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Introduction: The Launch of a Magazine

Jenny L. Small

What does it mean to launch a new magazine? How do you determine focus areas that will inspire both readers and potential writers? How do you recruit authors to an untested publication? How do you publicize in ways that attract readers? How do you pull all the organization of the materials together, even as your attentions are split with your other work, your personal and family life, your needs for wellness and wholeness? How do you measure your successes (or failures)?

When we launched Convergence Magazine in 2018, we had a vision for some of these questions; others we came upon during the process of publishing our first issue in April. Our broad idea of offering a venue for discussing the convergences within our work (between religious, secular, and spiritual identities on college campuses, and between student affairs administrators, faculty members, and religious, secular, and spiritual life professionals) was and remains clear and relevant. But the question lingers about how to pull all of this off logistically, even while Convergence itself is an entirely new non-profit organization that our team must nurture alongside our other responsibilities. So too, quite frankly, does the question of how to inspire potential writers to choose a new magazine in which to publish their writing. These two concerns led to the longer-than-anticipated gap between our first two issues.

It may seem strange to make our challenges public to all through describing them in this introduction. However, Convergence is an organization devoted to supporting the innermost truths of our students; if we don’t display full honesty in our materials, then how can we purport to do truth work? Speaking for myself, my own answer is that I cannot. I have always believed that part of my ability to write about...
religious, secular, and spiritual identities has been my willingness to place my own beliefs and identity into the material, to convey to my readers that I have lived this story as well. I try to both understand and own my biases. And so, as Managing Editor of Convergence Magazine, I will do my best to promote this mindset with the publication.

This issue contains articles on a variety of interesting perspectives from the field, ones which are not necessarily available through traditional academic journals. Our main features address two of the major prongs of our work in Convergence: working with campuses in their efforts to support religious, secular, and spiritual students, and connecting with external partners to ensure we remain alert to best practices and cutting-edge research. In the Administration and Policy section, Nick Stancato, Chair of the Convergence Board of Directors, shares insights from Chaplain Tee Rogers about the University of Central Florida’s experiences with supporting Humanist and secular college students. In Opinion, Executive Director Cody Nielsen bring you an insider’s view of the Parliament of World Religions. In this issue, we have also launched two new sections of Convergence Magazine: Book Reviews and Spotlight Programs. We are excited to present this expansion of our offerings, which will help further an honest conversation about the opportunities and challenges of doing religious, secular, and spiritual identity work on college campuses.

The team behind this issue welcomes you to share your reactions to any of the pieces on our Facebook page. We have also included various thoughtful questions and prompts throughout these pages for your reflection—enabling you to join us in the quest for transparency. Finally, we ask you to consider submitting an article for publication in the magazine. See the Call for Submissions at the end of the issue for more information.

The launch of Convergence Magazine is a process that continues today, with your readership. We look forward to future collaborations with our readers from the field as we move our process forward.
Humanist and Secular Services at the University of Central Florida

By Nick Stancato

Providing inner-life resources is essential for the well-being of the campus community and the academic, personal, and professional success of students. Students, faculty, and staff are facing challenges such as loss, grief, fears about mortality, exam stress, life-planning stress, family issues, ethical dilemmas, and the wild existential questions that keep us up at night. While these stressors impact people of all religious, secular, and spiritual backgrounds equally, academic institutions often offer only religio-centric or even Christian-centric resources.

What does the term “Christian-centric” mean? It means that Christian Americans experience privilege in a way that no other religious, secular, or spiritual identity group does. American social, cultural, and political norms and institutions are set up based around Christian wants, needs, and norms (Blumenfeld, Joshi, & Fairchild, 2009). This can be seen in discussions around issues ranging from LGBTQ+ and reproductive rights to the role of religious personnel in politics and in the media, among others. On campus, this manifests in how much access to resources and financial support that the (often dozens of) Christian student organizations have, as compared to the singular Islamic, Buddhist, Pagan, or atheist groups.

Further alienating atheists is the cultural presence of religio-centric language, institutions, and concepts. When a campus experiences a tragedy and hosts a prayer vigil for the community to engage in, secular students are more often than not overlooked completely. It is common to at least see the dominant monotheistic traditions represented, such as with a priest, pastor, imam, and rabbi. However, where are the Buddhist, Sikh, or secular community leaders, among others? It is rare for campus student life (and similar) offices to be experienced in working with secular students in moments of need. Traditionally religiously-centric rhetoric and terminology can oftentimes turn off secular students from feeling wanted, included, or valued.

Even interfaith programs have this issue, if not in their actions, at least in their language. For instance, the term “interfaith” doesn’t include those without faith. Likewise, terms like “mission,” “ministry,” “chapel,” and “belief” all carry baggage that might turn off atheists and secular students entirely. Of course, using “spiritual” as a general term will also miss the mark with a lot of secular folks. To be inclusive, we oftentimes have to spend more time in descriptions than we otherwise might want to. Religious Life, Interfaith, and similar offices thus have the important duty of putting a lot of thought into how they appeal to students.
how they interact with various identities, and what language they use when engaging with religious, secular, and spiritual communities on their campus.

One in three college-aged adults in America, and one in four general adults, identify as unaffiliated with a religion, and a significant number of people specifically identify as atheist or agnostic (Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, 2015). To be truly inclusive and demonstrate care for the success of campus communities, intentional support must be provided for non-religious identities.

Non-religious, or secular, people face additional challenges with culturally normalized marginalization, discrimination, and stereotypes. When coming out as a non-religious person they may face isolation from friends, estrangement from family, challenges with professors and other university staff, and impacts to professional relationships. Or, they could struggle with guilt and fear because in some (or all) areas of their lives they are not out, feeling they must hide their secular identity in fear of potential repercussions.

