Religion and Knowledge in the Post-Secular Academy

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Chapter 2 of The Post-Secular Academy:
The Return of Religion in American Higher Education (Working Title)
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For decades the standard plotline of American higher education celebrated the progressive liberation of scholarship from the shackles of religious tradition. For historians such as Richard Hofstadter, secularization could not have come too soon.¹ More recently, some religious scholars have lamented the exclusion of the sacred from academic discourse. Though they have taken very different positions on the merits of secularization, both secular and religious accounts of higher education concur on one major point: religion has had little to do with knowledge in the modern university.²

There is strong evidence that something close to the secularization of scholarship did occur. Until the late nineteenth century, religion exerted a powerful influence over American higher education. Intertwined with the rise of the modern research university, the process of secularization overtook most fields in the first decades of the twentieth century. Across the academy, the influence of Freud, Nietzsche, and Darwin cast doubt on religious understandings of reality. As the academic disciplines matured, scholarly inquiry became increasingly specialized. In the words of historians Jon Roberts and James Turner, the goal was “to think small: to ask questions for which there were determinate and publicly verifiable answers.” In an age of empiricism and hyper-specialization, larger questions of religion and spirituality became increasingly irrelevant.³ In The Secular Revolution, sociologist Christian Smith argues that the early twentieth-century secularization of higher education was not a faceless process unfolding over time, but an organized social movement with clearly identifiable leaders, organizations, social networks, and financial resources. Social scientists such as Lester Ward, organizations like the American Sociological Society, and philanthropists like Andrew Carnegie helped push religion to the margins of academic life. By the 1930s, the movement to secularize higher education had largely succeeded.⁴

Despite the success of the “secular revolution” in transforming American higher education, it was not irreversible. Indeed, at the turn of a new millennium religion is returning to scholarship in what might be called a post-secular revolution.⁵ In a postmodern era more and more
scholars are challenging the boundary between faith and knowledge, acknowledging the importance of religion as a social phenomenon and as a way of knowing. Articles on the return of religion can be found in a dozen disciplines, including art, English, philosophy, music, political science, social work, medicine, history, and sociology. Some 50 religious scholarly associations foster the integration of faith and learning, while newly-created centers for the study of religion can be found at Columbia, Virginia, Princeton, New York University and a host of other institutions.

Like the secularization of knowledge during the first half of the twentieth century, the contemporary resurgence of religious scholarship can be described as a social movement. Far from inevitable, the reintegration of religion and knowledge has been realized by scholars who have organized themselves collectively for the purposes of promoting the study of religion. Their efforts have found expression in and support from religious professional associations, centers and institutes, journals, and philanthropic foundations.

This paper is a guided tour of the movement to reconnect religion and knowledge, a group portrait of the individuals and organizations behind the growing prominence of religious scholarship. Its purposes are three-fold: to document the comeback of religion across the disciplines, to show the close relationship between the return of religion and what Alan Wolfe calls the “moral revival,” and to map the leaders, organizations, and networks of the interdisciplinary movement to reconnect religion and scholarship.

**The Comeback: Religious Resurgence across the Disciplines**

The scope and size of the academic comeback of religion is truly remarkable. From the humanities and social sciences, to the professions and the hard sciences, the “religion and higher education” movement is active in every sector of the contemporary academy.

Though it is not surprising to find religion in religious studies departments, it is worth noting that they have experienced steady growth. Between 1990 and 2005, the membership of the American Academy of Religion increased from 5,500 to 10,300 members. In 2006 a record
11,000 scholars attended the joint meeting of the AAR and the Society of Biblical Literature. According to the AAR, the number of religion majors grew by 25 percent between 1996-1997 and 1999-2000, while overall enrollment in religious studies courses increased 15 percent. During the 1999-2000 academic year an estimated 685,000 students were enrolled in religion courses. Attendance at American seminaries is also on the rise. Between 1990 and 2004, enrollment in mainline Protestant divinity schools increased 20 percent.\textsuperscript{10}

Paralleling the expansion of religious studies, religion has become increasingly visible across the humanities. Nowhere has the return of religion been more dramatic than in philosophy. In a recent article in the journal \textit{Philo}, the secular philosopher Quentin Smith chronicles what he calls the “desecularization” of American philosophy. Estimating that “one-quarter or one-third of philosophy professors are theists, with most being orthodox Christians” he writes that “it became, almost overnight, ‘academically respectable’ to argue for theism, making philosophy a favored field of entry for the most intelligent and talented theists entering academia today.” According to Smith, Oxford University Press’ 2000-2001 catalogue contains 96 books in the philosophy of religion, of which 94 take a theistic position. A half-dozen philosophy journals currently focus on religion. Pointing to the reversal in attitudes toward religion, Smith claims that since the late 1960s, academic philosophy “does not have a mainstream secularization.” This is in sharp contrast to the 1950s when American philosophers viewed belief in God as academically indefensible.\textsuperscript{11}

Founded in 1978, the Society of Christian Philosophers grew to over 1,000 members by 1994, about 12 percent of American philosophers.\textsuperscript{12} As in many academic disciplines, the return of religious philosophy has been underwritten by Christian philanthropists. Thanks to support from the Pew Charitable Trusts and other sources, Notre Dame’s Center for Philosophy of Religion has awarded fellowships to over 100 scholars since 1984.\textsuperscript{13}

Though less dramatic than in philosophy, a religious resurgence can also be seen in the field of literary studies.\textsuperscript{14} As early as 1983, Edward Said warned of the rebirth of “religious criticism,” noting that “when you see influential critics publishing major books with titles like
The Genesis of Secrecy, The Great Code, Kabbalah and Criticism, Violence and the Sacred, Deconstruction and Theology, you know you are in the presence of a significant trend.”

By 1997 John McClure could speak of the “return of religion in contemporary theory and literature,” noting that “over the last twenty years, a growing number of influential secular intellectuals . . . have begun to reopen negotiations with the religious.” These figures include such literary heavyweights such as Terry Eagleton and Stanley Fish. In a more explicitly theological vein, the 1,300-member Conference on Christianity and Literature has explored the connections between faith and literary criticism, enlisting the help of such world class scholars as Rene Girard, Denis Donoghue, and the late Wayne Booth.

