of religion credits. However, I would propose that we view the question as an opportunity to reflect analytically about why Adventist colleges should require religion classes. Doing so will help us discover

BY GREG A. KING

and set forth the rationale and objectives for such classes, and to reaffirm their essential nature.

I believe there are persuasive and weighty reasons for requiring religion classes as part of the general-education program at any Christian college—and especially at an Adventist institution.

Rationale

There are a number of rationales for required religion classes, but I would like to focus on two matters

close to my heart. First, if the endeavor in which Adventist colleges and universities are involved is to truly deserve the label “education,” it must have a spiritual dimension. It must speak to the most vital area of life, namely, humanity’s need for a relationship with a transcendent God. Solomon was right when he declared, “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge” (Proverbs 1:7, NIV).¹

Unfortunately, most secular higher education has completely lost this di-

mension. For example, Harvard University, arguably the most prestigious educational institution in the world, has as its motto the Latin word *veritas* meaning “truth.” However, you might have a hard time finding a Harvard student or faculty member who could make any connection between the current brand of education offered at the university and the original meaning of that motto. When Harvard began its storied history, that term did not mean truth in the abstract, it meant the truth that is found in

Christ Jesus. Harvard was founded to train missionaries to witness to the Native Americans.

It is hard for some to fathom that Duke University, famous today for its basketball championships, has on its campus a plaque that reads, “The Aims of Duke University are to assert a faith in the eternal union of knowledge and religion set forth in the teachings and character of Jesus Christ, the son of God.” But that was what Duke stood for at one time. Now, any assertion by its administra-

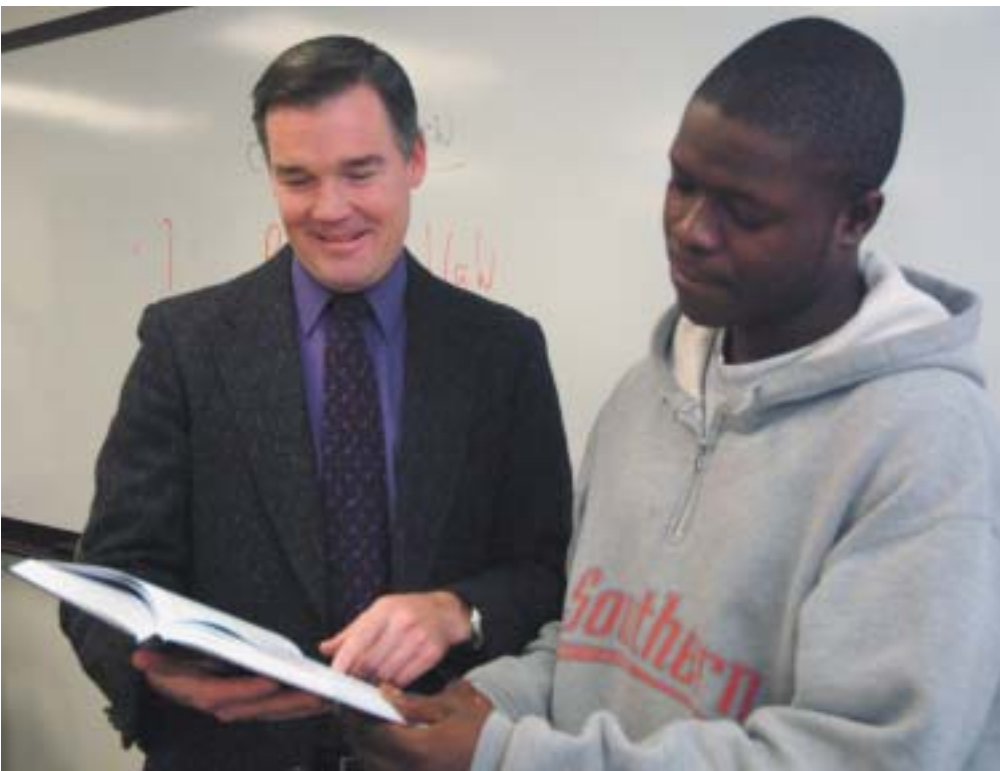
tive leaders that Duke is a Christian university would be met with either a firestorm of protest or howls of laughter. But I would maintain that the founders of Duke and Harvard—and nearly all colleges and universities founded in early America—had it right. The most important aim of education is to seek a knowledge of the One who claimed to be the Way, the Truth, and the Life.

This should especially be true at Seventh-day Adventist colleges and universities. Our charter is found in the following statement: “True education means more than the pursuit of a certain course of study. It means more than a preparation for the life that now is. It has to do with the whole being, and with the whole period of existence possible to man. It is the harmonious development of the physical, the mental, and the spiritual powers.”² With this understanding, we have no reason to be apologetic and every reason to be unhesitating in our support of required religion classes, which focus directly on the spiritual dimension of life. These classes should be at the heart of what we do in Adventist higher education.