A common assumption on public university campuses in particular is that, because they are secular (i.e. toe the line between separation of church and state), they are a neutral ground, and therefore secular students feel entirely comfortable and welcome on campus. For many, the reality could not be farther from the truth. Affiliation with a religion or god-belief is assumed by American culture, including in places of education. For example, many major campus events commonly do not include the non-religious in their language and traditions, often unintentionally. These may include graduation ceremonies that begin with religious invocations, campus vigils that include a prayer as part of the proceedings, or the previously-mentioned interfaith meetings or resources that use religious-centered language and expectations that don’t include secular identities.

According to the Pew Forum, atheists in the general population “seldom or never discuss their views on religion with religious people,” while “26% of those who have a religious affiliation share their views at least once a week with those who have other beliefs” (Lipka, 2016). Additionally, Pew also showed that atheists are among the least liked religious, secular, or spiritual group in the general U.S. population (Pew Research Center, 2017). In another poll, nearly half of Americans also reported that they would be unlikely to support an atheist for president, simply because that person is an atheist (McCarthy, 2015). College campuses are a microcosm of larger American culture, so we should not expect them to be insulated against these prejudices and intolerant concepts any more than any other institution.

Possibly playing a part in these intolerant attitudes is the false concept

The Pew Research Center, in its 2014 Religious Landscape Study, found that 22.8% of American adults identify as unaffiliated with a religion and 7.1% as atheist or agnostic. Among college-aged adults, 36% identify as non-religious.
that morality is derived from god(s) or religion. Pew also reports that while the trends are moving toward inclusion, 42% of Americans still say that “belief in God is necessary to have good values,” significantly higher than the rest of the Western world (Smith, 2017). Atheists, and other non-religious Americans, look to various different outlets for choosing their values and ethics. Pew reports about a third of atheists use science for such guidance; other common outlets may include philosophy or be based on the golden and platinum rules. In general though, atheists are a pretty tolerant and accepting group; they “overwhelmingly favor same-sex marriage (92%) and legal abortion (87%). In addition, three-quarters (74%) say that government aid to the poor does more good than harm” (Lipka, 2016). Because atheists are a rapidly growing demographic that tends to skew much younger than other religious, secular, and spiritual groups (Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, 2015), their needs and well-being can no longer be easily overlooked on college campuses. If a college or interfaith programming is using religiously-based language to discuss ethics, values, and morals, then it is unintentionally contributing to many of the cultural issues that non-religious students may face in their daily lives.

One great step that a campus can take is the creation of a Humanist chaplaincy on campus; particularly if the chaplaincy structure already exists for other groups. Humanism is a non-religious worldview that focuses on personal and social well-being. These chaplains can fill a much-needed gap on their campuses when it comes to working with students, representing secular students’ interests and needs in the community, and in working with various university departments in building more inclusive language and programming.

Humanist chaplains can serve any person of any faith; however, they recognize, understand, and address unique challenges faced by the non-faith community. They serve as advocates at the institutional level to ensure the university or college is providing resources that are inclusive. Because Humanist chaplains are so sparsely found, and with little to no institutional support, they are typically an unavailable resource to most students in the U.S. There are only about 7 officially-recognized Humanist chaplains at universities nationwide (The Humanist Society, n.d.); only Harvard currently financially supports their chaplain. The U.S. military, including at their college campuses, actively prevents the creation of Humanist chaplaincies, even though they allow nearly every other religious or spiritual group to be represented by a chaplain (Faram, 2018). Much like any other chaplaincy (or similar body on campus), Humanist chaplains need to exist on campus and be financially and politically supported by their institution. They can be one of the best, if not only, people on campus that a secular student would be comfortable approaching and speaking to. They can also be a badly-needed resource to the university’s administration in representing what their non-religious student community is feeling as well as serving in an advisory role as needed when events or tragedies arise.

At the University of Central Florida, the volunteer Humanist Chaplain, Tee Rogers, works in collaboration with campus partners to offer workshops, institutional advocacy, office hours, a monthly support group, a Secular Safe Zone network, advisement for the Secular Student Alliance chapter, and a secular student award for volunteerism. Humanist and Secular Services (HSS) at UCF began in early 2014 with eight months of focus groups to explore the campus need for implementing a Secular Safe Zone, a national effort led by the Secular Student Alliance to encourage high schools and universities to establish a program educating about and supporting secular students. Students, faculty, and staff in the focus groups clearly indicated a need for programming beyond a safe zone training. People of all religious, secular, and spiritual identities reported experiencing challenges on UCF’s campus because of their perspectives – including harassment in perspective-normalized offices, feeling silenced and voiceless, and experiencing microaggressions. People with atheist identities also shared feeling invisible, isolated, unrepresented, and without resources.
A strong, common perception existed among employees that non-Christian identities were not welcome or that only certain faiths were supported and recognized on UCF’s campus. Employees rated the university as less inclusive than students. Additionally, campus administrators were perceived to be faith-biased, leading employees to fear there was nowhere to turn with concerns or complaints. Stories shared included people being belittled for not celebrating holidays as part of their faith; LGBTQ+ employees unable to express themselves or dress according to their identity because of faith bullying; atheists being told they were immoral; and people just feeling stressed about the subject of religion.

Students in the focus groups reported similar, through fewer, challenges. They portrayed the campus experience as more inclusive and welcoming than did faculty and staff, but reported more relational challenges. They shared fear of coming out to family, experiences of estrangement and loss of friends or family after coming out, stress of balancing the expression of secular values with respecting others’ right to faith expression, and guilt and sometimes even shame in reflecting on past religious belief, or the belief of loved ones, through a secular lens. Students also held some concerns about faculty bias favoring Christian students.