Even more than the field of English literature, the discipline of American history has witnessed a return of religion. During the 1980s and 1990s, the study of American religion moved from church history courses in divinity schools into what Harry Stout and Robert Taylor call the “mainstream of historical research.” When Henry May wrote hopefully of “The Recovery of American Religious History” in 1964, the study of American religion was still the property of liberal Protestant “church historians” in mainline Protestant divinity schools. By contrast, over half of the American religion scholars surveyed by Stout and Taylor in 1993 identified as Catholics (26 percent) or evangelicals (32 percent), suggesting a shift from “the mainline Protestant orientation of the 1960s and 1970s to one more evangelical and Roman Catholic.”

Since May’s essay, historians have shifted their focus from white mainline Protestant clergymen to African-American Pentecostals, Orthodox Jews, Japanese-American Buddhists, and Southern evangelical women. By the late 1990s, centers and institutes dedicated to the study of American religion had been established at Princeton, Yale, Notre Dame, Indiana, Boston College, and the University of Southern California.

A major force in the mainstreaming of American religious history has been the emergence of the “new evangelical historiography.” In books such as Fundamentalism and American Culture and The Democratization of American Christianity, a network of evangelical historians helped
reshape scholarly views of evangelicalism. By 1991 historian Jon Butler could describe the “evangelical paradigm” as “the single most powerful explanatory device adopted by academic historians to account for the distinctive features of American society, culture, and identity.”

Drawing on their own autobiographical experiences and confessional commitments, scholars like Mark Noll, George Marsden, Edith Blumhofer and Nathan Hatch have brought their Christian convictions into the field of American history. Through organizations such as the Institute for the Study of American Evangelicals, they have contributed to the heightened visibility of religion in the academy. Like the larger project of American religious history, the Institute was supported through grants from Lilly Endowment and the Pew Charitable Trusts. During the 1990s alone, Pew spent $14 million on programs aimed at strengthening evangelical scholarship.

Across the social sciences, scholars are rediscovering the power of faith. Heralding “the return of the sacred,” Harvard sociologist Daniel Bell gave a widely-reported lecture at the London School of Economics in 1977, arguing that the exhaustion of secular ideologies had led to a new hunger for meaning and transcendence. During the 1980s and 1990s, studies of American evangelicalism, religion and politics and new religious immigrants rapidly proliferated as the social scientific study of religion expanded. Such research helped debunk theories predicting the complete secularization of American life. Chronicling the “desecularization of the world,” scholars envisioned a new era “after secularism.”

Established in 1994, the religion section of the American Sociological Association had 650 members in 2006, making it larger than 26 of the ASA’s 44 sections. According to Nancy Ammerman, the Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion is the eighth most frequently cited publication in sociology.

Classical European social theorists such as Max Weber and Ernst Troeltsch frequently explored the connections between sociology and religious thought. Thirty years ago this tradition found new expression in the works of Robert Bellah and Peter Berger. While Bellah’s Beyond Belief called for a “new kind of integration” between religion and social science, Berger’s A Rumor of Angels made a case for the reality of the supernatural. In “Christianity and Symbolic
Realism,” Bellah argued that “religion is true” insofar as its symbols orient human beings to the ultimate problems of life. 28 Joining Berger and Bellah on the boundary between religion and social science have been the sociologists David Martin and Christian Smith. While Martin’s *Reflections on Sociology and Theology* advocates a peaceful coexistence between the disciplines, Smith’s *Moral, Believing Animals* allows for the possibility of a “superempirical order.” 29 Anthropologists are also paying more attention to what Joel Robbins calls the “awkward relationship” between theology and their discipline. 30

Reflecting the heightened role of faith in American politics and across the globe, the study of religion has achieved what Kenneth Wald and his colleagues describe as a “new prominence in political science.” Ignored by postwar political scientists, religion has been rehabilitated as an independent variable. This is in no small part due to the efforts of political scientists like the so-called “gang of four” (John Green, James Guth, Lyman Kellstedt, and Corwin Smidt) who have dedicated their careers to “rediscovering the religious factor in American politics.” These scholars have been heavily involved in the religion and politics section of the American Political Science Association, a group that has enjoyed rapid growth since its founding in the mid-1990s. With a 2007 membership of 640, it is now larger than the APSA sections on political parties, race and ethnicity, public administration, urban politics, the presidency, and political communication. Not surprisingly, religion is making a comeback in the study of international relations. While the Council on Foreign Relations recently inaugurated a Roundtable on Religion and U.S. Foreign Policy, the Carnegie Council on Ethics and International Affairs has sponsored a series of events on religion and politics. 31

Like sociology and political science, psychology has become more open to the study of religion. In a 2003 essay in the *Annual Review of Psychology*, Robert Emmons and Raymond Paloutzian tracked the dramatic growth of the psychology of religion since the late 1970s. Noting the proliferation of books and journal articles between 1988 and 2001 (1,200 PsychInfo citations on religion and 800 on spirituality), they argued that the psychology of religion has “re-emerged
as a full-force, leading edge research area.” Founded in 1975, Division 36 of the American Psychological Association (which focuses on the psychology of religion) had over 1,100 members in the year 2000, making it larger than 29 of the organization’s 55 sections. 

Psychologist Michael Nielsen traces the heightened attention to faith back to a 1980 debate between Allen Bergin and the noted psychologist Albert Ellis. A practicing Mormon who taught at Brigham Young University, Bergin was a leading advocate for the field of the psychology of religion. In 1997 the APA published Bergin and Scott Richards’ *A Spiritual Strategy for Counseling and Psychotherapy*, a handbook which presents a “theistic” approach to psychology. More recently, Robert Emmons has integrated the theology of Paul Tillich into his 1999 book on *The Psychology of Ultimate Concerns*.

