

What in God's Name? Administering the Conflicts of Religious Belief in Writing Programs¹

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Writing program administrators face increasingly complex social issues—from local and national economics to the identity politics of race, class, gender, and sexuality. We want to suggest that WPAs consider another important influence on students, instructors, and programs: religious belief. We have two reasons for making this suggestion: First, it's hard not to notice that religious belief has made a comeback in American public discourse, a resurgence that scholars in the sociology of religion characterize as persistent, pervasive, and increasingly multi-religious (see Eck 3-5). Even in the secular stronghold of American academia, Stanley Fish predicts that religion will “succeed high theory and the triumvirate of race, gender, and class as the center of intellectual energy in the academy” (C3). It seems likely that religious belief will not only continue to operate in students' writing and in civic discourse but also increasingly influence the scholarly thought that inevitably shapes our programs.

Second, in discussions of religion in composition studies, the work of writing program administrators—directors of writing programs, writing centers, or WAC programs—is strikingly absent. (Brad Peters and Mark Montesano and Duane Roen present notable exceptions.) Instead, most scholars rely on a description of an uncomfortable encounter between a religious student and a secular instructor to define the conceptual boundaries of the conflicts involved. For example, in a foundational contribution to the growing body of literature on this topic, Chris Anderson focuses exclusively on the student and teacher, leaving unexamined the question of how the writing program could have helped both—even though he writes from the position of a WPA.

We believe that WPAs, as campus leaders with a vested interest in writing and public discourse, have a responsibility to work with students, instructors, and administrators to develop practices that address religious belief ethically and effectively. At the end of this article, we provide sug-

gestions for beginning this work. However, because we believe that most WPAs—like we do—find talking about religion difficult, most of what we have to say here focuses on what might well prevent WPAs from even considering this work. As Anne Gere notes: “Because discussions of religion have been essentially off-limits in higher education, we have failed to develop sophisticated and nuanced theoretical discourses to articulate spirituality” (Brandt, et al, 46). Beyond issues of language, we believe that three powerful tenets—what we might call secular ideologies of religion—both play out in stories of secular instructors and religious students and help to account for why WPAs might hesitate to address the conflicts that emerge from these scenarios: 1) the idea that the Constitution, specifically the First Amendment, regulates what can and cannot be said about religion in the academy; 2) the assumption that religious faith and intellectual pursuits are at odds with one another; and 3) the more respectful (but still limited) notion that religion is a private matter, not appropriate for public disclosure. We believe that examining these assumptions can help WPAs better engage religious beliefs—our own or those of others—that shape our administrative and intellectual work.

THE RIGHT TO SPEAK/THE RIGHT TO SILENCE

We begin with our own story of an uncomfortable encounter between a religious student and secular teacher. As a young and inexperienced GTA, Lauren advised an international student not to write about her religious conversion in the public setting of an academic institution. The outcome was to effectively silence a student whose family had immigrated during the dissolution of the Soviet Union probably in part because the United States famously guarantees freedom of expression. Had the student written about any other aspect of her identity—her race, ethnicity, class, sexuality, and/or disability—Lauren would have applauded her for using her new-found freedom. But in a shockingly familiar scene of identity politics, this student found instead that she had to “keep that identity closeted,” as Shari Stenberg puts it (279). Why do we respond to religion in such troubling ways? Perhaps because of how most of us interpret the First Amendment of the Constitution.

The First Amendment contains two clauses that appear to be at odds with one other. The first of these is the Establishment Clause, “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion,” which serves as the basis of the “wall of separation” metaphor for the relationship of church and state. Believing that we are safeguarding a neutral public space, instructors, tutors, and even WPAs might silence religious talk in academic

contexts. In so doing, however, we may violate the protection offered by the other side of the wall. While many Americans presume that the Establishment Clause exclusively safeguards the state from the church, Constitutional historians and legal scholars note that the wall also safeguards the church from the state: indeed “the metaphorical separation of church and state originated in an effort to protect religion from the state, not the state from religion” (Carter 105). The wall, then, protects both state and church from domination by the other. If we would protect public discourse by segregating religious talk, we ought to do so with care, acknowledging the parallel protection offered to religion.

