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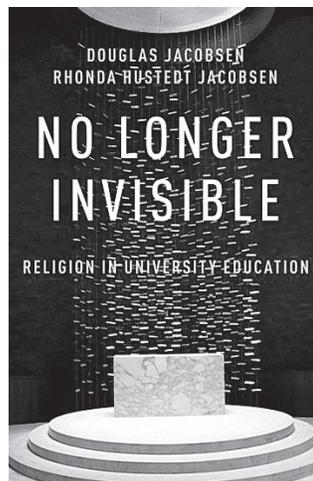
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L. DeANE LAGERQUIST

Post-Secular Religion on Campus: Conversing with Jacobsen and Jacobsen

That the secularization thesis, once regarded as self-evident, turned out to be false is no longer news. Despite the confident predictions by astute scholars and observers in the mid-twentieth century, religion has not gone the way of the dinosaurs. To the contrary, examples of its presence are easily multiplied from attention to one's own social context and from popular media. These instances illustrate the ways religion can enrich individual lives and play a forceful, positive role in local, national, and global communities. They also demonstrate religion's potential to restrict personal freedom and to generate conflict in families, among neighbors, and between nations.

Similarly, despite the alarm raised in the late-twentieth century by theologian James Burtchaell, historian George Marsden, and others, religion has not disappeared from colleges and universities in the United States. As the book, *No Longer Invisible: Religion in University Education*, claims, religion is increasingly visible across the entire landscape of American higher education, from public community colleges to prestigious research universities to small liberal arts colleges, both secular and religiously affiliated schools like those associated with the Evangelical



Lutheran Church in America (ELCA).

The value of this slim volume is not that it brings breaking news, but that authors Douglas Jacobsen and Rhonda Hustedt Jacobsen help their readers to better comprehend the news and how to respond to it. With exceptional clarity, yet never falling into reductionist oversimplification, they deepen our understanding of what religion is, explore the nature of its presence on campuses today (in contrast to in earlier eras), and offer guidance about how to respond constructively to the

opportunities and challenges of this new situation. The book's title, *No Longer Invisible*, hints at their claim: because the ways religion is present in higher education now are significantly different from how it was present only a few decades ago, faculty, staff, administrators, and students must engage one another in thoughtful, informed conversation. More specifically, the authors articulate and explore six questions about religion that should be discussed on campuses of every sort. This is not a how-to book, providing worksheets or small group exercises. It does, however, invite its readers—whatever their religious affiliations, scholarly expertise, or type of school—to launch conversations about these questions on their own campuses.

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Launching the Conversation

The authors are well equipped to identify pertinent issues about religion on campuses today. They bring long experience as professors, significant previous scholarship about religion on campus, and wisdom gained from campus visits and numerous interviews. Rhonda Hustedt Jacobsen is Professor of Psychology and has given leadership to faculty development at Messiah College. Douglas Jacobsen is Professor of Religion at the same college. His *The World's Christians* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2011) is an excellent overview of the history and current state of Christianity, well suited to the college classroom. Together they have been reflecting about matters of religion and education for many years. Their previous two, edited volumes anticipated this one: *Scholarship and Christian Faith: Enlarging the Conversation* (2004) and *The American University in a Postsecular Age* (2008). Both books continue to be relevant, offering insights that inform the conversations the current volume is intended to stimulate. These books also provided a starting point for the authors' Religion in the Academy project. Supported by the Lilly Endowment, the authors visited more than four dozen campuses to investigate how religion is engaged there and what it contributes to higher education. What they learned from those many conversations is the substance of this newest book.

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In *Scholarship and Christian Faith*, their chapters alternate with essays by six Messiah College colleagues. Although local, the on-campus collaboration expanded conversation about Christian scholarship by shifting its focus. The authors are both appreciative and critical of the integration of (Christian) faith and learning model promoted by Reformed scholars such as philosopher Nicholas Wolterstorff and George Marsden, whose 1997 book was titled *The Outrageous Idea of Christian Scholarship*

(Jacobsen, *Scholarship*, 15-32). Their contribution to the debate is a step back from a heavily philosophical approach in order to ask what other streams of Christian tradition bring to the task of education. Messiah College offers its own Anabaptist perspective. In the Prologue, Rodney J. Sawatsky, then Messiah's president, proposes a focus on "the end, the *telos* of Christian scholarship." Drawing upon a typically Anabaptist and "biblical vision of the future in which peace and righteous will flourish and learning will result in wisdom," he claims the centrality of hope: "Grounded in this spirit of realistic hope, Christian scholarship seeks not only to understand and celebrate the creation as it is but also to participate in God's work of restoring and transforming the world" (9, 10). While exploring theological and other resources of their historic tradition, the authors also invited their readers to identify the particularity of their own traditions within Christianity, a task Lutherans have pursued at the Vocation of a Lutheran College Conference and in other venues.