Chaplain Rogers believed there was clearly work that needed to be done around inclusion to address these issues and alleviate some of this stress. Students deserve a safe place to learn and to be served by faculty and staff who understand and care about their needs. University employees should model the inclusive attitude their students will carry beyond their institutions and into the world. Education, advocacy, and resources are needed as a support system and as a foundation for an inclusive environment where diverse faith and non-faith perspectives work and learn together.

In response to the findings from the focus groups, a holistic, InterWorldview, university-wide program was born to serve both students and employees. “I use the term ‘InterWorldview’ because it goes beyond the limiting concept of interfaith,” said Rogers. “Ecumenical is the inclusion of diverse Christian perspectives. Interfaith is ‘ecumenical plus,’ inviting non-Christian religious identities into important social and political dialogue while still maintaining a wall that excludes and marginalizes non-religious people. ‘InterWorldview’ builds another bridge: it is truly inclusive of everyone.” One of UCF’s most important values is inclusion; it is that inclusive spirit that allowed for this program to emerge. The new program, Humanist and Secular Services (HSS) at UCF, demonstrated the university’s commitment to building a truly inclusive culture and made space for secular and underrepresented faith minorities to have inner life resources dedicated to their needs. Once a need is recognized, the Pew’s 2017 study, “When Americans Say They Believe in God, What Do They Mean,” found that 10% of Americans do not believe in any higher power or spiritual force.
only option is to address it.

The first offering from HSS was a workshop called InterWorldview Respect and Inclusion where participants seek to understand privileges and challenges that people of all faiths and non-faith perspectives might experience on campus and in our culture, followed by a discussion of tools and resources that empower everyone to increase inclusion in their spheres of influence. The workshop is part of UCF’s Office of Diversity and Inclusion trainings which are open to students and are part of university professional development offerings for employees. Those attending the workshop are able to sign up as Secular Safe Zone Allies, a network of more than 250 campus community members who are educated about InterWorldview challenges, can listen openly and without judgment, and are knowledgeable about campus and community resources. The visibility of Safe Zone placards lets those who may feel voiceless know they are not alone, someone cares, and there is a place to turn.

In the fall of 2017 a second workshop, Atheism and Humanism: Living Without God, launched. This discussion follows the same model as the first; however, it focuses specifically on the experience of – and creating inclusion for – secular identities. Intentional education existed for other faith minorities, including previous workshops on Islamophobia and others about religious minorities, but an intentional discussion about secular identities was missing. This new workshop was added at the request of both religious and non-religious campus community members.

Both workshops are offered each semester. Weekend and evening sessions are held regularly because multiple employees shared that they were afraid to request permission to attend during work hours, for fear their supervisor might think they are not Christian. Some even reported their supervisor prevented them from attending during their shift because the workshops mention secular identities. There is still much work to do at UCF – and in all higher education institutions – to overcome stress and bias around InterWorldview inclusion. The more diverse we become, the more we must recognize and address gaps in inclusion.

Beyond the workshops, the Humanist chaplain maintains a line of communication with relevant campus service offices. Information about challenges being faced by students and employees allows university entities to examine policy and resources from a different perspective. For example, non-religion is now an explicitly protected class in UCF’s official non-discrimination language because Institutional Equity and other offices were aware of non-religious student and employee concerns as well as national statistics on the numbers of non-religious students and employees being served. The new language was initially added to the President’s Statement on Non-Discrimination in June of 2016 and was passed by the Board of Trustees on October 26, 2017, ubiquitously across UCF’s non-discrimination documents.

Still more institutional changes have been made at UCF. Through a collaboration with Campus Faiths and Ministries and university administrators, the inner-life resources website, formerly “Campus Faiths and Ministries” was updated to “Religion and Non-Religion” in summer of 2017. Campus Faiths and Ministries is a private, paid-member organization that continues to be featured as a valuable partner and campus resource; however, a dedicated section of the site serves secular identities. In addition, it now includes a list of all faith and non-faith specific student organizations, whether or not they are part of Campus Faiths and Ministries. This sends a clear message to the campus community: all perspectives are welcome and supported here.

Humanist and Secular Services at UCF continually seeks creative opportunities to educate and engage the campus community. An expert panel event on “minorities within a minority” featured secular Black, Hispanic, and LGBTQ+ leaders. An annual diversity week blood drive challenge engages the Humanist,
Black, Pride, and Latino Faculty and Staff Associations. Internships engage students in advocacy and the continued improvement of the program. UCF’s Humanist Chaplain also serves on panels and offers specialized workshops for teams such as the Housing Resident Assistant staff.

In addition to advocacy and education, HSS hosts a monthly peer support and discussion group as well as chaplain office hours (by appointment) for consultations. Issues addressed have included responding to discrimination, bullying, and microaggressions; being stereotyped; being devalued for not being a Christian or having a faith perspective; navigating conversion tactics from loved ones and in professional spaces; feeling voiceless, invisible, isolated, and without resources; fear of coming out and the process of coming out as an atheist; being closeted; challenges within the non-faith community such as misogyny and prejudice; and coping with grief, loss, and mortality as a secular person. Having a safe space to discuss these and other issues is important; for some, this may be the only space where they can openly share their concerns and think collaboratively about solutions to challenges.

Rogers has served as the advisor to the Secular Student Alliance at UCF for more than 10 years. She also initiated and manages a scholarship that rewards and encourage compassionate action as well as reflection on the experience of secular people who live openly as non-religious people. The fallacy that a belief in G/god(s) is necessary to be a moral, good human being is very common in the faith-biased field of social work and community impact. Overcoming that barrier to engagement in the community takes people willing to build bridges across differences by being visible and vocal about secular values in action.

