The Teaching of Religion in Higher Education in America: Background and Issues

CHARLES S. MILLIGAN

IT will be necessary to speak in very broad terms and to indulge in many generalizations as we cover this large subject in the space available. There is value in attempting the broad view, but it requires that you mercifully understand that room for many qualifications and exceptions must be allowed in what I have to say. Having thus injected the standard scholarly vaccine into the discussion, hoping that it will be immunized against some of the more devastating onslaughts to which it would otherwise be plainly vulnerable, I will turn to the historic sketch.

We must begin with some rather unusual features of the English dissenters. For all their differences, the Pilgrims and Puritans shared a common view of the importance of education, which left a continuing influence. It is significant that their churches were served by a "teacher" as well as "pastor," and later ministers were habitually "called to be pastor and teacher" of a parish. In Plymouth, in fact, they got along for several years without a pastor, Elder William Brewster serving as "teacher." Now the point is not merely that they stressed education. All religions stress the importance of education of some type for some people. What is unusual, if not unique, in the New England group was their emphasis on discussion and the degree to which they regarded the discussion as open to all participants who had earned the right to engage in it by virtue of their own study and thought, rather than by virtue of position or ordination. We are more familiar with the enforced restrictions that occurred—e.g., Roger Williams and Ann Hutchinson—and it is true that when the Puritans lowered the boom, they had a way of doing it "without let or hinder." But it must also be remembered that prior to the banishment of each there had been extended and intense debate. Considering the extent to which societies have been wont to rule positions and topics out of bounds, the surprising thing is the extent to which these and similar discussions were open.

This stemmed very largely from their view of the Bible as a book to be studied, discussed, and used as a light unto their path, a view which had its effect on attitudes toward other areas of knowledge. For as biblical understanding was not regarded as the exclusive domain of the minister, rather as the requirement of every citizen of the New Israel, so skills and knowledge of many kinds were to be pursued by every man as he had need and opportunity.

1. Religion in the Integrated Curriculum

Thus we find the establishment of Harvard in 1636, remarkably early in the development of the Massachusetts Bay Colony. The famous quotation from a contemporary letter, now inscribed on the gates of the yard, explains this:

> AFTER GOD HAD CARRIED US SAFE TO NEW-ENGLAND, AND WEE HAD BUILDED OUR HOUSES, PROVIDED NECESSARIES FOR OUR LIVELI-HOOD, REAR'D CONVENIENT PLACES FOR GODS WORSHIP, AND SETTLED THE CIVILL GOVERNMENT; ONE OF THE NEXT THINGS WE LONGED FOR, AND LOOKED AFTER WAS TO ADVANCE

CHARES S. MILLIGAN is Professor of Christian Ethics, the Iliff School of Theology. This paper was read at the Conference on Religion in Higher Education, held at the University of Denver, Ocotber, 1960.

LEARNING, AND PERPETUATE IT TO POSTERITY; DREADING TO LEAVE AN ILLITERATE MINISTRY TO THE CHURCHES, WHEN OUR PRESENT MINISTERS SHALL LIE IN THE DUST.

The college was established primarily for the education of ministers, but it was by no means limited to that purpose. Nor was the curriculum, as it developed, a mere Bible training program. The purpose was pursuit of wisdom and "to advance learning." Their goal was to equal one of the colleges of Cambridge University. Yale was established in 1701, in no small measure to counteract the alarming liberal tendencies of Harvard, but again we find the underlying assumption of the value of higher education for men in all walks of life, carried on by a continuing debate.

The total pattern was the opposite of specialization. The calling of a gentleman and scholar was to have as broad a fund of knowledge and appreciation as he could acquire. This left its mark on the liberal arts tradition. It was taken for granted that specifically religious studies were both a central and pervasive part of such a calling, whatever one's occupation.

In the first period, then, the teaching of religion in higher education was within an integrated pattern. There were no departments of religion as such, and department lines were loosely drawn, insofar as they were there at all. It seems a reasonable supposition that the Greek professor took occasion to deal with doctrine, the rhetoric professor sometimes found himself preaching, and the professor of natural science dealt with the Creator as reflected in creation. Professors of moral philosophy and history—judging by their writings—freely related their domain to that of other disciplines. It is significant that Amos Comenius, that phenomenal universal scholar, was seriously considered for the presidency of Harvard in 1642, for he typified, despite his heresies from the Calvinist point of view, what higher education should lead to.

2. The Development of Specialized Fields

The development of specialization of subjects, fields, and departments is too well known to call for much comment. It led necessarily to a more compartmentalized structure and thus the establishment of departments of religion, Bible, and divinity. This made possible more concentrated scholarship, and it freed the other faculty members from the restrictive effect of doctrinal requirements. On the other hand, it often made religion a thing apart, either outmoded or irrelevant, and professors often found it wise or a requirement for survival to avoid dealing with religious data—even when they clearly belonged in their area of investigation, and with religious perspectives when they might illumine or inform their material. It is easy to exaggerate—and I think it is often done—the extent of the religious sterilization of the liberal arts, as "secularized" and pretending that religion has not been an integral part of culture, but that this happened on occasion and in degree seems to me beyond question.

