



Religious Pluralism in the Academy: Opening the Dialogue
reviewed by [R. Joel Farrell II](#) — 2003

Title: Religious Pluralism in the Academy: Opening the Dialogue

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On September 11, 2001, life in the United States changed. Since then, Americans have invoked elements of spirituality and religion to soothe pain and provide answers. For some this has eased emotions and led to a quest for understanding. However, for some, it has led to religious fervor, hatred, and violence. The dilemma or contrast is obvious. How can the world's religions with their statements of love, peace, and hope result in such drastically different outcomes? Perhaps our real question is "Why do you suppose that so much violence has been, and is still being, committed in the name of religion throughout the world?" (p.34)

Robert J. Nash's timely text tackles these questions and issues for higher education. Nash seeks to bring together the voices and perspectives of higher education—faculty, administrators, and students—for dialogue. Nash provides answers, critiques and challenges for confronting the religio-spiritual issues on contemporary campuses. For all in academia, whether they seek to avoid hatred and violence, or they are fearful or indifferent toward this spiritual revival, Nash simply says, "... it will benefit all of us to formulate a coherent and compelling educational response to this revival, because a very teachable moment is upon us" (p.11).

The crux of the issues presented is the conflict between the quest for intellectual exploration and dialogue—a fundamental element of traditional liberal arts education—and the beliefs of multiculturalism, diversity and tolerance. For Nash, the blame for this conflict rests squarely on the shoulders of faculty, and administrators. "I fear that those of us in higher education preparation programs throughout the country have defined diversity and pluralism in such a way as to systematically exclude religious considerations" (p.9).

Nash provides the reader with a thorough analysis of the real world tension between these ideologies—intellectual dialogue and politically corrected pluralism. In this analysis, the reader senses Nash's passion for intellectual dialogue as well as his self indictment—and indictment of higher education—for limiting the dialogue on religion with the doctrine of pluralism. He does not attempt to hide his personal preferences or convictions. Quite the contrary, Nash clearly reveals his own process of searching and states his own beliefs as part of the conversation with the reader. This transparency and honesty is both refreshing and challenging.

Another of the many issues raised by Nash is the paradox of students' interest in

meaning-seeking and pluralism's exclusion of religion from discussions in higher education. As Nash recounts the stories of students, their pervasive need to define meaning, purpose, and direction in their lives with spiritual/religious content becomes evident. Then, Nash bluntly holds up a mirror to academia and asks critical questions. Why has higher education ignored the fundamental cry for meaning by students? Why does the paradox exist? Why has higher education allowed this paradox to exist?

Nash's answers are convicting. The paradox exists because the pluralistic world of academics has ignored or even forbid addressing the reality of the spiritual needs of students. Instead, attention and reverence has been placed on establishing the parameters for other communities of difference, while faith communities are ignored or even worse, demonized. "One of the worst-kept secrets in higher education is that too many faculty and administrators, in spite of their professions of appreciation for diversity, are latently religio-phobic" (p.10). After this harsh critique, Nash continues by suggesting that higher education is fearful of religious issues, ignorant on religious issues and hypocritical in dealing with religious issues.

If Nash stopped at this point, he would receive various labels—hero, prophet, lunatic, heretic, villain, etc.—depending upon the reader's own biases. Fortunately, Nash does not stop but continues on to provide a text that outlines three cogent objectives for an unbounded dialogue on religion. This text creates a rationale for academia to help students in the quest for meaning; examines the nature and content of religious differences; and explores a model for moral conversation.

