

White paper: A new model of spiritual and religious life at Smith College  
Jennifer Walters, Dean of religious life  
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Financial pressures and the rising costs of higher education require that Smith College to make structural changes in student programming to reduce costs. Last Spring the Board of Trustees approved reductions in the Office of Religious and Spiritual Life resulting in the elimination of chaplain positions. While this decision marks a departure from the most recent staffing model at Smith, it is an opportunity to think creatively about the future of the department and the relationship between religious and spiritual programming and the education Smith endeavors to provide. The growing multiplicity of religious and cultural identities and the changing ways students practice faith requires that we think strategically about spiritual and religious life at Smith. This short paper will review the dynamic history of religious life at Smith and outline new program initiatives oriented to today's diverse student population and real fiscal constraints.

### **A brief history of the Office of Religious and Spiritual Life at Smith**

Departing from the philosophies of its peer colleges, neither a library nor a chapel was thought to be essential when Smith College opened its doors in 1871.<sup>1</sup> The college founders distinguished Smith as an institution that would, by design, send its students into the "world" beyond campus for learning and spiritual guidance.

Drawing most of its students from congregationalist New England, the college could reasonably expect that students' religious obligations and spiritual needs would be met in Northampton churches within walking distance of the campus. President Seelye, in addressing the board of trustees in 1884-85 said of the students, "the great majority . . . Christians and the controlling sentiments in their social life are unequivocally in harmony with the fundamental doctrines of Christianity."<sup>2</sup> For the first sixty years of the college's operation, Smith presidents served also as the chaplain. Reflecting on the college's early years, William Allan Neilson wrote:

One of the arguments in favor of Northampton as the site of the College was that, as it contained churches of chief denominations to which students belonged, no chapel would be necessary as the students would be expected to attend the local church.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Forbes Library on West Street opened in 1894 and was Smith's first library until town-gown tensions resulted in the use of a gift by Andrew Carnegie to build a college library in 1906. It was named after William Allan Neilson, Smith's third president, in 1946.

<sup>2</sup>Unsworth, R.P. (1975) *A Century of Religion at Smith College*. (pamphlet), 3-4.

<sup>3</sup> Neilson, W.A. (1946) *Smith College: The First Seventy Years*. (unpublished typescript) Chap. 12, 1.

Despite the lack of a chapel building, the college president led a “voluntary compulsory”<sup>4</sup> chapel” gathering each day at which faculty and visiting lecturers spoke about moral, political and religious issues of the day. In addition, Neilson built a “Little Chapel” seating 60-70 people in a new wing of the library for quiet meditation and daily student-led services.

From the opening of the College and for many years thereafter the academic day began with Chapel. A simple service, consisting of a chant, a Scripture reading, a hymn, and a prayer, and terminating with the Lord’s Prayer, was conducted by the President or some member of the Faculty. Attendance was expected rather than enforced; no record was officially made, though for many years students were required to hand in to the Registrar’s office at the end of the term a report of their absences.<sup>5</sup>

As was the case at numerous colleges during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Smith’s first president, L. Clark Seelye, was a Congregational minister. A collection of Seelye’s prayers composed for use at college gatherings was published in 1925 shortly after his death. Faculty-led chapel gatherings were officially made “optional” under President William Allan Neilson in the 1930s and gradually disappeared from campus life (save for “Last Chapel” which still convenes on Ivy Day during commencement festivities).

Neilson’s account of campus life during the early years of the college notes that attendance at religious services could not be considered a “sure index of [their] religious life”<sup>6</sup> and students’ “devotional attitude and atmosphere left much to be desired.” However, there was tremendous activity related to what we would now call social action and community service.

The Smith College Association for Christian Work (SCACW), founded by students in 1892, is the forerunner of the current Community Service Office and had an inclusive vision from the beginning. The SCACW united the disparate religious and philanthropic student societies and early in its history declined to restrict membership to Christian students. According to President Neilson, the SCACW’s activities included religious worship, bible study, interfaith activities arranged by representatives of the Roman Catholic and Jewish groups on campus, social action, a group called “Interrace” which sought inter-racial understanding, social work with community centers, the Girl Scouts, classes at the Northampton People’s Institute, international student outreach, peace education, and support of Ginling, Smith’s sister institution in China.