Social workers are also rediscovering the importance of religion. While the 1,650-member North American Association of Christians in Social Work advocates “a vital Christian presence” in the profession, the Society for Spirituality in Social Work exists to foster “connections and mutual support among social workers of many contrasting spiritual perspectives.” Between 1995 and 2001, the number of accredited social work programs with courses on religion and spirituality rose from 17 to 50. 

Echoing the critique of secularism in other fields, religious approaches to social work are being published in the top journals of the field. In 2005 the flagship journal *Social Work* featured no less than six articles on religion.

Paralleling the return of religion in psychology and social work, the field of medicine is paying more attention to the sacred. The number of medical schools offering religion-related courses has grown from 5 in 1992 to 101 in 2005. At places like the Center for Spirituality, Theology, and Health at Duke University (supported by the John Templeton Foundation), researchers are exploring the impact of spirituality on blood pressure, depression, and alcoholism. Part of the federal National Institutes of Health, the National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine has promoted research on Ayurvedic healing, prayer, and mind-body medicine. According to David Myers, the “wall between faith and medicine is now breaking
Not surprisingly, such research is extremely controversial. In *Blind Faith: The Unholy Alliance of Religion and Medicine*, Columbia University’s Richard Sloan argues that the field of religion and health is based on shoddy scholarship. Although Sloan’s book questions the healing power of religion, the fact that it was published at all indicates the salience of the topic in the medical profession.

The wall is also coming down in the hard sciences, as the relationship between religion and science shifts from “warfare to dialogue.” In *Why Religion Matters*, Huston Smith notes that “God-and-science talk seems to be everywhere,” citing the profusion of science and religion centers (ten across the United States), journals (*Science and Spirit*, *Zygon*, *Theology and Science*), and hundreds of science and religion courses (including 800 funded by the John Templeton Foundation’s course development program). Like the research in spirituality and health, many of these initiatives have been sponsored by Templeton, including the American Association for the Advancement of Science’s “Dialogue on Science, Ethics, and Religion.” Chicago’s Center for Religion and Science, the Berkeley-based Center for Theology and the Natural Sciences, and Columbia University’s new Center for the Study of Science and Religion have also been major nodes in the science/religion network. According to Dennis Cheek, there are now over 150,000 citations in the literature on religion and science. Though most of the field has been oriented towards Christianity, Hinduism and Buddhism have also been incorporated into the conversation. While the Templeton-funded Metanexus Institute recently sponsored a lecture series on “Indic Religions in an Age of Science,” the Dalai Lama was a featured speaker at the 2005 meeting of the international Society for Neuroscience. Through its Local Societies Initiative, Metanexus has created over 200 religion and science discussion groups around the world, in countries such as Iran, India, Armenia, and Nigeria.

**Religion and the “Moral Revival”**

Over the past two decades, the religious resurgence has spread across the academy. In almost every discipline, there is more attention to religion. A more interdisciplinary expression of
the comeback of religion on campus can be seen in what sociologist Alan Wolfe calls the “moral revival.” In overview of these developments, Wolfe points to the rediscovery of moral development by psychologists such as Lawrence Kohlberg, James Q. Wilson’s work on a universal “moral sense,” and the rise of communitarianism. Of the academic movements on Wolfe’s list, communitarianism has done the most to return moral and religious questions to table. It helped that the founding manifesto of the movement, Habits of the Heart (1985), was one of the best-selling sociological books of all time. By 1995 Habits had sold over 400,000 copies, a figure only exceeded by books such as The Lonely Crowd and Tally’s Corner. Taking Americans to task for their rugged individualism, Robert Bellah and his co-authors drew on both civic and Biblical vocabularies. Likewise, in the field of philosophy, works by the Catholic communitarians Charles Taylor and Alasdair MacIntyre have helped make room for religious conceptions of the good life. Along the same lines, the debate over Robert Putnam’s Bowling Alone has attracted a number of religious voices. Putnam’s Saguaro Seminar has included scholars and politicians interested in religion and civic life (John Dilulio, Glenn Loury, Martha Minow, Barack Obama, Jim Wallis, and Stephen Goldsmith).

Though the influence of communitarianism has been greatest among social scientists and political philosophers, it has also spilled over into larger policy discussion about the future of higher education, providing an ideology for reformers seeking to counteract the fragmentation of American culture. In particular, Ernest Boyer’s classic study, College: The Undergraduate Experience in America (1987), applied a communitarian approach to campus life, arguing that “through an effective college education, students should become personally empowered and also committed to the common good.” Citing Habits of the Heart, Boyer criticized American higher education for failing to provide students with “coherent view of the human condition,” a mission almost religious in its scope. As president of the Carnegie Endowment for the Advancement of Teaching from 1979 until his death in 1995, Boyer used his position to promote an understanding of education strongly influenced by his own faith background. The product of church-related
higher education (at Greenville and Messiah colleges), he wrote sympathetically about the moral mission of both religious and secular institutions. In the words of his widow, Boyer believed in “putting Christian principles into action for everybody.”

A byproduct of the new emphasis on community was the birth of the service learning organization Campus Compact in 1985. A national network of college and university presidents “committed to the civic purposes of higher education,” it helped make service learning one of the most widespread curricular innovations of the late twentieth century. By 2007 over 1,100 presidents had signed on. Church-related colleges and universities have played a central role in the leadership of Campus Compact. As of 1995, twenty percent of member schools were Catholic.

The most important consequence of service learning has been to blur the boundaries between morality and education. As Julie Reuben points out, moral concerns have long been consigned to the non-academic, extra-curricular world of student development, with the “institutional structure [reinforcing] the divide between the Good and the True.” A reintegration of the good and the true can be seen in the growing focus of higher education policymakers on moral education. Continuing where Ernest Boyer left off, the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching recently sponsored a major study of “moral and civic learning” directed by Anne Colby and Tom Ehrlich. Entitled *Educating Citizens: Preparing America’s Undergraduates for Lives of Moral and Civic Responsibility* (2003), it profiles twelve colleges and universities that “have made broad institutional commitments to the development of all students’ moral and civic development.” A disproportionate number of the schools in the study are church-related (Notre Dame, the College of Saint Catherine, Alverno College, and Messiah College).