Nash provides a succinct rationale for religious dialogue in higher education. He states directly, that the "fearless, open-ended, intellectually stimulating, cross campus dialogue about religio-spirituality is what liberal education ought to be about" (p.54). As Nash reminds the reader, an objective dialogue on religion in a secular setting is not inconsistent with the First Amendment. The great hypocrisy of higher education is in demanding that students leave their beliefs at the door for the sake of "diversity." As Nash suggests, the result is not diversity, but uniformity to a restrictive ideology despite the "liberating" labels of multiculturalism, tolerance, or pluralism. In essence, removing religion from the dialogue leads to the very things pluralism seeks to prevent. In fact, according to Nash "religious pluralism, if left unattended, is a phenomenon that in the future will threaten to divide students, faculty, and administrators in a way that makes all the other campus divisions look tame by comparison." (p.30)

Furthermore, without the religious context how can a meaningful dialogue and understanding of history, politics, art, ethics, psychology, morality, etc. occur? Nash's conclusion is it cannot; religion is simply too important in the intrapersonal and interpersonal fabric of the world. Religion has played such a vital role among all cultures and time periods that an accurate, thorough education is not possible without it. Religion, as he argues, is the primary tool for making meaning in life.

The stories of religion that lead to meaning are a key to Nash's religious dialogue model. These religion narratives "help us understand who we are, whom we belong to, how we should behave, and how we might come to grips with the mystery of our

existence?” (p.63) Nash argues that the true power of religion is in these narratives. These narratives provide the foundation for past, present, and future life. As Nash reflects, even though he has long ago rejected Catholicism, he still finds the influence of the catholic narratives on him today. Nash discusses in detail six common narratives—orthodoxy, wounded belief, mainline belief, activism, exploration, and secular humanism—that though not necessarily tied to any particular religion reflect the journeys and discoveries that occur in personal spiritual growth. Thus, the personal narrative that each person brings to the academic setting is a key element in the religio-spiritual dialogue.

The religious dialogue model presented is a straightforward framework that prescribes ground rules based on the idea of an individual’s right to speak and obligation to allow others to speak. All members of a community have the right to speak in an engaging and but not enraging manner. Nash further suggests that when participants listen actively, disclose fully, and behave civilly, then dialogue leads to true understanding. Although this model may be simple and perhaps even idealistic, Nash makes a strong argument for its usefulness and effectiveness based on his experiences and research.

Overall, Nash’s text is a powerful dialogue that challenges academia to return to the liberal arts heritage of open intellectual dialogue. “American universities ought to enlarge their understanding of pluralism to include open, challenging, spiritually and educationally revitalizing conversations about genuine religious differences” (p.4). Academia is the perfect environment for this dialogue to lead to true understanding. This text should be required reading for anyone who is serious about higher education and its students.

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Religious exclusivism and religious pluralism appear in most categorizations, but not always with the same meanings. Religious inclusivism also sometime appears, but primarily in discussions about sufficient conditions for spending eternity with God, as it does in the discussion below (section 8) on the Eternal Destiny of Humankind. Accordingly, our general discussion of religious truth claims will focus on three basic categories: religious exclusivism, religious non-exclusivism, and religious pluralism. Another influential type of challenge to obligatory belief assessment in the face of religious diversity has been raised by Jerome Gellman. The focus of his challenge centers on what he identifies as rock bottom beliefs. Academic journal article *Anglican Theological Review*. Religious Pluralism in the Academy: Opening the Dialogue. By Waggoner, Michael D. Read preview. Article excerpt. Religious Pluralism in the Academy: Opening the Dialogue. By Robert J. Nash. Public university campuses ought to be arenas for "unbounded dialogue" and moral conversation on issues of spirituality and religion: so argues Robert J. Nash in his book *Religious Pluralism in the Academy: Opening the Dialogue*. Bringing to this topic more than three decades of teaching and encounters with thousands of undergraduate and graduate students, Nash distills several narratives from their stories that he says represent the principal stories of college students in their "religio-spiritual" (p. 14) quest for meaning. Editorial Reviews. Review. «In *Religious Pluralism in the Academy*™, Robert J. Nash opens the window on a topic in American higher education shuttered much too long – promoting real dialogue on religion and spirituality across the academy. Through six engaging narratives of differing images and beliefs, Nash tells the story of student spirituality with the perception of a philosopher, the passion of a polemist, and the craft of a very gifted teacher. A must read for educators – faculty and administrators alike – committed to responding to the deepest questions in students™ lives.»