

Interfaith conversations when some faiths are secular

Gordon Bermant

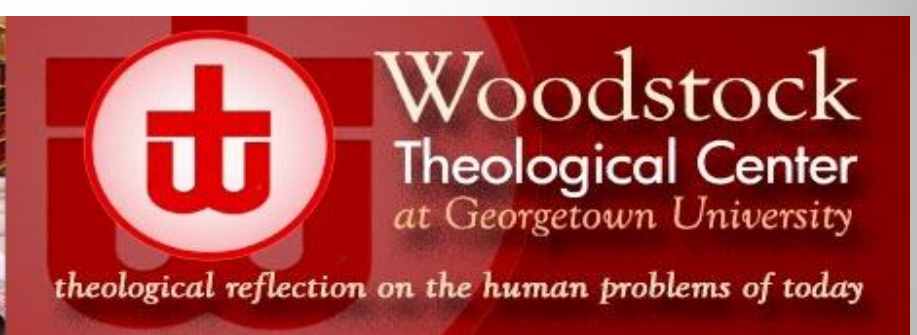
October 6, 2010

Three parts to the story

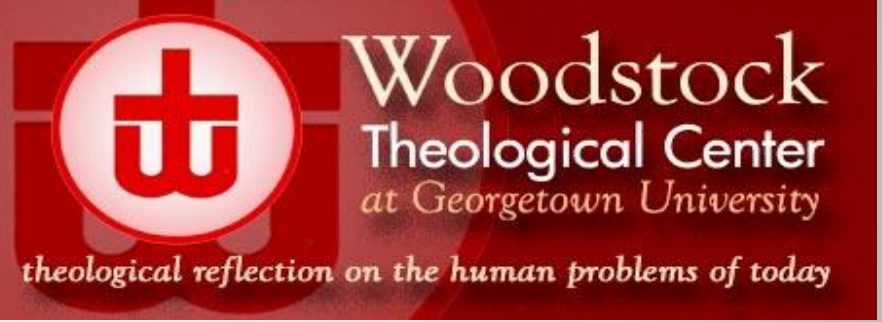
- Current personal influences and speculations
- Examples of secular faiths in religious conversations
- A constructive and perhaps controversial alternative vocabulary

Current personal influences

- Interreligious Dialogue on Education at Woodstock Theological Center
- Teaching Psychology and Religion to Penn undergraduates
- Teaching Buddhist Psychology to GTU seminarians



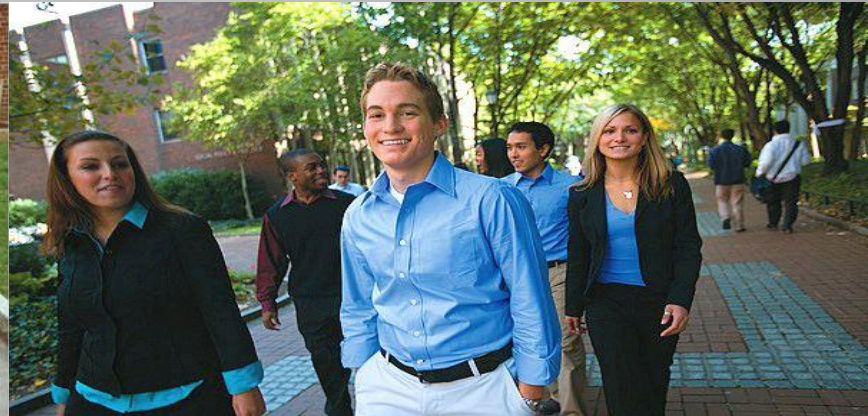
- The Interreligious Conversation
 - About a dozen regular members across the spectrum of religions, guests of the Jesuit Center
 - Most are lay, a few are ordained
 - Some are retired, all are senior in something or other
 - Tasked to write a book expressing our personal understandings from within our own traditions
 - Faith and belief, prayer, pluralism, dimensions of dialogue, interreligious conflict in the public square



- We are sustained in this by
 - Courtesy and mutual respect
 - A willingness to move beyond the boundaries of our separate beliefs to an unverbilized acceptance of what is beyond belief
- We do not dwell on this community

