

CONFERENCE REPORT
FAITH AND TRUTH-SEEKING: WHAT IS THE ROLE OF RELIGION IN HIGHER
EDUCATION?
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Introduction

Heterodox Academy hosted this online conference. Elizabeth Corey, a political science associate professor in the honors program of the university, moderated this event. Speakers discussed a diverse set of experiences and perspectives to look at the role of many religions in universities, as well as religious beliefs and truth-seeking.

Speakers

- George Harne, Executive Dean of the School of Arts and Sciences at the University of St. Thomas in Houston
- Ilana Horwitz, Associate Professor, Tulane's Grant Center for the American Jewish Experience
- Omar Qureshi, a scholar on philosophy, ethics, theology, and Islamic law

Q: How does the practice of faith connect with truth-seeking and scholarship?

Harne stated that despite differences in traditions, religious practice should not obstruct the pursuit of truth. If anything, it enlightens it and broadens the scope of what to look for in the search for truth. Qureshi explained that Muslims believe their primary duty is to know God through reasonable and independent inquiry. Muslims believe using their intelligence and searching out truth in all subjects is their first duty. Horwitz shared that many Jews perceive and demonstrate their Jewishness largely through pursuits of learning and, in some cases, social justice. They feel that preparing the world, healing the world, and discovering reality are the fundamental ways in which they can show their Jewishness.

Q: Do you believe that whether or not there is sincere confidence in a real God makes a difference?

Horowitz said that within Judaism, there is a wide range of perspectives about God's role in people's life. She discussed the significance of people's perspectives on God's holy word. There is a Jewish analysis method where individuals discuss scriptures and religious texts from a secular standpoint. Harne made the distinction that sincere confidence in God can also be related to a tradition within an institution. It is important to be clear about who individuals are and where they fit into an institution to determine if their confidence comes from God or tradition.

Q: Is religious identity another identity marker on the order of race, sexual orientation, gender identity? What religion fits along that line of potential identity markers or is there anything different? Is there a qualitative difference between religious identity and these other sorts of more secular than the markers?

Horwitz answered yes, religious identity differs in several ways. Religious identity is a deliberate decision, unlike race, class, and gender. However, similar to race, class, and gender, religions are also socially constructed. On an epistemic level, religious identities can be compared to race, or gender identities, according to Qureshi. There are currently philosophical efforts boosting racial identities to the degree where they have epistemic importance because that is how they see everything. Harne said individuals are identified by their choice of religion, and respecting and incorporating these different views into universities is important. Institutions benefit from continually defining their institutional perspectives to themselves and to others.

Q: Do religious schools exclude certain lines of inquiry? Or is there a possibility for more openness for truth at religious schools?

Harne emphasized that academic freedom is necessary, but it comes with two constraints, one of which is respecting both personal and community rights. Universities, by definition, must provide an environment where all of these varied perspectives can be discussed. It cannot be a university if it is not receptive to different points of view.

Q: Do we see conflicts of gender and sexuality as something that can be somehow solved or addressed in a constructive way or are there permanent conflicts between revealed religion and university life as it is currently engaged in 2021?

Qureshi stated that a possible issue in academic institutions is the loss of rational debate standards. Many individuals believe that religion is not intellectual and that universities are not scholarly. Harne emphasized that it is important to establish skills for students to be able to discern if something is fact, comment, intuition, or opinion.

Q: To what degree should students be able to voice unpopular opinions and strong religious beliefs?

There is a current divide between religious and non-religious students; however, these groups can unite and learn to respect one another, claimed Horwitz. Harne highlighted that students can entertain a much wider range of viewpoints through the foundational frameworks of their college. Meanwhile, Qureshi said it helps to have a shared idea of what the principles of logic are and what standards to follow.

Q: How do you recommend students of faith, especially graduate students of faith, navigate hostile classrooms and or lead class discussions that exclude this dimension of human experience?

Harne emphasized to continue carrying honesty as we move forward. At the end of the day, key aspects of individual identity will be lost if one does not stay truthful in crucial situations. Horwitz said professors must be more informed of the importance of religion in the lives of millions of Americans.

Q: Can faith from a religious perspective operate as an effective frame for inquiry if the inquiry points to things unknowable? In the tradition, in the classic tradition we never fully know the transcendent. But does that mean we don't inquire into it? Or do we have an obligation to inquire into it?

All three panelists agreed that a religious perspective can be an effective form of inquiry. To make this available in universities, they suggest creating a space to recognize assumptions and limitations and understand the diverse ways of other human beings.

Q: Would you consider atheism itself to be a faith system? In other words one has faith there is no God?

Qureshi defined atheism as a legitimate perspective in a reasonably acceptable stance that can take the form of religion. The strategy is to start a conversation. On the other hand, Horwitz considered it as a possible concept of religion because of the idea that religion does not have to involve a god or supernatural identity. Harne added that atheism is a type of binding ritual. It can be a binding tradition with specific methods of practice and a metaphysical component.

Q: Should professors disclose their religious viewpoint to students when it's relevant to the course? Or should they attempt to stay neutral?

The panelists concurred that the objective of professors is to try to bring students the greatest ideas that have been examined. Keeping the qualities of kindness and humility in front of our classrooms is beneficial. Humility in opinions and compassion toward those with disagreements should serve as an example for students. The panelists explained that professors can share beliefs if they are sensitive to minority groups and focus on the text and content of authors.