The editors open *The American University in a Postsecular Age* by examining the post-secular context of higher education and close with "Talking about Religion: A Framework for Academic Conversation." The fourteen essays between shift focus from Christian scholarship to a more general consideration of religion and higher education and attend to other historic religions, the realities of religious pluralism, and public institutions. The first section explores issues related to faculty roles; the second takes up issues related to student learning. Several studies have highlighted the mismatch between faculty members' cognitive goals for their religion courses and students' desire for personal benefits. The Pew Research Group reports that nearly 20 percent of conventional aged college students claim no religious affiliation and anecdotal evidence points to a large, but uncounted number who assert that they are "spiritual, but not religious."

In their essay, "The Different Spiritualities of the Students We Teach," Robert J. Nash and DeMethra LaSha Bradley present a typology of student spirituality that is unexpected, but helpful for understanding students' expectations and their responses to religion courses and to the larger campus ethos. The types are not based on specific historic religions, either Christian denominations or other traditions such as Hinduism, Islam, or others. Instead, the five types

are based upon students' individual attitudes about their connection (or lack of connection) to any historic religion, thus highlighting the importance of their personal religion. For example, whatever their community, orthodox believers are confident in their beliefs, while spiritual skeptics question all traditions. Thus Nash and Bradley's approach allows a more nuanced analysis of students' religion which anticipates the six questions posed in *No Longer Invisible*.

Mapping the Landscape

No Longer Invisible continues the enterprise begun in the previous volumes. This time Jacobsen and Jacobsen are the sole authors, but the scope of their investigation is large, drawing upon comments from students and major scholars in humanities and social sciences. Their partners are evident in references to published materials and quotations from interviews. Readers who have been following these issues over the past quarter century will recognize both its contours and major participants; those who are new to the topics will be gently brought up to speed and directed to further sources. Addressed to their colleagues in higher education most widely conceived, the book assumes a high level of general cultural knowledge, but not specialist understanding of either religious studies or the history of higher education.

The book is divided into two parts. The first four chapters examine the current context; each of the following chapters explores one of the six key questions introduced in chapter four. In the conclusion the authors look toward the future, asserting that "careful and nuanced attention to religion can be a source of revitalization for higher education as a whole" (*No Longer Invisible* 154). Those familiar with the context, who know something of the development of American higher education, or who are well versed in scholarly efforts to define religion, may be tempted to skip part one. They should not. Here the authors use clear prose and common sense concepts to build the intellectual table to which they invite their readers. Their straightforward presentation of the current context, how we got here, and what is at stake provides expansive access to anyone concerned about these issues.

The story of religion's presence on American campuses can be told, as it is here, in three acts. In the first act

religion was Protestant; in the second Privatized; and in the third it is Pluriform (17). For decades religion was visible and its importance was assumed at nearly every school, regardless of instructional sponsorship. Even if was not specified, the religion was usually some variety of Anglo-American Protestantism. But then, through much of the twentieth century, at most schools but especially at public institutions and even at some schools once affiliated with Christian churches, religion of any sort was relegated to the margins, privatized, and rendered invisible. Since late in the twentieth century, religion has begun to reappear. Telling examples introduce the book. Ordinary observers and expert commentators notice that the religion they see is different from what was once so ubiquitous.

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If religion never disappeared from most Lutheran college campuses, nonetheless the general contours of the plot can be traced in their history, perhaps lagging behind the trends by a few years. The difference now is both a matter of more kinds of religion, that is descriptive pluralism, and a changing conception of what constitutes religion. Lists of the historic religions represented on campuses are longer. At the same time, what continues being religious is no longer a simple matter of membership in a community. Like some of the students described in Nash and Bradley's essay, "most Americans now assume that a person can be spiritual or religious to varying degrees without any connection to a particular religious group. The differences between religious and nonreligious lifestyles are not always obvious, and the line between public and private has also become blurred" (27).

After decades of avoiding any notice of religion or giving it only shallow, polite attention, many American are ill prepared to engage religion of any sort, either the old style or the new. After reviewing four ways educators have reacted to the reemergence of religion in public, Jacobsen

and Jacobsen propose a framework for better questions. They propose four “trail markers” to might help guide us in this time of transition: (1) distinguishing spirituality from religion, (2) differentiating teaching *about* religion from teaching religion, (3) signaling the importance of difficult dialogues, and (4) urging exploration of big questions. However, the authors assert that these strategies are not up to the challenge. A more proactive approach and a more robust, yet nuanced notion of religion is needed. Harking back to the final chapter of *The American University in a Postsecular Age*, they offer a revised three-part description of religion: Religion is historic, it is public, and it is personal.

Historic religion “names itself and...is organized into observable communities of belief and practice” (49). *Public religion* is more elusive. It “defines what a society takes to be true, provides a rationale for that society’s way of life, and enumerates the values that society strives to uphold” (50-51). *Personal religion* is just that, “an idiosyncratic collection of whatever it is that provides meaning, purpose, grounding, trust, hope, and a sense of wholeness” (53-54). To these three categories of religion, they add a further distinction between two modes: religious ideas and religious behaviors. Belief and practice are present in each of the categories of historic, public, and personal religion. The framework as a whole is serviceable, perhaps because although the three categories and two modes yield six distinguishable sites of engagement, these zones also overlap and interact. That it does not eliminate the messiness inherent in any effort to define religion and allows for religion’s dynamic, living character is a virtue of this framework.