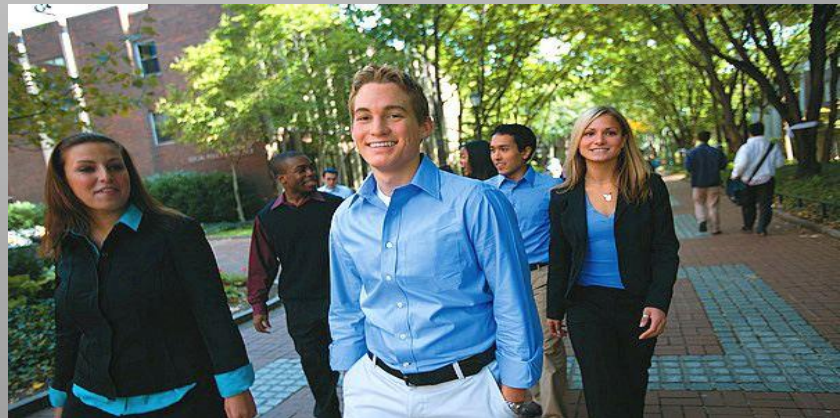


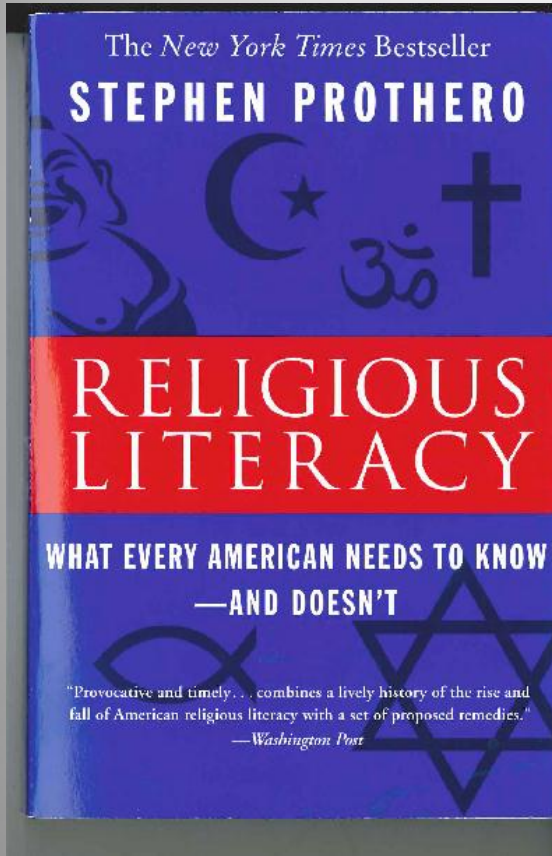
- Teaching Psychology and Religion to Penn undergraduates
45-50 students during the past three years





- Students self-identify as follows:
 - Jewish (approx. 40%)
 - Christian (approx. 40%)
 - Other (including Atheist and Humanist, approx. 20%)
- Religious identification is often unaccompanied by religious literacy





Prothero's lament about American religious ignorance applies to many of our students:

The four Gospels

**The first five books of the
Hebrew Bible**

The Ten Commandments

Abraham and the binding of Isaac

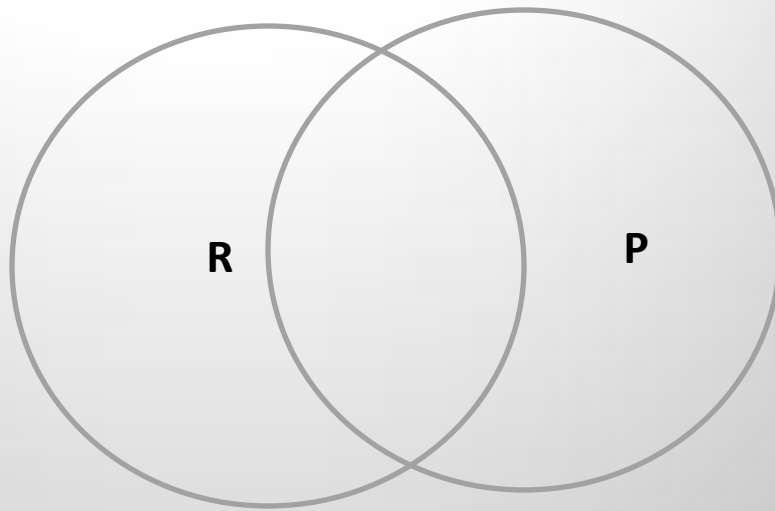
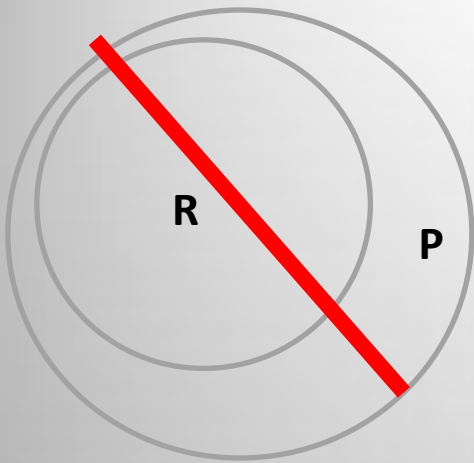
Story of the Good Samaritan

