

WHY THE STUDY OF RELIGION BELONGS IN ADVENTIST GRADUATE PROGRAMS

*“What therefore you worship as unknown,
this I proclaim to you.*

*The God who made the world and everything in it,
being Lord of Heaven and earth. . . .”*

The Apostle Paul in Athens¹

Should graduate students in Adventist universities be required to take religion courses? I believe that they should.

My purpose in asserting the importance of including religious studies in the curricula of graduate programs is born of two convictions. I believe that the careful study of religion should be an important element in Christian education at all levels, and I lament that many graduate programs are missing this opportunity. So this is a call for change.

Some years ago, when I became dean of the religion faculty at Loma Linda University (LLU) in Loma Linda, California, I needed to understand the religion requirements for undergraduate and graduate programs as well as for post-baccalaureate professional programs. I found that these programs had vastly different requirements. In order to earn a diploma, every undergraduate student had to take a significant number of religion courses. And, thanks to the visionary leadership of my predecessors, the LLU post-baccalaureate

professional programs such as medicine and dentistry also included carefully designed religion components. The curriculum for our medical students, for example, continues to include seven required courses in religion, for a total of 14 quarter units, with titles like “God and Human Suffering” and “Wholeness for Physicians.” The dentistry program has a similar religion curriculum.

I was surprised to discover that most of LLU’s graduate programs required only one unspecified two-unit course in religion. The requirement could be fulfilled by either a graduate-level or upper-division undergraduate course. This minimal requirement applied regardless of whether students were enrolled in one- to two-year master’s degree programs or in the much longer doctoral programs.

A proposal to change this requirement, so that all graduate students would take at least one three-unit course in religion at the graduate level, produced some resistance. One program director—a very conservative Adventist—wrote a stern two-page letter in which he argued that our graduate school was not a “seminary” and that the purpose of religion courses for graduate students should be mostly devotional.

More than one colleague asked me why our university should have any graduate-level religion requirements when most of our sister institutions’ graduate programs had no such re-

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BY GERALD R. WINSLOW

quirement. Nevertheless, the proposal passed.

Since that time, the inclusion of religion in the curricula of all LLU graduate programs has expanded so that even our 18-unit certificate programs include at least one graduate-level course in religion. And our doctoral programs, with the clear mandate of LLU's administration and board of trustees and the generally enthusiastic support of program directors, now include three different three-unit graduate-level religion

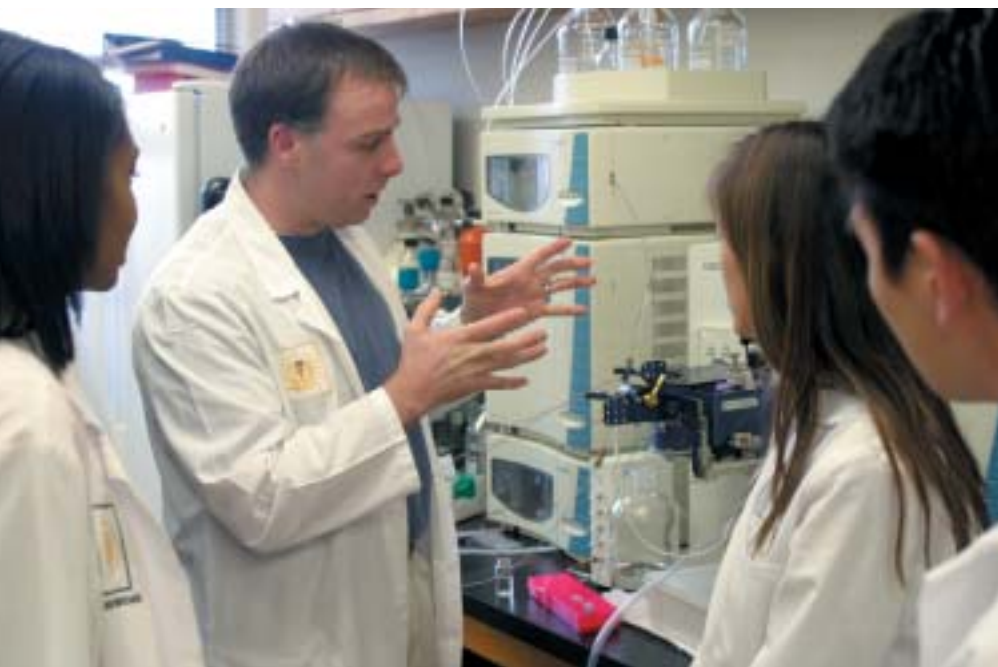
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ist graduate programs in North America other than those at LLU. The eight schools surveyed offered a total of 80 graduate programs (ex-

had any visible requirement for the study of religion.