Exploring similar territory the Templeton Foundation has funded a variety of college-level character education initiatives, including the Institute on College Student Values, the magazine *In Character*, the *Journal of College and Character*, the Character Clearinghouse, and the Center for the Study of Values in College Student Development. The *Colleges That Encourage Character*
Development guidebook currently lists “405 exemplary college programs in ten categories that inspire students to lead ethical and civic-minded lives.”

According to Colgate University President Rebecca Chopp, the “movement of civic education in this country is vast and sustained,” adding that “in recent years educators, educational associations, and students have returned to the long and deep American tradition to educate citizens.” Comprised of thousands of ethics courses, over 1,100 Campus Compact schools, and 405 Templeton character-building institutions, the movement for moral and civic education is transforming American higher education.

An Interdisciplinary Movement to Reintegrate Religion and Knowledge

Efforts to return religion to American higher education have gone far beyond the quest to heighten moral and civic engagement in college classrooms. Building on the recovery of religious scholarship in individual disciplines, an interdisciplinary movement for the study of religion has emerged in the contemporary academy. Over the past two decades, scholars in dozens of fields have uncovered connections between “religion and . . .” Now many of them are speaking and writing across disciplinary lines, addressing the sorts of meta-questions that concern the entire university.

It is this interdisciplinarity that makes the contemporary resurgence of religion so promising. By blurring disciplinary boundaries, the advocates of religion are resisting a key process of secularization: the institutional differentiation of knowledge into hyper-specialized disciplines and sub-disciplines. If, as Jon Roberts and James Turner have noted, the rise of specialized, departmentalized knowledge led faculty away from the big questions of ultimate meaning, the emergence of interdisciplinary discussions of faith and knowledge has helped to bring those questions back into the spotlight. According to Rebecca Chopp, the rise of post-modernity has led to a shift from a department-oriented to a post-modern network-oriented “multiversity.” In the multiversity, interdisciplinary centers and institutes, foundations, and cross-disciplinary concentrations have moved to the center of academic life. While the modern
university drew sharp boundaries between disciplines, in the multiversity “flexible boundaries” prevail.53

Nowhere has the trans-, cross-, multi- and inter-disciplinary study of religion been more visible than in the creation of centers and institutes with a religious focus. Currently, there are over 150 such centers and institutes in American colleges and universities, including ten specializing in the intersection of religion and science and 33 that have at least some focus on North American religions.54 Ten of the most prominent were established as part of the Pew Charitable Trusts’ “centers of excellence” program. The goal of this program was to establish an academic foothold for religion at America’s most elite universities, including Princeton, Yale, Boston University, NYU, Virginia, Emory, USC, Notre Dame, Missouri, and Penn. Most of the centers of excellence are interdisciplinary in focus.55 At Princeton’s Center for the Study of Religion, faculty members from across the university have participated in seminars, conferences, and thematic projects. Since its creation in 1999, the Center has sponsored courses in history, sociology, philosophy, English, art, theater and dance, anthropology, and East Asian studies. At the time of its founding, it received the endorsement of Princeton University president Harold Shapiro who said he knew of “no other institution in the United States pursuing efforts as interdisciplinary and wide-ranging.”56

At some of the most elite centers and institutes the primary emphasis has been on religion as an object of study. According to Pew, the centers of excellence were established to “encourage the study of religion’s role in the humanities and social sciences, including international affairs, urban society, American democracy, and the media.”57 This has certainly been the case at Princeton’s center where founding director Robert Wuthnow called religion “the most understudied social phenomenon of the 20th century.” In a 2003 essay published in the Chronicle of Higher Education, Wuthnow defended the value of “scientific studies of religion,” arguing that sociological, economic and psychological explorations of the sacred compliment the insights of theologians and philosophers. The same year the Chronicle piece appeared Wuthnow served as
president of the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion. Together with the much larger American Academy of Religion, the 1,200 member SSSR is one of the leading venues for the interdisciplinary study of religion, attracting scholars from sociology, political science, psychology, anthropology, and economics.58

Outside of the social sciences, scholars in the humanities have made a secular case for the study of religion. In his 1995 book Religion and American Education, the philosopher Warren Nord argued that “to be liberally educated students must hear the religious voices that are part of our cultural conversation.”59 Issuing a similar, the 2005 Wingspread Declaration on Religion and Public Life concluded that the “study of religion and its public relevance is a crucial dimension to liberal education.” Sponsored by the Society for Values in Higher Education (the successor to the Society for Religion in Higher Education), the Declaration was drafted by 20 scholars from both religious and secular backgrounds, including the editor of the Journal of American History and the president of the Association of American Colleges and Universities. Noting the importance of religious literacy for the future of American democracy, the document urged faculty and administrators to devote more attention to the teaching and study of religion.60

Proposing to do just that, a 2006 Harvard University committee chaired by Louis Menand recommended adding a required course on “Reason and Faith” to the institution’s undergraduate core. Though the proposal was later withdrawn, the fact that it was on the table at all is significant. Given Harvard’s historic role as an opinion leader for American higher education, the possibility of a required religion course was widely reported. During the month that it was being considered, the proposed requirement attracted the attention of the Chronicle of Higher Education, the Associated Press, the Times of India, the Wall Street Journal, the Washington Post, and several other national and international news outlets. If nothing else, the committee’s deliberations helped raise the profile of religion at Harvard. While the final report abandoned the idea of a religion requirement, it included an unprecedented 20 mentions of the words “religion” and “religious” in a
34 page document (the landmark 1945 Harvard report *General Education in a Free Society* made only 25 references to religion or the religious in 267 pages).  

While plenty of scholars are content to teach *about* religion, others have grown dissatisfied with value-free approaches to the sacred. Envisioning a more expansive role for religion in higher education, they have sought to make room for moral and religious values in academic discourse. In the same *Chronicle of Higher Education* piece where he defended the scientific study of religion, Robert Wuthnow called for a closer relationship between “the realm of facts” and the “world of values,” arguing that we “need studies that investigate more pointedly the great human concerns that redound in special ways to each generation.” In an earlier essay, Wuthnow acknowledged the impact of personal religious commitments on his own teaching. The connections between empirical social science and normative religious commitments can be seen at Wuthnow’s Center for the Study of Religion where programs on “Public Theology” and “Christian Thought and Practice” coexist with quantitative survey research.