The college quickly became more religiously diverse. Fifteen years after the college opened there was one Jewish student and five Catholics; in 1910 the student body was 1.5% Jewish and 6% Catholic.<sup>7</sup> With each decade the proportion of self-identified Christian students declined in relation to the increasing diversity of other religious traditions.

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<sup>4</sup> This was voted upon by Smith students in 1929. Each student pledged to attend four times per week. The voluntary part of the pledge was unsuccessful and in 1930 a majority of students voted to return to regulated attendance; in 1932 “chapel” was renamed “Student Assembly.”

<sup>5</sup> Neilson (1946) Chap. 12, 2.

<sup>6</sup> Neilson (1946) Chap. 12, 3.

<sup>7</sup> Unsworth, 4.

In 1935 Neilson appointed Smith's first chaplain, A. Burns Chalmers, a Quaker and a pacifist. Chalmers distinguished his ministry and the college through his engagement in world affairs, particularly the Second World War. Chalmers played a key role in enabling 5,000 Jews, most of them children, to survive the Holocaust in a mountain village in southern France.<sup>8</sup> Starting in 1944, a rabbi supported by the National B'nai B'rith Hillel Foundation was in residence at Smith.<sup>9</sup>

While religious life at Smith continued to be rooted in social action, community service, and respect for diverse identities and views, the religious landscape in the United States shifted considerably in the mid-to-late twentieth century. It was during this period that the U.S. pledge of allegiance was amended by the phrase "one nation under God," (1954) and the national motto became "In God we Trust" (1957). By that time, Smith had several active student religious organizations including the Newman Association (Catholic) and Hillel (Jewish).

In 1955, under President Benjamin Wright, Smith College built a campus chapel with a donation from Helen Hills Hills, Class of 1908. The chapel was established not as a college church but as a gathering place for people of every religion.<sup>10</sup> The college also established relationships with Roman Catholic and Jewish religious leaders in the local community.

Catholic, Protestant, and Jewish religious services were held regularly on campus with a college chaplain attending to the needs of various groups. Though the chapel was dedicated as a site of prayer for people of all religions, its architecture and the prominence of a Protestant institutional culture strongly signified it as a Christian space. The Smith Jewish community continued to host Shabbat services and guest lecturers<sup>11</sup> in other campus buildings while holding high holiday services in the chapel. The three chaplains maintained connections with community religious leaders who served with the chaplains as advisers to students from other traditions.

Until the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a New England college could feel secure in meeting the spiritual needs and interests in religious practice of its student body with chaplains from the Catholic, Protestant and Jewish faiths. And for many years, Smith has employed ministerial professional representatives from those faith traditions as chaplains to the college. The Naturalization and Immigration Act of 1965 shifted the balance of immigration to the United States from Europe to Asia and these changes are evident across the country as the children of these immigrants enter college. Seeing the changing face of Smith students, President Ruth Simmons, formed a committee in 1996 to review the mission of the chapel and consider "new

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<sup>8</sup> Glazer, M., Glazer, P. (2005) *The Jews of Paradise: Creating a Vibrant Community in Northampton, Massachusetts*.

<sup>9</sup> Rabbi Louis Ruchames served the student communities at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst and Smith colleges starting in 1944.

<sup>10</sup> "[I hope] that it will give a faith to live by to all future generations of Smith students, whatever their religious beliefs or creeds." Helen Hills Hills' remarks at the building's dedication in 1955. Smith College Archives.

