

The Liberal Arts and the Study of Religion at Purdue

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Purdue was founded in 1869. Unlike private, church-related colleges that stressed the “liberal arts” (e.g., the humanities and social sciences), Purdue was to be a state-supported, land-grant university that stressed the “mechanical arts” (e.g., engineering, technology, agriculture). Unlike schools that emphasized the social, cultural, and spiritual aspects of life, Purdue would emphasize physical and material issues. These emphases are reflected in the university’s nickname (the “Boilermakers”), its mascot (a locomotive), and a stained-glass window on the second floor of the Purdue Memorial Union, which includes the following quotation from twelfth-century churchman and builder Abbé Suger: “Our poor spirit is so weak that it is only through the use of materials that it can rise to the truth.”

Purdue is still a public university and still emphasizes research on material solutions to physical problems, but it also has changed in many ways, including its increasing support of the liberal arts, and its increasing recognition that one of the liberal arts’ key components—religion—is a legitimate area of study at Purdue.¹

The Liberal Arts

In the late-1800s and early-1900s, the university’s attention was almost entirely focused on agriculture and the mechanical arts. The curriculum included only a handful of courses in the liberal arts, especially

English and history. The purpose of these “service” courses, and the role of the professors who taught them, was to increase the communication skills and cultural sophistication of students seeking degrees in science, agriculture, and technology. The university did not consider the humanities and social sciences ends in themselves.

This pattern changed dramatically in the 1940s and ‘50s. The United States was becoming less rural and more urban, less blue-collar and more white-collar. World War II was over, the G.I. Bill was in effect, and there was a post-World War II baby boom. The number of applicants to Purdue skyrocketed, and the characteristics of the applicants were very different. More of the students were women and veterans;² more sought careers in the white-collar sector of our economy; more were interested in the social, cultural, and aesthetic aspects of life; and more wanted to major in the humanities and social sciences.

Purdue adapted to these changing circumstances in several ways. Starting in the 1940s, the university created new liberal arts departments, funded new faculty lines in these departments, developed new undergraduate majors and minors in these disciplines, authorized new Masters degrees and doctoral programs, and funded new assistantships for graduate students. In addition to supporting the faculty’s teaching, it also supported their research, travel to and from national conventions, publications and performances, and other professional activities.

It also organized these departments into various “schools” or “colleges.” A School of Science, Education, and Humanities (SEH) was formed in 1953. As the social science disciplines increased, SEH was reorganized and renamed the School of Humanities, Social Sciences, and Education (HSSE) in 1963. When a separate School of Education was

formed in 1989, HSSE was reconfigured and renamed the School of Liberal Arts (SLA). In 2005, it was renamed the College of Liberal Arts (CLA). CLA now includes nine departments (five in the humanities: English, Languages and Cultures, History, Philosophy, and Visual and Performing Arts) and four in the social sciences (Anthropology, Communication, Political Science, and Sociology). It also encompasses seventeen interdisciplinary studies programs (e.g., African-American Studies, Women's Studies, Religious Studies, and Jewish Studies).

The Study of Religion

In Purdue's early years, university officials saw religion as an extra-curricular activity that could help the university produce students of character who would be responsible citizens. The "main building" (now University Hall, dedicated in 1877), included the president's office, a library, a classroom, *and a chapel*. All students were required to attend morning prayers in the chapel Monday through Friday at 10:15. They also were invited to attend a voluntary worship service in the chapel on Sunday afternoons at 3:30. In the 1930s, the university sponsored a religious convocation series featuring prominent religious leaders and initiated an annual Christmas Show.

Although the Christmas Show persists (including three sold out performances on consecutive weekends every December), for the most part, the university no longer sponsors religious activities. The chapel is gone; so are morning prayers, Sunday afternoon worship, and the religious convocation series.

Meanwhile, religious groups have sprung up all over campus—groups such as the YMCA and YWCA (in the 1880s), the Wesley Foundation

(1917), University Church (1919), the Hillel Foundation (1939), St. Thomas Aquinas Center (1951), Chapel of the Good Shepherd (1956), the Baptist Student Foundation (1959), and the Islamic Society of Greater Lafayette-Purdue Mosque (2001). Believing that these groups also want to foster good character and responsible citizenship, university officials have cooperated with them. One example of this cooperation has been the university's practice of asking prospective students to indicate their religious preferences, then sharing their answers with the appropriate campus ministries. The result has been such a high level of activity in campus ministry programs that in the 1980s a participant at a conference of Big Ten campus ministers described Purdue as "the most religious school in the Big Ten."

