

The Curricular Domain

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Responsible for the curricular unit of this report, our group focused much of our attention on interviewing professors and some representative students to get a qualitative feel of the religious climate in classrooms here at CWRU. We talked with a wide variety of professors in our interviews because they are obviously integrally involved in the academic processes of this campus. Also, we spoke with a handful of students to confirm, and qualitatively expand on, some trends we saw arising in the student survey. The survey included several questions of particular interest to our group. In all cases, we wanted our interviews to be representative. With that thought in mind, we interviewed professors from many different disciplines: physics, biology, psychology, philosophy, anthropology, geology, classics and of course we interviewed nearly the entire religion department. Also, we spoke with some administrators to see the interaction of religion and academics from a higher perspective. When speaking with students, we talked to members of Chi Alpha and the president of FCA, we spoke with commuter students, students of the Muslim Student Association and others. We also informally gathered information from many more students of varied religious backgrounds. Although one seldom finds complete consensus, we did find some striking patterns and themes, from the need for more communication between religious groups and academic departments here, to the role of religion in the classroom. When interviewing, we found it convenient to divide our questions up into three loose categories, the first being what the interviewee thought of religion's roll in classrooms here at CWRU, second the role of religion in a student's education, and third the general religious climate here at CWRU. We shall cover the findings in each of these categories in order.

Religion in the Classroom

The first topic that many of the interviews touched on was the role that the interviewee felt religion should play in classrooms here at CWRU. Mostly, this was interpreted to mean what level of religious discussion is appropriate in a technical classroom, but some professors also had comments about their experiences teaching religion. Also, in this category was the question of

how comfortable students felt discussing religion in class. As far as this last point is concerned, there seemed to be general consensus that religion is an “ever-present concern”. A recurring theme in this, the curricular section of this paper, is the need for discussion and communication. Here we see a volition for discussion between students about religious topics. There are several caveats, though, that come with this observation. First, while everyone seemed in agreement that more communication in academic settings wouldn’t hurt, many students feel reluctant to initiate such discussion. The survey revealed that, by and large, students are more comfortable with other students talking about religious issues and beliefs than they are discussing their own beliefs. Why is this? According to students we spoke to, many feel that religion is a taboo topic of sorts, it’s something that is understood to be a personal matter only. Beyond this general conception of taboo, many students said that they didn’t want to “step on anyone else’s toes”, they didn’t want to offend. An equal number of students feared judgment by their peers, saying that they were reluctant to discuss religious ideas because they feared critique. One administrator we spoke with said that he saw two types of people on this campus: those who are religiously inclined and stick to themselves and their own tight-knit religious circles content to avoid conflict and those for whom religion is not important, but who are not ‘anti-religious’ in that others practicing doesn’t bother them and they just ignore it. There was a wish expressed for at least a little more confrontation for the sake of discussion, but the fact remains as one professor told us, “The atmosphere here is one of mutual respect and distance. ‘You do your thing, I’ll do mine’”. The second caveat to the notion that religion should be discussed instead of ignored like the proverbial elephant in the room, leads to another major theme in our interviews: religious discussions, while important, deserve their own forum.

The Separation of Science and Religion

Throughout our interviews, the majority of the professors and students we spoke with echoed this sentiment: religion does not belong in technical, scientific classrooms. Although most people want more discussions about religious perspectives, they want it in religion classes or some other setting, not in science and engineering classes. Many professors wanted this question to be more specific- they said that the role of religion in the history of science (such as