Paul on the road to Damascus

Name of any Hindu sacred text

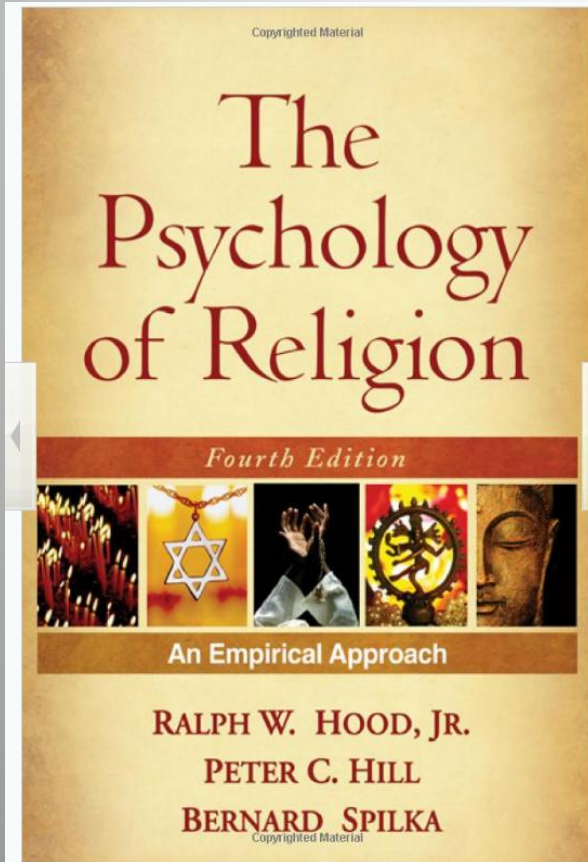
Buddhism's Four Noble Truths

EXCEPTION: All students correctly name the Holy Book of Islam and identify Ramadan as an Islamic holy occasion (One student has self-identified as Muslim in three years)



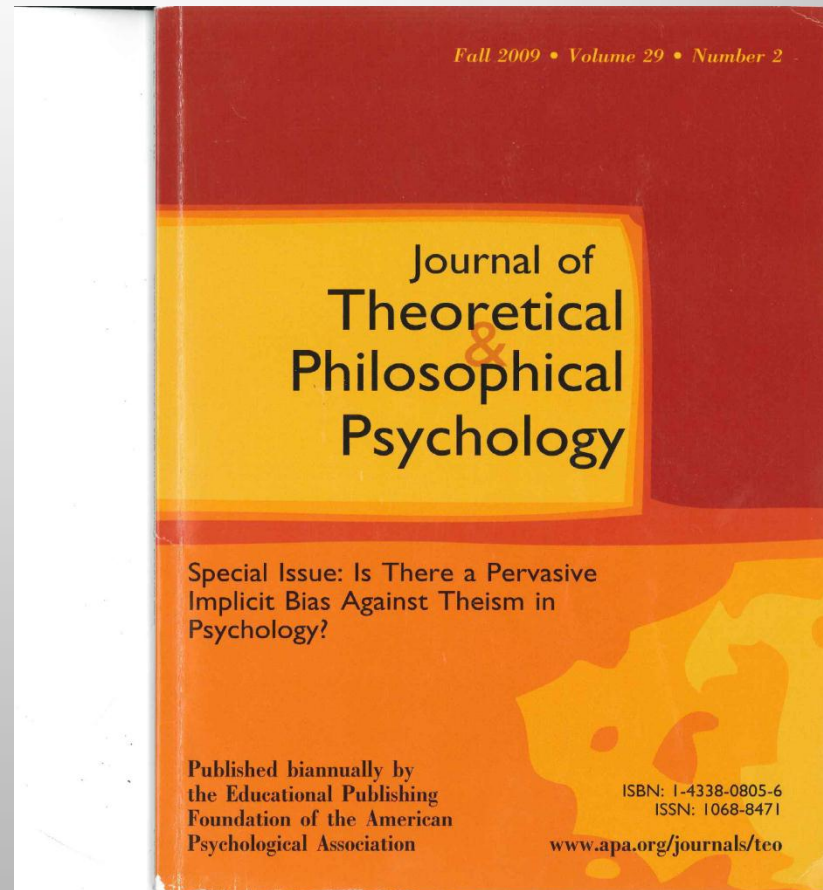
- I distinguish Psychology **of** Religion from Psychology **and** Religion
 - Try to avoid privileging either discourse domain
 - Try to find a mutually respectful way through the material
 - Expose students to “the field”
 - Meet the students “where they are”

The state of “the field”



650 pages, approx. 2,600 references
Authors senior, and self-identified
Christian

“We advocate an empirical, scientific
approach.”



“...attempts to use the insights
gained from a naturalistic
worldview could constitute a
significant prejudice against
theism and theists.”

The field...and many students, are stymied by the elephant in the room



- **“The question of whether religion is ‘true’ or not has haunted the psychology of religion for decades....Most psychologists of religion have chosen to ignore this elephant in the living room.”**
— E. Ozorak

Meeting students where they are

- “Spirituality” is generally approved or avowed
 - Students do not label themselves as more religious than spiritual, though they may label their parents as such
- “Religion” is problematic
 - Students tend to question the religious apparatus in which they were raised
 - Religion, as “organized”, is blamed for many world ills
- Exceptions: some movement to Orthodox Judaism (noticeable at Penn) and Bible-centered Protestantism (more noticeable elsewhere)

Where conversation is comfortable

- Emphasis on personal experience with emotional content of mystery, awe, or transcendence
- Mutual disclosure of such experience without necessarily connecting it to sectarian vocabularies (“religion”)
- “Faith” is not frequently used in these conversations
- Being “spiritual but not religious” is a comfortable place for many students to be



