

Report to The Teagle Foundation

on a Listening on Religious Work

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On September 8th through 10th, the Teagle Foundation brought a group of about 60 participants to Little Switzerland, North Carolina, to discuss how the foundation might best fulfill Walter Teagle's directive to support "religious work." Participants were drawn from a mix of liberal arts colleges and research universities, and included presidents, provosts, faculty senior and junior, administrators working in academic religious offices (both clergy and lay), and four undergraduate students. What follows is the author's synthesis of the main points of the meeting.

FACULTY AND STUDENT ATTITUDES

Many noted a difference in cultures between students, who tend to enter college with rather benign views toward religion, and faculty, whose views toward religion seem to range from indifference to condescension to hostility.

The most thorough, recent research has shown that students between the ages of 13 and 17 tend to have very conventional views of religion. Almost none self-identify as "spiritual but not religious." Religion seems to them to be a pretty good, benign part of their lives. They entertain the idea that more of it might be better; but it exists in the background. Their theological stance, in whatever tradition they are located, was characterized by one participant as "Moralistic Therapeutic Deism." For most of them it is not a subject they talk about much, and when they are asked to do so these students, who on some subjects are fluent and communicative, are highly inarticulate. The educational environments out of which most of them come (public high schools) instill a sense that religion is a forbidden subject in polite company.

Faculty attitudes were described by the participants according to anecdote and not the more rigorous findings available to characterize incoming freshman. According to the participants' impressions, faculty are "baffled" by students' religious commitments. Those who admit religion as a part of their own lives are much more likely than their students to describe themselves as "spiritual but not religious." With some frequency, participants identified an attitude among faculty that religion is a quaint vestige in a world where "progress is synonymous with secularization and a victory over superstition (which, as a matter of fact, they see as synonymous with religion)." The view was also expressed that since 9/11 many faculty are willing to admit that they may have missed something.

EVANGELICAL STUDENTS

A portion of the Listening was directed toward gaining a better understanding of Evangelical students, who tend to be the most vocal and forthright in raising issues of religion on contemporary campuses. Evangelicals represent an ethnically diverse group, with East Asian as well as white rural students present in noteworthy numbers. Some participants suggested common elements that characterize this diverse group. They arrive to campus respectful, with little skepticism about their religious beliefs, and an approach to reading texts of ultimate meaning that is narrow and defensive. On the other hand, they need no convincing that texts might represent a source of ultimate learning about the large questions in life; they often have a deep investment in learning, thinking of it as a vocation and part of a journey toward spiritual fulfillment. One participant noted a simple shift in the design of a reading list harnessed these classroom strengths and went some lengths toward mitigating the limitations. His college's great books course had in the past started with Genesis, raising from the beginning the anxiety around interpretation. By putting classical Greek works first, professors set an environment where students could become familiar the methods and rules that typically govern classroom interaction. Turning to biblical texts subsequently, the class was already well-practiced on the basic rules of engagement.

Participants noted that Evangelical students sometimes rub against the grain of a few specific customary attitudes one finds in classrooms with only non-Evangelical students. Two main types of these points of friction emerged in discussions. Evangelicals may be comfortable suggesting epistemological schemes at variance with commonly accepted disciplinary norms -- for example a project on the history of a denomination that considered only that denomination's official documents; or use of arguments that appeal to divine causation. Secondly, they may be resistant to gender-inclusive language in reference to the divinity or to inclusive attitudes toward homosexuals. These areas of concern are difficult to paper over, specifically in regard to the Evangelical student, because of their determination (so the name) to evangelize.

BEYOND TOLERANCE

Tolerance, that watchword of a modern pluralistic society, took something of a sinister cast among many of the participants. It was described by one participant as "elevator behavior," that is, a form of polite non-engagement. Although, of course, no participants thought we ought to foster IN-tolerance, many felt a need to aim for a higher goal than merely tolerating others. As a guiding principle, tolerance risks becoming a synonym for isolationism and disengagement. It has the infelicitous side-effect of blocking true understanding in favor of avoiding conflict at any cost. Many participants expressed, sometimes passionately, the depth of the need to move beyond tolerance toward understanding.

By the standards of 40 or even 20 years ago, the stakes of fostering thoughtful and pluralistic views have raised dramatically. The issue of diversity has changed its valence. In the recent past, "diversity" guided a salutary discussion, whose goal was most often understood as a kind of "attitude correction." It was aimed at rooting out lingering, sometimes hidden, prejudices against others whose differences were viewed as more or less superficial (skin color, economic background, etc.). This understanding of the issue assumed a broad commonality on the issues of ultimate concern among the different

members of the diverse group, since it was typically predicated on a notion that we're all "really alike," in some essential sense, when you look beyond difference. Those at the Teagle Listening consistently articulated a shift in the parameters of this value, toward fostering the ability to engage across profoundly different knowledge systems, even where fundamental premises differ radically -- and perhaps not even with the initial assumption that we are all essentially alike (though we may, in time and with effort, find commonalities). From an issue of avoiding inadvertent offense, then, the question of diversity has deepened into an examination of how to produce citizens capable of engaging in the most pressing social and political problems of our times, in educational communities and in a larger society whose depth of heterogeneity is nearly unimaginable by standards only decades old.