Although the university has always valued religion as an extra-curricular activity, it wasn't until the university embraced the liberal arts that religion became a part of the university's curriculum. As a core component of a liberal arts education, religion offered students other-worldly images of a better life. In courses comparing the world's major religions, students could discover which parts of their own religious traditions are most universal and most distinctive. By studying Dante's *Inferno*, Jonathan Edwards' *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God*, and Thomas Merton's *Seven Story Mountain*, students also could learn how others have struggled with issues of faith and morals, what fateful decisions others have made, and what decisions *they* might make under similar circumstances. This humanities-oriented approach continues to be grounded in the philosophy department and has become the backbone of the interdisciplinary Religious Studies program.

People in the social sciences are more interested in the social origins and consequences of religion. They want to know what social conditions breed various patterns of religious belief and practice, and when religion is likely to be an opiate or an inspiration. They set aside their personal perspectives and use a variety scientific theories (e.g., functionalism, conflict theory, rational choice, symbolic interactionism) and methods (e.g., national surveys, case studies) to gather evidence bearing on their hypotheses and to examine the relative importance of various correlates. They submit their conclusions to their peers, who look for any biases or errors that must be corrected before their findings are considered valid.

At Purdue, the central location for this social scientific approach has been the Department of Sociology, which was founded in 1953. Its first head was Harold Christensen, whose research on marriage and the family included comparisons of intrafaith and interfaith marriages. He learned that interfaith marriages were more likely to involve premarital pregnancy and end in divorce. In the 1960s, sociologist Jeffrey Hadden wrote a frequently-cited book (*The Gathering Storm in the Churches*) about the conflicting views of clergy and laypeople regarding the social issues of the sixties. In the 1970s, Dean D. Knudsen coauthored a book (*Spindles and Spires*) documenting churches' impact on the transformation of the economy in Gastonia, North Carolina between the 1940s and '60s. The study of religion experienced a setback when Hadden left Purdue, Christensen retired, and Knudsen turned his attention to studies of child abuse and neglect.

I joined the Purdue faculty in 1968. In the next two decades, I introduced a popular new course in the sociology of religion, published numerous articles on the correlates of religious commitment, conducted evaluations of three interfaith organizations, wrote a book on the Lafayette

Urban Ministry, edited the *Review of Religious Research*, and was promoted to full professor.

During a reorganization project in the mid-1980s, the department discovered that religion was one of six areas that were attracting the most graduate and undergraduate students, bringing in the most grant money, and producing the most publications. Thus, the department voted to recognize religion as one of its six areas of teaching and research emphasis.

In 1989, the department hired Roger Finke. Sometimes on his own, sometimes with his graduate students, and at other times with Rodney Stark, Finke used rational choice theory to the study of America's religious economy (c.f., *The Churching of America, 1776-1990*). His conclusions that religious adherence has increased in the U.S. and that religion is an important part of modern society were major contributions to Purdue's growing reputation in the sociology of religion.

Meanwhile, I pursued three lines of research: why some affluent churches are more involved than others in social service and social justice activities, generational differences in the beliefs and practices of American Catholics, and continuities and changes in religious stratification over the course of U.S. history. These studies resulted in many articles and numerous books (e.g., *The Search for Common Ground*, *Catholicism in Motion*, and *Ranking Faiths*). They also led to many speaking engagements, leadership positions in professional associations, and awards.

In addition to our personal achievements, Finke and I wanted to create a *program* in the sociology of religion. The program would include a sequence of courses on religion, an emphasis on students' involvement in every phase of our research, and a culture of participation and leadership in our profession and in our society.

We believed that there would be widespread support for such a program in our department and other parts of the university. We assumed that, regardless of their personal views of religion, our departmental colleagues would appreciate whatever additional resources we could bring into the department, whatever advantage we could give the department in recruiting top-flight graduate students, and whatever we could do to enhance the department's national reputation. People in the humanities would see our program as additional evidence of the importance of religion and the value of their work in religious studies. Given the fact that people in the physical sciences, agriculture, and engineering are among the most religious people on any campus, we believed they would appreciate our program's scientific approach to topics they consider important. People in university administration would find that many alumni/ae, public officials, private foundations, and other stakeholders consider the program a reason to increase their support of the university.