in Galileo's life) and as a motivation of many scientific discoveries should, of course, be taught and discussed. They also noted that when asking questions of morality and ethics religion should be cited as a possible basis for such decisions. However, as far as religion being used as an alternative explanation of phenomena (such as intelligent design) in a science classroom, people were nearly unanimous that this belonged in a separate course. This isn't to say, many were quick to add, that ideas such as intelligent design are intrinsically untrue, simply that they are not science and as such belong in a different setting. While the consent on this was high, it is interesting to note that the reasons cited for it varied a fair amount. One professor said that it was a simple matter of training. Professors are trained, generally, to great expertise in one field and are qualified to teach only in that field. The professor in this particular interview pointed out that religious issues and religions themselves are very intricate and a professor who is not trained in the study of religion will likely not understand the complexities of the issues well enough to have a good class on the subject. Another, similar argument was that religion is fundamentally different from the physics or biology of the classes it may arise in. Religious ideas and explanations are often not testable, repeatable, or useful for prediction – all things that qualify something as a science. For this reason, they deserve a separate context. Just as a student in a religion or philosophy class would be distraught to see an integral, a student in a physics class should only expect to learn physics. One other argument stemmed from this and explored the ways in which the subjects are understood. A science professor that was interviewed explained that being a science professor is unlike being a religion professor. He says that when he teaches something in his classes, it is taken as truth. When he says force equals mass times acceleration, there is no period for debate, it is simply taken as being the way it is. On the other hand, when a religion teacher presents some religious perspective, it is understood to be just one opinion which may or may not be correct. Given this dichotomy, the professor said that he would feel bad presenting religious material or theories in his classroom because he feels they would be assigned undue weight and he feels as if he would be abusing the authority given to him as a science professor and forcing a particular religious perspective onto his students. This professor lamented the way science is viewed in our society, saying that this incongruous esteem for science causes many problems. He wishes it were better understood that even science is just theories (which are often flawed). But, as long as we continue to take science for truth he would shirk from presenting religious ideas in that venue. Discussions with students seemed to concur

with these sentiments expressed by the professors. When asked whether or not religious ideas should be discussed in technical, scientific classes, only 12% thought that these discussions would be appropriate.

The Academic Study of Religion

So, given these thoughts on religion in scientific classrooms, what about in religion classrooms? What have professors observed in the way students learn about religion? A general consensus throughout the religion department is that students are better (in general) at learning about other religious traditions than they are at learning about their own. Many professors felt that this is probably most attributable to the fact that oftentimes students are simply too close to their own traditions to study them academically. They feel that they already know quite a bit about their own religious perspectives and so they shut out what the professor is presenting, reciting back on exams only what they already know. One exception to this trend, though, was pointed out by a professor who said that every now and then she will have a student who has enrolled in a class to get answers about his or her own religious tradition. In these cases, the professor found that the students make very receptive learners. Still, she said, this was the exception not the rule. More often students want to learn about other religions or are simply taking the class to fulfill a requirement, and in these cases the students very often suffer from not being able to learn about their own perspectives academically.

Religious Diversity in the Classroom

Another point that was brought up in discussing religion in the classroom was that of diversity. CWRU undoubtedly has much diversity, but is it valued? In general, as evidenced by the segregationist attitudes of ‘you do your thing, I’ll do mine’ referenced earlier in this paper, it seems that this diversity is very well tolerated but not appreciated or valued, per se. However, this is not the case amongst professors, particularly those in the religion department. These professors were anxious to tell us that they were very appreciative of the different perspectives that a diverse class can bring to discussion. The professors said that classroom discussions can be

much more interesting and stimulating when there are many varied perspectives brought to the table. This reinforces the idea that more constructive inter-religious and interdisciplinary discussion could benefit our campus, a theme that pervades the findings of the curricular. The problems seem to lie in finding appropriate contexts for these discussions and coaxing a rather apathetic student body into discussing these issues that we all see but fail to see as educational opportunities.

The survey gave us interesting results. Students seemed comfortable with hearing about other people's religious views, but were more hesitant to voice their own views. See Figures 2 and 3.

