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Religious Diversity Can Reform Our Campuses

Campus protests are fueled by a spiritual crisis



HIGHER EDUCATION is in trouble. More than 800 colleges and 9,000 campuses have closed since 2004. The cost of attending a four-year college has increased by 180 percent between 1980 and 2020, forcing many students to consider alternatives to college. Schools are also facing what's called a demographic cliff (a decline in the number of college-age students due to decreased fertility). Add to the mix an intense culture of cancellation that has persisted on campus and limited open inquiry and authentic questioning for years, a culture that engenders student self-censorship in the exact spaces where many young people have, in previous generations, first found their voice. We are presiding over the decline of one of

our civilization's most historic innovations: open and accessible higher education. No wonder only 28 percent of Americans today have confidence in colleges and universities.

It is not a coincidence that these grim developments coincided with the academy's attempt to foster more diverse environments on campus. These efforts at repairing our social fabric may have been inspired by good intentions. But their impact on higher education has been, on the whole, negative. What was intended to bring students together in a close community and promote upward social mobility, empathy, and understanding has managed to silo students into echo chambers and create mistrust, misunderstanding, and division. It has racially balkanized our institutions and politicized every facet of the collegiate experience, even the disciplines one would think are naturally immune: science, math, and engineering. No less a scientific powerhouse than MIT was among the most enthusiastic about instituting changes along DEI lines, releasing a strategic action plan for DEI in 2021 and hiring "six new assistant deans, one in each school and in the MIT Stephen A. Schwarzman College of Computing, to serve as DEI professionals."

The results have been so counterproductive that they prompted a dramatic reversal. In May 2024, MIT, followed quickly by Harvard, ended the requirement for faculty to include "diversity statements" in their self-assessments and hiring applications. Why? As MIT President Sally Kornbluth said, "My goals are to tap into the full scope of human talent, to bring the very best to MIT and to make sure they thrive once here... We can build an inclusive environment in many ways, but compelled statements impinge on freedom of expression, and they don't work."

Notice in Kornbluth's words acknowledgment of both an ethical problem ("compelled statements impinge on freedom of expression") and an empirical one ("they don't work"). The question is, what does

work? If universities want to promote diversity on campus, how can they do so in an ethically responsible and effective way that neither impinges nor silos?

Fortunately, another form of diversity is thriving on campus and tends to bring students of varied socioeconomic, racial, and cultural backgrounds together: religious diversity.

The diversity of religious faith (and non-faith) on American campuses today not only offers an opportunity for our universities to live up to their goals of social repair; it also provides a window into understanding why some students have been drawn to the silos—including unhinged protests and encampments—in the first place.



In their book *No Longer Invisible: Religion in University Education*, Rhonda Hustedt Jacobsen and Douglas Jacobsen chart the history of religion in American higher education, identifying three periods: “Protestant,” “Privatized,” and “Pluriform.” “We are now living in a new Pluriform era in which various types of religion are prominent in cultural discourse,” they write. “The increasing religious diversity of the nation has also been a factor in making religion more visible on college and university campuses.”

The Jacobsens are right. The Higher Education Research Institute at UCLA (HERI), which has been tracking the religious affiliation of incoming students since the 1960s, found that in 1966, more than half (55 percent) of all first-time, full-time college students described themselves as Protestant, and more than one-quarter (28 percent) identified as Catholic. Only 7 percent of incoming students in 1966 reported having no affiliation with a religion.

In 2015, HERI found that less than a quarter (24 percent) of students identified as Catholic while the number of Protestants dropped

to 38 percent. 2023 data from a Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression study of more than 55,000 undergraduates from over 250 schools show that students identify across a host of faiths: 10 percent as Protestant, 18 percent as Catholic, 17 percent as “Just Christian,” 3 percent as Jewish, 2 percent each for Muslim and Mormon, 1 percent each as Buddhist and Hindu.

I experienced the results of this change as soon as I arrived on campus as an undergraduate. My Hindu hallmates invited me to join them for their Diwali celebration, an experience entirely foreign to me, a young Modern Orthodox Jew. Over the course of the evening, I learned a great deal about my fellow dormmates, not to mention the spiritual victory of dharma (crudely translated as virtue) over adharma (non-virtue) as well as their views about promoting light over darkness, good over evil, and knowledge over ignorance—all very similar themes to what I see in Judaism and many of its core values. The evening brought us into closer friendship, as did the Hanukkah celebration they attended with me not long after. These exchanges started a conversation about spirituality, community, and purpose that continues to this day. As a professor, I have witnessed this same kind of phenomenon among my students.

But I have also witnessed something else. Even more dramatic than the increased diversity of religions represented on campus is the growing number of students with no religious affiliation at all. As of 2023, that group makes up 36 percent of college students. If it were a religious denomination, it would be the largest one on campus.