As at Georgetown, convergence is found beyond belief



Graduate Theological Union, Berkeley



Institute of Buddhist Studies

- Teaching Buddhist Psychology to seminarians (on-line course)
 - In addition to IBS students, students from the Starr King Unitarian-Universalist seminary at GTU

Hard lessons to learn

- There is no single or unified Buddhist Psychology operating over the 2500 years since the death of Sakyamuni Buddha
- Understandings of Buddha, karma, nirvana, no-self (*anatman*), consciousness, and multiple lifetimes have changed repeatedly
- Every change brings something new and maintains residue of the past
- There is no view from nowhere
- “Cafeteria Buddhism” and “Cafeteria Psychology” are tempting menus

Strongly expressed differences are not difficult to locate within Buddhism

- “ ‘Do you understand the changing nature of all things?’ I said I had arrived at this understanding in Japan and...seen it in a new way yesterday. ‘As far as we are concerned, you have reached the first stage and there are eighteen stages....The Zen method is altogether different....you may not say you have succeeded in ours. And do not tell people our method is like Zen.’ ”
 - Famed Burmese meditation master Mahasi Sayadaw to American student Jack Huber in Huber’s book *Through an Eastern Window* (1967)

Satipatthana, vipassana

Mindfulness, insight

Zazen

“Just sitting,”

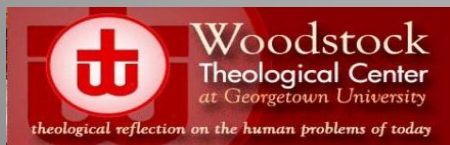
koan introspection

Nevertheless...

- Shared silence is a converging occasion
- “I open my mouth, I make a mistake”
- Awareness of emptiness (*sunyata*) as a form of ignorance rather than knowledge can become the focus of interfaith attention

Conjectures from these experiences:

- The Woodstock, Penn, and IBS/GTU experiences lead me to conjecture:
 - Interfaith congruence lies beyond belief
 - “Religion” is sometimes *subordinated* to “spirituality” in interfaith conversations
 - Subordination is not the same as a positive account or organization of experience
 - “Religion” is at risk of losing all positive valence
 - “Spirituality” works in part because it is so vague



Part 2

- Current personal influences and speculations
- Examples of secular faiths in religious conversations
- A constructive and perhaps controversial alternative vocabulary

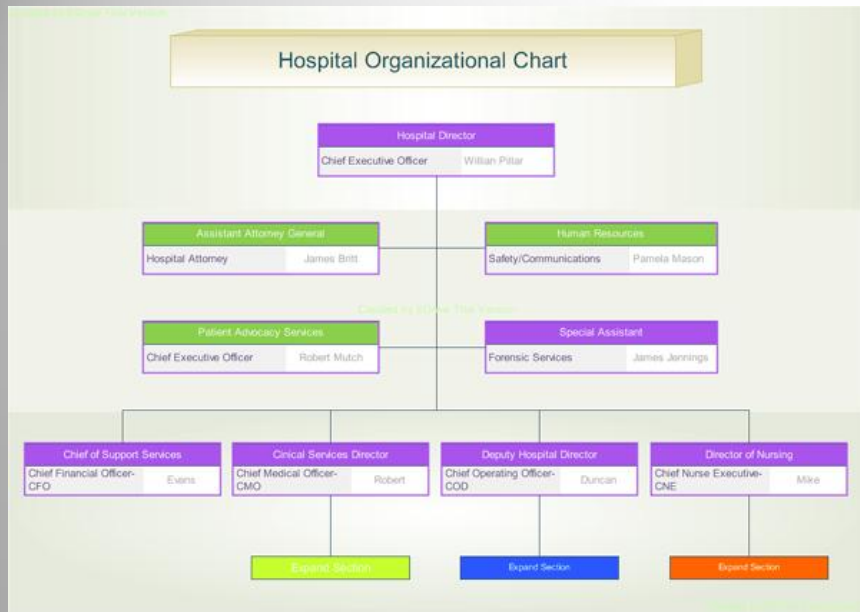
Secular faith 1: Science-based Cure and Care (SCC)