Wuthnow is not alone in his openness to religious values. Though he is not a “person of faith,” the sociologist Alan Wolfe has defended the value of religious perspectives in both teaching and research. In Wolfe’s view today’s students “are in desperate need of at least three dispositions usually associated with religious belief: a tragic view of life, grounding in a particular set of ethical maxims, and a sense of wonder.” Heralding the religious resurgence in higher education, he believes that the return of religion can contribute something valuable to academic scholarship. As director of the Boisi Center for Religion and American Public Life at Boston College, Wolfe has presided over a rich conversation among journalists, religious leaders, politicians, and scholars.

Conversation is also at the heart of the pedagogical vision articulated by Warren Nord. In *Religion and American Education*, he articulates a compelling critique of value-neutral approaches to the teaching of religion, arguing that we “take religion seriously when we try to understand it from the inside.” While rejecting proselytizing as inappropriate in publicly-funded institutions,
Nord believes that it is impossible to study religion fairly without admitting religious arguments into the classroom. True fairness requires that we “allow religious ideas and values to contend with secular ideas and values for the informed, critical judgment of students.”

Although figures like Nord have done much to heighten the place of religious perspectives in American higher education, they have not gone far enough for everyone. Envisioning a marriage between faith and scholarship, some Christian scholars have called for explicitly confessional approaches to academic research. Conceiving of religion as a way of knowing, rather than an object of study, these scholars have incorporated personal religious beliefs into the content of their scholarship and teaching. Such an integration of faith and knowledge has been made possible by the widespread questioning of objectivity in the contemporary academy. In a postmodern, multicultural, and post-positivist era, people of faith have challenged the culturally constructed boundaries between facts and values, religion and profession, and faith and knowledge.

The most prominent critic of secular neutrality has been the evangelical historian George Marsden. In the mid-1990s, the publication of Marsden’s *The Soul of the American University*, a plenary address at the American Academy of Religion, a cover story in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, and op-ed pieces in the *New York Times* and the *Wall Street Journal* gave new visibility to the movement for religion in higher education. For over ten years Marsden has challenged the exclusion of religion from academic discourse. In an era of African-American studies, feminist epistemologies, queer theory, and multiculturalism, he has asked, why can’t Christian perspectives be equally welcome at the table? In Marsden’s view, all knowledge is *perspectival*, that is, filtered through worldviews, perspectives, and paradigms.

In his perspectivism, Marsden has much in common with his long-time colleague, philosopher Alvin Plantinga, one of the architects of religion’s comeback in American philosophy. For the past four decades, Plantinga has advanced an influential defense of Christian theism, arguing that religious belief and unbelief rest on assumptions that cannot be proven or disproven.
Like Marsden, Plantinga was influenced by the turn-of-the-century Dutch Calvinist thinker Abraham Kuyper, a figure who stressed the role of presuppositions in the making of knowledge. As many thinkers have noted, “Kuyperian presuppositionalism” has a great deal in common with post-modern and post-positivist critiques of value-free knowledge. Sounding much like the historian of science, Thomas Kuhn, Marsden and Plantinga have called for an academy where multiple paradigms are represented. There are growing signs that they are having an impact. Richard Rorty notes that “Plantinga’s God and Other Minds is quite convincing on many points,” adding that Plantinga and fellow Calvinist Nicholas Wolterstorff are “remarkable philosophers.” In a similar way, George Marsden’s critique of the secular university has been engaged by such prominent academics as Rorty, Alan Wolfe, Robert Orsi, and Stanley Fish.

Given the central role of Christian philosophers and historians in the comeback of religion on campus, it is fitting that the Lilly Seminar on Religion and Higher Education was co-directed by the philosopher Nicholas Wolterstorff and the historian James Turner. Perhaps the most distinguished gathering of scholars on the topic in decades, the Lilly Seminar explored “the epistemological question of what relation might come to exist between religion and mainstream academic scholarship.” Located at the University of Notre Dame (home of Marsden, Turner, and Plantinga), the seminar met six times between 1997 and 1999. By bringing religious academics (Turner, Wolterstorff, Mark Noll, Douglas Sloan) into conversation with secular intellectuals (David Hollinger, Richard Bernstein, Alan Wolfe) the Lilly seminar helped legitimate the reintegration of faith and knowledge in American higher education.

Paralleling the discussion on faith and knowledge, a growing number of scholars are calling for the integration of spirituality and higher education. If George Marsden has served as the unofficial leader of recent efforts to re-Christianize the academy, the educational consultant Parker Palmer has been the central figure in the movement to bring spirituality into academic life. A 1998 survey of 11,000 faculty and administrators identified Palmer as one of the 30 “most influential senior leaders” in American higher education. Called a “phenomenon in higher
education” by the New York Times, his books are among the best-selling higher education titles in America. In works such as To Know as We Are Known (1983), The Courage to Teach (1997), and, most recently, A Hidden Wholeness: The Journey Toward an Undivided Life (2004), he has laid out a vision of education as spiritual journey, criticizing the separation of the knower from the known, the objective from the subjective, and spirituality from knowledge.

Reflecting this interest in all things spiritual, the Education as Transformation Project at Wellesley College drew 800 faculty, students, staff, and administrators, including 28 college presidents, to a 1998 conference on “religious pluralism, spirituality, and higher education.” At the 1998 gathering, attendees witnessed presentations on classical Indian dance, spirituality and jazz, and Tibetan Buddhism, as well as talks by Palmer and Diana Eck. Since then the project has produced a ten volume book series for Peter Lang Publishing. In the year 2000 the project co-sponsored a meeting with the University of Massachusetts on “Going Public with Spirituality in Work and Higher Education” organized by then UMass Chancellor David Scott.