Furthermore, in our attempts to locate religious talk we may over apply the Establishment Clause. While legal scholars agree that this clause regulates religious and governmental institutions, no agreement exists about whether it applies to individuals, believers or not. Yale law professor Stephen Carter, for one, argues that the Constitution does not restrict individuals: The Establishment clause “does not mean ... that people whose motivations are religious are banned from trying to influence government, nor that the government is banned from listening to them” (106). Troublingly, when we misinterpret the Establishment Clause, we enforce a silence of submission, as Cheryl Glenn describes: “When silence is ... not our choice, but someone else’s for us, it can be insidious, particularly when someone else’s choice for us comes in the shape of institutional structure” (263-264). To enable a silence of submission is to eliminate the opportunity for people to use silence—or the talk that would break silence—rhetorically, as “empowered action, both resistant and creative” (283).

The second clause of the First Amendment—the Free Exercise Clause that guarantees “the free exercise” of religious belief—undergirds the central claim of much of the scholarship on religious faith in writing programs, namely, that students should be at least allowed if not encouraged to bring their religious belief to their writing. WPAs might well worry about the programmatic implications of this claim for two reasons. First, because this clause has been misused by those who claim that “free exercise” provides universal protection for any religious sentiment expressed publicly, WPAs and instructors might worry that once allowed into their programs and classrooms religious discourse will overrun the discussion. Second, if instructors overzealously apply the Free Exercise Clause, students may find themselves compelled to write about their faith when they would rather not. Both of these over-applications of the Free Exercise clause eliminate the opportunity for students, instructors, and WPAs to discuss restraint as a foundational rhetorical concept to the “rhetorical art” of silence/speech

(Glenn) and to the necessary balance between the right to speak and the right to remain silent (Gere).

Overly-broad attempts to enact the First Amendment—either attempts to quarantine religious talk from public discourse or attempts to compel religious talk in public ultimately contradict the purpose of the First Amendment. Regarding the First Amendment, WPAs ought to wonder how our writing programs might prepare instructors and students to discuss the rhetorical potential of religious discourse to shape civic life for ill and for good. History provides examples of religiously rooted arguments not only wreaking havoc on the environment and people's lives but also protecting the land and freeing many. Because religious principles can exist largely independent of political principles and can operate largely free of political expedience, they can serve as effective external pressure on public discourse and civic action, as the religiously motivated resistance to racial segregation in the United States and religiously based reconciliation in South Africa demonstrate. Thus, regarding the First Amendment, the pressing question for WPAs is not if we should attend to arguments rooted in religious belief. Rather, it is how our writing programs prepare instructors and students to recognize and, perhaps, craft arguments that make rhetorical use of religious discourse. For WPAs, the Constitutional conundrum becomes a remarkably practical problem: writing programs that do not acknowledge religious belief as a powerful force in people's lives compromise good teaching and good learning.

THE FALSE SEPARATION OF INTELLECT AND BELIEF

Discussions of religion in writing instruction are commonly shaped by a second assumption: religious belief is inherently opposed to scholarly inquiry. As Shari Stenberg argues, "after all, in academic culture, religious ideologies are often considered hindrances to—not vehicles for—critical thought" (271). Given our allegiance to critical thought, most of us can identify with the frustration that results from students (and instructors) who hobble scholarly inquiry with unexamined belief. Sometimes that frustration boils over in ways that embarrass us. Doug Downs quotes his disproportionate response to a student who had allowed his religious beliefs to taint his research process: "Congratulations! You've just written the most indoctrinated, close-minded, uncritical, simplistically reasoned paper I've ever read" (39). Shocked at the venom of his comment and realizing that this student's unexamined allegiances were no worse than any others, Downs turns to James Paul Gee's work to examine the ways in which students' religious belief can challenge their willingness to commit to the criti-

cal inquiry valued by the academy. Downs's story raises a useful question: Is it possible that the opposition of religious belief to academic inquiry is potentially false, one we perpetuate at the expense of all stakeholders in our work? Some scholars suggest that religious contexts can foster the critical inquiry we value in the academy. Priscilla Perkins suggests that we draw on the hermeneutical savvy of religious students. Likewise, Stenberg maintains that "Rather than dismissing religious inquiry or even testimony as inappropriate for intellectual work, we might consider what possibilities are opened by beginning with students' religious literacies, by assuming that they are not only deserving of study and reflection, but may in fact also serve as a resource for critical projects" (282).