The departmentalization of religion was also used as a sop to the churches and business community to reassure them that after all the college was caring for the spiritual needs of students and counteracting such unfortunate heresies as might be promulgated in other departments. The establishment of Andover Seminary in 1807 initiated the rise of graduate schools of theology. This was inevitable and had many advantages, but it also had the effect of removing areas of serious religious scholarship from the university community of scholars. But again it was a way of avoiding suspicion that youth from various faiths would be forcibly subjected to a sectarian indoctrination at odds with their family background.

I must also add that not infrequently

a department of religion was able to bring a level of scholarship and serious investigation to the subject which secular scholars, ill informed and innocent of the extent of their misinformation, had been unable to provide. Undoubtedly the sealing off of religion into its own compartment was sometimes nothing more than a device to keep the nose of piety out of the business of the rest of the university, yet providing Exhibit A that could be pointed to for public relations purposes. But even when that happened, the students who took religious courses were engaged in that continuing discussion with other students that is so much at the heart of the enterprise of higher education.

3. Reactions Against the Isolation of Religion

Many parents and churchmen were understandably dissatisfied with the insulation placed around religion on the campus. Reactions were various. In many church related schools a certain number of hours was required in the department of religion or Bible for graduation. In others a course was required for seniors in moral philosophy or what we might today call philosophy of life, taught by some wise and broad scholar with religious interests, not infrequently by the president, who was most likely a clergyman. If sometimes these required courses left much to be desired academically, it must also be recognized that in many situations they were of excellent quality and left an important and enduring influence on students' lives. The senior course was an attempt to integrate and interrelate the fragmentation that otherwise was to an extent inevitable. It was a partial corrective for the disadvantages of specialization. In recent years introductory survey courses in the humanities often attempt to serve a similar purpose. It would take a brave critic to insist that our present efforts are always superior to the old style integrative senior course.

Roman Catholic colleges must be mentioned, for they antedate by far those which arose in this country out of Puritanism. They had already developed somewhat of a pattern of specialization. Thus they adapted rather easily to prevailing American college patterns. The clergy had separate schools. Required courses in theology and morals found a place in standard curriculum patterns. How far religious doctrine was incorporated into the subject matter of other departments, say of history, biology, sociology, and education, seems to have varied widely, perhaps with somewhat more of it than in other situations thus far mentioned.

Still another reaction to compartmentalization is found in those Protestant schools established by persons utterly dissatisfied with the secular education available. An important distinction must be made here. In one group we find the church schools which set up religious requirements, explicity or implicitly, for the whole faculty, and where it was assumed that religious views would permeate the entire curriculum, but where it was also a strong determination to have academic standards of the highest level possible under such limitations. Many Lutheran and Episcopalian schools have in degree exemplified this pattern. In the other group, we find religious requirements, but in a different atmosphere, which made a great difference in curriculum and substance. For here the religious requirements were foremost in selection of faculty, the understanding being that at every opportunity a teacher would become an evangelist in the classroom. In this group a heavy part of the curriculum consisted in religious angles to various subjects. Academic standards suffered greatly. In recent years an interesting development has been the attempt, notable in the Evangelical Protestant movement, to improve academic quality in some such schools.

4. Efforts to Supplement the Existing Pattern

In the past several decades there have been various attempts to supplement the existing academic pattern. At the State University of Iowa there is a very creditable School of Religion on an independent but accredited basis. This has been adapted to the situation in other states. The SCM and church denominations, with their campus foundations in some places offer supplementary courses in religion, usually on a non-credit basis. Their work, and that of allied and kindred agencies, goes back long before this, but in offering courses is a fairly new development. Even more important, I think, may be the opportunity for that continuing discussion which helps the student integrate his learning in terms of his religious perspectives. The Hillel and Jewish Chautauqua foundations have provided both opportunity for such discussion and, also, for interfaith dialogue. Another development has been to make courses in religion optional ways of meeting humanities requirements. And still another development is to encourage cross departmental discussion, including religious departments and scholars. The establishment of chaplaincies, directors of religious activities, weeks of emphasis or convocations, is to be listed among the efforts to supplement the existing pattern and to integrate learning in terms of religious perspectives. That academic credit is not given does not mean that religious teaching of importance does not occur. On the whole, these efforts have proved far more successful than the required chapel or required Bible course.

In summary, we find a great diversity, with well marked general trends. First, there is the integrated pattern with religious education permeating the curriculum, a pattern which we find recurring in more recent times, but with much less success because of the sheer magnitude of subject matter. Second, there is specialization and departmentalization, with religion being given its own province, a trend toward which the previous pattern seems necessarily to give way, in part because of the demands of academic freedom. Third, there is the recognition that compartimentalization, however necessary in academic structures, is contrary to the very purpose of religion, when it means compartimentalization of life and faith, and therefore by some additional structures the fragmented views need to be supplemented so as to be informed by and interrelated with the religious perspective for those who want such opportunity, if the institution is to fulfill its whole task.