Beyond New England the quest for the spiritual is making inroads into national higher education policy circles. In recent years, religion and spirituality have been the topics of cover stories in Liberal Education, Academe, and Change. In 2002 the Association of American Colleges and Universities sponsored a conference on spirituality and learning. The keynote speaker was UCLA’s Alexander Astin, the most cited higher education researcher in America and an influential advocate of spirituality in the academy. According to a study Astin co-authored with his wife Helen, a “movement is emerging in higher education in which many academics find themselves actively searching for meaning and trying to discover ways to make their lives and their institutions more whole. This quest reflects a growing concern with recovering spirituality and meaning in American society more generally.” As leaders in this movement, the Astins signed a 2002 position statement on “Spirituality and Higher Education” that critiqued the exclusion of spiritual and religion concerns from American colleges and universities. Since 2003 they have served as co-investigators on a massive Templeton-funded study on spirituality in the
academy. Through a national survey of 112,000 undergraduates, the project has documented strong student interest in spirituality and religion. Almost half of the students surveyed said it was very important or essential that the college or university they attended encouraged the “personal expression of spirituality,” while 67 percent said it was very important or essential that their institution help them develop personal values. The study has been used to legitimate the goal of integrating spirituality into college and university classrooms. Consistent with this goal, UCLA recently held a National Institute on Spirituality in Higher Education.81

Compared to the overtly Christian focus of some religious scholars, the advocates of spirituality in higher education could be described as “spiritual, but not religious.” In sharp contrast to George Marsden’s “Christian particularism,” they have stressed the search of all human beings for transcendence and wholeness.82 In their Fetzer Institute study on faculty spirituality, the Astins define the spiritual as “the individual’s sense of self, sense of mission and purpose in life, and the personal meaning that one makes out of one’s work,” a definition that most secular academics could embrace.83 Going even further, Vachel Miller and David Scott question whether we “even need to use the word ‘spirituality’ directly in our efforts to revitalize academic life. Rather, concern for spirit can be a matter of sensitivity and sensibility about the shared spaces we inhabit in our lives together. If those spaces are rich with conversation, constructive conflict, celebration, and appreciation, then surely, we are going public with spirituality.”84

Those searching for more substantial engagement between thick religious traditions (both western and non-western) and academic life can find plenty of examples scattered throughout American higher education.85 Since 1998 fellows at Notre Dame’s Erasmus Institute have explored the relevance of Catholic and more broadly Abrahamic intellectual traditions across the disciplines, pursuing projects on sacramentality and health care policy, Catholicism and American liberalism, Augustinian theology and modern technology, and politics and natural law theory.86 Erasmus Institute founder James Turner argues that Catholic intellectual traditions have much to contribute to contemporary academic research, even for those who are not themselves Catholic.
Noting the influence of what he calls Catholic “analytic devices” on fields as diverse as cultural anthropology and American pragmatist philosophy, Turner describes the ways that secular and religious scholars have appropriated conceptual tools from Catholic sources.\(^{87}\)

Addressing the more narrowly-defined category of evangelical Christian scholarship, the Pew Christian Scholars Program funded over 100 faculty fellowships during the 1990s, ranging from historian Mark Noll’s project on the incarnation and historical thinking to Charles Marsh’s provocative study of Christianity in the civil rights movement. At its height, the program sponsored a vertically integrated system of initiatives for undergraduates, graduate students, and faculty, all designed to heighten the profile of Christianity in the academy. Though Pew ended support for the program, its legacy can be felt in the publications of its alumni. An evaluation of the program conducted by Rhys Williams and Eugene Lowe highlighted its role in “mainstreaming” Christian scholarship. Williams and Lowe found that “[d]uring the early 1990s, for instance, only some 33 percent of books and book chapters produced by participating scholars were published by secular academic outlets. By 2001, this proportion had increased to just over 75 percent, with close to 80 percent of forthcoming work submitted to secular, rather than Christian, presses.”\(^{88}\)

Outside of the Christian tradition, more scholars are applying the insights of Buddhism and other contemplative traditions in the classroom. Since 1997 the Center for Contemplative Mind in Society has worked to “integrate contemplative practices into academic life” through an innovative fellowship program. Partnering with the American Council of Learned Societies, the Nathan Cummings Foundation, and the Fetzer Institute, the Center has awarded 121 fellowships to scholars at 103 institutions. According to the program’s webpage, “a contemplative pedagogy is emerging,” as networks form between scholars from across the nation.\(^{89}\) Though a self-described “secular organization committed to the value and insights of all the spiritual and religious traditions,” the Center’s programs have drawn on “many of the teachings and methods which are a part of Buddhism.” Its executive director, Mirabai Bush is a practicing Buddhist as
are many of the grantees funded by the Center. Together they are mainstreaming Eastern and Western traditions of contemplation in the American academy.  

Jewish Studies is also thriving in the contemporary academy. Before World War II, notes Daniel Jeremy Silver, “less than a dozen scholars taught Judaica on a full-time basis.” By the 1970s, 250 faculty were teaching Jewish Studies courses full-time, with an additional 300 to 400 working part time in this area. According to Robert Eisen, there are now 600 Jewish Studies courses, 150 endowed chairs, and 800 to 1,000 faculty positions in American higher education. Jewish Studies professors can be found across the humanities and social sciences in such disciplines as history, sociology, art history, and philosophy. The vigor of the field can be seen in the swelling ranks of the Association for Jewish Studies. Formed in 1969 it has a current membership of 1,500 scholars.

Paralleling the expansion of Jewish Studies, Islamic Studies is experiencing steady growth, buoyed by the increasing number of Muslim Americans and the resurgence of global Islam. In 2005 a Saudi Arabian prince donated $40 million to the interdisciplinary Islamic Studies programs at Harvard and Georgetown, gifts that were announced in two full-page color advertisements in the New York Times. The Harvard donation will support no less than four positions. Along with Georgetown and Harvard, several other institutions have established endowed positions in Islamic Studies, including Rice University, the University of Alberta, the Claremont School of Religion, the University of California-Santa Barbara, and the University of Toledo. Centers for the study of Islam can be found at institutions as diverse as Oxford, Villanova, Duke, and San Diego State. The vitality of Islamic Studies is also reflected in the heightened attention to Islam as a way of knowing. Exploring the possibilities for distinctively Islamic scholarship, organizations like the Association of Muslim Social Scientists (founded in 1972) and the Association of Muslim Scientists and Engineers, actively promote the “Islamization of knowledge.”