**There are
cathedrals**



**There are
priests,
vestments,
and purity
rituals**

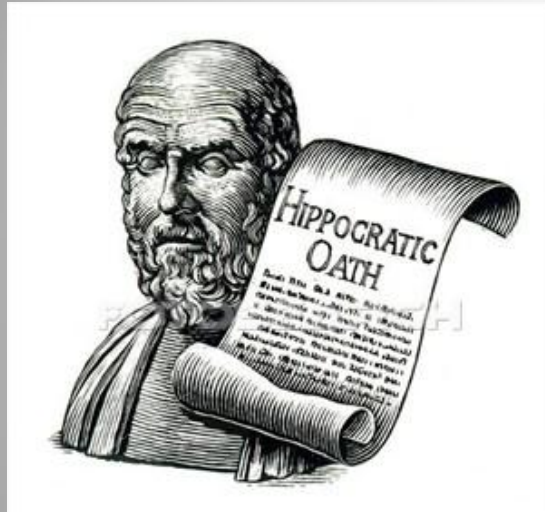


**There are hierarchy
and power**

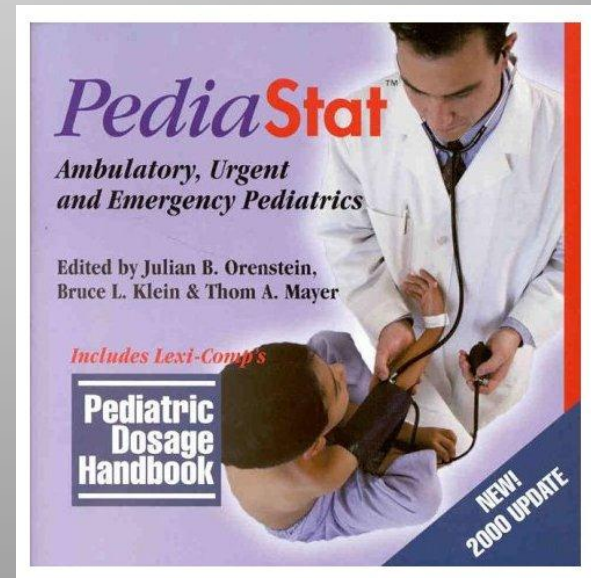
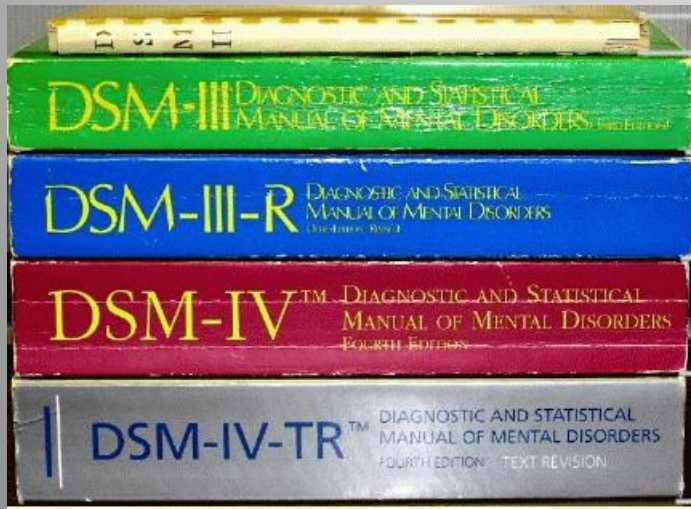


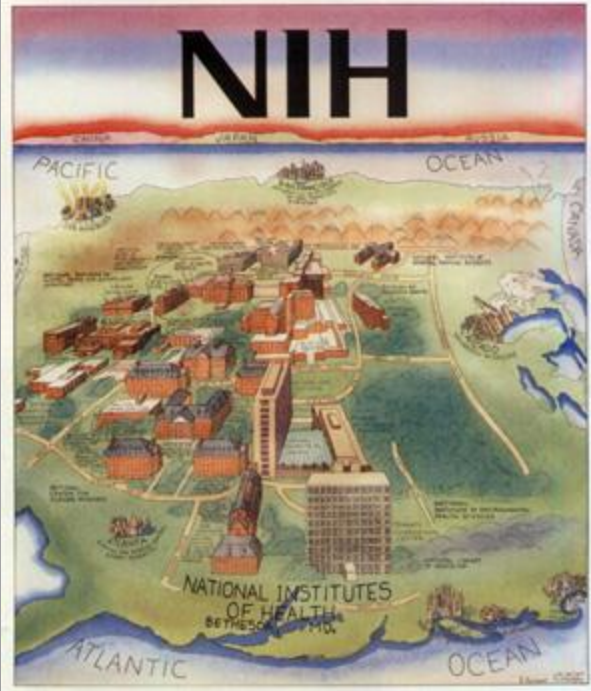


There are
wealthy
benefactors



There are texts of doctrine and practice





**As with religions
historically, there
are tight
connections with
the government**



Where does science-based cure and care engage with other faiths?

- **Hospital chaplaincies**
 - **Pastoral care, counseling, and therapy**
 - Direction of appropriation
 - Questions of evidence?
- End-of-life protocols
- Procedures at or before birth

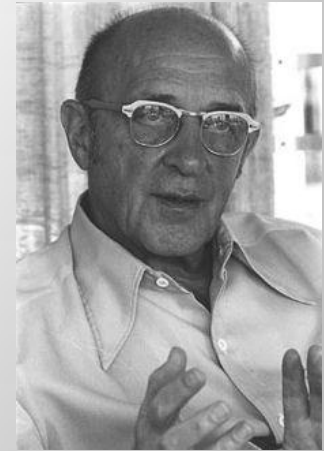
John Ehman's "Interfaith Chaplaincy"