5. The Most Important Resource

There is an additional factor, without which this sketch would be quite barren. Under all the patterns I have described, there have been instances of the very best in the teaching of religion. These have occurred where there has been a faculty member, whose scholarship held its own among his peers, who was not only informed in religious data, but who brought a catalytic excitement to the subject, whether in the classroom or elsewhere, and who had that perceptive understanding of the moods and intellectual itchings of students, which enlightened faith and in turn informed with religious understanding the diverse areas and corners of life. When alumni, who enjoyed this privilege, talk about their school days, they speak not of departments or programs, they speak of a man and the illumination he brought to their minds and—phrased in different ways—the quickening he awakened in their religious life. No pattern or structure meets its requirements without this. There is simply no substitute for it, and it is fitting to close this survey with a tribute to those individual faculty members who brought to "the endless discussion of the themes which are endless," in Masefield's

words, such excitement and discovery. This is a university's most precious resource.

I turn now to a listing of some present issues in the teaching of religion. I can do no more than put forth a very partial list of questions. On each you will find contrasting opinions.

(a) Is it possible to provide non-sectarian instruction in moral and spiritual values, devoid of religious doctrine? Is it desirable?

(b) It is possible and practical for religious foundations and the like to provide academically accredited programs of instruction? If there is important subject matter to be presented, ought not the university itself to provide for it? If there are interpretative and doctrinal views to be presented, need this be done along academic course lines?

(c) If religious programs and courses are optional, many students will be wholly untouched by them. Should the college do everything short of requiring attendance to involve the maximum number of students? Or should it return to some explicit requirements? Or should it simply offer such opportunities for those who want them?

(d) The college includes students of different faith and very different persuasions within each faith. To what extent should the college even offer opportunity for an academic approach to religion which will in many cases undermine certain dortrines? This is not solved by eliminating religion as such, for in biology, psychology, and geology, for instance, the student with an authority-directed religion may be shaken. Is this a matter of concern or responsibility for the college?

(e) Should the college initiate cross departmental courses, which include religion, or should the college leave this to informal discussion in the community of scholars?

(f) Should the college provide religious services under its own denominational auspices? Is this in competition with the churches? Or is this an expression of the church? Or is this a supplement to and strengthening of the church?

(g) Are present supplementary patterns really providing religious substance or are they primarily fellowship groups? If the former, are they reaching a significant number of students? If the latter, do they serve a necessary function?

(h) Is the objective, subject matter centered course in religion an asset to the religious life? E.g., a course in comparative religions or contemporary religious institutions may be taught with as little sectarian bias as any course in the social sciences. Does handling religion in this way necessarily leave the impression, by way of omission, that personal commitment is insignificant in religion? Is this a specious question?

(i) Should the pre-theological student be encouraged to take courses in religion or advised in the main to avoid this?

(j) In what academic ways should graduate schools of theology be related to universities? There is no issue over the view that there should be academic cooperation and conversation. But should there be more active participation? (Whether a theological school is attached institutionally to a university has no bearing on this, for you will find all degrees of academic separateness and cooperation in both types of situation). Should college students be encouraged in some instances to take courses in the theological school, and vice versa? The official stance in theological education leans heavily toward separateness, with characteristic jealousy of graduate schools. A few schools, however—Harvard, e.g., also Columbia and Union, where there is institutional separateness—have freely ignored such requirements, and students and professors are encouraged to roam across the divisional and institutional lines. Is this desirable? If so, is it subject to being transplanted elsewhere?

(k) Are religious professionals adequately in touch with other scholars as to the latter's thinking on separation of church and state? On the subject of academic freedom? I am sure you would find strong disagreement on both questions.

(l) To what extent and what ways is the church related college morally bound to take into account the religious pluralism of the community?

These are some of the issues, as I have encountered them on the college campus. Some of them have received a great amount of attention; some of them have been largely ignored. They are all, I believe, among the questions to which we should address ourselves in the widest and freest exchange possible.

ATLAS erials

Copyright and Use:

As an ATLAS user, you may print, download, or send articles for individual use according to fair use as defined by U.S. and international copyright law and as otherwise authorized under your respective ATLAS subscriber agreement.

No content may be copied or emailed to multiple sites or publicly posted without the copyright holder(s)' express written permission. Any use, decompiling, reproduction, or distribution of this journal in excess of fair use provisions may be a violation of copyright law.

This journal is made available to you through the ATLAS collection with permission from the copyright holder(s). The copyright holder for an entire issue of a journal typically is the journal owner, who also may own the copyright in each article. However, for certain articles, the author of the article may maintain the copyright in the article. Please contact the copyright holder(s) to request permission to use an article or specific work for any use not covered by the fair use provisions of the copyright laws or covered by your respective ATLAS subscriber agreement. For information regarding the copyright holder(s), please refer to the copyright information in the journal, if available, or contact ATLA to request contact information for the copyright holder(s).

About ATLAS:

The ATLA Serials (ATLAS®) collection contains electronic versions of previously published religion and theology journals reproduced with permission. The ATLAS collection is owned and managed by the American Theological Library Association (ATLA) and received initial funding from Lilly Endowment Inc.

The design and final form of this electronic document is the property of the American Theological Library Association.