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Secularism & Spirituality in Today's Academy

A Heuristic Model

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ALEXANDER ASTIN'S RECENT ESSAY (2004), "Why Spirituality Deserves a Central Place in Liberal Education," makes a powerful argument for rethinking some of our common assumptions about higher education. The case he makes is hard to ignore when one considers the data about current student interests, about faculty malaise, about the nature of creativity, about current trends in higher education that have the potential to open out onto a spiritual horizon, and about the rising visibility of religious and spiritual issues worldwide. I myself am persuaded by his argument. It was just this kind of thinking that prompted me recently to move from a conventional liberal arts college to one whose focus is "contemplative education," in search of fresh leverage on the liberal arts tradition.

But most academics I have known over the past three decades, regardless of their own religious or spiritual inclinations, would be profoundly uneasy about drawing spiritual issues into the classroom. This is not surprising, given the debt of the academy to the Enlightenment, with its prizing of the cognitive mind and of objectivity, and its definition of a public sphere that is intentionally free of religious influence. A great deal of intellectual and institutional momentum has been generated over the past three hundred years, creating the attitudes and structures that currently shape academia, and it will not be quickly redirected. So while I believe Astin's call is prophetic in discerning needed directions in higher education, I know these will not be easily accomplished. It is indeed a huge task that lies ahead, if we are to bring secularism and spirituality into happy coexistence within the academy.

En route to that goal, it is useful to turn to history and to note two things. One is that when the Enlightenment set out to understand the external world in objective terms, apart from the inner life of the knower, it took a tack away from the holistic education that had previously characterized the Western academy and the classical traditions of learning throughout the Middle East and Asia, an education that aspired to nurture both the inner and the outer person. The challenge of incorporating spirituality into liberal education today is therefore an effort to recapture a balance of inner and outer in our vision of education.

The second recognition is that, ever since the Enlightenment, there has been a dialectic within the academy between two alternative ways of engaging with or

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construing the world. Such a dialectic lies at the heart of what W. B. Carnochan calls “the battle of the books” in the latter part of the nineteenth century. That battle pitted the defenders of the then-fixed curricula (“the ancients”) in classical learning and science against the free elective system propounded by Harvard’s president Charles Elliott (“the moderns”). The roots of this struggle were far older, for, as Carnochan notes (1993, 22), “Ancients’ and ‘moderns’ take their names originally from the ‘battle of the books’ fought in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries between defenders of ancient literature and learning and defenders of, among other things, the new science.”

This same struggle continued on into the late twentieth century, in the so-called “culture wars,” on which Carnochan commented from their midst: “There have always [or at least for the last three centuries] been ancients and moderns, and lines of allegiance may be generational as much as intellectual. If Western philosophy is a series of footnotes to Plato, the pedagogical debate of the past few years has been a series of footnotes to the several battles of the books that began with Bacon’s proposals for the ‘advancement of learning,’ his program for overturning Scholasticism and for an empirical conquest of the natural world” (22). To put this another way, the tradition of liberal education that we inherit developed in two phases, one emphasizing “the personal-cultural, knowledge as understanding,” the other emphasizing “the object-objective, knowledge as information,” and these two phases have “never [been] quite integrated” (Smith 1975, 4).

Today’s effort to bring secularism and spirituality into happy coexistence in the academy should, I suggest, be seen as the most recent iteration of a long-standing search

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for a fully adequate understanding of what it means to be human and, therefore, of what it means to be educated, with a balance of inner and outer knowledge.

Elliptical thinking
As we take up this task, let me also suggest we are in need of a new model for thinking about this dual heritage of the liberal arts tradition, one that thinks about the dynamism

that has characterized our institutions for the last three centuries in language that is less bellicose than that of “battles” and “wars.” I am not the first to suggest that it is time for the academy, and the culture in which we are embedded, to move beyond “the culture of argument” (see Tannen 1999). The demands of the twenty-first century require such a move.

I believe that, in fact, a new model is at hand, and that the heat generated in the culture wars over “decentering” the curriculum points us in a constructive direction. The assumption in those wars, of course, was that there was, or should be, a single center to the curriculum. But suppose there has never been a single center to liberal education. Suppose we recognize the dual heritage of liberal education over the past many centuries and seek a model that does justice to the dialectic between its two strands.

Suppose it is not the circle but the ellipse that should guide our thinking about liberal education, past and present, secular and spiritual.

The difference between a circle and an ellipse is simple, something most of us have known since high school. A circle is the pattern that a point traces when it revolves around one other point—the circle’s center—so that it is always equidistant from that point. An ellipse is the pattern that one point traces when it revolves around two other points—the ellipse’s foci—so that the sum of the distances from those two points remains constant.



The two foci are critical to the definition of the overall elliptical shape, and there is a dynamic tension between them.

The move from circular to elliptical thinking once revolutionized our understanding of the universe, and I suggest that the time is ripe for making a similar move in the way we think about liberal education. Plato believed that the circle was the perfect shape, since every point on its circumference was equidistant from the center, wonderfully symmetrical. He challenged the mathematicians of his day to find a way to account for the motion of the planets in terms of circular motion with uniform speed. It is, in fact, possible to describe planetary motion in these terms, but only by generating equations of daunting complexity. And yet this model of the solar system persisted for nearly two thousand years. It was only then that, inspired by Kepler, astronomers found they could account for planetary motion much more simply, and more elegantly, by assuming that planets move in elliptical orbits with varying speeds. Our understanding of ourselves, and of the universe, has never been the same.

So too, I suggest, will our understanding of our liberal arts heritage become both simpler and more elegant if we think of it as having two foci, dialectically in relationship, both of which are critical to the definition of our enterprise. The encounter of secularism and spirituality is only the most recent instance of the dynamism that lies at the heart of liberal learning, a dynamism that is graphically captured by the image of the ellipse. In affirming that spirituality has a place in our institutions, we are actually reaffirming a part of our heritage that has been in remission since the Enlightenment. What the encounter of spirituality and secularism in liberal education promises is therefore a fresh instance of the vitality that has animated our heritage for a very long time. It holds high promise for helping the contemporary academy out of its centuries-long overemphasis on the secular, thereby coming to a more apt understanding of the contemporary world, in which the secular and the spiritual intertwine and complement each other in complex and wonderful ways.

As for the heuristic utility of the ellipse, there is much more that could be said. Its two foci, for example, can be seen as representing the dialectic between teaching and research,

or between curricular and cocurricular life; between content and skills; between academic affairs and student affairs; or between general education and the major. But exploration of this broader promise of thinking elliptically must wait for another day.¹ Meanwhile, thinking of secularism and spirituality as the two foci of the elliptical life of liberal learning can ease us into an exciting new chapter of our dynamic history. □

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NOTE

1. I have done some preliminary exploration of this line of thinking (see Coburn 2000). I am particularly indebted to two sources for stimulating it. One is Elizabeth Blake (1996). The other is the following passage from a book by Diana Eck (1981, 17): "Even Westerners who consider themselves secular participate in the myth of monotheism: that in matters of ultimate importance, there is only One—one God, one Book, one Son, one Church, one Seal of the Prophets, one Nation under God. The psychologist James Hillman speaks of a 'monotheism of consciousness,' which has shaped our very habits of thinking, so that the autonomous, univocal, and independent personality is considered healthy; single-minded decision-making is considered a strength; and the concept of the independent ego as 'number one' is considered normal."



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