- Care of patients "with or without religious affiliation or inclination"
- "Desire to connect in new and meaningful ways"
- "*active listening* that follows the patient's lead"
 - "conveying caring, interest, and relationship"
 - "avoiding **the interpersonal barriers of traditional religious differences**"
 - "non-anxious and trustworthy **presence...is the ground upon which an interfaith spiritual care relationship can be built** "
- The interfaith chaplain is a "welcome stranger" who can create a setting for "sacred moments of sharing"

Spirituality acts to avoid barriers of religious difference

- The benefits are delivered, beyond belief, in the existential encounter between the chaplain and the patient
- The chaplain offers the patient a partnership of authenticity
- There is significant resemblance between this model and the Person-Centered Therapy of Carl Rogers

Rogers' Person-Centered Therapy



- “This approach emphasizes therapist presence, empathic attunement to the client's internal frame of reference, acceptance and affirmation of the client, congruence in the therapist, and a fundamental belief in the client's resourcefulness and potential to move forward in their lives. It also honors and preserves clients' autonomy and choice.”
 - From an APA review of Cain, *Person-Centered Therapy Over Time*

An appropriation from secular faith care to interfaith care

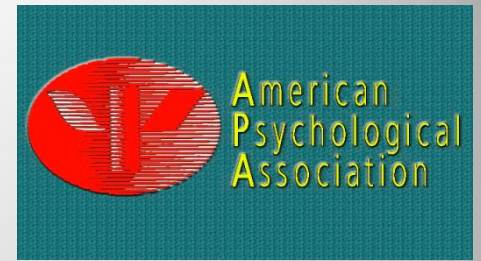
- What obligations, if any, are on the appropriator to honor the context and traditions of the practice or method appropriated?
- A flower uprooted into new soil?
- What context and traditions might apply in this case?

Evidence of effectiveness

- The move to insisting on “evidence-based treatment” in clinical psychology and psychiatry is producing some strenuous arguments within psychology
- The American Psychological Association has been battling with the Association for Psychological Science about criteria for clinical training programs
- The argument arises against a background of a consensus in mainstream psychology that a model of empirical effectiveness evaluation is appropriate for psychotherapy and counseling



APS-APA Positions



- “Clinical psychologists’ failure to achieve a more significant impact on clinical and public health may be traced to their deep ambivalence about the role of science and their lack of adequate science training, which leads them to value personal clinical experience over research evidence, use assessment practices that have dubious psychometric support, and not use the interventions for which there is the strongest evidence of efficacy.”
 - Baker, McFall & Shoham, *Current Status and Future Prospects of Clinical Psychology* (2009)
- Corporate APA which now controls Clinical Ph.D. program accreditation, and some APA divisions, argue that the APS position is falsely based and that the training regime urged by APS would be counter-productive
- Of particular interest is the position of APA Division 32, the Division of Humanistic Psychology

The position of Humanistic Psychology



- “Thus, it would appear that it is a political war disguised as a scientific one. ...Scientific research on psychotherapy actually shows ...that all bona fide therapeutic systems are robustly effective. Contextual factors – not techniques -- are the primary determinants of therapeutic outcome [citations omitted]. The article marginalizes the extensive scientific research that undermines their position on therapeutic interventions.”
 - societyforhumanisticpsychology.blogspot.com/2009/11/response-to-baker-mcfall-shoham-2009.html

Does interfaith chaplaincy have a stake in this psychological spat?

- Not now
- Could interfaith chaplaincy become subject to regulation under the secular faith?
- Would claims of sacred sharing and spiritual care be sufficient to buffer the practice from the control of science-based cure and care?

Appropriation from religious to secular
faith

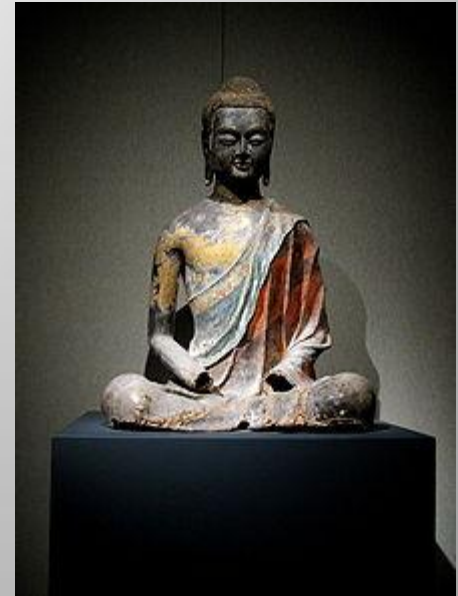
Mindfulness meditation is the poster child for appropriation from religion to secular faith

Many therapists employing mindfulness techniques take pains to disassociate themselves and their practices from Buddhism.

In this way mindfulness practice becomes another example in the “spiritual but not religious” category.

It also rests comfortably in the secular faith of science-based cure and care.

Is there any downside to this?