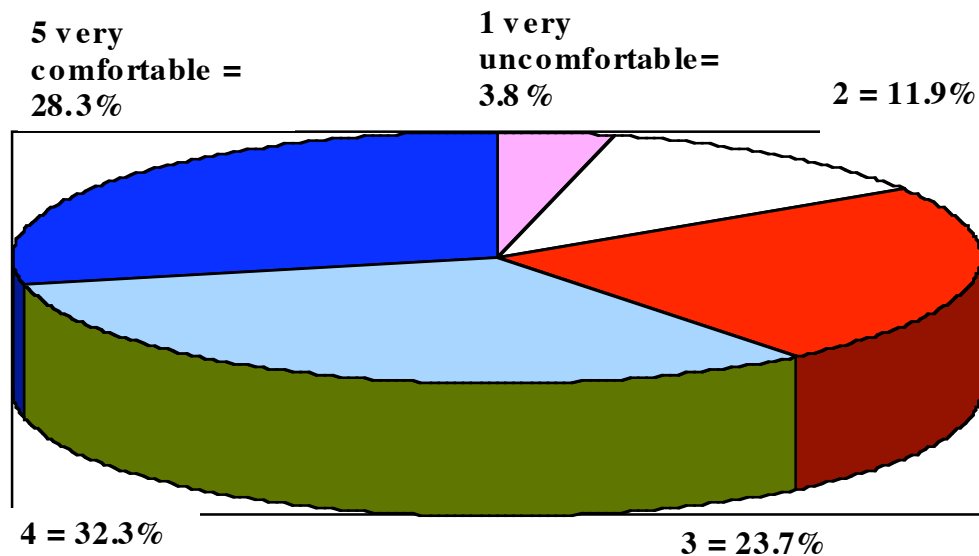


Figure 2: How comfortable do you feel when others share their religious views or views about religion in class?

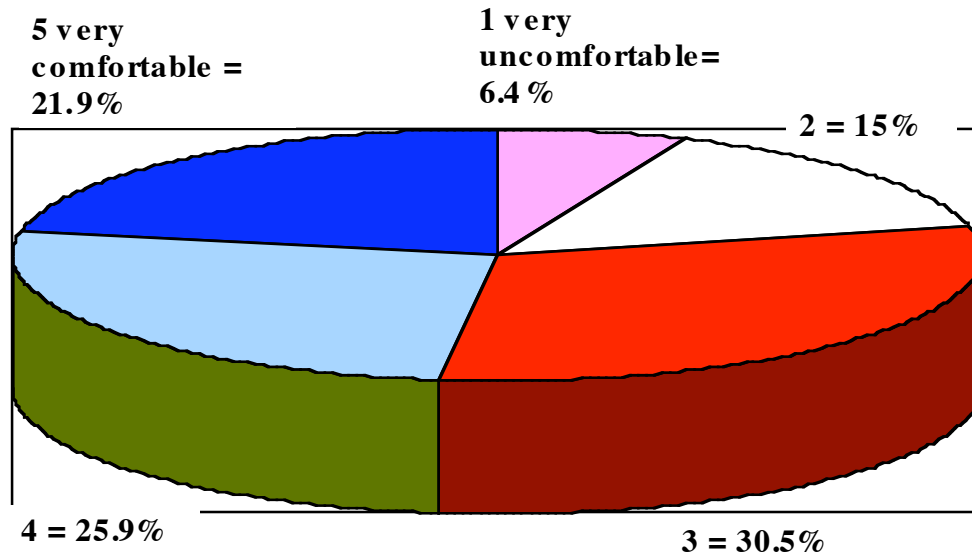


Figure 3: How comfortable do you feel sharing your religious views or views about religion in class?

Religion in a Student's Education

When students enter their undergraduate college years, they usually discover an atmosphere that is more complex than the parochial, public and boarding schools that they may come from. One of the things that they usually discover about college is that it is a more open forum of various religious beliefs and perceptions introduced. Some students may even find their beliefs and perceptions of religion even being challenging in respect of the newfound academic rigor given to them. In other words, the college atmosphere has the potential and likelihood to personally, socially and intellectually transform a student's previous view on religion.

In regards to how religion is applied in the academic setting, this section will examine how religion plays a role in a student's education. Many students find themselves having to abandon their preconceived notions about religion when taking a particular religion course. Many students seem to establish a relationship between academic and religious discipline. Many students even find their own religious views being challenged in one of the most intense and brutal forums that religious and theological discussion can be in: the classroom.

Our interview with various students and professors revealed overarching themes from both parties. These themes are generally assigned roles to religion in a student's education. It would be obvious if we start analyzing the themes from the students that we have interviewed.