If WPAs build programs that complicate the opposition between scholarly inquiry and religious belief, they may tap into what motivates some students, instructors, and fellow WPAs to engage in academic and civic discourse. For instance, exploring the relationship between her religious faith and her work, Virginia Chappell suggests, "without certainty, but with conviction, my faith gives me the energy and the courage to do my work in the academy" (52). Chappell describes this work as preparing students for "active citizenship" by "equipping [them] to engage in this discourse, beginning with the effort ... to help them articulate their commitments" (49). It is not the place of universities, according to Chappell, "to prescribe the particularity of those commitments" (49). In the end, according to Chappell, "individual students will make their own decisions about how to use their education, how to fulfill their personal promise, and in what measure they will do so through leadership and service" (49). To administer writing programs without acknowledging the rhetorical force of religious belief is to ignore the personal commitments that compel some students and instructors to engage in scholarly inquiry.

Finally, breaking the intellect/belief binary can help WPAs critique the allegiances that shape our own intellectual work. When WPAs craft writing programs that do not acknowledge the rhetorical force of religious belief, we not only reinforce our own, secular sources of rhetorical power; we also hobble those who would use their rhetorical skills (skills perhaps fostered in religious belief) to challenge that power. To maintain the intellectual/religious belief binary is to risk creating writing programs that are destructively certain of the nature of academic inquiry and the means to best foster that inquiry into that binary.

THE FALSE SEPARATION OF PUBLIC AND PRIVATE

The third assumption that informs the conflicts of religious belief in writing programs comes from a well-intentioned respect for religion as a private

aspect of a person's life. In fact, much of the scholarship on religious belief in composition studies extends research on cultural and social identity, an extension that can make talking about religion seem like trespassing. When WPAs treat religion as a private property, off-limits to public discussion, we risk at least two things. First, we may reinforce student resistance to the goals of our writing programs—of making school—and writing—matter. When students develop analytical skills without finding opportunity to apply those intellectual tools to the supposedly private aspects of their lives, we risk producing the educational result that students fear: “estrangement from one's past, an uncertainty about one's place in the world, a resigned sense that what one must give up during the educational process can never be recovered” (Richard Miller 22). Furthermore, when our writing programs do not press students to consider how religious belief—their own or that of others—shapes public discourse, we reinforce a widely held assumption that writing programs ought to teach “writing skills” sanitized of their rhetorical power, skills that “should not disturb one's place in the world” (22). Ironically, when WPAs ignore the rhetorical force of religious belief, they may unintentionally impose upon their program limitations that they would otherwise resent.

Second, when WPAs exclude religion, they miss an opportunity to create writing programs that prepare students for critiquing public, rhetorical uses of any supposedly private matter. Considering private matters in general, Barbara Couture cites “amusing and some pathetic examples of the tendency of some individuals to make their private lives the subject of ubiquitous public expression,” to establish her claim that “private identity accepted as public without debate poses a threat to an open society” (3, 7). Couture's remedy easily applies to issues of religious belief: “For public expression to function as public rhetoric requires a reconciliation of private identity with the ethical demand of relating to others. This movement cannot occur if we hold that our identity is defined and preserved through excluding rather than acknowledging others” (6). Giving people opportunity to make their own choices to speak or to be silent about religious issues, writing programs can helpfully complicate the notion of religious belief as an exclusively private matter, and they can open rhetorical use of religious belief to critical analysis.

Such an expansive understanding of religious belief is appropriate according to scholars of the sociology of religion because while “the temptation is to treat the distinction between public and private as fixed” ... “religion is located at the crossroads of public and private” (Cochran 16). Indeed, Eldon J. Eisenach points out that for most Americans, religious belief is not solely private—it includes not only “an ethnic-church-family-

oriented religion that points to personal and even private identity that no one should meddle in without our permission," but also "a moral-political-national-oriented religion that points to a public and civic identity that becomes an open invitation for meddling by others and a warrant for our meddling with others" (15). This second type of religion is a civic force, and, consequently, a site for rhetorical analysis.