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On a smaller scale, the addition of Sikh Studies, Hindu Studies, and Buddhist Studies positions has further added to the pluralistic mix of American higher education. While Sikh Studies positions can now be found at the University of California-Santa Barbara, Columbia University, the University of California-Riverside, and the University of Michigan, chairs in Buddhist Studies have been created at Harvard, Santa Barbara, the University of Calgary, Columbia, and several other institutions. The first North American endowed chair in Hindu Studies was created at Concordia University in Montreal.\textsuperscript{96} Centers and institutes are also sprouting up across the country, including the Center for Buddhist Studies at UCLA and the Center for the Study of Hindu Traditions at the University of Florida. Robert Buswell, the director of UCLA’s center, is a former monk who speaks autobiographically about his immersion in Buddhist culture. A UCLA publication praised Buswell for bringing “Buddhist principles of modesty, wisdom, and compassion to his work.”\textsuperscript{97}

The growth of Catholic, Evangelical, Islamic, Jewish, Buddhist, Hindu, and Sikh Studies has created both opportunities and challenges for American higher education. To address the challenge of maintaining civility in an age of unprecedented pluralism, the Ford Foundation initiated its Difficult Dialogues Initiative in 2005. In a letter signed by 15 educational leaders (including the presidents of Harvard, Berkeley, Princeton, and Virginia), foundation president Susan Berresford invited proposals for projects that promote “new scholarship and teaching about cultural differences and religious pluralism.” Out of the 675 institutions that applied, 136 were invited to submit final proposals. In the end, 27 colleges and universities received $100,000 grants to “promote campus environments where sensitive subjects can be discussed in a spirit of open scholarly inquiry, academic freedom, and respect for different viewpoints.”\textsuperscript{98}

The most difficult dialogue of all may be between the advocates of religious scholarship and their secular colleagues. Recent surveys of the American professoriate show that the most popular religious affiliation after Christianity is not Jewish or Muslim or Buddhist but “none.” Though most faculty do in fact claim a religious affiliation, they are much less likely to do so
than the general population. According to a 2004 survey conducted by Neil Gross and Solon Simmons, 31 percent of faculty identify with no religion. Along the same lines, a UCLA study of faculty spirituality found that 37 percent are “not at all religious.” The number of non-religious faculty is even higher at elite institutions. A 2005 survey of scientists at 21 top-ranked universities conducted by Elaine Howard Ecklund found that half of elite social scientists have no religious affiliation, while only 8.6 percent attend religious services at least once a week (one-third of the general public attends weekly services). Another survey found that 53 percent of American faculty harbor negative attitudes toward evangelical Protestants. 99

Given these low levels of religious engagement, how have faculty responded to the return of religion in the academy? If statistics are any guide, the most common reaction may not be hostility or skepticism but indifference. According to the UCLA study of spirituality in higher education, 62 percent of college students said their professors never encouraged discussions of religious or spiritual topics. 100 Religion may also be missing from the vast majority of faculty research agendas. Analyzing four years of scholarly output in one discipline, Nancy Ammerman found that only 4 percent of the 3,000 books reviewed in Contemporary Sociology were primarily about religion. 101

And yet it does not take a huge number of scholars to introduce innovations into higher education. In fields such as philosophy and political science, a determined minority has managed to put religion back on the scholarly agenda and into the major journals. In a recent survey conducted by UCLA, 30 percent of faculty agreed that “colleges should be concerned with facilitating students’ spiritual development.” Likewise, Gross and Simmons found that 39.9 percent of American professors attend religious services at least monthly and that 18.8 percent identify as born-again Christians. 102 Such findings suggest that a significant minority of faculty are actively religious and that a sizeable constituency within the professoriate sees fostering spirituality as an educational goal.
Support for the religious resurgence is even greater if one distinguishes the academic study of religion from efforts to revive Christian intellectual life or to foster spiritual growth. While faculty may differ over the desirability of integrating faith and learning, few can argue with the importance of religion as an object of study. Moreover, many contemporary scholars cannot be easily pigeon-holed into either secular or religious categories. The fascination with religion shown by academic superstars such as Jurgen Habermas and the late Jacques Derrida transcends the dichotomy between the sacred and the secular. While Derrida spent his final years reflecting on the “possibility of religion without religion,” Habermas has written sympathetically about the legacy of Christian and Jewish ethics, participating in a public dialogue with the future Pope Benedict XVI. Functioning as what John McClure calls “border discourse,” such encounters between the sacred and the secular represent a new form of religious engagement in the academy.103

Conclusion: A New Story for American Higher Education

The college campus has long been perceived as one of the most secular precincts of American society. In the academy and mass media, the secularization storyline remains the dominant narrative for describing the place of religion in the American university. Despite its explanatory power, there is strong evidence that a new story needs to be told about religion in the academy, one that recognizes the resilience of the sacred in a secular institution.

Over the past two decades, a religious resurgence has spread across the academy. In a host of disciplines, faculty and administrators interested in religion can point to the existence of religious professional associations, high-profile scholars, influential books, and religion-oriented centers and institutes. Advocates of moral education and the interdisciplinary study of religion have further heightened the place of the sacred in contemporary scholarship. Some have gone so far as to call the religious resurgence a “movement.” A closer look reveals not one movement but many. Like most successful academic movements, the return of religion has been achieved by a heterogeneous group of scholars with very different conceptions of the academic vocation.
Reflecting this diversity, the religious resurgence includes believers and skeptics, the spiritual and the religious, insiders and outsiders, those who integrate faith and scholarship and those who emphasize the separation of religious values from their academic work. Together they have raised the profile of religion in American higher education.
Higher Education in America


For an application of social movement theory to secularization, see Christian Smith’s *The Secular Revolution*. We are extending Smith’s approach by treating the de-secularization of higher education as a social movement.


