

Religion, Spirituality, and Intellectual Development

Victor Kazanjian

Dean of Religious and Spiritual Life, Wellesley College

President of Education as Transformation, Inc.

Email: vkazanji@wellesley.edu

Adapted from a presentation at Oxford College of Emory University in Spring 2005, the author explores how issues of religion and spirituality can enhance and serve the educational mission of institutions of higher education. The author advocates developing a new holistic educational framework, based in part on the cognitive-affective learning model, which would allow students' religious and spiritual ways of knowing to be incorporated into their educational experience.

Why should colleges and universities be concerned about issues of religion and spirituality in the lives of their students? I hear this question quite a bit from educators concerned about the past and present relationship between religion and higher education. Old fears of an entanglement that would compromise core educational principles of academic freedom and rational inquiry have new life in an America and a world in which extremist religious movements entangled with mainstream politicians are attempting to turn back the clock to a time when religious ideology determined what was acceptable to teach and learn. Given this reality, why then should colleges and universities consider issues of religion and spirituality as a resource in the education of their students?

This was the question that I was asked to reflect on in a visit to Oxford College of Emory University this past February. It was a particular pleasure to gather with senior administrators, faculty, staff, and students at Oxford because I have been intrigued by the work being explored at Oxford through the Center for Cognitive-Affective Learning (CAL). The CAL materials that I had seen before coming to Oxford (and used in a number of previous talks at colleges and universities) bridge a chasm that has existed in higher education for decades between two realms of human understanding, the cognitive and the affective, from which is derived the twin forms of educational philosophy, “instrumental education – in which learners acquire knowledge or skills that enable them to do particular tasks – and transformational education – in which learners develop in important ways as human beings” (Oxford College of Emory University, 2005, p. 1).

The gulf between these two aspects of human perception and educational process has formed a daunting obstacle to the development of more holistic models of learning in higher education. The CAL initiative offers a framework for the development of a new epistemology that incorporates all aspects of human knowing, including, I will argue, the spiritual.

Returning to our central question, why should colleges and universities consider issues of religion and spirituality as a resource in the education of their students? There can be only one answer acceptable to educators. Why? Because it will enhance the education of our students and serve the educational mission of our institutions.

For too long conversations about religion and spirituality in higher education have been framed in ways that are simply about serving the religious needs of students as defined by religious institutions. Religious life on college and university campuses in the last quarter century has consisted largely of chaplaincy programs that were either

outposts for off-campus religious denominations or remnants of a mono-religious structure that served these institutions in days gone by. If we are going to talk seriously about religion and spirituality in higher education, there has to be a solid educational rationale for doing so and it has to come in a context that is framed by and understood by the academy, not just by religious institutions.

In the CAL program, Oxford has articulated a powerful educational rationale for bringing the cognitive and affective aspects of human perception into a new partnership for a more holistic learning experience. In this article my task is to examine how religion and spirituality fit into this model.

Over the past 13 years on campus at Wellesley and through Wellesley's Education as Transformation Project, (our national program on religion, spirituality, and higher education,) we have been exploring ways that academics, administrators, student life staff, and students can engage questions of religion and spirituality from an educational perspective. For decades, conversations about religion and spirituality in higher education have been mired in one of two outdated frameworks. Either they sound like a yearning for the good old days when colleges and universities were founded on religious principles, led by "persons of faith", and embraced religion (at least the one religion of the founder); or one hears a battle cry from self-proclaimed secularists purporting to be fighting to preserve the "intellectually pure" environment of rationalism won through the disestablishment of religion from institutions of higher education.

At Wellesley, we have tried to move beyond this polarity and approach the question of the role of religion and spirituality in education not in the framework of an epic struggle between two institutions battling over defining consciousness, but rather in the context of the educational goals of our college.

The mission of Wellesley College is to provide an excellent liberal arts education for women who will make a difference in the world. Wellesley is a secular liberal arts college, which broke with its nondenominational Christian roots in the middle of the last century. In 1993, at a time when most colleges and universities, confused by the conflict between their mono-religious institutional history and an increasingly multi-religious contemporary college community, were de-emphasizing the religious and spiritual dimensions of their institutions, Wellesley set out on a journey in the opposite direction.