SUGGESTIONS FOR ACTION

WPAs willing to take on the challenge of administering the conflicts of religious belief in their programs might well wonder where to begin. We outline three starting points. First, WPAs may find it helpful to work with students, tutors, and instructors to establish some boundaries for the function of religious belief in writing programs, and they might want to turn to legal precedent for guidance. Although under attack from conservative forces, the "Lemon Test" (referring to the 1971 Supreme Court case *Lemon v. Kurtzman*) still provides precedent for legal decisions regarding the relationship of the United States government and organized religions. As Stephen Carter summarizes it, the Lemon Test requires three things: "First the statute must have a secular legislative purpose; second, its principal or primary effect must be one that neither advances nor inhibits religion; finally, the statute must not foster 'an excessive entanglement with religion'" (110). WPAs could adapt the Lemon Test to the function of religious belief in our writing programs along the following lines: 1) Texts produced within the writing program must serve an academic purpose. Writing programs and instructors should be prepared to describe the outcomes for writing assignments; students should be prepared to explain how their texts meet those outcomes. 2) Students (and instructors) should not write in an effort to convert readers; instructors (and students) should not teach in an effort to denigrate religious belief. 3) Students and instructors should be allowed to be silent on matters of personal religious belief.

The project of articulating policies such as these naturally fosters an enriched language for discussing the function of religious belief in academic contexts. A WPA could nurture this articulation through staff development. Several scholars provide excellent case studies that could provide relatively safe springboards for program-wide discussions among faculty or tutors (see Vander Lei and Kyburz). WPAs might also suggest curricular models to faculty who would like to make religion explicit, rather than secretly or accidentally, a part of their writing classes. Keith Miller and Jennifer Santos, Priscilla Perkins, and Kristine Hansen, for example, offer curricular models that consider religious belief as a public or civic force

and successfully engage public issues of religion while allowing students to remain silent about their own religious commitments.

Or instructors could root curricula in recent research in composition theory. For example, Sid Dobrin's work focuses on an ecological model of discourse that attends to the physical environments that nourish discourse, "environments that are dependent upon, created by, those same discourses" (223), environments that are sometimes religious. Beverly Moss's study of African American churches as sites of literacy (*A Community Text*) and Beth Daniell's study of the function of literacy in an Al-Anon group (*A Communion of Friendship*) can serve as productive models of this kind of research. Alternatively, instructors could explore the rhetorical effects of religious identity. How, for example, does religious belief foster radical public action as it does for Paulo Freire, whose work "results as much from his Catholicism as it does from his Marxism" (Daniell "Narratives" 402)? Likewise, Azizah al-Hibri describes how Muslim American women use their membership in the Islamic community to argue for human rights. Students might see clearly how enacting their commitments—religious or otherwise—can help them rhetorically.

Addressing religious belief in our writing programs is complex business, made all the more complex by the false binaries—church and state, intellect and belief, public and private—that limit our thinking. As WPAs, we need to develop scholarly language and writing programs that foster talk about issues that have, for too long, seemed out of bounds. In doing so, we affirm our scholarly belief that "human beings can influence one another with words," and that rhetoric influences by harnessing "the most basic unit of power—being able to modify the beliefs of another human being," (Daniell "Pedagogy" 183). Further, we acknowledge that myriad forces—intellectual, social, ideological—influence how and why we want to modify those beliefs, and we help students learn "how to work within and against discursive constraints simultaneously," (Richard Miller 27). And we find opportunity to critique arguments that are based on religious belief, asking questions such as these: What function does religious belief serve in the author's argument? Has the author used religious belief ethically? To what extent is the author's religious belief held by a community of believers and to what extent is it idiosyncratic? How does the author proceed logically from religious first principles to her conclusions? Such robust critique would challenge those who lob religion-based argumentative grenades into public discussion and then retreat behind an imagined "wall of separation." Finally, when we engage the conflicts that come with addressing religious belief in writing programs, we develop new perspectives that may help us evaluate our own rhetorical uses of this issue.

NOTES

¹ We want to acknowledge the critical insights Jeanne Gunner offered on an earlier version of this article.

² This work includes discussions of the ways in which religious faith shapes the writing of African American students (Moss, Jackson and Richardson), (presumably white) Christian fundamentalist students (Rand, Perkins), Muslim students (Williams), and Jewish students (Fitzgerald). See also the two edited collections of essays on religious belief and academic writing (Buley-Meissner, Thompson, and Tan; Vander Lei and kyburz).

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