

## Peter D. Jauhiainen, Kirkwood Community College



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In this brief article I would like to explore several issues concerning the teaching of religion in community colleges. They all focus on some aspect of what I would call the "pragmatic dimension" of the community college itself and its impact on religious studies. By this I mean that the mission of the community college is oriented toward the "useful" or the "practical" in a manner that is somewhat different than four-year colleges and universities.

First, the community college is designed to be a comprehensive institution that responds to the needs of the local community. This has been part of its mission since the 1930s when the federal government allocated funds to establish emergency junior colleges in order to retrain people who had lost their jobs during the Great Depression. The community college movement was further fueled by returning World War II veterans who took advantage of the GI Bill to gain access to higher education. In 1947, the Truman Commission advised that junior colleges think of themselves as "community colleges" and offer not simply the "first half of a four-year degree" but a wide variety of programs to meet the needs of local citizens of diverse ages and social backgrounds. Today the community college provides not only two-year transfer degrees but vocational and technical training, programs for retraining of workers, developmental education, high school completion, and various community services.

Because of this broad mission, religion offerings are typically limited to survey courses that are easily transferable to four-year schools and that appeal to a wide range of students. *Transferability* and *marketability*

are essential factors of whether or not a course will succeed. Thus there is little opportunity to teach specialized courses in the area of one's expertise. At Kirkwood Community College, which has an enrollment of over 11,000 students, I teach three introductory religion courses semester after semester — Judaism, Christianity and Islam, Introduction to Religions of the East, and Religion in the United States. In past summers I have also taught Introduction to Religions of the World. Furthermore, there are typically no religion majors and professors are fortunate if they have some of the same students for more than two courses. This makes it difficult to develop the kind of rapport with students that one might have at four-year institutions, especially liberal arts colleges.

At the community college, pragmatic considerations serve another and perhaps more foundational one — money. Since at my institution, at least, tuition dollars account for around fifty per cent of the general operating budget due to current state budget restraints and a twenty-year pattern of neglect of the community colleges by the state legislature, an overriding concern of the administration is to ensure that certain arts and sciences courses maintain high student enrollments. In effect, they have become the "cash cows" of the college. Since students pay the same tuition rates no matter what courses they take, and since many courses like religion, philosophy, and history can be taught through the medium of large lectures, they help to finance smaller, more expensive courses in the vocational and technical programs where high-tech classrooms and laboratories give students much-needed hands on training. Of course, implied in this understanding is the idea that we in the liberal arts, for example, can adequately improve and measure students' skills and learning when we are assigned 150-190 students per semester. The large student volume restricts one's choice of assignments and the amount of constructive feedback one provides on papers and exam essays, and indeed tempts one to resort to much multiple choice testing in order to reduce the time spent grading.

In responding to community needs, community colleges have been concerned to provide quality programs at low cost. One way of reducing costs is not only to have some faculty teach large classes, but to have them teach more classes than they would in a liberal arts college or university setting. At Kirkwood, the standard load is five classes per semester. Needless to say, there is little time for research. At the community college, faculty are primarily teachers. They are not expected to publish. Thus they are relieved of the pressure of having to churn out articles and books in order to receive ongoing employment. Yet this can be frustrating for faculty who would like to make contributions to the larger scholarly community, or who fear intellectual stagnation if time prohibits them from keeping up to date with the latest scholarship in their disciplines.

Another way of keeping costs down is to employ large numbers of part-time, adjunct instructors. Community colleges generally use a higher percentage of adjunct instructors than four-year colleges and universities. This not only keeps tuition costs lower, it allows them to be more

flexible in their programming. Since religious studies is often seen as tangential to other "core" disciplines, courses are frequently taught by professors trained in other areas like philosophy or literature or by members of the clergy.

This presents two obvious concerns. One, there are a lot of instructors teaching religion at community colleges who are not adequately trained in the academic study of religion, let alone the particular subject being taught. I don't have any statistics to back this up, but a casual check of community college course catalogs or web pages bears this out. This perhaps promotes the perception that religion is not a rigorous academic discipline in its own right that deserves to be placed alongside history, philosophy, literature, and so on.

Second, I suspect that some ministers who serve as adjunct instructors are tempted to use the classroom as a pulpit for promoting their own religious faith. This raises serious church/state issues that might further confirm the reluctance of some community colleges to offer religion courses. Not only do state supported, secular institutions need to be convinced of the importance of religious studies, but they must be convinced of the importance of hiring qualified religious academicians to teach the subjects in this area.

A final issue relates to the pragmatic dimension in a different way. The community college is characterized by a "consumer approach" to education where the overriding concern is the economic and social utility of its courses. Its primary concern is to prepare students for jobs — to connect newly acquired skills to the job market, thereby promoting students' economic and social progress. This emphasis on practical usefulness represents a somewhat different ideal than the traditional college or university, where a strong commitment to the liberal arts reveals an underlying concern to develop well-rounded, educated persons who are prepared to encounter life in all its variety.

What kinds of implications does this "consumerist culture" have for religious studies, or more specifically, for the promotion of religious studies at community colleges? I still think there is a place to argue for the validity of religious studies by appealing to the value of developing full human beings who might be intellectually, morally, and spiritually enriched or challenged by studying the religious dimensions of different cultures. Yet in a context where vast numbers of students never go beyond one or two years of course work, but instead are concerned to get just enough education to improve their job prospects, we need to articulate how the study of religion is applicable to the work place. I would like to suggest a couple of ways how this can be done.

One thing we hear increasingly from employers is the desire for prospective job seekers to be not only technically proficient but to be thoroughly trained in the so-called "soft skills." These include critical or logical thinking, problem solving, oral and written communication, and the ability to work in small groups. We should stress how the study of religion can promote some of these skills, through the interpretation of texts, the writing of papers, and the critical analysis of ideas, practices and institutions of human cultures. Community college administrators need to be shown how religious studies give students important analytical tools that will serve them well in the work place and other facets of life.

Another way is to stress the importance of preparing students for constructive engagement in a multicultural workplace and society, and for understanding the complex reactions of world communities to the ubiquitous forces of globalization. They will be working with and living among people of diverse religious beliefs, values, and practices. The academic study of religion can promote a healthy understanding of and appreciation for diversity, thereby encouraging cooperation and mutual respect among workers or citizens. It can also encourage a more nuanced awareness of the divergent expressions of religious conviction within each of the world's religions, thereby preventing rash and indiscriminate judgments that perpetuate cycles of prejudicial thoughts and actions toward the individual members of different religious communities. This goal has perhaps been never more urgent than in the aftermath of the tragic events of September 11, as Americans of all faiths work to understand each other better and assess the social, political, and religious factors that breed hatred and violence, both within our country and the world at large.