Religion Classes and Mission

Having a meaningful religion requirement is one of the best ways of advancing the overall mission of a school. The PUC mission statement reads as follows: “Pacific Union College is a Seventh-day Adventist learning community offering an excellent Christ-centered education that prepares its students for productive lives of useful human service and uncompromising personal integrity.” Other Adventist colleges’ mission statements have similar emphases.

Since such statements describe the overall mission of the school, the college’s required curriculum must be designed to ensure that these words become a reality in the lives of students. Required religion classes play a vital role in providing a “Christ-cen-



Photos in this article depict the author, Greg King, interacting with his students at Southern Adventist University.

tered education,” and in challenging students to live “lives of useful human service and uncompromising human integrity.” In fact, the role of these classes is so vital that it would be difficult to imagine the mission being accomplished without a religion requirement.

To summarize, both the *sine qua non* of the spiritual component in true education and the vital role of religion classes in fulfilling the mission of the college provide a strong rationale for required religion classes. I will now set forth several objectives of such classes.

Objectives

Several years ago, a student wrote on an information sheet distributed at the beginning of one of my Bible classes: “I was raised in a Seventh-day Adventist home. My parents are people of great faith, and I love them and am grateful to them for raising me as a Christian, but I no longer consider myself to be Christian. In academy, I became a real believer, but later I became a believer with a lot of doubts. Over the past few years, I’ve seriously questioned my beliefs and am currently in the process of doing so. My

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questions have become more basic right now. They’re somewhere around, am I prepared to believe in a God? If so, what kind of God?” It is these kinds of students—who are becoming increasingly common on our campuses—that I have in mind as I propose the following objectives.

1st Objective: *Evangelistic*

Simply stated, the primary purpose of religion classes must be to help our students have an encounter with Jesus Christ. In other words, we are not merely transmitters of information, or experts in various specialties, we are also evangelists—and our target audience is the group of students in our classrooms.

The importance of this task is underscored by the fact that many of our students have never experienced a soul-saving, life-changing relationship with Jesus. If we really believe

that Jesus is the One who provides the most abundant, satisfying, fulfilling way to live (see John 10:10), and that eternal life is found in knowing Him (see John 17:3), then one of our primary goals must be to inspire our students to have a relationship with Him, too. And we should use every opportunity we can, whether through sharing a devotional thought in the classroom, touching base with students outside of class to let them know we are praying for them, etc., to share our own relationship with Jesus Christ.

In a published interview, Malcolm Maxwell, president of Pacific Union College for 18 years, succinctly described this responsibility: “In accepting a position on the faculty of Pacific Union College, you are accepting pastoral and evangelistic obligations;



part of your job at PUC means you will reach out and touch our students for Christ. This is the one thing that sets our school apart. Many schools provide a good academic experience; we do, too, in a context of Christian commitment. That's what we're all about." If this is the responsibility of any teacher in any discipline, it must especially be true for religion teachers.³

This objective is not necessarily achieved through excellent lectures or scintillating reading assignments. In fact, accomplishing this evangelistic goal may sometimes have little to do with course-related issues or specific subject matter. Please do not conclude that this condones shoddy teaching or scholarship, for we must strive for excellence in our lectures, our scholarship, and indeed, all that we do. But our primary objective transcends the academic enterprise.

I was reminded of the transitory nature of the information we transmit when a student, immediately after completing his final exam, went over to the wastebasket in the corner and without fanfare, threw away all of his notes from the class. This experience served as a jarring reminder that students tend to remember little of the factual content of their classes. Many of the dates and names and historical events vanish from their minds like the morning dew. However, they are likely to remember what type of person I am, whether I took a genuine interest in them, and most of all, if I, in their view, had an authentic relationship with Jesus Christ that inspired them to want to get to know Him better.

2nd Objective: Impart Bible Knowledge

A second objective follows naturally on the heels of the first. It is to impart a knowledge of the Bible, the Word of God. To fulfill this objective, we must require classes that focus on the study of Scripture.

This objective is worthy of attention for a couple of reasons. First, we must communicate to our students

the centrality of the Word of God in our personal Christian faith and in the life of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. We need to clearly indicate that we really do give priority to the words of Scripture. In a world where so much is transitory, we must show that we believe that, "The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of our God stands forever" (Isaiah 40:8). Teaching the Word of God has always been a central part of the Protestant tradition, and Adventist colleges should show that they value this aspect of their heritage.

Emphasizing a knowledge of Scripture will also help to counter the widespread biblical illiteracy that exists in both the world and the church. While we might chuckle about the lack of biblical knowledge exhibited on television game shows, with peo-

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ple identifying the Epistles as the wives of the apostles or declaring that Noah's wife was Joan of Arc, we might be shocked at the lack of awareness of some scriptural basics by longtime church members.

By "imparting a knowledge of the Bible," I don't mean that the teacher should act as if he or she has completely mastered the treasures of the Bible and is there merely to dispense these treasures to the students. While the teacher does need to share important passages, themes, and concepts, perhaps the best thing he or she can do is to inspire students to engage in their own personal study of the Word.

