Religion as a Critical Measure

An Address to Graduating Seniors – April 15, 2015
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A couple of years ago, I attended a conference celebrating the 80th birthday of Cardinal Walter Kasper, a German academic sufficiently influential in Rome for the media to dub him “the pope’s theologian.” Many of Kasper’s friends and colleagues shared a number of anecdotes about him during this conference, and my mind has repeatedly returned to one in particular since I began teaching in the U’s Religious Studies Program last fall.

Having returned from giving a lecture in the Midwest, Kasper made a remark to Carl Peter, then the dean of the School of Religious Studies at Catholic University of America. Kasper said to Peter, who had grown up in Omaha, Nebraska, “How did you ever discover your vocation to be a priest, living out there where it is so flat? You need to have an ‘Alps experience!’” Kasper declared, continuing that “being in the mountains lifted [my] mind and heart to God.” Carl Peter dryly responded, “Being in the mountains gives me claustrophobia,” and explained that he preferred the wide horizons and the big sky.¹ Personally, having taught theology in Indiana and Religious Studies in Utah, I have to come down on Kasper’s side and say that the mountains are pretty fantastic setting for studying religion. So consider yourselves quite fortunate!

In all seriousness, our Religious Studies Program is fortunate to have you, who are among the first students to complete this major which is so new and valuable to our University. Its course of study is an integral part of any university, central goals of which include open inquiry, dialogue between differing viewpoints, and mutual criticism carried out with respect, not only between scholars of religion, but between researchers in numerous fields. In the medieval

academy, lively debate flowed seamlessly between topics as seemingly disparate as scriptural interpretation, Greek philosophy, ethics, and the natural sciences. Although universities have since become increasingly specialized and compartmentalized, the interdisciplinary nature of the Program you’re completing places you in a rich tradition of broad intellectual inquiry.

As you’re well aware, there is a national tendency today at all levels of education to prioritize the advancement of science, technology, engineering, and mathematics – the acronym “STEM” is ubiquitous from elementary schools to universities to the evening news. To be clear, I think an emphasis on STEM is a good thing – I majored in mathematics as an undergrad and come from a family where if you’re not in education, you’re in engineering! That said, as important as STEM is and as much good as it does, scientific and technological advancement can only address so much of the human situation.

In the late nineteenth century, in a world becoming crisscrossed by railroad tracks, phone wires, and electrical lines, it was becoming an increasingly common belief that human salvation was fundamentally tied to scientific and technological progress rather than to various religious dogmas. As many of you may remember from your coursework, social anthropologist James Frazer wrote in The Golden Bough in 1890,

“It is probably not too much to say that the hope of progress—moral [!] and intellectual as well as material—in the future is bound up with the fortunes of science, and that every obstacle placed in the way of scientific discovery is wrong to humanity.”

But then came two world wars, during which human beings demonstrated a stomach-churning capacity to kill one another with startling and increasing efficiency. On its heels quickly followed the Cold War and its mindset of “mutually assured destruction” (M.A.D.); at this point

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in time, the rosy attitude about technological advancement of the late 19th c. had faded significantly.

Around the world, there was an increasing realization that positions proposing a proper regard for STEM in many cases emerge, for better or for worse, from worldviews which are religious. Examples are as numerous as there are religions: technological advancements can be shunned, appropriated for community building, used in proselytizing, apologetics, polemics, or even horribly violent means; STEM can be aimed at “humanization.” This latter aim was addressed in 1965 by a young German theologian named Joseph Ratzinger, who, forty years later, would become Pope Benedict XVI. Painfully aware of the atrocities carried out during his teenage years in the name of “progress,” Ratzinger wrote,

“\textit{The world will not be redeemed through instruments and gadgets, but through love...}

\textit{Technological service is Christianized when it serves the humanization of humans, that is, when it serves love.... Only then is it progress. The task of the Christian message cannot be to glorify technology—it does not need such glorification— but to give technology the critical measure in which it is shaped.}”

Today, fifty years later, interest has largely expanded beyond efforts of humanization in order to aim at the flourishing of our entire biosphere, that is, toward the flourishing all kind of life.

It is worth pointing out that whether it’s framed as “humanization” or in broader terms, the goal of such “flourishing” is going to mean different things to different people, many of whom are shaped by their religious commitments. According to Ratzinger, authentic humanization requires “the Christian message” to give technological advancement its “critical measure.” Although many people would and have sympathized with Ratzinger’s suspicion of

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unfettered “progress” as understood in the minds of Frazer’s contemporaries, Ratzinger’s solution is, de facto, one of a variety of visions about flourishing.

This variety of religious attitudes has given people different sets of language and different objectives when it comes to the pursuit of such flourishing. Some seek communion with God within the world while others stress the need to transcend ordinary life; some stress social cohesiveness while others primarily pursue their own inner tranquility; some insist on a divine mandate for social justice while others insist that the God’s eschatological Kingdom must not be “immanentized.” This wide range of ways to depict authentic flourishing might very well be seen as a rich and even mutually complementary variety, but it can also be seen as an assortment of entirely erroneous “others” which, in the end, amount to competitive threats to a singular religious model. Fear of “the other” can lead to a lack of communication, tensions, and even outright hostilities between groups, each of whom contends that their notion of flourishing indeed represents the “critical measure” for human progress.