Not only is religion different now than it was in the past, so too higher education has changed. These developments are treated in less detail. Nonetheless, the authors highlight three that significantly inform their proposal for how religion is best engaged on campuses today: “(1) rejection of epistemological objectivity and the embrace of multiculturalism, (2) the growth of professional studies, and (3) the turn toward student-centered learning” (27). The first shift is evident in a difference they notice between older and younger faculty; professors in the younger generation, formed after the mid-century critique of objectivity, often are much more willing to wrestle with religious issues in their classrooms than are their older colleagues. Student-centered learning is fundamental to this book’s agenda.

Commitment to student development combines with a less articulated, but deep commitment to higher education’s obligation to foster civic responsibility in students. These two goals harken back to the earliest era of American higher education. However, this book does not argue for a simple return to the past. It is not a manifesto for reinstating Christianity on campus as it once was, but instead a plea for thoughtful, constructive grappling with the messy, pluriform reality of religion as it is already reappearing.

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Engaging the Questions

The six questions Jacobsen and Jacobsen pose, one for each site of engagement, are relevant in all sectors of higher education, though the conversations on any campus will be informed by local history and current conditions. At ELCA colleges and universities, the common historic religion, namely the Lutheran tradition, provides theological resources, informs practices, and sets the institutional structure. At their founding, these schools’ missions included some version of nurturing Lutheran students’ personal religion so that they would continue their participation in Lutheran communities and that some would assume leadership in congregations and the larger church. To a large extent the campus community of students, faculty, and staff was religiously (and often ethnically) homogeneous. There was little, if any, difference between historic Lutheran religion and the schools’ public religion. Students took religion courses that treated Christianity, not infrequently with special attention to Lutheran teaching. They were offered opportunities for Christian worship, or they were required to attend. In recent decades these schools, in varying degrees, have experienced the same changes described in this book and have altered their stance toward religion, including Lutheran Christianity, other traditions,

public religion, and personal religion. All the questions posed in the volume can guide conversations on these campuses and inform responses to the changes. Here I highlight two topics that may be of particular interest on Lutheran campuses, rather than discussing each question.

“*What are appropriate ways to interact with those of other faiths?*” This is the guiding question in the zone defined by historic religion and behavior. This discussion and the behaviors a community regards as appropriate will be shaped by institutional structure as well as its attitudes and ethos. Half-a-dozen structural models are described in the chapter on Interfaith Etiquette. Perhaps some Lutheran college faculty and alumni remember a Homogenous Model fondly, but the “State Church” and the One-Party Rule models are more common. Colleges which operate with One-Party Rule are in company of Notre Dame and Brigham Young University. Here the school’s historic religion is dominant in its full particularity. Yet members of other religious groups are welcomed and respectful accommodations are made. The State Church model “acknowledges the particularity of the institution and intentionally welcomes religious diversity on campus, but it also provides a structure that allows the spiritual needs of the campus community as a whole to be named and addressed” (86). Institutional resources provide staff, space, and programming. Nonetheless, the historic tradition may be muted or generalized in order to function as public religion for a more diverse community. As ELCA colleges continue to recruit students, faculty, and staff from a wider range of historic religions and with fuzzy notions of personal religion, serious reflection on these structures is an urgent matter with consequences for curriculum, student programming, budgets, and public ceremonies such as graduation. When the discussion turns to curriculum, the discussion of the goals of religious literacy in the previous chapter will be instructive.

In recent years Lutheran colleges have reclaimed the traditions’ commitment to vocation with enthusiasm and profit. The chapter on Civic Engagement offers valuable insights for our continued reflection on how the notion is grounded and the ways students’ vocation is fostered. “*What values and practices—religious or secular—shape civic*

engagement?” This is the guiding question for this exploration of public religion and behavior. Of course, vocation is a topic which spans all three categories of religion. One perennial challenge is how to articulate a Lutheran theology of vocation while also taking account of other religious and secular understandings. The chapter helpfully places this ongoing conversation in a larger frame that points toward overlap between a specifically Lutheran approach and public debates about the relative importance of activism and community service. It also addresses the potential conflicts between various definitions of “civic” when promoting civic engagement. Vocation is addressed directly in the chapter devoted to personal religion and behavior. Here the key question concerns how colleges and universities help students develop lives of meaning and purpose, particularly students emerging into adulthood. The authors draw upon studies of student development as they explore this question. Pacific Lutheran University’s “Wild Hope” program receives praise for doing this well, drawing on Luther’s teaching in a way that invites everyone into the enterprise.

Conclusion

In this book, Jacobsen and Jacobsen pose pertinent questions about religion in higher education, provide useful background, and offer a clear framework for engaging those questions. Their book will reward solitary readers, but it will be most valuable when its insights are part of actual conversations that address the messy realities of religion newly visible on local campuses.

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