For Chaplain Rogers, the biggest challenge – aside from not enough time in the week – has been finding national and institutional research on documented discrimination or related challenges faced by non-religious people. Documented instances would be of great assistance in communicating the need for this initiative. Connecting with professionals at other universities who are working on similar programs – in any stage of development – would also help; all would benefit from idea sharing, brainstorming solutions to challenges, and helping one another strengthen our programs.

Work is being done to bridge these gaps. Convergence is beginning a surge of trainings that are empowering institutions to enhance their religious, secular, and spiritual support efforts. The Secular Student Alliance is also doing national outreach on the importance of supporting secular students and strengthening the network of SSA chapters at high schools and colleges. Humanist and Secular
Services at UCF invites opportunities to share the perspective of an institution that has implemented, and continues to improve, an InterWorldview support program. It is essential that higher education institutions provide care and support for students of all religious, secular, and spiritual identities to achieve academic, professional, and personal success and fulfillment, as well as ensuring a safe and inclusive workplace for faculty and staff.

Universities and colleges should network to ensure that they follow best practices and provide resources that serve the real needs of their campus communities, and that must include exploration and implementation of InterWorldview – religious, secular, and spiritual – inner-life support. This is a crucial dialogue in greater conversations around student services as well as inclusion and diversity. The need for this work is immediate and immense.

You can learn more about Humanist and Secular Services at UCF by visiting http://rnr.sdes.ucf.edu/non-religion. If you would like to connect with Chaplain Rogers, she can be reached at nonreligion@ucf.edu.

References

By J. Cody Nielsen

Less than 3 seconds. That’s all it took for me to feel “at home.” I was in Toronto...at a convention center... at a conference with participants from over 100 countries and with about 8,000 total members. But it only took 3 seconds to feel “at home.” From there sprang to life one of the most vibrant and memorable gatherings of individuals I’ve ever been a part of. From morning to night, day after day for an entire week in early November of 2018, Toronto’s convention center was home. A home that inspired hope, provided intentional meaning making, and ultimately gave new opportunities to consider how religious, secular, and spiritual identities can be a community of activism and engagement. And all because a group of people decided to make it a space of belonging and welcoming, a space and a group called the Parliament of the World’s Religions.

Begun in 1893 in Chicago, Illinois, the Parliament of the World’s Religions has met seven times. An organization “created to cultivate harmony among the world’s religious and spiritual communities and foster their engagement with the world and its guiding institutions in order to achieve a just, peaceful and sustainable world” (Parliament of the World’s Religions, 2019), the Parliament has been hosted throughout these last 125 years in Chicago, Salt Lake City, Melbourne, Toronto, Cape Town, and Barcelona. The Parliament is considered the organization that helped to begin interreligious dialogue work across the world (Mouzzouri, n.d.). And wow has it grown. From small beginnings of just a few hundred persons in 1893 to nearly 10,000 persons in Salt Lake City, the Parliament’s expansion and growth has been fueled by the changing and dramatically shifting religious environments across the world.

As a person of faith, I didn’t want to miss this gathering. There is much to be learned from our colleagues and friends across the globe and across traditions. My act of being at the Parliament was meant to be one of learning, listening, and finding my place in all of this. And for seven days, I was privileged to do so.

It began when my partner Katie and I arrived on the morning of November 1 at the small island airport of Billy Bishop. Situated on an island on lake Ontario, Billy Bishop is the ultimate fly-in to Toronto, as it sits just a few minutes from downtown, with everything from the backdrop of the skyscrapers to the CN Tower within viewing. A quick trip to drop off our bags and we were ready to head downtown on the beautiful subway system. And it was after that, while on the walk to the convention center, when I asked Katie how long it would take until we saw someone we both knew. We agreed that it might be about five minutes.
But as we approached the doors and the glass window panes that lined the front of the main entrance, there stood our friends Tahil and Skyler. Within minutes, we had met a few new people, and my seminary colleague Sam surprised Katie and I both by telling us that she and our mutual friend Simran had gone to college together. And this was how it all began.

Everywhere we went, there were people. Everyplace we found, people were interested in connecting with one another. I have been to many conferences, have experienced many settings in which thousands of people traversed escalators and endless schedules of workshops and keynotes and the sponsorship hall, and never have I felt so connected to people as I did at this gathering. I will admit, it’s not perfect. But in the end, there is something that makes it special. And I believe that specialty is its ability to help step back and offer people a hope through building community.

Stepping Back to Step Forward

There are so many places one could trace the history of tension between religious communities across the world. But let’s begin with 1096. After the Eastern Orthodox Church and the Catholic Church out of Rome split and Islam was spreading further and further, Pope Urban the II called for a holy war against Islam. Muslims had seized much of the holy land, and Urban II called upon Christians to offer their lives to reclaim it. Over the next 200 years, blood would be spilled in vast amounts, and in the end, Christians and Muslims were seemingly permanently left at odds with one another (The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2019).

This is by no means the only tension point within religions. Buddhists and Muslims have been at odds in the eastern hemisphere for over eight centuries, an unfortunate concern which has continued in present day Myanmar, where the Rohingya Muslims are being murdered in a genocide by the Buddhist community (Agence France-Presse, 2017). And of course we cannot forget the continual and systematic anti-Semitism that has been a part of the world for much of the last two millennia.

The divisions that have prevented the world’s religions from coming together needed something that would galvanize a change through both relationships and narratives. This was what led in many ways to the Dalai Lama calling for the first gathering and the creation of the Parliament in 1893. Religious boundaries were breached and individuals gathered from across the world to find common ground.
this hope in common ground led to a movement that has transpired over the past 125 years.