Why Graduate Programs Do Not Include a Religion Component

How is it that so many Adventist graduate programs include no provision for the academic study of religion? Did this result from the conviction that such programs would be superior if they did not include a religion requirement? I have not made a study of the history of Adventist graduate education, but my more



All of the Loma Linda University students shown in this article, at both undergraduate and graduate level, are required to take religion courses.

courses. From all that I can see, the dire predictions have not come to pass. On the contrary, student evaluations indicate a high level of appreciation for the courses.

A Survey of Graduate Programs

The argument that required religion courses would put Loma Linda University out of step with other Adventist graduate programs puzzled me. Was it true that Adventist graduate education was generally devoid of required courses in religion? The disappointing answer, at least in North America, is mostly yes. In 2003, I surveyed the curricula of all the Advent-

cluding ones such as the M.Div., whose major emphasis is the study of religion). Of these 80 programs, only five (about six percent) required courses with a religion prefix. Two of these programs were in church administration; one was in music ministry.

Further scrutiny of the 80 programs indicated that several of them did require courses with titles such as "Christian Ethics and Values" and "Faith and Learning" that obviously included the academic study of religion, even though the courses did not bear religion prefixes. Even so, it appeared that only about 18 percent



than 40 years of personal experience, first as a student and then as a professor and administrator in Adventist higher education, have allowed me to draw some conclusions.

The relative absence of religion in so many of our graduate programs is not the result of secularization. In other words, these programs did not start with a clear vision regarding the integration of religious studies, and then, over time, experience an erosion of commitment. Most of the graduate programs that are now de-

void of the formal study of religion have always been this way. Why is this so?

I offer the following incomplete list of answers based on my experience and on numerous conversations with Adventist educators. Here are three examples of reasons commonly given:

1. *Our students have already studied enough religion.* When Adventist graduate programs first emerged, most of the students came from the church's undergraduate institutions. Some decades ago, it was common for Adventist colleges to require two units of religion for every undergraduate quarter of study. Thus, at that time, most students had to take 24 units of



The author, Gerald R. Winslow, teaching a religion class at Loma Linda University.



religion to earn a baccalaureate degree.² Later, this was lowered to 18 units for students who had attended Adventist secondary schools. Subsequently, the standard became 18, and in some cases 16 units, for all students. In the early days, since most students enrolling in Adventist graduate programs were church members who had taken many religion courses, administrators concluded that benefits of the academic study of religion had been achieved. Underlying this argument is a profound misun-

derstanding of the purpose of religious studies. Many people regard such courses as “academic lite”—mostly devotional in nature, and hardly worthy of graduate-level study.

2. *Required religion courses will make our graduate programs unattractive.* This fear expresses itself in many ways. Some are afraid that including religion courses will cause prospective students or colleagues at secular institutions to view our programs as substandard. They fear that we will be confused with a “Bible college” and

not taken seriously. Others fear that the inclusion of religion will either make the program longer, and thus more expensive, or will force the elimination of other important courses, thus making the program inferior to its competitors.

3. *We can integrate religion in our programs without requiring formal courses.* This is one of the most common reasons for rejecting required religion courses at both the graduate and undergraduate levels. After all, should it not be possible to integrate the study of religion within courses in history, literature, mathematics, and science? And, since all of our professors are people of faith, surely they can make clear the connections between their disciplines and religious convictions. I fear that part of the price for a belief in the “priesthood of all believers” is the corollary that most anyone should be able to teach religion, regardless of his or her academic preparation.

Reasons to Require the Study of Religion in Graduate Programs

To these three examples, many more could be added. It is my belief, however, that negative reactions of this sort have caused Adventist graduate programs to miss remarkable opportunities for offering a genuinely superior education. Many reasons can be given for this belief. I will men-

tion only three.

1. *Graduate education presents students with an important opportunity and stimulus for spiritual growth and maturation.* Graduate studies typically present students with critical issues of meaning and values at a time when they have newly entered adulthood. Many of these students are more ready to address fundamental questions about their purpose in life than at previous times. As James Fowler has observed, “Persons may reach chronological and biological adulthood while remaining best defined by structural stages of faith that would most commonly be associated with early or middle childhood or adolescence.”³³

While there are many ways to in-



corporate opportunities for faith development in the curriculum, the inclusion of carefully crafted courses in religion ensures that graduate students will encounter, both in their course work and in the person of the professor, potentially invaluable opportunities for growth.

Our graduate students today come from remarkably diverse religious backgrounds. Providing them an appropriate environment for the exploration of faith requires careful respect for this diversity. But it does not require spiritual or theological neutrality.⁴ As Richard Rice has argued, the task of the professor of religion on an Adventist campus is more than “dispassionate inquiry.” In Rice’s words, we have a responsibility to “recommend a religious perspective.”