<sup>11</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr., Coretta Scott King, William Sloan Coffin, Abraham Joshua Heschel, Paul Ricoeur, Daniel Berrigan, Paul Tillich and Isaac Bashevis Singer gave lectures at Smith during this period under the direction of Rabbi Yechiael Lander and the Rev. Richard Unsworth.

ways that we might attend to the spiritual development of our students at a time of increasing diversity of religious beliefs."<sup>12</sup>

The goal was to stimulate and nurture a multi-faceted program of spiritual development and global engagement consistent with the mission of the college. Following organizational and philosophical shifts at several peer colleges, including Wellesley and Mt. Holyoke, Smith's religious life structure was revised in 1997 by de-centering the chapel as the site of religious life on campus and establishing a dean of religious life who would function as a spiritual and administrative leader for a diverse college community, privileging no particular religion or denomination. The committee hoped that the new dean would bring "an integrated vision for our diverse community in all its religious pluralism."<sup>13</sup> The chaplains were given new titles as "chaplains to the college" to signify their new mission to work beyond denominational boundaries.

Since 2001, when the first dean of religious life was appointed, the college made progress integrating religious and spiritual concerns and commitment into the fabric of the college by creating new partnerships with faculty and student life offices. The Office of Religious and Spiritual Life supports a broad range of student interests, commitments, and religious affiliations. A robust set of student-led religious organizations lead numerous religious events and programs on campus that are very well attended. In partnership with various college departments we have established new programs at Smith including the Wellness Office, the Center for Work and Life, intergroup dialogues on race and class, the Women's Narratives Project, the Hot Seat, Spiritual-ideas, Pet-a-Pet Day (with the Counseling Services), interfaith collaborations among students, and community partnerships with the Interfaith Cot Shelter and various faith communities in the Pioneer Valley.

The Office has also been careful to preserve and revive valued Smith traditions such as Christmas Vespers and Baccalaureate. The Office of Community Service continues to support student engagement in community service and leadership partnerships with numerous community agencies in Northampton, Holyoke and Springfield.

### **Student religious involvement: Trends and changes**

In the last decade, significant interest by social science researchers in college student religiosity and spiritual development is making it possible for campus deans and chaplains to think more systematically (and less anecdotally) about student interests and behavior to guide program development. Authors of the 2004 report, "The Spiritual Life of College Students,"<sup>14</sup> argue that students demonstrate a high level of concern and involvement with spirituality. For instance, the report claims that 83 percent of students believe in the "sacredness of life; 80 percent indicate an interest in spirituality; and 47 percent say that it is essential or very important

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<sup>12</sup> 1997, Report of the Ad Hoc Chapel Committee, Smith College

<sup>13</sup> 1997, Report of the Ad Hoc Chapel Committee, Smith College

<sup>14</sup> (2004) The Spiritual Life of College Students, Higher Education Research Institute, UCLA.

that they seek opportunities to grow spiritually. Many proponents of campus religious programs have used the findings of this early study to support claims that there is an *increase* in student interest in religious concerns and to advocate for increased college resources in religious and spiritual programming.

However some researchers are challenging these claims. Bender (2007) suggests that large-scale quantitative surveys of spirituality are limited by their use of broad categories which can disguise important nuances and variations in religious practices and what students mean by “spirituality.” Some critics argue that the design of the HERI study shapes rather than reveals what students mean by spirituality or religious practice. In addition, students’ answers about their own spiritual development during college are influenced by various factors including the college they choose to attend.

The mission and character of a college exerts significant influence on the spiritual journey of students. In general, students attending a college with a church denomination are more apt to report that they have developed a deeper sense of spiritual growth over the course of their college career than students who attend non-affiliated institutions.<sup>15</sup>

The few historical studies of college student religiosity do not answer the question of whether today’s students are more interested in religion than students 50 years ago or whether the current interest is due to colleges admitting more students traditionally more deeply involved in religious practice (African Americans, Latinos, women, and Christian evangelicals).<sup>16</sup> What we can conclude from the studies is useful but not definitive:

Students are more likely to express a belief in God or concern about spiritual growth than they are to attend religious services. While recent studies claim that college students are very engaged in religion and spirituality, in fact, they are less engaged than high school students. Among non-religiously affiliated colleges, a small minority of students are involved in religious activities on campus. At Smith, while the numbers of religiously based student groups has increased in number since President Neilson’s days, this seems more likely a result of increased diversity in the student body than an increase in students’ interest in religious activity. The numbers of students at who declare an affiliation with a religious tradition or denomination upon arrival is declining (60% compared with 80% fifteen years ago). Students are claiming multiple religious identities (e.g., Jewish and Christian, or Buddhist and Catholic) which makes on-campus denominational programming and staffing more challenging. Students are interested more in learning about religion than in joining a religious group. And those who are strongly affiliated with a religious tradition typically continue to practice their religion in college.

Students’ use of new technologies for learning and engaging with the world has changed student expectations of how, when, and what opportunities are (or should be) available to them. A number of large U.S. churches, for instance, now have on-line live streaming video of religious services. One can virtually “attend” several religious services on the Atlantic and

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<sup>15</sup> Braskamp, L (2007) *Fostering Religious and Spiritual Development of Students during College*, The Religious Engagements of American Undergraduates, Social Science Research Council, ([www.religion.ssrc.org](http://www.religion.ssrc.org))

<sup>16</sup> Mayrl D and Ouer F (2009) Religion and Higher Education: Current Knowledge and Directions for Future Research, *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 48 (2): 260 – 275.r

Pacific coasts from one's bedroom in a single afternoon. Sociologist of religion, Robert Wuthnow, talks about "porous institutions" arguing convincingly that people don't participate in organizations the way they used to--they participate in less (or differently) organized ways and move from one to another. Facebook, texting, cell phones, and other tools of "socio-mental space" mean that students expect that they can be in two places at once, and behave as though this is the case. This is a significant challenge to religious institutions whose traditions are founded on "gathering." This is true at Smith as well, since only a tiny fraction of students who say they are active and interested in religious life actually attend on-campus religious services.

### **A new mission and structure for the Office of Religious and Spiritual Life**

The staffing and programming of the office will reflect a new focus on preparing each student to live and work and lead in a world where religion matters, even if she doesn't profess one of her own. Educating the student body at-large about world religions and their importance in world affairs can become a college priority by looking at curricular and co-curricular dimensions of a Smith student's education about religion. The new Office of Religious and Spiritual Life will provide information and guidance to students seeking to practice their religion at college while offering new programs to engage all students in interfaith dialogue, learning, reflection and leadership development.

A new mission and structure for the program in religious and spiritual life at Smith should be guided by current research about college student development, spirituality, and religious practice. The office will support the mission of the college by working closely with faculty, staff, student organizations, community, five-college, and national colleagues.

### **Distinctive programs proposed for the Office of Religious and Spiritual Life**

The revised mission of the office will be to prepare each student to be an effective citizen of a world in which religion plays a vital role for good and for ill. We will, of course, continue to engage the interests of students who want to practice their religious faith while at Smith. While the college will no longer offer weekly religious services for students, we will continue to advise and assist students who want to hold prayer or worship on campus at regular intervals. In most cases, we expect that these services will be student-led or led by clergy whom students invite. Some students will choose to attend services off campus, in which case the office will assist students in finding a local community of faith and transportation to it. The dean and an associate will continue to do those things we've always done well, provide spiritual counsel, support the devotional study of religious texts, hold brown-bag discussions on various topics, and sponsor lectures by visiting scholars and religious leaders. We will continue to connect students with local faith communities through various media including our website, house teas, personal relationships, Smith's e-digest, and social media. The office will work closely with student organizations to determine ways to support and accommodate students' continued religious practices.

In addition, we propose to develop several distinctive programs with an emphasis religious literacy, student spiritual development, inter-cultural service experiences, and pastoral care.