Much has changed since that first gathering, as the global religious community undergoes perhaps its greatest transformation. In North America, what was once a dominant Christian narrative is changing. Still, more than 70 percent of North American individuals claim a Christian identity, but those numbers are drastically shifting (Pew Research Center, 2014). Christianity is moving and evolving, growing most in the global south, while Hinduism, Buddhism, and Sikhism expand, alongside the tremendous growth of the non-religious community in Western culture.

All of this leads us back to the seven days in Toronto. The Parliament was designed as a place to build interreligious dialogue. It has been seen by some as simply a place for us to showcase our ideas, to have a platform of workshops, keynotes to inspire us, and time to organize. And this is true. As the global religious community changes, so too does our need to know one another, to understand each other, and ultimately to reconcile the past tensions that have existed across our traditions.

Parliament Expresses the Way Forward

The theme of the 2018 Parliament of the World’s Religions was “The Power of Inclusion, the Hope of Love: Pursuing Global Understanding, Reconciliation, and Change.” Toronto offered the perfect setting for such a conference. One of the most diverse cities in the world, is it estimated that half of the population of Toronto was not born in Canada (Surman, 2015). Additionally, Canada has made significant
strides in reconciliation with the native and Aboriginal peoples on whose lands many Canadians now live. Unlike the U.S., where Native Americans have been largely forced completely off their land, many tribes still remain on their lands (Canadian Geographic, n.d.). This was largely illustrated in the opening night’s session, in which Aboriginal identities were extensively highlighted, with keynotes from several chiefs, dignitaries, and representatives of the Canadian government. The night was a celebration of diversity, of a call to unity with the Aboriginal community, and ultimately, to a new way of being that was about a love for each other and the world.

Each of the successive nights would illustrate different aspects of the call to community. From nights focused on youth and young adult engagement to emerging leadership, the keynotes were powerful and unifying. And as we listened and heard from participants, each night was an illustration of the global impact religion can have when it is at its best. And for it to become its best, it must be formed and grown in the community experience.

So how did people find each other at the Parliament? Well, there were many ways to connect with people. You could attend the sessions that interested you, but I found myself connecting with people at the displays that were scattered throughout the convention center. One such display was the unity quilt, an over 100-foot-long multicolor quilt with intricate squares which each had a unique image of the diversity of global religious, secular, and spiritual identities. Its location was easy to find, and once you found it, you were mesmerized. I spend at least a couple of hours over a few days stopping and exploring the quilt. And every time I was there, I struck up conversations with those who were also enjoying the experience of the quilt. Some of the conversations were mostly in passing, but some became life giving. I had never met nearly any of these persons, and I may never see them again, but the time we had together, sharing our stories of what we were most passionate about, was all in the shadow of one of the most beautiful tapestries I have ever seen. The quilt helped to build community by simply being a conversation piece.

The People of the Parliament

The Parliament of the World’s Religions is known to bring together more than 40 different religious traditions in a single space. Old, young, families, singles – all gather together. When you want to really want to get to know people, you throw an off-site get together. Enter: the young adult extravaganza.

On the first night that we were in town, I realized just how many people I knew. I invited people for drinks, while being cognizant of the many traditions that forbid alcohol consumption. Everyone I talked with, though, was okay with coming out either way. Many came and simply didn’t drink. I had hoped for a few friends, and to meet a few others. We formed a Facebook group and a WhatsApp group that eventually merged. And the list grew, and grew, and grew and became a phenomenon. One night, we had over 40 people at a pub called the Loose Moose. I had invited my friend Kate, who had never been to a conference like the Parliament. I wanted them to find a community, and so invited them to come out. And after the third night, I realized that they had connected with so many of the people who were coming that it was incredible. Everyone was. No one was alone. Religious, non-religious: no one was. We were becoming something more. Something bigger than even than the sum of our whole parts. And that group, which would end up meeting every single night of the Parliament, came together in love, in hope, and ultimately, in solidarity. Some would say that having a few drinks together isn’t the point of the Parliament, but if we are meant to be changed, if we are meant to have reconciliation and better understanding, did the mode through which conversation took place really matter?

The people of the Parliament and the activities that took place outside of the main convention center were as much about the efforts of this massive undertaking as the programs, the dynamic speakers, and
all of the displays. Some people often step out of conferences and ask why they are there. Some people think that just adding to one’s resume is the only reason to show up, so that we might add lines to our vitae or connect with people who might become our clients. But the Parliament was about coming together, about overcoming the historical tensions between religious communities, and about forming solidarity across lines of difference.

Now two months past the Parliament’s conclusion, I still use the WhatsApp from time to time to say hey to people. I still think about those conversations in front of the unity quilt, and I still ask myself how we might get back to the Loose Moose one more time as a group. I miss those gatherings, but it’s because I miss the reality of being together. Our world needs us to be together, to gather as communities, to form movements, and to inspire a transformation of the experiences of religious intolerance. I want a future in which religious, secular, and spiritual identities of all forms stand beside one another, not just in solidarity, but in reconciliation, in hope, and in love for the world that needs us to. My hope is that the Parliament continues to inspire other conferences and gatherings to be about more than simply the programs, and I hope that we remember that being together is what really matters in this work.

May it be so.

 References


According to John Schmalzbauer and Kathleen Mahoney, the accepted narrative about religion and higher education since the 1970s has been that secularization was the fait accompli. The decline of the Protestant Church in society seemed a clear indicator of the future of religion in the academy. Schmalzbauer and Mahoney undertook extensive research, originally funded by a grant from the Lily Endowment, to explore if the linear secularization narrative about higher education was in fact reality. Exhaustive research covering the primary aspects of religion and higher education have revealed this to be a false assumption. Indicators from the past 30 years clearly display a resurgence in religion and higher education in the academic study of religion, church-related colleges, and student religious life on campus. The Resilience of Religion in American Higher Education, a comprehensively researched book, is an excellent tool for higher education administrators, collegiate ministers, religion faculty, and the average clergy and laity in local faith communities, enabling them to see the value of engagement with religion on today’s campus.