Doing so in a manner that respects the student’s own religious biography is the way to the most fruitful conversations.

2. *The inclusion of religious studies helps to ensure the balanced education of the whole person.* Because of the ministry of Ellen White, Adventists have rich resources for reflection on the value of wholistic education. Adventist education is never more successful than when it remembers these words: “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 possi-

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ble to man. It is the harmonious development of the physical, the mental, and the spiritual powers.”²⁵

Nothing about this vision ends at the conclusion of a baccalaureate education. Failure to include serious study of religion at the graduate level carries the unhappy risks of imbalance. Students are expected to gain the highest levels of intellectual inquiry in their chosen areas of academic specialty while the exploration of their religious convictions may remain at the level of adolescence. Small wonder, then, that religious belief may seem juvenile and irrelevant for such students.

Quality Christian education, on the other hand, makes explicit provision for the integration of the sacred. In the words of Parker Palmer, “The health of education depends on our ability to hold sacred and secular together so that they can correct and enrich each other.”²⁶

3. *Graduate education that includes the study of religion is intellectually superior.* This claim may seem the least obvious. But I am firmly convinced that including religious studies in curricula as diverse as business administration and the natural sciences will help to create programs that are stronger academically.

Recently, one of my colleagues, a periodontist who teaches in our dental school, told me that the most important course he took during his graduate studies in dentistry was Philosophy of Religion. He said he believed this was true not only because of the opportunity for spiritual growth, but also because the mode of inquiry opened new horizons of intellectual life.

Exploring the relationship between language and thought and the way we justify our most basic convictions helped this colleague throughout his career to seek greater clarity on the issues that matter most. Any time students have the opportunity to join with other first-rate minds in the close examination and discussion of a text, their intellectual growth is likely to be significantly enriched. This is



especially true when the text in hand focuses on what it means to be human in a divinely created universe. Ellen White’s observation is as cogent today as it was when published a century ago: “As a means of intellectual training, the Bible is more effective than any other book, or all other books combined. . . . No other study can impart such mental power as does the effort to grasp the stupendous truths of revelation.”²⁷

If we believe this—and we should—then we will be emboldened to integrate religious studies, including biblical study, in every Adventist graduate program. We should not fear decreased enrollment because we will

believe that the educational programs we are offering are spiritually and intellectually superior to their secular counterparts. We already have sufficient evidence that large numbers of students will be attracted to exactly this kind of education.

How to Do It

Experience has taught me that expanding the religion curricula at the graduate level must be done with great care. A supportive alliance with program directors and deans is essential, and courses must be tailored to the specific needs and interests of the participants. Most graduate students are highly focused on particular aca-

ademic and professional goals, and courses in religious studies need to address the practical implications of their inquiry. So, for example, when our graduate school introduced a new doctoral program in social policy, one of the new religion courses, negotiated with the program director and approved by the graduate council, was “Christian Citizenship,” an exploration of Christian ethics focused on the formation of social policy.

Finally, and crucially, the professors who teach graduate students must be carefully selected. An excellent undergraduate teacher may, or may not, make a gifted leader of a graduate seminar.



Today, Adventist graduate programs have an unprecedented opportunity for reaching new levels of academic and spiritual excellence. Many thousands of students come to our colleges and universities seeking the best education. For a significant percentage of these students, their time in our church’s graduate programs will be their *only* encounter with Adventist education. We should not fail them, nor should we fail to live up to our visionary calling as a prophetic community of faith, by omitting the

careful study of religious convictions as a central feature of every graduate program we offer.

We must pray for the Holy Spirit to help us overcome our insecurity about our spiritual heritage and religious identity, which so often produces fear of overtly incorporating religion into our graduate curricula. Other Christian universities have matured beyond this insecurity. And, by the power of the Spirit, I am confident that we can, too.

As administrators and professors,

we should work to ensure the creative inclusion of religious studies in our graduate programs because this is our calling from God, and because the result will be a better education for the wonderful students who invest in Adventist higher education and who put their trust in our leadership. ✍️



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the university and Vice President for Spiritual Life at the LLU Adventist Health Sciences Center. This article is adapted from a presentation to the International Conference on Religious and Theological Education in Silver Spring, Maryland, July 6-10, 2003.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Acts 17:23-24, English Standard Version.
2. I am referring to quarter units, not semester units.
3. James Fowler, *Faithful Change* (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon Press, 1996), p. 57.
4. Richard Rice, “Religion and the Adventist University,” *Spectrum* 28 (Spring 2002), p. 60.
5. Ellen G. White, *Education* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Publ. Assn., 1903), p. 13.
6. Parker J. Palmer, *The Courage to Teach* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1998), p. 111.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 124.