“Clinical research shows Buddhist mindfulness techniques can help alleviate anxiety, stress, and depression” (Wikipedia)

Secular faith 2: Constitutionalism



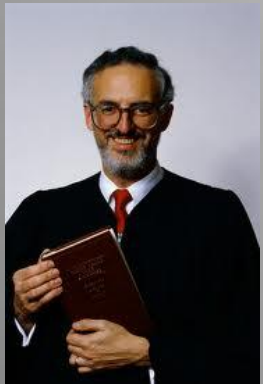
**There is a
cathedral**



**There are priests,
vestments,
succession plans
and purity rituals**



**GINSBURG WITHDRAWS NAME AS SUPREME
COURT NOMINEE, CITING MARIJUANA 'CLAMOR'**
New York Times, November 8, 1987



U.S. Supreme Court

appeals on cases of
constitutional law

U.S. Courts of Appeals

appeals, challenges to
orders from fed
agencies

Special Courts - tax, trade, etc.

specific types of
cases heard

U.S. District Courts

hear cases related to
violations of federal law

**There are
hierarchy
and power**

THE VOTE

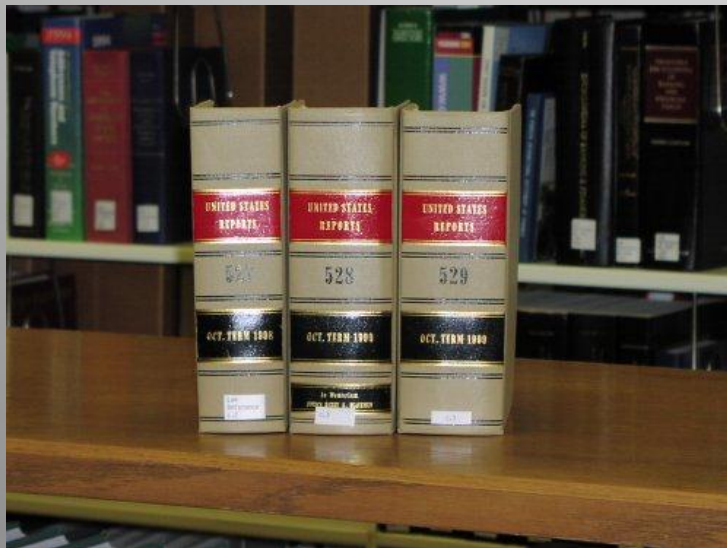
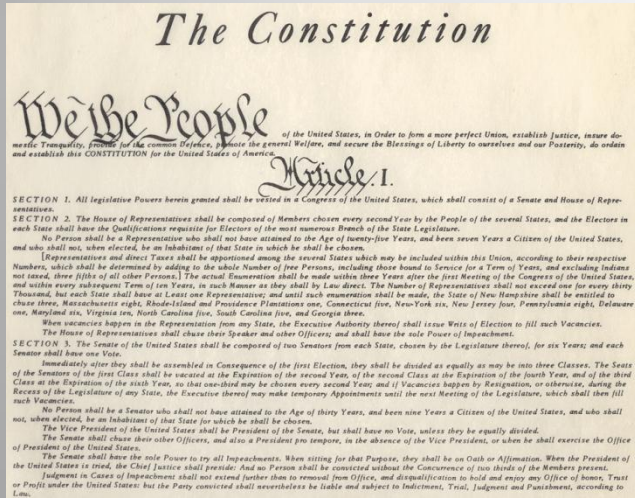
**BUSH, GORE & THE
SUPREME COURT**