Themes from Students

- *Whether or not they were majoring in religion, students see understanding various religious beliefs will promote more success in working with potential co-workers and clients.*

We have interviewed several students from various undergraduate programs and religious backgrounds. Although religion doesn't influence the career choices for most CWRU students, they see understanding religion as very vital to succeeding in whatever profession that they will be entering upon leaving CWRU.

One CWRU sophomore accounting major, stated the following about this particular theme: "...if you know people's religions, you would work with them better. In accounting, you're going to encounter people from different religions and you gotta know how to respect one's religion. For example, if I have a Jewish client and I want to have some business lunch or gathering with him, I can't invite him to a place that serves sausage or pork. Neither if I had a Muslim student, I can't invite him to have a beer with me."

A junior English and German studies double major also states, "English & German are very humanistic and hopefully I will be able to work with a diverse clientele. It would help me be more open-minded, but then again I don't need to be more open-minded, because I'm already am. I think you do need to have some stable opinions & perspectives, but you shouldn't force anybody to believe in them just like you have your opinions, everybody around you has the right to have them."

About only 30 percent of the CWRU undergraduates surveyed contributed religion as having at least some sort of direct or indirect influence on their choice of major and/or career (see Figure 4). However, the majority would also believe that understanding religion has great vitality to excelling in their profession, which can be concluded from the 82 percent that feel as though CWRU should have a religion department. See Figure 5.

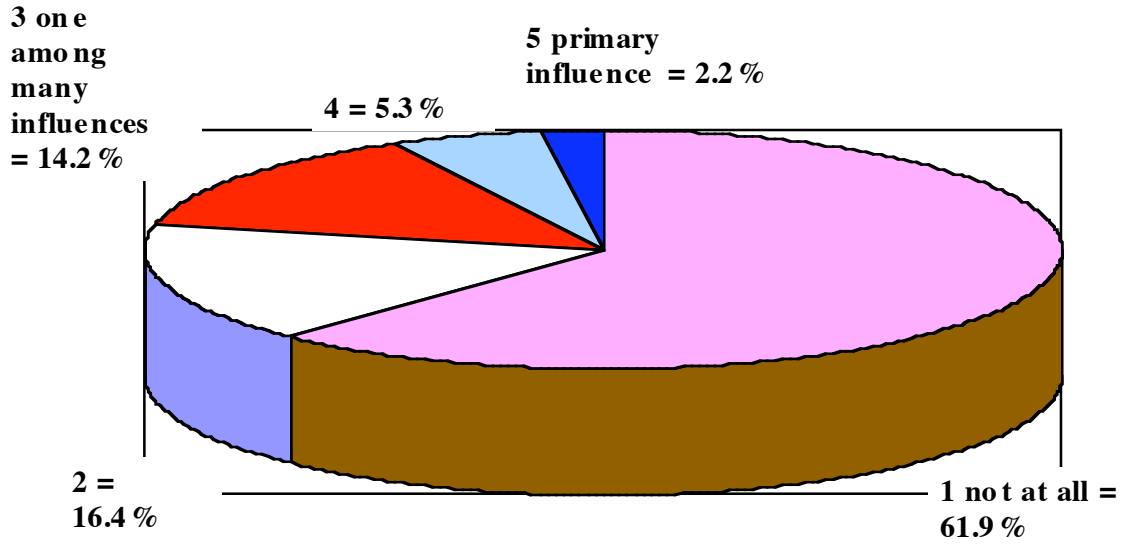


Figure 4: To what extent has religion influenced your choice of major or career?