This state of affairs represents an opportunity for you. As students of religious studies, you’re uniquely equipped to be a guiding voice in today’s conversations on precisely these issues. Having completed your work in this university setting, you’ve witnessed the best of academia: the exchange of ideas from a variety of perspectives, together with an evaluation of those ideas which is (ideally, anyway) at the same time both respectful and critical. A troubling number of people today are shaped by 24-hour news channels in which “respectful” and “critical” are mutually exclusive categories. And when differences are feared and “critical analysis” slides into polemics, proponents of various models for flourishing will, in the best-case, retreat into their own sectarian silos and remain there. In the worst case, the polemics emerging from such silos can turn violent. But you have both seen and practiced how conversations on
religious topics can be simultaneously respectful and critical, and you’re well positioned to subvert what is, unfortunately in many ways, becoming the status quo.

Moreover, you have a unique skill set: You’ve studied the historical, sociological, and psychological factors which shape religious belief; you’ve studied the nature and history of multiple religious traditions, along with their theologies; and finally, you’ve done this alongside people whose approach such issues are (sometimes markedly) different than your own. Once again, you’ve actually analyzed religious traditions with your religious “others” in a way that is at the same time respectful and critical.

As we honor you graduating seniors, who are sure to use this skill-set in diverse ways in whatever your next pursuits may be, I want to reiterate that your training serves an important purpose in a world that continues to place an increasing emphasis on STEM. Along with such an emphasis comes (and rightfully, I would add) a variety of distinctive visions, religious and non-religious, about how to give scientific and technological progress its “critical measure” in order to preclude abuses and allow for the flourishing of human and non-human life. As you encounter proponents of such visions, I’d advise you to assiduously avoid two pitfalls in particular.

The first pitfall is to sit back and passively watch the discourse as it is shaped by divisive, sectarian voices coming from perspectives that don’t understand each other (and perhaps don’t want to!). Mischaracterizations of nuanced religious positions abound as such voices attempt to promote their own vision by distorting those of others. Make your own voice heard and don’t allow a cable-news approach to religious discourse to become the norm.

The second pitfall is earnestly working to conflate this variety of visions into a single, harmonious, utopian whole right here and now. A well-intended zeal to bring people together
can, done impatiently, end up dissolving important differences and silencing perspectives that need to be heard, even (and perhaps even especially!) when one does not agree with them. Unity is a laudable goal to pursue, but not every kind of unity necessitates uniformity.

Neither does the pursuit of unity require people to jettison their convictions and truth claims. As much as I like John Lennon, I have a hard time “imagining” that stripping all people or their distinctive religions is the best way to achieve unity; such an imagined group looks more uniform than united to me. The work of “unifying” people presupposes that there is something there to unify, and I’d encourage you to continue respecting various convictions that differ from your own for what they are and not as something simply to be bleached away.

Between these two pitfalls lies the path I’d recommend, namely, fostering dialogue like you’ve seen here. To be sure, the rest of the world isn’t a university, but practices central to academic activity in a university setting can bear great fruit in religious discourse as well. Again, such values include open inquiry, dialogue between differing viewpoints, mutual criticism carried out with respect, and as one of my students put it when I asked about his motivation for enrolling in a religious studies course, “the pursuit of truth”! Dialogue requires that diverse conceptions of flourishing are neither whitewashed nor used as bludgeons.

In the pursuit of such dialogue, you may encounter situations where this variety of visions isn’t even recognized. Once again, you’re well-positioned to help people recognize it, and knowledge about variety in the world is a necessary condition for any kind of fruitful dialogue within it. I’ve had a number of students in my World Religions course express to me their surprise upon discovering appealing elements within religious traditions other than their own, as if they expected the course to simply survey the various ways people have “gotten it wrong”! Others have expressed their surprise about how incredibly different religious
worldviews are from one another, as if they expected the major world religions to consist of minor permutations of the same, basic set of doctrinal commitments. The fact of the matter is that there is a genuine diversity of worldviews, each rich enough to have survived and developed over long periods of time and in many cultural settings. Helping people to recognize such genuine diversity does not amount to asking them to abandon their own convictions and truth claims – the only thing necessarily lost in such recognition is ignorance.

Allow me to thank you once again for being pioneers in this important program at the U and to congratulate you on your achievement and contributions. Possessing a degree in Religious Studies can open up a variety of pathways for the future, and I want to be clear that in the suggestions I’ve made here, I’m not proposing that “the world’s referee” should be your future job description! Rather, the challenge I hope you’ll take on is this: Dare to model what it looks like to respectfully and critically engage your religious “other.” Communicating precisely and thinking intelligently are hallmarks of STEM, but so too are they indispensable when it comes to analyzing the categories with which so many people give STEM its “critical measure.”