EDITED BY CASS R. SUNSTEIN & RICHARD A. EPSTEIN

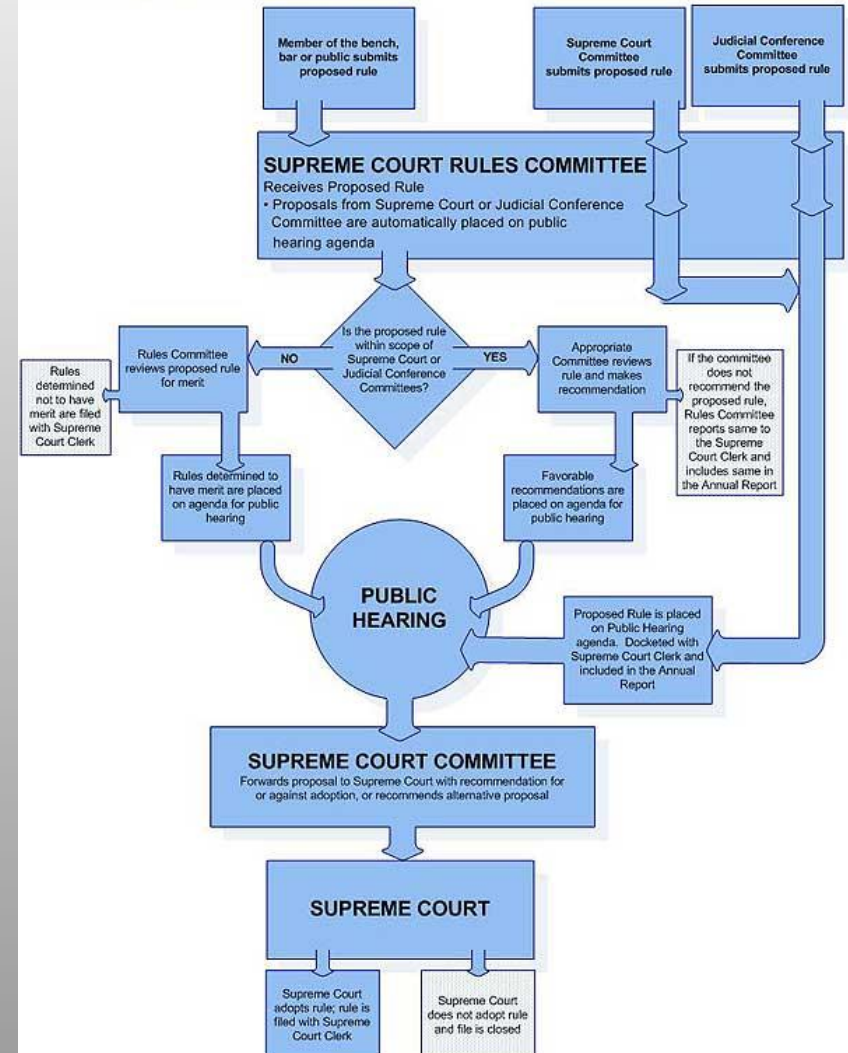


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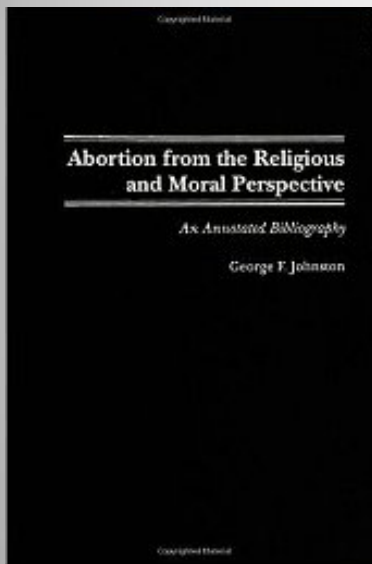
Supreme Court Rulemaking Procedures





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To be continued...

How constitutionalism converses
with science-based care and cure and
the religious faiths



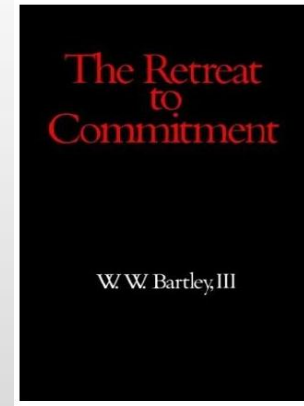
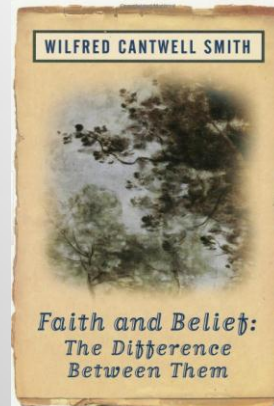
Part 2 summary: when secular faiths enter the interfaith conversation

- Science-based care and cure may have an regulatory streak that is less respectful of “spirituality” than other inter-faith interests would like
- The elephant in the room is locked up whenever possible to prevent chaos in the public square
- When the elephant breaks loose, constitutionalism tries to bring everyone back under the tent
- Righteousness, and self-righteousness in particular, doesn't work very well in conversations with constitutionalism

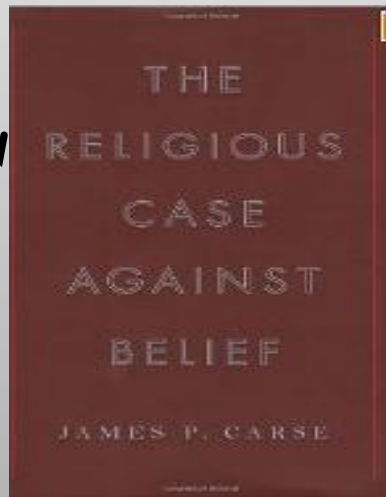
Part 3

- Current personal influences and speculations
- Examples of secular faiths in religious conversations
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Faith as fidelity,
faithfulness, and
trust rather than as
the negative of
doubt or index of
belief.



The individual
always open
to clarification
or revision



Religion as *communitas*

- Spontaneously arisen, indestructible by *civitas*
- Community gathered under a shared acceptance of mystery with tentative accounts that are disputable within the *communitas*
- Shared horizons, but not boundaries
 - Morality not coercive within or outside the *communitas*
- Acceptance of a form of “higher ignorance”

Religions have never been completely separate from associated belief systems

- Belief systems claim knowledge or belief
- Belief systems establish *boundaries* of true and false, right and wrong, rather than shared *horizons* of awe, mystery, and ignorance
 - Belief systems separate groups from each other
 - Religions need not
- Organized promotion of belief systems may claim a coercive morality acting through *civitas*

Might this group usefully discuss
Carse's book together?

Thank you