Schmalzbauer and Mahoney initiate their exploration by recappping what is often seen as the peak of religion on campus in the post-World War II era. Campus communities boasted strong religion departments and the essential leadership of chaplains and other faith leaders, and the religious journey of the student was an accepted way of being. The importance of religion seemed only to be in the ascendency. The authors then detail the movement toward secularization, which seemed inevitable in the 1970s, and the ensuing belief that the trend has remained unchanged since then.

The bulk of the book then explores three primary ways that religion has proven to be resilient in American higher education, stating that the movement is not simply a return to religion in some form, but actually a partial reversal of the separation of religion and the academy. The first area explores the academic study of religion. The authors state that it is not simply a movement, but many movements, as witnessed in the pluralistic nature of the study of religion. Academic knowledge has grown dramatically in regards to Buddhism, Islam, Judaism, and Hinduism, as well as more modest work about other non-Christian belief sets. The expanding pluralistic nature of society has influenced the scope of the academic study in ways which would scarcely be recognizable 70 years ago during what was considered the prime time of this field of study.
The authors continue their exploration by examining the state of church-affiliated colleges. Close to 800 institutions of higher education are faith related, with the vast majority being Christian. While the beginnings of academic institutions in this country were integrally connected with Christianity, a significant number of such colleges struggled with their religious identity by the 1980s. The distinctions between Catholic, evangelical, and mainline institutions are explained succinctly, as are their responses to the growing secularization in society. While some colleges discontinued their church relationship, others decided to revision it. This soul-searching led numerous colleges to deepen their connection, albeit in quite different ways than previously envisioned.

The final area examined is student life. Schmalzbauer and Mahoney provide the historical development of student religious life, especially with the origination with the Young Men’s Christian Association. As student affairs divisions emerged in higher education, the recognition and support of religious development was assumed, until the secularization narrative began in the 1970s. Yet, student affairs started to reintegrate the acknowledgment and support of students’ spiritual lives before the turn of the last century. National student affairs conferences have explored this aspect as an essential part of student development. While mainline campus ministries have declined in recent decades, parachurch groups and non-Western groups have expanded markedly. Campuses did not so much secularize, as they became spiritual marketplaces.

“Research reveals that student participation in religious life has been strong throughout the decades, but has simply been conducted in different forms over the years.”

The authors conclude that the teaching and practice of religion has had a modest but clear resurgence in the past three years. They posit that this post-secular environment is good for society in general, primarily through civic education, art and culture, and the ecology of religious intellectual life. The argument for civic education is quite compelling, especially with insights from individuals such as former Secretary of State, John Kerry, in the need for diplomats to have a clear understanding of the world religions and religious differences.

While Schmalzbauer and Mahoney display the trend of a clear resilience of religion in American higher education, their final chapter
The Resilience of Religion in American Higher Education

John Schmalzbauer and Kathleen A. Mahoney

confronts the uncertain future. The insecurity comes primarily from the challenges facing higher education in general, and not so much from the nature of religion in today’s society, even though it is a smaller consideration. Higher education is at a crucial point, especially since the Great Recession of 2008. Financial pressures have led to the closure of a number of smaller church-affiliated colleges, while larger public universities have encountered significant issues with reduced state funding. Student religious groups are impacted by ongoing decreased funding, as well. The topic of the end of the university is greatly discussed in higher education circles today. When combining this issue with the rise of the “nones,” (individuals claiming no religious affiliation; p. 165) the question remains of how resilient religion in higher education will be in the future.

The Resilience of Religion in American Higher Education is an essential read for individuals working with religion on today’s campus, whether they are administrators, ministers, faculty, or the average person in a faith community who wants to support religious and spiritual exploration by college students. The research is comprehensive and thorough, as evidenced by almost 100 pages of end notes. This is a timely read, especially for administrators who have continued the assumption of secularization and might question the value of religion, whether in the academic field of study or in student life. Numerous collegiate ministers have offered anecdotal information in support of a resurgence in recent years, and this book offers the research and data to support such insights.

While the authors did not set out to explore how the broader inclusion of women in higher education coincided with the perceived secularization, it is a question that comes to mind. The book has a couple brief mentions of women’s colleges, but the broad changes and transitions of higher education do not factor in how the opening of higher education to a significantly larger number of young women has impacted religious studies and religious life. In providing the historical timelines, a more comprehensive picture could have been provided by this important addition.

Overall, this is a vital and important contribution to the understanding of religion in American higher education, in all its variety of forms. While the future is uncertain, the historical and thorough nature of this extensively researched book is an important contribution to the topic.
What Was Your Role During the Program?

As Dean of Religious and Spiritual Life, I serve as part of a team of chaplains to create a weekly interfaith program related to emerging and persistent topics within the sphere of religion and spirituality. Much of my contribution along with other staff and student input is in setting a vision for the programming and ensuring we are pay attention to the salient experiences taking place across campus as well as in the broader community. It is also my role to develop our budgets and allocate resources to sustain the program costs.

Program Description

A form of what is now called Interfaith Lunch began around 1998 during a time when the college shifted from a primarily Protestant affiliation or Christian model to a multi-faith model.

The fundamental motivation has always been to nurture dialogue between and among students of different faiths. As the demographics pertaining to religious affiliations have shifted dramatically and have become increasingly pluralistic and secular since the 1960s, the initial motivation has not only...
remained, but in some ways has become even more important to us. The need for regular dialogue to develop trust and religious literacy of different worldviews on campus has emerged as essential in strengthening our community.

