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The Spiritual Life of Colby College: Then, now, next

BY KURT D. NELSON

I was 25 years old when I took my first job in college chaplaincy. Tasked with bolstering the programmatic life of Dartmouth College's Tucker Foundation, I operated under the fairly meaningless and entirely made-up title Multi-Faith Program Advisor.

Weeks into the job, I was asked to lead a memorial service for an alumni class celebrating its 70th year. I was terrified. I spent my days talking and planning with 18- to 22- year olds of vague and varied religious expressions. What had I to say to alumni older than my grandparents? Had not the context changed so drastically that there wasn't a bridge between?

After a few deep breaths and some well-timed advice, however, I regained my stride. For all that had changed over the course of 70 years—demographics, buildings, job titles—was not the college experience still made meaningful by deep friendships, hopeful futures, and the pursuit of purpose?

Not so many years later and now operating with the almost-as-made-up title Dean of Religious and Spiritual Life, I find myself facing similar questions. Especially as we at Colby enter our 200th year: What meaningful connections can be traced back to the Maine Theological and Literary Institution? How does the spiritual life of Colby College today connect with those who came before? What does our Baptist past mean to us as we look forward?

The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life has declared this the year of the "religiously unaffiliated." For those of us working with college populations, this is not especially surprising.

Demographically speaking, the landscape of religious and spiritual life has shifted. Based on an incoming survey of the Class of 2016, the stalwart denominations of Colby's past—Baptists, Congregationalists, and Episcopalians—make up less than 10 percent of our incoming student body. The population of Muslims, Hindus, and Buddhists is growing. The Catholic and Jewish populations remain substantive. Fully a third of Colby students come in identifying as atheist, agnostic, or no religious preference.

We are officially a multifaith community. Mixed religious families are as normal as nonreligious families. Students' parents are as likely to be atheist or evangelical as to belong to a mainline denomination. We have entered an era, according to sociologist Robert Putnam, LL.D. '12, of "polarization and pluralism."

There are those who will grieve this shifting landscape. Any shared language of faith and religion has surely gone. Cultural Christianity is gone and, without drastic measures, is not going to return. There is, in

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a sense, no religious "normal" at a place such as Colby.

But one wonders how concrete that shared language or normal ever was. Despite a clear purpose from the beginning to train Baptist clergy, the College never closed its doors on sectarian grounds. And more than half of early graduates went into professions other than the ministry.

A 1938 article in the *Colby Alumnus* by Director of Religious Activities Herbert Newman spoke of a desire to "build closer fellowship between various religious groups" including, "Mohammadean, Jewish, Eastern Orthodox, Catholic, and Protestant."

Ernest Marriner, Class of 1913, devotes the last chapter of his excellent *History of Colby College* to religion at Colby. The central goal? Clearly to assure his readership that the "sudden divorce" from the Baptist church was neither sudden nor a divorce.

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Call me an optimist, but such context leaves me hopeful. In the absence of an assumed religious normal, perhaps we can get to the good, hard, and important work of thinking and talking about faith. Recent surveys suggest that while this may be the least religious generation ever, the desired connection to something beyond ourselves is as strong—if not stronger—than ever.

And despite the shifting landscape, colleges and universities are



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beginning to understand that holistic education demands some attention to spiritual pursuit. While meaning, hope, purpose, and community are by no means the exclusive property of religious faith, if we are to take them seriously, religion must be on the discursive landscape.

Thus, change is underway. Much as it has been over the past two centuries.

If you find yourself on Mayflower Hill on a given evening, you'll find both familiar and unfamiliar forms: Catholic Mass and college chapel services of the ecumenical Christian variety happen each week. Shabbat candle lighting and dinners come with sunset on Friday evenings, led by a rejuvenated Hillel and Rabbi Rachel Isaacs. A small group gathers for Juma prayer each Friday at 1 p.m. beneath a list of Colby missionaries dating back to the early 19th century. Though it may not be the norm, interest in traditional religious observance and community is consistent among some students. And such groups will always have a place.

Holiday observances—from Diwali to Carols and Lights—brighten the dark Maine evenings. And Colby is now home to not one but three meditation groups. Intervarsity and the Global Friends Christian fellowships gather often, and enthusiastically. And budding Quaker, Hindu, and ecumenical Christian student communities are in the process of forming.

Some new forms have taken hold this year. A new student multifaith council graces the chapel lounge each Wednesday evening. Together we ponder the ways in which Christians, Jews, Muslims, seekers, atheists, and others are both irreducibly different and undeniably similar. Together, a wide swath of religious

communities—and some others—are tackling the question of food and hunger in our local community as part of the White House's Interfaith and Community Service Challenge. Such groups include members and leaders of the aforementioned religious communities as well as those outside of traditional forms who are yearning for conversation, exploration, and community.

Much has changed—names, forms, demographics, buildings, job titles, and programs. While any semblance of shared language may be gone, we are now free to pursue these deep questions together. And as I sit with Colby students and hear about their hopes and plans and fears, I cannot help thinking those conversations would resonate across generations of Colby students. Students connect to spiritual life through community, in one-on-one conversations, in moments of struggle, and—even occasionally—through their studies and quest for a vocation. And we will continue to pursue ways to meet them where they are, in the midst of an always changing “normal.”

To ponder life's biggest questions. To build meaningful relationships. To encounter new ideas and be challenged by them. To find a sense of purpose in life. This is what a place like Colby is for. And this is, at its best, the role of religious and spiritual pursuit.

In words penned by Marcia Chaplin as she sailed toward Waterville on the Sloop *Hero*, “To do good.” This is what we challenge ourselves to do. And I am ever-hopeful that religious and spiritual life will continue to be an important part of the ever-changing landscape.

Kurt Nelson is the dean of religious and spiritual life.