One participant defined the difference between tolerance and understanding as the willingness to engage in an argument. Here engagement is the prime directive, not the imperative to avoid offense. Teasing out an argument (or, just as good, a meaningful discussion) may thereby become an efficient means of bridging secular and sacred.

PEDAGOGY

If students arrive on campus inarticulate on the subject of religion, faculty are hardly mellifluous. Faculty interaction with students over questions of religion tends to be regulated by a list of "don't's" rather than "do's." Concerns over raising offense, or worse, provoking litigation, were said to be salient. The classroom environment tends not to be welcoming to religious questions. Even in the study of history, one participant noted, discussion of religious questions is underdeveloped.

Faculty are trained to be specialist professionals, experts in their own fields. Graduate schools do not encourage them to become mentor figures, co-investigating life's great questions with their students. They are likely to claim not to have expertise in the area of "life's meaning" and so abstain from a discussion. Nothing exactly stands in the way of those who have inclination to become educators of this kind, but for the most part the incentive structure in the profession does not nurture this mission. Liberal arts colleges tend to be an exception here (and not least religiously-oriented ones) where thoughtful and comprehensive pedagogy has always been highly valued. In other venues Teagle has addressed the question of nurturing faculty members to develop more thoughtful approaches to teaching. This general Teagle concern is surely part of this set of issues as well.

Faculty resistance to picking up "Big Questions" works in concert with a certain pragmatic and pre-professional orientation of students toward education to create an environment where big questions about life's meanings and purposes, about what it is to be human, and about what it is to have a self-seeking meaningful orientation toward the world and other selves, atrophy.

PARALLEL WORLDS

For many years Evangelicals have been underrepresented in higher education because of economic reasons, but they are no longer. This new form of diversity is a real issue. From the perspective of an administrator keeping each constituency of students happy Evangelicals present their own unique case. On most college campuses there are rich,

extra-institutional resources for students who wish to pursue religious questions. Participants at the conference expressed a certain ambivalence toward these institutions.

In the best light, they are meeting the needs and aspirations of students on questions toward which their faculties are ill-disposed. On the other hand, that these resources exist parallel to the university institution, rather than within it, raises the concern that the worlds will never meet. Discussions within these parallel communities have the potential of creating very positive experiences for students, a home within a home for them, but also potentially sealing them off from the challenge, even sometimes danger, that several participants saw as an inevitable part of transformational liberal education. In this connection two participants mentioned a seminar offered in an extra-institutional setting at a prestigious university, whose purpose was explicitly to present a more doctrinal version of religious history than that presented by an internationally renowned scholar of early Christianity.

A further source of concern grows out of higher education's own internal structure. In keeping with the relentless drive toward professional specialization, it reserves the responsibilities for students outside the classroom to a staff on a university-life career track, sometimes only loosely coordinated with the academic life of the institution. Campus ministries and faculties tend to fall on opposite sides of this organizational chart.

AT THE LIMITS OF LIBERALISM

Taking seriously the religious commitments of students precipitates a re-evaluation of intellectual life on an even broader scale as well. The unfinished business of the great intellectual movements of the past century has left behind the problem of how to acknowledge the diversity of truth claims while not giving in to blithe relativism (nor for that matter to isolationist tolerance). This issue became salient at several times during the discussion, particularly around the competing epistemologies presented by religious systems. Here the call for dialogue, engagement, discussion, and argument -- respectful and vigorous -- was repeatedly re-stated.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUNDERS

In the context developed over the course of the Listening, "religious work" was most often articulated as the difficult work of moving beyond tolerance toward engagement and understanding. Participants raised many ideas for institutions to become more attuned to the issues raised. Some participants thought the faculty and student life staff of universities needed more venues to collaborate and share ideas. In particular participants suggested that offices of religious life, or chaplaincies, presented real resources for bringing together thoughtful, productive interaction between various constituencies on campuses. These offices are for the most part underutilized. They have mentoring to offer to faculty, and not just students. They are also practiced at developing a language of engagement that still honors differences. A form of "public theology" might be well worth pursuing, encouraging dialogues, even dangerous dialogues that seek out the controversial moment. These dialogues would also be a venue where the aims and goals of a liberal education would need to be more fully articulated. This would likely have a salutary effect on liberal education as a whole.

Among all these ideas, three general areas seem the most promising to me, to be pursued by whatever avenue:

- 1) Faculty would benefit from a clearer idea of their students' religious lives. Productive discussions would have the best chance of succeeding via the existing, internal offices that minister to religious life on campuses.
- 2) Faculty should be encouraged to take up the "Big Questions" in their teaching and in nurturing an openness to such questions among their graduate students. These might be approached in discipline-specific ways, as the most productive means of engagement. In these contexts, faculty might at the same time be encouraged to discover religious questions as "teachable moments" to gain a purchase on these Big Questions.
- 3) Faculty could be encouraged to find a way in to students' intellectual lives outside of class-time via seminars in the residential houses. These seminars would aim to create a bridge between classroom and dorm room, between academic life of specific questions and the life of the mind.