What does this mean, and what impact has this form of diversity had on university culture?



To answer this question, we need to recognize two features that distinguish this religiously unaffiliated group from their religiously

affiliated classmates. The first is their mental health. According to numerous studies, religiously unaffiliated students report higher levels of stress, anxiety, and depression than do their religious peers. And data have shown that being part of a religious community can combat the nation's loneliness epidemic by decreasing feelings of isolation.

College can be a psychologically challenging time for young people, and it is not uncommon for students to experience mental health difficulties at higher rates than the general population. But whereas 60 percent of Protestant students report feeling anxious half of the time or more often, the students with the highest percentage of such feelings are the religiously unaffiliated, at a whopping 72 percent. Similarly, 48 percent of agnostics state that they feel depressed half of the time or more frequently, in contrast to 35 percent of Catholics and Jews and 32 percent of Protestants. About 51 percent of atheists state they are regularly lonely, to 43 percent of Catholics, 41 percent of Jews, and 40 percent of Protestants. (Aren't Jews supposed to be the neurotic ones?)

The second feature is their relative support for stifling campus speech. We all might be concerned to learn that 59 percent of religious college students believe that there are times when shouting down a speaker could be acceptable. But the fact that 71 percent of *nonreligious* students feel that way might seem counterintuitive. Censoring other people's speech has historically been a tactic and impulse more common to religious authorities and reactionaries than secularists. When it comes to self-censorship, a prevalent practice in religiously dogmatic societies, the percentage of religious students who engage in it is the same: 59 percent. But for students of no faith, the number goes in the other direction, 48 percent, less than half. In other words, students who do not identify with a faith are more willing to express themselves than are their religiously identifying

counterparts, but at the same time they are more open to silencing dissent and ideas that they find objectionable.

Considering that the growing population of religiously unaffiliated students hold these two propensities (toward mental health challenges on the one hand and censorship behavior on the other), a certain image comes into view: the replacement religion of anti-Zionist protest.



In a June 2020 article entitled “Kneeling in the Church of Social Justice,” Columbia professor John McWhorter observed that the third-wave antiracism (TWA) movement begun in the 2010s “is not a philosophy but a religion.” He said that this became particularly clear during the Covid lockdowns. “In the wake of the murder of George Floyd,” he wrote, “this vision has increasingly been expressed through procedures, routines, and phraseology directly patterned on Abrahamic religion.” Focusing on the choreography of ritual, McWhorter described demonstrations

where protesters kneeled on the pavement in droves, chanting allegiance with upraised hands to a series of anti-white privilege tenets incanted by what a naïve anthropologist would recognize as a flock’s pastor. On a similar occasion, white protesters bowed down in front of black people standing in attendance. In Cary, North Carolina, whites washed black protesters’ feet as a symbol of subservience and sympathy. Elsewhere, when a group of white activists painted whip scars upon themselves in sympathy with black America’s past, many black protesters found it a bit much.

Such rituals of subservience and self-mortification parallel devout Christianity in an especially graphic way, but other episodes tell the same story. Many conventional religious institu-

tions are now rejecting actual Christianity where it conflicts with TWA teachings.

These congregations arose during the lonely months of the pandemic. Its lingering effects may be driving a lonely generation of college students, who spent a considerable amount of high school undersocialized at home because of Covid restrictions, to campus encampments.

The rites of ritualized protest and righteously indignant censorship have taken the place of religious commitment for nonreligious students. Taking on a distinctly religious character, they fill a spiritual void. Censorship is a communal response to loneliness, a performance of spiritual insecurity disguised as certainty—a form of hostile reaction to new or uncomfortable ideas common to the history of religion. This tendency for controlling discourse and behavior on campus offers the assurances of a religiosity of the nonreligious, an orthodoxy for the spiritually undernourished. Into the spiritual power vacuum has stepped the religion of anti-Zionist protest.

Despite the media's fixation on some of the Jewish and Muslim participants, the protests are likely attended by many religiously unaffiliated students. After all, the pro-Palestinian position is more popular among progressives and the political Left, where levels of religiosity in all its forms tend to be the lowest, as we know from numerous surveys. Anecdotally, many of my own students who have participated in the protests have told me that they feel far more focused than they were before joining, far less lost, isolated, and lonely.

Like religious communities, the encampments and protest groups see themselves as a confessional collective, morally driven to achieve a higher purpose and make the world a better place. They borrow and decontextualize religious concepts such as *tik-*

kun olam, which are often invoked by Jewish members of the protest movement, many of whom are atheistic or agnostic. And they remake religious practices by holding services like “Seder in the Streets to Stop Arming Israel,” presided over by atheists such as Naomi Klein.