The estimate that Society of Christian Philosophers members comprise 12 percent of the American philosophical profession is derived from Kelly James Clark’s 1993 report that the Society had over 1,000 members and the American Philosophical Association’s “Selected Demographic Information on Philosophy Ph.D.’s, 1995,” which reported 8,300 philosophy Ph.D.’s. The latter is available online at [http://www.apa.udel.edu/apa/profession/selected.html](http://www.apa.udel.edu/apa/profession/selected.html).

Of course, not all the members of the Society of Christian Philosophers hold the Ph.D. in philosophy.


The Center for the Study of Religion and American Culture at Indiana University/Purdue University-Indianapolis (IUPUI) has served as a clearinghouse for the subfield of American Religion. For a list of centers and institutes focused on North American religion see the Centers and Institutes Project 2006 (Indianapolis: Center for the Study of Religion and American Culture, 2006). This list is available online at http://www.iupui.edu/~raac/CIP.html.


See www.asanet.org/page.ww?section=Sections&name=Latest+Section+Membership+Counts for statistics on ASA sections. Citation figures for the *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* were reported in Ammerman, “Sociology and the Study of Religion,” 83.


Information on Varadaraja V. Raman’s “Indic Religions in an Age of Science” lectures can be found at [http://www.metanexus.net/metanexus_online/show_article2.asp?id=9099](http://www.metanexus.net/metanexus_online/show_article2.asp?id=9099). For an account of the Dalai Lama’s lecture to the Society of Neuroscience see Marc Kaufman, “For the Dalai Lama, a Meeting of Brain and Mind,” *Washington Post*, 9 November 2005, C1. For more on the Local Societies Initiative see [www.metanexus.net/local_societies/default.html](http://www.metanexus.net/local_societies/default.html).


Statistics on Catholic colleges from Robert McClory, “Campus Compact Urges Student Service,” *National Catholic Reporter*, 6 October 1995, 13. For the Campus Compact mission and


54 In our evaluation of Lilly Endowment’s Religion and Higher Education Initiative, we counted approximately 130 religion or ethics oriented centers and institutes at church-related colleges that participated in Lilly funded programs. There are undoubtedly dozens more in non-sectarian institutions. See the 2006 Centers and Institutes Project booklet available from the Center for the Study of Religion and American Culture, Indiana University/Purdue University-Indianapolis. It lists 33 centers and institutes that focus at least some of their attention on North American religion. Sixteen of these are focused primarily on American topics. See the webpage of the “Centers and Institutes Project” at http://www.iupui.edu/~raac/CIP.html. See also Mahoney, Schmalzbauer, and Youniss, “Revitalizing Religion in the Academy” at http://www.resourcingchristianity.org/downloads/Essays/PublicReport.pdf.

55 For a list of the Pew Centers of Excellence, see http://www.pewtrusts.org/ideas/index.cfm?issue=17&misc_idea=2.


63 For more on the Center for the Study of Religion, see [www.princeton.edu/~csrelig/](http://www.princeton.edu/~csrelig/).


66 For more on the activities of the Boisi Center see its webpage at [http://www.bc.edu/bc_org/research/rapl/index.htm](http://www.bc.edu/bc_org/research/rapl/index.htm).


68 For examples of such confessional scholarship, see the individuals profiled in Schmalzbauer, *People of Faith*.


73For the mission and membership of the Lilly Seminar see http://www.nd.edu/~lillysem/.


75The figure of 800 attendees comes from the Education as Transformation Project webpage at http://www.wellesley.edu/RelLife/transformation/edutransformationoverview.html. See the webpage of the “Going Public with Spirituality in Work and Higher Education” conference at www.umass.edu/spirituality_conference/.


77See the webpage for the “Spirituality and Learning: Redefining Meaning, Values, and Inclusion, in Higher Education” Conference held April 18-20, 2002 in San Francisco at
On Astin’s status as the most cited higher education researcher see [www.spirituality.ucla.edu/research/](http://www.spirituality.ucla.edu/research/).


For a discussion of “thick” (more substantially religious) and “thin” (more generically moral) discourses, see Stephen Hart, “Cultural Sociology and Social Criticism,” *Newsletter of the Sociology of Culture Section of the American Sociological Association* 9 (3): 1, 3-6 (1995).

For more on these projects, see the webpage of the Erasmus Institute at [www.nd.edu/~erasmus/](http://www.nd.edu/~erasmus/).


90Quotations taken from the Frequently Asked Questions page of the Center as it existed in May of 2003. The webpage has since been modified. Buddhism is no longer mentioned in the FAQ. The old URL was www.contemplativemind.org/about/faq.html. It is available at the internet site http://web.archive.org/web/20020504050139/http://www.contemplativemind.org/about/faq.html.


93The membership data for the Association for Jewish Studies is available at http://www.ajsnet.org/; Silver, “The American University and Jewish Learning,” 286.


95Information about the Association of Muslim Social Scientists (in English, Arabic, or French) is available at http://www.amss.net/. The webpage of the Association of Muslim Scientists and Engineers can be found at http://www.amse.net/. The goals of the Institute of Islamic Sciences, Technology, and Development are articulated in a brochure posted at http://www.islamicscience.org/pages/english/broch1of%203.htm. See also “From Islamization of Knowledge to Islamization of Education,” *American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences* 16(2)1999. Available online at http://www.amss.net/AJISS/PastIssues/editorial16-2.htm.


"Spirituality and the Professoriate," 1. This report is available online at www.spirituality.ucla.edu/results/spirit_professoriate.pdf.


Seek knowledge from cradle to the grave. — Prophet Muhammad (Peace be upon him).

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This chapter explores the link between religion and knowledge in the post-secular academy. It considers the comeback of religion across the disciplines, the networks of scholars and organizations responsible for these developments, and the competing visions that animate efforts to heighten religion's place in the academy. The chapter begins with a discussion of the postwar religious revival in higher education that led to more religion in the curriculum. It then examines the increased interest in religion as evidenced by the growth of religious studies departments in universities.