Determined to continue to value the role of religion and spirituality in the educational experience, which had been so much a part of her past, and yet equally as determined not to recreate the entanglement between education and institutional religion that would erode hard won freedoms, Wellesley embarked on a largely untraveled path for an academic community. This was the creation of a multi-faith religious and spiritual life program that served the educational goals of the college. How did this happen? First a bit of context.

The Wellesley College that you may think you know or at least that I thought I knew before arriving at Wellesley, is not the Wellesley that I found in February of 1993 when I walked onto campus for the first time. The college whose name for many conjures up images of white, New England debutantes, (as evidenced by the recently released Hollywood film, *Mona Lisa Smiles*), is in fact one of the most racially, ethnically, and economically diverse colleges in the United States. Due to its commitment to need-blind admissions, which enables Wellesley to admit students without regard to financial status, and to an equally strong commitment to multiculturalism as an essential context in which

excellent global education takes place, Wellesley College's student body is a microcosm of human diversity. What had not changed as rapidly by 1993 were the institutional structures that were born out of Wellesley's history as a more homogeneous community in which the cultural norms of wealthy, white, Western, Protestant Christian society were dominant. One such outdated institutional structure was the College Chaplaincy that was a reflection of both Wellesley's history and a much broader history of religion and higher education.

The history of religious and spiritual life in higher education has been a complicated one. It was religiously inspired motivation that led to the founding of many of the earliest colleges and universities in this country and shaped early educational philosophy and pedagogy. The relationship between religion and education persisted, over the growing objections of many scholars who found their academic freedoms restricted by theological principles rather than educational ones. This continued until the mid 20th century when secular scholarship and academic freedom won out and most colleges and universities severed ties with organized religion or relegated it to the extreme margins of the educational enterprise.

In the face of just such a history, Wellesley College, in 1992, convened a consultation on the religious and spiritual life of the college involving trustees, students, faculty, and senior administrators. Through this consultation the college devised a plan to renew its commitment to religious and spiritual life through developing a multifaith program, the shape of which was yet to be determined. The first act of the college in this direction was to create the new position of Dean of Religious and Spiritual Life. The Dean's job was not to represent any one religious community, but to design and oversee a new structure that would meet the religious and spiritual needs of students, faculty, staff, and alumnae, and consider the role of religion and spirituality in the college's overall educational mission. The second part of this charge proved to be especially important, in that it opened a door to reconsider the relationship between religion, spirituality, and education, a process that ultimately moved religious and spiritual life from the margins of the institution to a seat at the table as a partner in implementing the college's core educational goals.

In my opening address to the College as Wellesley's first Dean of Religious and Spiritual Life in February of 1993, I offered the following words:

I believe that it is the awakening of a desire for wholeness, in one's self, in one's relationships, among humanity and in all of creation that is the essential task of all spirituality and religion, and the essential work of education. In my first few months at Wellesley, I have been truly inspired by the desire of so many people here to incorporate a spiritual component into their lives: students who seek the support of familiar religious experience, other students who explore the possibilities of spirituality beyond institutionalized religion; faculty who see the educating of the mind as inseparable from the nurturing of the spirit; and staff for whom the place in which they work holds the possibility for the development of community. In these first months, I have experienced a genuine commitment to include religion and spirituality in the life and learning of this College.

Now for some, the thought of a College embracing any sort of religious or spiritual component in this day and age strikes fear in their hearts and raises critical not to mention constitutional concerns... and to this I say, "not without

good reason,” for in the past the mingling of religion and academia has often meant the establishing of a normative religious perspective centered around a single religious tradition. But we are up to something new at Wellesley, something that springs forth from the rich religious and spiritual traditions of this College and yet something, which truly reflects the magnificent montage of religious and spiritual beliefs represented in today's Wellesley College community.