## **Religious Literacy**

In his book *Religious Literacy – What Every American Needs to Know and Doesn't*,<sup>17</sup> Stephen Prothero argues that Americans are dangerously illiterate about world religions. Only fifty percent, he claims, can name the four gospels, let alone say what the Qu'ran says about jihad, or what the Passover seder commemorates. We can hope that our students are much more informed about religion than the general public, but there is more that we could do to assure it. There is no facile answer to the question: What should a Smith student know about religion when she graduates? Engaging faculty, students, and other partners in this question could be a fascinating and useful exercise as we attempt to imagine a link between the content and pedagogy of a religion course or a course in which religion figures into the context, culture, or analytical lens of a subject and what might be offered to students out of the classroom to enhance their general knowledge of and respect for religions and people of faith. This program would be an innovation for Smith; no other college is approaching religious life or the education of its students about world religions in this way.

Components of the program may include partial credit courses;<sup>18</sup> a partnership with Interfaith Youth Core, a Chicago-based organization whose mission is to promote mutual respect and religious pluralism among young people through community service;<sup>19</sup> informal discussions or mini-courses about religious texts or rituals; lecture series; five-college projects, and a peer educators/peer religious advisers training program. Mt. Holyoke College and Smith are already in considering co-hosting a conference about the future of religious life in liberal arts colleges to be held in 2011 or 2012.

## **Spirituality, Contemplation and Action**

Community service, social activism, and political engagement are hallmarks of a Smith education, starting with Sophia Smith's hope that a Smith education would enlarge a student's capacity for good. We propose an initiative to support individual students and student groups in structured long community service projects, international projects, internships and social justice advocacy with an intentional interfaith component. Research on intergroup relations affirms bringing people together to work on common projects as the most effective intervention for promoting mutual respect, tolerance, and knowledge of others across all social differences. Working with the Community Service Office, we will connect students with local, national, and international service organizations. Staff and student peer advisers will facilitate reflection on their experiences upon their return. In addition, the Office of Religious and Spiritual Life will

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<sup>17</sup> 2007, S Prothero, *Religious Literacy – What Every American Needs to Know and Doesn't*, HarperOne.

<sup>18</sup> Courses on Religion and Public Life and Religious Narratives of North America have already been suggested.

<sup>19</sup> In 2009, Ilana Alazeh '11 was named Smith's first Interfaith Youth Core Fellow.

establish at least one long-term partnership with an external agency or organization to cultivate continual engagement of Smith students in an inter-cultural, interfaith project. This initiative will involve partnering with the Center for International and Intercultural Studies, the Center for Community Collaboration in developing new sites and linking with established ones.

### **Leadership, Ethical Inquiry, Vocation**

Sharon Parks<sup>20</sup> and others argue that the most important developmental activity of a college student is discernment of a vocation, a sense of purpose. With the establishment of the Center for Work and Life, the Women's Narratives Project, the use of e-portfolios, and changes to academic advising, Smith is helping students ask themselves "big questions" and link their intellectual development in college to life after college. This has always been the work of the Office of Religious and Spiritual Life. Through personal conversations, gatherings and programs such as the Hot Seat (a lunchtime panel discussion about moral questions) and the Friday lunch program, Soup, Salad, and Soul, we will continue to do so. The Multi-faith Religious Council and the Religious Life Liaisons program will be revised to provide more leadership training (on matters such as collaboration, conflict resolution, listening, communication, and self-reflection). In addition, we will link leadership and moral development. We will continue to offer programs which prompt students to reason and defend positions on important issues of moral relevance to personal and public life, e.g., reproductive technologies, approaches to child-rearing, issues of war, peace, inequity, and prejudice. We will work closely with the Center for Work and Life, the Lewis Leadership initiatives, and other Smith programs.

### **Religious Observance, Practice and Spiritual Development**

We will continue to develop Smith as multi-faith educational community through the support and celebration of the different religious and spiritual traditions represented at the college. The Office of Religious and Spiritual Life will work with each religious group and, where relevant, community partners to create and maintain a religious program that nurtures and facilitates the religious practices of our students. Religious rituals, holidays, worship services, and informal gatherings will be held on an occasional basis. Peer advisers, supervised by the dean, will be trained to advise and assist student religious organizations in planning activities and accessing college resources.