The Office of Religious and Spiritual Life sponsors Interfaith Lunch. Interfaith Lunch is our signature program. It is a weekly program that offers a free lunch of soup, salad, bread, and cookies. The program is open to the whole community. It is very popular with students and staff, and has been attracting faculty as well. Food is prepared by our part-time chef/kitchen manager. The event is held in the Unity Space, and for programs we anticipate a large turnout (>50) we reserved the Great Room in the Blanchard Campus Center--increasingly we are using the Great Room. The pre-planning is essential and requires the whole staff to meet for a planning day at the beginning and end of each semester as well as during our weekly staff meeting. We develop a theme for the year, i.e. "Finding Unity in Diversity," "Who's my Neighbor?" etc. We then create a semester of weekly programs that will address topics of intersectionality with issues related to religion and spirituality. We are paying attention to current affairs, and when we become aware of an emerging concern – we might shift our programming to accommodate a speaker or a discussion that would be particular relevant to all. Having connections to the key religious and civic leaders, scholars, public intellectuals, student groups, etc. to invite to lead a discussion is essential. The program format is one hour. The speaker has about 40 minutes to present and engage the attendants. Our campus speakers do not receive an honorarium, but we do offer a small honorarium to off-campus speakers. In some cases, we might bring a national speaker or co-sponsor a speaker with another campus group. There are also times when we will intentionally construct the program to introduce a difficult conversation at lunch, with a tandem night event that will provide a more intimate and in-depth program with the speaker. The costs is in the staff time allocated to developing and planning the program, provision of a simple lunch, and the honorariums for off-campus speakers. The use of social media, particularly our Facebook page, and a weekly email reminder of our programming from the Dean of Students, also helps to keep the program on everyone’s mind.

**Program Agenda**

Reserving the Unity Space is automatically done as Interfaith Lunch was one of the key reasons it was created. Lately we have needed to reserve the Great Room--a larger venue with a stage and large screen for some of our programs. Food is prepared in our Office and Religious and Spiritual Life center known as the Eliot House. The food is carted over to Blanchard and the dining service provides the appropriate dishes, bowls, and utensils. We are committed to sustainability and have opted not to use paper products.

Attendants pick up their lunch starting at noon and have an opportunity to connect with other attendees. We have a regular base of students, staff, and faculty that numbers around 20-25 and there are always 10-20 additional attendees. The program will be introduced by a chaplain from ORSL or a student leader around 12:30pm. The program will last until 1:05, as the next class begins at 1:15.

Clean-up happens immediately following the program with a student worker packing up what needs to be returned to the Eliot House and rolling the dirty dishes, etc. to the dining hall which is located nearby in the same building.

The entire program runs very smoothly. For many, it is their time to simply be and not feel they need to perform. The lunch is comfort food – especially, the Chef Jeff cookies offered for dessert.

**Program Budget**

The Interfaith lunch program is included in our operating budget from the college. We have a part-time chef who prepares the meal and works with dining services to have plates, soup cups, and utensils available to us. Additionally, dining services provide water as our beverage.

The space is also provided by the college.
Program Impact

Last year, we conducted an in-depth assessment of the program and it was clear – based on surveys, video takeaways, and a focus group – that the most powerful learning outcome was a “belonging.” The weekly ritual of a meal and discussion provided a space where connections could happen and a sense of belonging could be developed. The capacity [for participants] to engage in stories that were different from their own narratives seemed to open their hearts and minds to other stories, other worldviews. While we may have thought a greater sense of tolerance would be the outcome – it went deeper to belonging and a desire for more connections and relationship building.

What Advice Would You Give Someone Running this Program for the First Time?

As we all strive to understand how to engage our campus community on issues related to religion, spirituality, and meaning and purpose, holding a weekly event where the community can find ways to engage and develop relationships of trust has been well worth the effort. The regularity of the program, the consistency of the offering, the willingness to provide space for difficult topics (in a safe space) with follow up – this has created opportunities for pastoral encounters and has strengthened our individual faith groups and spiritual programming.

Do You Want to Add Anything Else?

We have discovered that many of our students have found lifelong friendships through Interfaith Lunch. The authentic conversations and openness of participants provided space for students to engage and to discover the gift of a friend. It is the relationship building that happens across faith and worldview lines that has impressed us and guided our programming – it has given us the impetus to create a residential Interfaith Living and Learning community. Interfaith Lunch is the yeast for our programming.
Contributors

J. Cody Nielsen

J. Cody Nielsen is Founder and Executive Director of Convergence and Multifaith Coordinator at the University of Guelph. Cody previously served as Expert in Residence for Religious, Secular, and Spiritual Initiatives at NASPA and is former President of the National Campus Ministry Association. Cody’s passion is the integration of higher education with religious, secular, and spiritual identity diversity work. Cody is a Ph.D. candidate in Higher Education Administration at Iowa State University and holds Master’s degrees in Mental Health Counseling from the University of Northern Iowa and Divinity from Wesley Theological Seminary in Washington D.C.

Amy J. Rio

Amy Rio is the Chaplain of Salem Academy and College in Winston Salem, NC. Prior to serving in this position, she worked as the United Methodist Campus Minister at the University of North Carolina in Asheville and as the Wesley Foundation/ELCA Director at the University of North Carolina in Greensboro. An ordained United Methodist minister, Amy received a Masters of Divinity from Duke Divinity School, and a Doctor of Ministry with a focus on Spirituality and Story from Wesley Theological School. Amy is also a certified spiritual director. Amy’s writing has explored spiritual formation with college students in To Transform the World: Vital United Methodist Campus Ministry, interfaith work, Celtic Spirituality, and issues surrounding women and spirituality.
Nick Stancato
Nick Stancato is Chair of the Convergence Board of Directors. He currently works with several nonprofits, including Americans United for Separation of Church and State and Black Nonbelievers, and works by day at The Ohio State University’s College of Medicine as a Biomedical Education Coordinator. He graduated from The Ohio State University with a major in History as well as minors in Roman Classics and Religious Studies. Nick has presented at the President’s Interfaith Community Service and Campus Challenge, Creating Change, the Secular Student Alliance Annual Conference. He also presented, and helped to organize, the 2017 NASPA Religious, Secular, and Spiritual Identities Convergence event.