It is my hope that in the years ahead, we will, through the Religious and Spiritual Life Program, nurture a multifaith environment which truly responds to this rich diversity of religious tradition and experience represented in the Wellesley College community among students, staff and faculty. This means striving to support the spiritual, educational and practice needs of each religious group on campus, while establishing new ways in which people of all religious and spiritual beliefs can learn about and from one another and thereby begin to discover the common threads that bind us together in community. This I might emphasize is very different from past interfaith efforts where the goal was most often to establish a kind of common, neutral language and practice, which offended no one but which also quickly became unrecognizable to any person of faith. Our hope is to affirm the integrity of each religious tradition while challenging all people, religious and nonreligious, to see their own experience as simply a part of some greater whole.

But there is more to this challenge than the support of the religious and spiritual lives of people at this College, for I believe that spirituality far transcends the boundaries of institutionalized religion and is a part of the intellectual, moral and personal development of all people. As an academic institution charged with the task of educating women to fully engage in society, the incorporation of a spiritual dimension to this educational process seems essential. What this means and how this becomes manifest in this community, is the work of discovery that lies before us. There is much in the recent and past history of this College that will inform us in this process. Some of what has come before we will incorporate into the future. While some things, we will necessarily need to leave behind, for we are attempting something new and yet something old as well. For the roots of this movement towards spiritual wholeness reflect the highest aspirations of the world's wisdom traditions and of educational philosophy. That which we create here at Wellesley in our day, will, if we do it well, awaken in us and perhaps in higher education in general, the desire for wholeness and will help us rediscover through a renewed educational experience our common humanity.

And with these words, we began a process of experimentation as to the role of religious and spiritual life in higher education that continues to this day.

After more than a decade of experimenting with issues of religion and spirituality as a part of the educational program of the college, we have developed five goals that serve as answers to the question of why educators should be concerned about issues of religion and spirituality in the lives of their students?

1. To respond to our students' learning needs
2. To equip our students with the skills necessary to be citizens of the nation and world
3. To provide an environment in which our students can grow as whole persons
4. To offer a less fragmented educational program and become a less fragmented educational institution
5. Meeting our highest goals

Responding to Our Student Learning Needs

Alexander Astin of the Higher Education Research Institute at the University of California in Los Angeles is the principle researcher on a national study of college students' search for meaning and purpose. In a 2004/2005 report on the project, he offers the following conclusion about students' desire for meaningful educational experience.

Students coming to campuses today are a diverse group ethnically, socio-economically, religiously, and politically. While they have high ambitions and aspirations for educational and occupational success, and college is the means by which they believe they can realize their goals, they are also actively dealing with existential questions. They are searching for deeper meaning in their lives, looking for ways to cultivate their inner selves, seeking to be compassionate and charitable, and determining what they think and feel about the many issues confronting their society and the global community. (Higher Education Research Institute, 2005, p. 22)

The survey results, which highlight findings based on data collected from 112,232 students at 236 colleges and universities, reveals that 80% of students indicated that they have an interest in spirituality, 81% of students attend religious services, and 79% believe in God. The results of the survey seem to provide evidence of what many in higher education have been suspecting for the last decade, that the majority of our students want spirituality to be an integrated part of their life at college and religion is an important part of the lives of a significant number of our students.

If this is the case, and if the spiritual and religious lives of many of our students are an important part of how they interpret and understand the world, should we continue to perpetuate a polarized learning environment where they compartmentalize their learning, secular scholarship in one box and spiritual in another and never the two shall meet? The principles of the cognitive-affective learning model speak directly to this question by insisting that liberal arts education bridge this split and create an integrative epistemology in which the analytical and the intuitive are brought together in a powerful partnership of learning. The cognitive and the affective, the rational and the intuitive, do not necessarily exist in polar opposition to each other.