The crowds articulate their protest liturgy by chanting in unison and are scrupulous about the specific words. When Norman Finkelstein suggested at the Columbia encampment that the protesters “amend” the potentially threatening “From the river to the sea, Palestine will be free” to the potentially less-triggering “From the river to the sea, Palestinians will be free,” the chant leader who followed him stuck to the authentic original.

Residents of the encampments even exhibit distinctive dress—the keffiyeh, in its Jordanian (red and white) or Palestinian (black and white) variety—as a way of marking their confessional identity distinct from the sinful larger society outside. In their evangelizing, student protesters call on their universities to repent and convert to BDS.

What are we to make of this replacement religion?

One inference is that it is an expression of spiritual or religious yearning. What we are witnessing in the protests is as much the result of a spiritual crisis as a political one. The move away from conventional religiosity has expanded and deepened the craving for spiritual and moral connection traditionally provided by religion. Whether conventionally religious or not, these protesters have religious needs and sensibilities. They are passionate about coming together to form, express, and experience community; they derive meaning and purpose from acting to advance what they see as important moral causes; they have a sense of differentiation, if not embattlement, with the larger sinful society; they chant a liturgy under leaders with powerful (or mechanically magnified) voices; their liturgical elements and congregational style are replicated

elsewhere, albeit with local variations; and they adopt distinctive elements of dress.

When we see smart and presumably ethically minded students harass their fellow students, accuse them of sin, prevent their freedom of movement in their shared home, and confidently call for their execution by the al-Qassam Brigades, we might remember what the physicist Steven Weinberg once said: “With or without religion, good people can behave well and bad people can do evil; but for good people to do evil — that takes religion.”



Although the situation appears bleak, the HERI data give us cause for optimism.

When asked to identify their major strengths, 88 percent of students who are now upper-level undergraduates included the “ability to work cooperatively with diverse people,” 77 percent included the “ability to see the world from someone else’s perspective,” and over two-thirds included an “openness to having [their] own views challenged.” Eighty-one percent consider themselves tolerant “of others with different beliefs,” and a similar number took pride in their ability to discuss and negotiate controversial issues.

We might be rightly skeptical about the veracity of this self-reporting. Are these students truly in a position to assess accurately their strengths in these matters? But what is more important in these data is that they reflect the students’ values. Whether or not their self-assessments are accurate, these students profess being drawn to a multiplicity of ideas and experiences and take pride in their ability to absorb, confront, engage, and react to these varied views. They want to empathize and understand. This is true of students

of all faiths, including the new protest religion. In that sense, the new protest religion can be seen as more of an extremist fringe.

If the analysis above leads us to see campus strife as a version of religious conflict, then what we need is a version of reform. What we are seeing on campus is not as much an explicit clash over underlying values as it may seem. On the contrary, there is widespread alignment among students when it comes to what they say they value, which is like saying they know what they *should* value. The goal of the moment must be to drive the student body as a whole, including those at risk of joining the fringe, back toward these stated values, rather than to uproot them altogether. There is a religious term for this: *reformation*. Religious reformations occur when communities realize they have deviated from their values and convictions, failing to live up to them. Religious reformations are far more historically common than mass conversions, which require the complete upending of values.

Knowing this, as well as the fact that students crave connection and meaning, college and university leaders can leverage the unprecedented religious diversity on campus to enact the principles of what Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks called “the dignity of difference.” They should invest, proactively, in increasing religious diversity on campus, empowering those communities to promote and foster the values that the majority of students (presumably including those susceptible to protest doctrines) hold, and facilitating *reformative* interreligious encounters.

With the combination of so many different religious and spiritual traditions represented on campus, the potential for reformative interreligious encounters is greater than it has ever been, including when I arrived on campus nearly 30 years ago.

Simply put, our schools must rise to the challenge and create the proper environments for these connections. Ironically, the com-

mitment to create “safe spaces” on campus has made so many campuses unsafe. The universities should be creating “brave spaces,” to use a term coined by Shahar Sadeh, former director of strategic affairs and faculty engagement at New York’s Jewish Community Relations Council. Students desperately need such spaces where critical discussions and dialogues occur. In their absence, the spiritual power vacuums are filled by replacement religion movements that are, practically speaking, religiously extremist.

Fortunately, with 30 states having introduced or passed bills in the current legislative session to either restrict or regulate diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives, it is clear that the nation is ripe for an alternative vision of diversity rooted in “the dignity of difference” rather than the divisiveness of difference. Now is the time for higher education to replace its diversity, equity, and inclusion regime with a diversity of faiths (and non-faiths) regime. They should celebrate the religious diversity across campuses nationwide and recognize that the many nonreligious students are searching for community and connection even more than religious students are. By doing so, they may come to embody the words of Thomas Jefferson, to protect “the Jew and the Gentile, the Christian and Mahometan, the Hindoo and infidel of every denomination.” *