The dean and assistant dean, in coordination with community religious advisors and the college counseling services, will offer students, faculty, staff and alumnae pastoral care, counseling, and companionship in times of need. Pastoral relationships vary according to the needs expressed, but may include spiritual direction, preparation for funerals, grief counseling, pre-marital counseling, and hospital visits. The office will not offer long term psychotherapy, but engage in short-term interventions and make appropriate referrals to the Smith College Counseling Service.

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<sup>20</sup> Parks, S.D. (2000) *Big Questions, Worthy Dreams: Mentoring Young Adults in their Search for Meaning, Purpose, and Faith*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, Inc.



## **Implementation of a new mission for the Office of Religious and Spiritual Life**

There is no shortage of creative work that can be done with a revised vision in support of the educational mission of the college, but it cannot be done all at once. The transition will happen in stages.

During the spring semester of 2010, there will be consultations with student religious organizations and interested others to review operational issues for students who will be challenged by the loss of on-campus religious services and their relationships with the individual chaplains who are concluding their work at the college. We want to assure that students who currently participate in campus religious activities are included in shaping the options and opportunities in the coming year. In addition, there will be conversations with faculty and staff about the proposed change in mission for the office. Important issues such as the supervision of the kosher dining facility, communication with admissions about changes in religious life, and the creation of a position description for an assistant to the dean will be addressed.

The roll out of programs proposed in this paper will take place over two to three years. The Interfaith Youth Core is already interested in partnering with Smith to develop the Religious Literacy Initiative. There is the possibility of being a more active field placement site for graduate students from Yale, Harvard, and other divinity schools. Faculty and students have expressed interest in the developing the partial-credit courses.

## **The Future of Helen Hills Hills Chapel**

Concern about the fate of the Helen Hills Hills Chapel is understandable given the change in mission for the department. What will happen in the building? Based on current use by student, Smith community, and local groups, we anticipate that the building will be in demand for religious gatherings, meditation, memorial services, weddings, and concerts. Though we have discontinued the Sunday morning Protestant service, currently, both the sanctuary and the Bodman Lounge are booked nearly every day of the week, often simultaneously, with various activities: Buddhist meditation, a Presbyterian house church gathering, Greek Orthodox Vespers, centering prayer, the Rosary, Christian bible study. The addition of wireless internet now makes the chapel an attractive gathering place for students to study or take a break.

After the Wright Hall renovations in the summer of 2010 make room for three new college centers, the Community Service Office will move out of the chapel leaving several additional meeting spaces. Whenever a space has opened up at the chapel, we have been able to make it available to the Smith community in new ways – for small meetings, prayer and meditation, etc. I expect that within a year, we will see many students using the chapel building.

The sanctuary space at the chapel is perfect for traditional weddings (of which there are 10 – 20 per year). However, the space has the potential to be a more appealing gathering place for religious and cultural activities if it was renovated. It also could be available to faculty as an instructional space. The removal of the pews and the installation of a new floor and movable seating would transform the chapel sanctuary and make it more useful for large and small

gatherings (religious and non-religious) without damaging the outstanding acoustics for which the chapel is known. I strongly advocate for an investment in the tasteful renovation of the chapel sanctuary for this purpose.

The college organist, Grant Moss, has acquired an important instrument for the college which is currently in storage awaiting the funds to rebuild and install it. He has proposed to install the organ in the chapel balcony, replacing the current instrument. Once this is accomplished we can anticipate that the chapel will also become known for its organ and its reputation as a location for musical performances will increase.

## **Conclusion**

Financial challenges and the changes in our student body and in student religious affiliation and practice give Smith an opportunity to re-imagine the role of the Office of Religious and Spiritual Life. Given the importance of religious discourse in politics, policy, and culture, students need to have a working knowledge of world religion and an informed perspective on the impact of religion (for good and ill) on culture and politics. The new mission of the office -- to help students to live, learn, and lead in a world where religion matters -- means that the entire campus will benefit in new ways from the work of the office with new partnerships across the campus, the five colleges, and the world.