Religious and spiritual life programs can serve the college's educational mission while creating a space for the practice of, as well as the study of, religion and spirituality on campus. It is not an easy task and there are many cautionary tales to tell. Those invested in the battle between religious institutions and secular institutions over the power to impose their form of orthodoxy, religious or secular, are both going to be incensed at the notion that another path is possible. It is the language of cognitive-affective learning, creating a new epistemology which includes the spiritual as one

among many dimensions of knowing, that I believe has the best chance of being widely accepted by the academy. If educational institutions do not answer the call from our students to take up issues of religion and spirituality (not just as phenomenon to be studied but as a part of students' ways of understanding themselves, others, and the world) then we will continue to perpetuate a polarized educational process and cede religion and spirituality to those religious people and institutions who most likely will not have our educational goals in mind.

Equipping Our Students with the Skills Necessary to be Citizens of the Nation and World

At a time when globalization has brought people of such great difference closer to each other, one of the things that we discover is how deeply fragmented a world we live in and how little we know about each other—not just globally but sometimes within our own communities. America is one of the most religiously diverse countries in the world (Eck, 2001) and yet it is also one of the most religiously segregated and religiously uneducated places on earth. That's a problem.

Most colleges and universities have adopted the language of teaching their students to be good national and global citizens. This being the case, providing a program whereby students can learn about the various religious traditions that comprise America and the world through intellectual study and practical encounter is an essential part of providing them with the skills that they will need to engage their lives as an educated person. The theory behind this is no different than the theory that has given rise to multicultural education in this country. It is becoming more generally accepted that competency in multicultural understanding is a critical component of a broad education and essential for citizenship and leadership in the country and world. To this point, religious diversity has rarely been included under the rubric of multiculturalism.

Researchers and writers such as Beverly Daniel Tatum and Daryl Smith, whose work on the impact of identity on intellectual development is central to contemporary multicultural educational theory, include religion as a significant category of identity relevant to education. In the Spring 1998 issue of *Diversity Digest*, Daryl Smith includes religion in her analysis of campus diversity.

Diversity on campus encompasses complex differences within the campus community and also the individuals who compose that community. It includes such important and intersecting dimensions of human identity as race, ethnicity, national origin, religion, gender, sexual orientation, class, age and ability. These dimensions do not determine or predict any one person's values, orientation, or life choices. But they are by definition closely related patterns of societal experience, socialization and affiliation. They influence ways of understanding and interpreting the world.” (para. 2)

If this is so, if religious identity impacts the way a student understands and interprets the world, then religious identity is an educational issue and needs to be taken up as such by educators, whether we welcome this task or not. It becomes an educational obligation.

In his 2004 article in the *Journal of Cognitive Affective Learning*, Marshall Gregory, maintains that teachers must “go beyond the transmission of ethically neutral disciplinary knowledge and into the realm of ethical learning and development” (p. 2). Included in his

analysis is the proposal that “there are four ethical commitments that are central to effective teaching from the standpoint of teaching as a social interaction: fairness, respect, charity and civility” (p. 6). If these are indeed crucial factors in the transaction that we call teaching and learning, and if this transaction is in fact a social interaction rather than the downloading of information from one neutral source to another, then religion and spirituality are going to play a part in this transaction. If for the majority of our students (and one imagines some percentage of faculty), religion and spirituality play a role in their learning, as the Astin study reveals, these factors must be accounted for to understand the very transaction that we are already having. The notion that learning happens best in a clinically sanitized environment is giving way to an educational process that accounts for the many variables that influence our cognitive processes including affective influences such as the spiritual.

This does not mean that faith suddenly should take a place equal to rational analysis on our campuses. This may crush certain religious enthusiasts who up to this point were hoping that this article would throw open the doors to replacing rational discourse with faith statements. What I am talking about is within a broadened understanding of the epistemological principles that govern the academy. Informed by work such as that being carried out at the Center for Cognitive-Affective Learning and in the theory and practice of multicultural education, we can include issues of religious practice and spirituality as recognized aspects of the lives of many of our students and seek ways to include religion and spirituality in a way that would better prepare students for engagement in the world.

For a fuller examination of examples of this process, please visit our websites www.educationastransformation.org and www.wellesley.edu/RelLife.

Providing an Environment in which Our Students Can Grow as Whole Persons

In his address to the Education as Transformation National Gathering at Wellesley College, Parker Palmer (1998b) urged higher education to consider a more holistic model of educating our students.