Finke and I made progress in establishing that program. Finke's work on America's religious economy transformed our discipline and led to many awards. My books on religious stratification and generations of Catholics also received critical acclaim in both academic and church circles. We developed a five-course curriculum on religion. Finke created the American Religion Data Archive (ARDA), an indispensable resource for everyone interested in data on American religion, and my work with the Lafayette Urban Ministry has improved the quality of life in our community, especially for the poor.

We were surprised that some colleagues opposed our efforts, but, with the support of Dean Toby Parcel, department head, Viktor Gecas, and a majority of our colleagues, we prevailed.³ The current members of the

program are taking it to new levels of excellence in research, teaching, and service. Fenggang Yang, who joined the department in 2002, has become America's leading authority on religion in China, established a Center for the Study of Religion in Chinese Society, attracted over \$5,000,000 to support his work, built relationships among American and Chinese scholars interested in religion in China, and been elected president of the Society for the Social Scientific Study of Religion.

Daniel Olson joined the department in 2007. He has become a leader in the study of church growth and decline. He has been president of the Association for the Sociology of Religion and the Religious Research Association, and chair of the American Sociological Association's Section on Religion. Olson also serves as the director of graduate studies and has earned the reputation of being one of the finest mentors of grad students in department history.

Assistant professor Daniel Winchester is developing an impressive record of significant research related to religious conversion and commitment, excellence in the classroom, and service based on expertise. Three other colleagues contribute to the program by advising students who want to link religion to politics and qualitative methods (Rachel Einwohner), social networks, decision making, and evaluation research (Scott Feld), and health, aging, and the life course (Kenneth Ferraro).

Conclusions

When Purdue was founded, the United States was a rural, agricultural, and blue-collar society, and Purdue was a state-supported, land-grant university that emphasized research on material solutions to physical problems. Since then, our society has become more urban, service-oriented,

and white-collar. As these changes have taken place, the university has adapted by increasing its support of the liberal arts and realizing that one of the liberal arts' key components—religion—is a legitimate and important area of study. These adaptations have transformed Purdue from a school that focused almost entirely on the mechanical arts and material issues of late-1800s into a more comprehensive university that still emphasizes physical issues, but now includes the liberal arts and addresses the social, cultural, and spiritual issues of the twenty-first century.

This transformation has been good for Purdue. It has introduced programs that Purdue's founders could not have imagined but which are important in today's society and to current university stakeholders, such as state taxpayers and legislators, alumni/ae, and benefactors. It also has allowed Purdue to extend its influence into spheres of life that were not within its domain in the late-1800s, but which are today—spheres such as marriage and family life, health care, criminal justice, domestic and global politics, changes in America's religious landscape, and the role of religion in local communities, national trends, and international conflicts.

Finally, this transformation gives Purdue a distinctive identity and an important role to play in the highly competitive world of modern-day higher education. Unlike narrowly-focused engineering schools that still see the liberal arts as little more than service courses for prospective engineers, Purdue has nationally-ranked engineering programs *and* recognizes the intrinsic value of the liberal arts. Also, unlike land-grant universities that have embraced a largely secular view of the liberal arts, Purdue treats religion as a legitimate area of study. Thus, Purdue has a special opportunity to prove that the liberal arts and religion are compatible with the mechanical arts and physical sciences. Advances in one sphere are compatible with

advances in the other. Paraphrasing Abbé Suger's words in the stained-glass window in the Union building, "*Sometimes our poor spirit is so weak that it is only through the use of materials that it can rise to the truth, and at other times our poor materials are so weak that it is only through the power of the spirit that they can be put to good use.*"

Endnotes

1. In addition to these two adaptations, the university has shifted from its early emphasis on agriculture and steam-driven technologies used on farms to nanotechnology and the other computer-driven technologies located in Research Park, Discovery Park, and the forthcoming aviation district that will be in the southwest corner of the main campus.

2. There were very few black students at Purdue in the 1950s, and they were more likely to be international students from Africa than minority students from the United States. The number of African-American students—and other racial and ethnic minorities—did not increase significantly until the 1960s.

3. The fiercest resistance came from colleagues who wanted to replace the department's universalistic norms of science and its increasing emphasis on religion with particularistic norms based on their secular Marxist and secular feminist ideologies.