If I can enthusiastically share a verse or teaching from the Bible, I have achieved a positive result. How-

ever, if I can arouse in my students a passionate hunger to study the Bible for themselves, to make a lifelong commitment to seeking God in the pages of His Word, I will have made a lasting, perhaps an eternal, difference in their lives.

A basic ingredient of imparting a knowledge of the Bible is sharing the time-honored principles for interpreting it. These principles will be of great benefit to our students as they study a Book that can sometimes be very challenging. If I can help them to interpret the Bible more competently and accurately, I will have better prepared them to serve as active lay people and leaders. Moreover, this may help safeguard them against some of the interpretive excesses that have been characteristic of fringe groups such as the Branch Davidians.

3rd Objective: Share Christianity's Major Doctrines

A third objective of required religion classes is to communicate the major teachings of Christianity and the Seventh-day Adventist Church. The Bible emphatically challenges the community of faith to transmit revealed truth from generation to generation (see, for example, Deuteronomy 6:7, 8). One of the best places for this to happen is in a classroom.

This objective is important for a variety of reasons, not least of which is that what is not passed along will eventually be lost. If we want our students to be committed Adventist Christians, we must communicate the beliefs that we as a church deem important. Babies are not born knowing the chief tenets of the Christian faith like salvation by faith in Christ, the inspiration of Scripture, and the Trinity, nor major teachings of Adventism, like the Sabbath and Creation. They must be taught these doctrines.

It is important to note that the purpose in communicating Christian teachings and the Adventist faith is not simply to indoctrinate or to en-

able the students to regurgitate ideas in the same way the teacher stated them in class. Rather, the Bible teacher should lead the students to thoughtfully reflect upon, understand, and commit themselves to the same heritage of faith to which he or she is dedicated.

For the teacher to fulfill this objective, he or she must not act as an impartial, unbiased moderator with no commitment to any position. As a Seventh-day Adventist Bible teacher, I am a partisan for Christ. I am committed to my church, and I make no apology for attempting to share my commitment with my students in a thoughtful and well-reasoned manner.

There is no space here to list the teachings that should be communicated in the classroom setting. Of course, foremost among them is the plan of salvation and acceptance of Christ as a personal Savior. Another important teaching is a biblical worldview that undergirds all of Christian faith and life.

Secular society continuously bombards our students with a completely different worldview, described in this quote by a Harvard scientist: “Man is the result of a blind, purposeless process that did not have him in mind. He was not planned.” Adventist religion teachers must combat this nihilism by presenting a loving, personal Creator God who knows His children personally and has a plan for each one (see Jeremiah 1:5; 29:11). In addition, Adventist doctrines such as the Sabbath, Creation, and the Second Coming should be presented in the classroom.

4th Objective: Transforming Students’ Lives

The fourth and final objective grows naturally out of the previous ones. It is to inspire our students to pattern their own lives after the example of Jesus Christ (see 1 John 2:6). Bible classes should challenge

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students to devote their talents and energies to God in order to make a difference in the world.

We are not just trying to change our students’ minds. Our goal is much more far-reaching and significant—for our students’ lives to demonstrate supreme love to God and unselfish love to others (see Matthew 22:37-39), for them to treat others with justice and mercy while they walk humbly with their God (see Micah 6:8), and for them to live the principles in the Sermon on the Mount. We want them to be so committed to living for God that they will respond with acts of moral courage, should the situation require it.

Our ultimate goal, like that of the Master Teacher Himself, is to see the lives of our students transformed so that they become agents in advancing the kingdom of God on Earth.

Conclusion

When I became chair of the religion department at Pacific Union College, one of my colleagues asked about my main objectives for the de-

partment. His question challenged me to crystallize in my own mind what I hoped our department would accomplish through its teaching ministry on our campus.

As I thought about his probing question, I concluded that our objectives revolved around three major concerns: the Son of God, the Word of God, and the church of God.

First, our religion classes should inspire students to begin or deepen a relationship with Jesus Christ and to model their lives after His pattern of love and service;

Second, our classes should help students become better acquainted with Scripture and motivate them to study God’s Word for themselves; and

Finally, our classes should challenge students to be more committed to the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

If religion classes leave our students more passionately devoted to Jesus, more deeply committed to His Word, and more strongly dedicated to His church, we will have accomplished our objectives. ☞



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NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. All Bible verses in this article are quoted from the New International Version. Texts credited to the NIV are from the *Holy Bible, New International Version*. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, International Bible Society. Used by permission of Zondervan Bible Publishers.

2. Ellen G. White, *Education* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Publ. Assn., 1952), p. 13.

3. This quote is taken from an interview with D. Malcolm Maxwell titled “Our Distinctive Difference—Seventh-day Adventist Higher Education,” *Pacific Union Recorder* (April 15, 1996), p. 5.