

Faculty view: Is religious faith incompatible with academic life?

True to its faintly medieval architecture, Swarthmore may be considered a kind of monastic cloister where students, faculty, and administration are very disciplined—or at least place a high value on the appearance of hard work. Many of us don't get out much into the so-called real world. Although we don't have a written list of monastic rules, some are nonetheless communicated and followed. For example, unless you work in the higher reaches of the administration, being well dressed is frowned upon. It's fascinating to observe how first-year students and new faculty gradually assume uniform habits of moderate grunginess.

Over the nine years that I've been teaching here, I've seen a subtle but similar hardening of avowed ideas at Swarthmore, especially, I think, since the College was designated No. 1 a couple of years in a row by *U.S. News & World Report*. One aspect of that hardening can be seen in campus attitudes toward religious faith. I wonder why, considering academia's current climate of respect for cultural diversity, it is still considered acceptable to scoff at religious faith and its practitioners. Why is it that Buddhists, Christians, Jews, and Muslims are so often assumed to be unintelligent or psychologically unstable? From what I've observed in faculty and classroom discussions, and from students' written work, this widespread attitude results from ignorance, intellectual laziness, or outright prejudice.

At a faculty lunch last year, the College's Roman-Catholic, Jewish, and Protestant religious advisers gave an eye-opening report on religious life on campus. It turns out that about half our students make use of the Office of Religious Advisers on campus, usually in their first or second year. It's also not commonly known that a significant number of tenured Swarthmore professors are deeply committed Jewish or Christian believers.

It is not unusual in academic work to see scholars and students struggling to explain such things as the revolution in 18th-century France or the predominantly liturgical creative output of J.S. Bach. Historians often assume that people must have socioeconomic motivations for their behavior, but is it so difficult to imagine that intelligent, psychologically stable people might actually do things that are against their social or economic interests? That in some instances their behavior might be inspired by genuine religious beliefs? You don't have to agree with the religious beliefs to appreciate their potential explanatory power in historical research.

Swarthmore may well be among the top two or three liberal arts colleges, but if so, I don't believe it's because of

the reasons indicated in *U.S. News* ratings. True, we have many quantifiable resources, including an incredibly low student-faculty ratio. These are the sorts of things a college can purchase, however, if it is fortunate enough to have sufficient funds. What really sets Swarthmore apart is its institutional seriousness of purpose, what President Alfred Bloom often refers to as a commitment to "ethical intelligence."

A commitment to ethical intelligence inevitably leads to a sense of discomfort. By asking hard questions and then using our academic and intellectual skills to search for answers, we risk upsetting our belief systems. We also open opportunities to dispel erroneous stereotypes we may have taken for granted.

Comfort has to do with the known, and it easily leads to stasis and hardening. Ethical intelligence, on the other hand, accepts continual forays into the unknown. A liberal arts education ought to liberate, not ossify. It ought to make students uncomfortable.

The notion of a liberal arts education originated in the ancient world where there were seven "liberal arts"—the verbal arts of grammar, rhetoric, and logic, and the mathematical arts of arithmetic, geometry, music, and astronomy. The liberal arts (from *liber*, meaning "free") were carried on by free citizens, as opposed to the mechanical arts, such as carpentry, which were rendered by slaves.

That solidification and maintenance of class distinctions doesn't apply at Swarthmore because we're able to afford a financial-aid policy that allows students to be admitted regardless of social class. Yet are our students truly free?

When I say that I hope students will be uncomfortable at Swarthmore, I mean that I hope they will not expect their education simply to affirm their existing identities and commitments. This sort of individual or group egoism, in my view, is neither ethical nor intelligent. I also hope that Swarthmore will do more than inspire questions about individuals' identities and commitments.

If a liberal arts education can affirm one's gender, race, color, age, ethnicity, or sexual orientation, there is no reason why it should work against one's faith.

In studying the sciences and "humanities" at Swarthmore (I prefer the corresponding German notion of *Geisteswissenschaften*—literally, "spiritual/intellectual knowledges"), I hope students will feel challenged and compelled to examine many things beyond what is comfortable and the immediately perceivable. I expect this will help in best realizing the College's stated purpose: "to make its students more valuable human beings and more useful members of society."



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This essay was adapted from Professor Marissen's talk at First Collection, welcoming the Class of 2002 to Swarthmore.