Jenny L. Small
Jenny L. Small is Managing Editor of Convergence Magazine and the Convergence Director of Communications. She holds a Ph.D. from the University of Michigan and is the author of multiple articles and books about worldview diversity and meaning-making in higher education, including Making Meaning: Embracing Spirituality, Faith, Religion, and Life Purpose in Student Affairs. Dr. Small is also an Associate Editor for the Journal of College and Character.

Tee Rogers
In addition to serving as a volunteer Humanist Chaplain at University of Central Florida, Tee is a full time coordinator of special projects in a vice president’s office and volunteers as the university’s blood drive chair. She is also the founding director of BE. Orlando Humanist Fellowship, a chapter of the American Humanist Association that focuses on engaging the secular community in volunteerism and overcoming stereotypes about Atheism through service and advocacy. Tee raises dwarf aquatic frogs, enjoys fine single-malt scotch, and loves to watch the sunrise.
Call for Submissions

**CONVERGENCE MAGAZINE WILL FOCUS ON TWO AREAS OF CONVERGENCE:**

1) the convergence between religious, secular, and spiritual identities on college campuses, and
2) the convergence between administrators and faculty members in all levels of higher education and religious, secular, and spiritual life professionals (including those in campus ministry positions). The magazine’s objective is to promote harmonious campus communities and the fostering of responsible global citizens through spreading understanding among those who espouse a wide range of identities and worldviews.

The target audience for Convergence Magazine is professionals, students, and scholars located on college campuses in the areas served through the publication’s content. In addition, the magazine is aimed to those working in related fields beyond campus borders, such as in religious organizations, schools of theology, and houses of worship, and in non-profits and educational service organizations serving the field of higher education student affairs.

Convergence Magazine is published online on a tri-annual basis and acts as one of the pillars of the Convergence organization, others of which include training professionals, consultation with universities, organizational systems and collaborations, and additional content (blog, podcast, webinars, and conferences).

The editors of Convergence Magazine solicit contributions in the following categories:

**Promising Practices**
Practitioners from all divisions, particularly those employed in the target convergence areas, are invited to tell the stories of the successful convergences on their college campuses. (Word count: between 3,000 and 4,000 words)

**Administration and Policy**
Administrators and other professionals are invited to describe the higher-order administrative practices and implemented policies that have led to successful convergences on their college campuses. (Word count: between 3,000 and 4,000 words)

**Opinion**
All higher education professionals are invited to share their opinions on steps that can be taken within our shared field to promote the two categories of convergence. (Word count: between 2,000 and 3,000 words)
Book Reviews

All higher education professionals are invited to share a review of a new or recent book publication on a related topic, such as interfaith dialogue, worldview development, or chaplaincy work. (Word count: between 1,000 and 1,500 words)

Spotlight Programs

All higher education professionals are invited to share brief information about a promising program on their own campus that meets Convergence Magazine’s goals of promoting harmonious campus communities and the fostering of responsible global citizens. The format for this category is question and response, differing from the feature-style writing in the Promising Practices category.

In addition to on-the-ground practitioners and administrators, the editors invite faculty and graduate students to submit articles in the above categories. However, the focus should remain on concrete strategies and ideas for practical implementation.

Convergence Magazine is not a research journal. The tone of the magazine will be forthright and conversational, rather than research-intensive. However, as the editors strongly believe that all promising practices, policies, and opinions are undergirded by high-quality research, we expect that cited references to supporting literature will be included in all published pieces. Please utilize the APA 6th edition for formatting these references.

Call for Submissions

Submissions for each tri-annual issue will be due two months prior to the publication month, on the 15th of the month. For example, upcoming submission deadlines will be:

- **March 15, 2019** for publication in **May 2019**
- **July 15, 2019** for publication in **September 2019**

Any submission that misses a deadline will automatically be considered for the following issue.

Note: Submissions to Convergence Magazine do not need to be blinded. Because the editors are seeking stories based on real-world experiences, details about specific campuses and programs are necessary and should not be anonymized. Authors should think carefully about whether this is appropriate for the articles they are submitting.

Because Convergence Magazine is an online publication, authors are invited to submit full-color photos to accompany their pieces.

To be considered for publication in any of the first four categories listed above, upload your document and photos at the following website: http://bit.ly/2gbZUEC

To be considered for publication in the Spotlight Programs category, complete the following online form: https://convergenceoncampus.wufoo.com/forms/m16e590j0ivlq8v/

Questions can be directed to Dr. Jenny Small, Convergence Communication Director:

jenny.small@convergenceoncampus.org

More information about the Convergence organization can be found here.
What We’re Talking About
What’s Being Talked about on the Convergence Blog

J. CODY NIELSEN: ON ONE YEAR OF CONVERGENCE

NICK STANCATO: SECULAR STUDENTS CAN BE YOUR RELIGIOUS, SECULAR, AND SPIRITUAL GLUE

NORA BOND: DON’T SETTLE FOR HEARSAY: WHY YOUR UNDERSTANDING OF RELIGIOUS, SECULAR, AND SPIRITUAL IDENTITIES MATTERS