



Haynes: Finding a stand in secular-spiritual divide in education

By Mike Haynes For AGN Media

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When I taught mass media at Amarillo College, I stayed away from discussing religion or politics in class.

I didn't want to hide the fact that I was a believer in Christ, so when talking about advertising, I might say something like, "On our way to church Sunday, Kathy and I saw a new digital billboard at Hillside and I-27." And once a semester, I would hand out one of my Faith columns as part of a collection of writing examples.

I have no regrets about keeping quiet on politics, but looking back, I may have been more cautious than necessary as I tried not to push my spiritual beliefs on the students.

It's OK (and legal, even at a public institution) to reveal where your moral compass comes from as long as it's part of an open discussion and you're not pressuring students in any way. I knew a faculty member who started each semester introducing himself – including the fact that he was a Christian. Another friend who taught in high school would, at some point in the year, ask his students what guided their moral decisions. Without judgment, he would tell them his own guiding light was the Bible. Neither of those guys overdid it by preaching their own worldviews.

That isn't so in many public college and university classrooms. Most professors at secular schools teach from what they may consider to be neutral perspectives, but according to a native of Wichita Falls who teaches at Claremont Graduate University in California, they are more biased than they think.

Mary Poplin's latest book is "Is Reality Secular? Testing the Assumptions of Four Global Worldviews." She also has edited "Christianity and the Secular Border Patrol: The Loss of Judeo-Christian Knowledge," an essay collection. She told

Christianity Today magazine that the purpose of the latter book is “to make explicit that secularism is a sort of umbrella of ideologies defined by its exclusion of religion, primarily of Christian voices. ...

“Secularism defines itself by what it is not; it has no agreed-upon moral compass, so it’s an umbrella for anything from the far right to the far left and everything in between – as long as it’s not religious.

“As Stanley Fish says, secularism has survived by pretending to be neutral, but it’s anything but neutral.”

It’s well-documented that many professors in public higher education openly promote their personal political and religious views, brazenly attempting to convert their students to the “correct” ideas. Rarely do those ideas include Judeo-Christian belief.

Poplin told CT magazine that university leaders often think their schools are the free, open marketplace of ideas, “But it’s the free marketplace of certain ideas and the closed marketplace of other ideas.”

So while believers in God censor themselves to avoid accusations of proselytizing, others fill their impressionable students with their version of “truth.” Contrast that approach with Poplin’s:

“When I’m teaching pedagogies, I teach critical theory – Marxism, feminism, etc. – and I also teach a Christian perspective,” she said. “I present the alternatives because I’m at a secular university. But even if we were at a Christian university, I would want the students to know the range of explanations ... What are the options here?”

The University of California-Berkeley is notorious as a hotbed of radical ideas and protests. Few would see it as welcoming to Judeo-Christian ideas, but author and Presbyterian minister Ryan Pemberton believes Christians can lovingly start to erase that ideological barrier. He wrote in CT magazine that God doesn’t separate secular and sacred spaces.

“God is no more present in the small towns, suburbs and cities in which our students grew up than in Berkeley,” Pemberton wrote. Even in a setting where opposing views have bred hatred and violence, civility and love can prosper.

Pemberton oversees a Christian student gathering place near UC-Berkeley where he says strangers are welcome no matter their views or beliefs. He recalled a night when two students with opposite political opinions had a respectful conversation about how to lovingly respond to a controversial campus speaker.

“When we gather as the church, we are reminded that our political commitments are not what unites us. God is,” he wrote. “...Gathering as the church reshapes how we relate to one another.”

Pemberton quoted a member of the Presbyterian church next door to the student center:

“I couldn’t believe it when I pulled into the parking lot and saw a Trump sticker beside their First Pres bumper sticker. When I realized whose car it was, I realized not only am I in a small group with that person, but I love them.”

Poplin proposes several responses to the secular-spiritual divide in education, one of which is building Christian communities on the edge of campuses.

“We need to understand that this is the way we’re probably going to have to live for a while,” she said. “...I don’t think we can be naïve and expect to be invited in to secular universities.”

As for the educators, she said they should be aware of how secularism excludes other ideas and consider “Where do secular theories and Judeo-Christian thought overlap, and where do they part ways? And what does the Judeo-Christian tradition add to the conversation?”

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