Higher education has developed its own orthodoxy, its own highly limited set of blinders through which to view the wonders and marvels that surround us--and it is an orthodoxy, I believe, that is as fully capable of trammeling inquiry as any of the orthodoxies found in the religious traditions... The orthodoxy of objectivism insists that we can know the world only by distancing ourselves from it, separating our inner lives from the external objects we want to know. Such objectivism is morally deforming because its distancing us from knowledge prevents a moral engagement with the world we study and (prevents) a taking responsibility for it. One of the most important contributions our religious and spiritual traditions can make through dialogue on our campuses is in the alternative epistemologies they offer which are more capacious, more relational and more responsive than classic objectivism. (para. 1-2)

In his many books on education that have followed since his address, Palmer (1998a) talks at length about what happens when we contribute to the fragmentation of the human person through dealing only with the cognitive but not the affective ways of knowing. Consistent with the principles of the Center for Cognitive-Affective Learning, he believes that when we offer such a fragmented learning process, we create a de-forming construct

for the education of our students that prevents them from being able to integrate and apply their learning.

I have witnessed this process frequently during a three and a half week course that I co-teach each January for the Peace and Justice Studies Program at Wellesley. In this course a teaching team comprised of faculty and student life staff takes students to the north of India to study the Gandhian legacy and grassroots organizing. Such an experience offers us a look at the educational process in microcosmic way. In dealing with students in the field and on the road, the faculty and student life staff that make up the teaching team work together to create the learning experience. Together we deal with the intellectual, social, spiritual, and psychological aspects of the learning process all in one place, 24 hours a day, in a very intensive way. On an experience such as this, it is obvious that all aspects of the students' experiences shape their learning, and that if any aspect is left unattended a negative impact on their learning is often the result. When a student struggles with the culture shock of being in a dramatically unfamiliar environment, her disorientation impacts her ability to think and learn. Working with a student to understand the dissonance of her experience as a part of her learning is clearly more constructive than telling her that what she is experiencing has no bearing on her learning and therefore she should try and ignore it and focus on a purely intellectual experience. I do not believe there is a faculty member anywhere who would advocate the latter over the former approach to teaching in such a circumstance. Why then, if it is generally accepted that in such intensive learning experiences a holistic pedagogical approach is crucial to a student's learning, is it so difficult for us to envision this same holistic learning model on our campuses?

Literature on stress and student performance, particularly data from the National College Health Assessment (NCHA) (American College Health Association, 2001), shows rising rates of stress negatively impacting our students' academic performance. Colleges across the country are concerned about the impact of negative stress on their students. All of this emphasizes that it is the collective enterprise of education involving faculty, administrators, student life staff, and many others working in partnership, that creates the optimal learning environment for our students. Religion and spirituality is just one dimension of the multidimensional world that a student brings to her learning and a faculty member to her teaching. Those of us whose role it is to consider the role of religion and spirituality in higher education must approach the possibility of this new partnership with great humility and patience. The history of religion and higher education has not been a particularly good one. It is up to us to prove that we can be good partners in the educational enterprise.

Developing Less Fragmented Institutions

Partnerships in learning, in which everyone involved in the educational process appreciates the unique gifts of each other, are crucial to education and yet our institutions often reflect deep fragmentation rather than partnership.

Student life staff often feel marginalized in institutions where faculty tend to be at the center of the universe. Faculty often feel as though their scholarly endeavors are underappreciated in the consumer-based marketplace that has become higher education. Administrators toil away keeping institutions viable while usually being demonized by

just about everyone. And no one realizes that often the first people who students want to see when they return to campus after graduation is the food service worker with whom they shared meals three times a day for four years.

I often say to my student life colleagues, "Have you been in a classroom and seen the gifts that faculty bring to their teaching and the environment that they create that is so extraordinary and so exquisite?" And to my faculty colleagues I say, "Have you talked with folks in student life and do you understand what they do when they are working with students individually or in groups, in residence halls, or in the library, or during office hours? Have you listened to the remarkable stories of transformation that occur?" And do any of us consider the comptroller, quietly thinking about ways that she can save money so that we all will have more resources to do our work.

If we can begin to appreciate the unique goals, gifts, and skills that each part of our institutions brings, we can then open the door to true educational partnerships. Only then will we realize that we need each other to do this thing that we call education. Such a climate of appreciation might be thought of as an expression of the deep values of an institution--what I would call the spiritual values of an institution--not because they relate to some transcendent notion of a divine being, but because they transcend our individual roles and lead us from fragmentation to partnership and community.

Meeting our Highest Goals

The last and the most important reason to deal with religion and spirituality is because we can better achieve our highest educational goals if we do (and because we are less able to achieve those highest educational goals if we do not.) Is not the highest goal of education to equip students with tools of analysis and reflection that deepen their understanding and ability to relate to self, other, and the world so that they might contribute meaningfully to the world through their lives? Is this so different from the highest goal of spirituality and the wisdom traditions? Perhaps if we could set aside the distorted institutional orthodoxies that claim exclusive authority in defining the realm of human knowing, then we could begin to design new partnerships to realize our common goal.

If you hear this discourse being framed as "How can religious and spiritual people bring spirituality and religion to the secular world of higher education?" perhaps it is best to just turn and walk away. This is the wrong question. My experience is that spirituality and religion, defined as those beliefs and practices that give meaning, purpose, and context to many people's lives and learning, are already deeply imbedded in higher education today. It is part of the process of cognitive-affective learning that takes place in a classroom that works. It is what happens when a faculty member creates an environment where students suddenly awaken to new concepts that change their lives, their understanding of themselves, and the world. It is what happens in a counseling session when a student who has hit some emotional wall breaks through something and realizes that she or he has a new piece of understanding of themselves that they will have for the rest of their lives.

I believe that the task of the next decade or so, for places like Oxford, Wellesley, and many other institutions concerned with more holistic models of education, is to articulate

a new epistemology of cognitive-affective learning that includes a variety of ways of knowing and then develop pedagogies and practices that can be used by other institutions. This work is already underway and finding broad interest from educators across the country. May we continue on this journey, proceeding with caution, and yet also enthusiasm as we move ahead with our eyes on the educational goals that we serve. □

Victor H. Kazanjian, Jr. is the Dean of Religious and Spiritual Life and co-director of the Peace and Justice Studies Program at Wellesley College. He is the president of Education as Transformation, Inc.

REFERENCES

- American College Health Association. (2001). National college health assessment (NCHA). Retrieved June 24, 2005, from http://www.acha.org/projects_programs/assessment.cfm
- Eck, D. (2001). A new religious America: How a "Christian Country" has become the world's most religiously diverse nation. New York: HarperCollins.
- Gregory, M. (2004). Pedagogical disjunctions, or if I say I want my students to be mainly learning x, why do I think mostly about teaching y? *Journal of Cognitive Affective Learning*, 1(1), 2-10. Retrieved June 24, 2005, from <http://www.jcal.emory.edu/viewarticle.php?id=27&layout=html>
- Higher Education Research Institute. (2005). The Spiritual Life of College Students: A National Study of College Student's Search for Meaning and Purpose. Retrieved June 24, 2005, from the Spirituality in Higher Education Web site: <http://spirituality.ucla.edu/spirituality/reports/FINAL%20REPORT.pdf>
- Oxford College of Emory University. (2005, January 21). The Executive Summary of the Emory University Oxford Campus Strategic Plan.
- Palmer, P. (1998a). *The courage to teach: Exploring the inner landscape of a teacher's life*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Palmer, P. (1998b). A vision of education as transformation: An address given at the Education as Transformation National Gathering. Retrieved June 24, 2005, from the Education as Transformation Web site: <http://www.wellesley.edu/RelLife/transformation/edu-ngvision.html>
- Smith, D.G. (1998). Institutional leadership and the complexity of campus diversity. *Diversity Digest*, 2(3), 4-5. Retrieved June 28, 2005, from <http://www.diversityweb.org/Digest/Sp98/complexity.html>