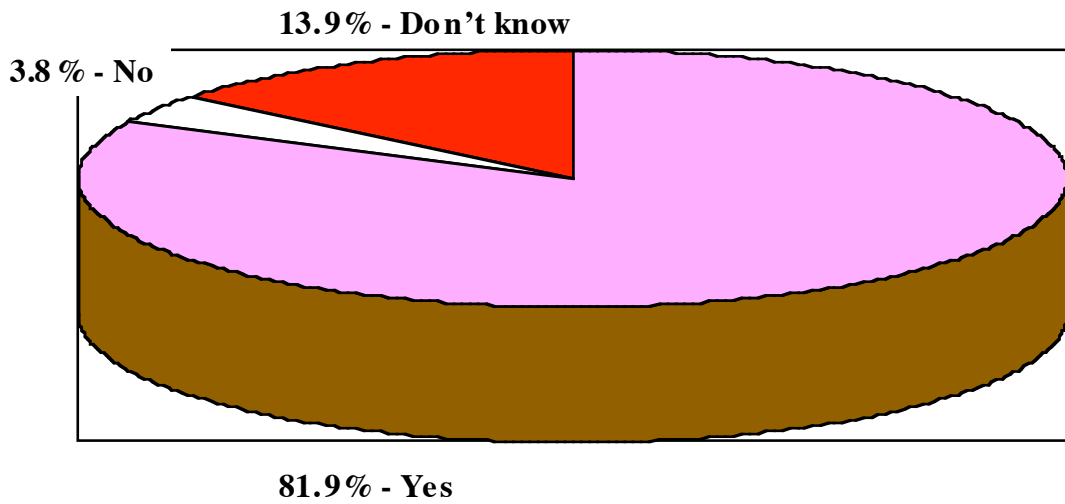


Figure 5: Should CWRU have a religion department?

- *Religion is useful to CWRU as a community of people from various religious backgrounds*

Many students would conclude that religious observance and/or religious studies are not exactly beneficial in their personal, social or academic venture. However, as they see the religious and philosophical diversity that makes up the entire CWRU community, they see such respect of religion as vital. In other words, most students see religion more beneficial to CWRU as a whole instead of individually.

Most students would agree that understanding religion would promote and maintain the tolerance and respect for the diverse populace that is CWRU. A CWRU freshman who is involved with Chi Alpha, a Christian fellowship organization with a chapter at CWRU, proclaimed that the religion department at CWRU plays a huge role in religion's overall vitality to the university and to individuals who are looking at religion from the outside in; but personally, he concludes the department as having the same detrimental effect to his personal faith in Christianity as the philosophy department.

“I think it's beneficial but I see the department for myself as potentially something potentially not useful to me because it's more like philosophy. Not everybody in the department believes in the same thing. It's not like a seminary, where everybody agrees. I think its beneficial to those looking at religion from an outside perspective, but it's useful to CWRU as a whole.”

- *Religious discipline coexists with academic discipline*

Many students, especially the ones who subscribe themselves to a religious tradition, see a proper responsibility and stewardship for their academic studies here as being highly encouraged by their religious beliefs. However, academic rigor has also influenced an even greater need for students to stay intellectually and spiritually devoted to their religion and spirituality.

Religious and spiritual students usually find themselves in need of balance for their academic studies and their religious devotionals. We asked students how religion affects their academic lifestyle and vice versa.

It seems as though religious and academic devotion and discipline seems to strengthen each other in a student's life. One form of devotion encourages equal and/or more fervent attention and concentration to another.

- *Influence of religious commitments on school work? Influence of school work on religious commitments?*

Two students from the Chi Alpha Christian Fellowship student organization at CWRU provided their takes on this theme:

“I try to keep my focus on my spiritual lifestyle. Being dedicated to Jesus Christ should be the center of my life, not my GPA. In terms of academic lifestyle, it's good seeing as relaxing, but then it can be bad seeing academics as not important and becoming lazy. [Academics] helps me be more diligent. Academics and Christianity are both disciplines. They take time and commitment and a lot of effort. Through my studying, it'll help me. When I'm in a mindset that Christianity is my center of lifestyle, I would ask if I have to read a textbook this much, how much more should I read the Bible.”

“Because I believe in God is center of all things in my life, God has to play some type of role in my academic lifestyle. I want to serve God to the best of my ability and I see academics as the best way to get there. My academic life is the biggest source of discipline in my life, and it helps discipline me for everything else. I find myself saving my devotions until I go to bed. I have to find time for my spiritual life inside my academic life.”

- *CWRU's academic calendars do not accommodate some religious calendars.*

CWRU, like many other universities in the United States plan class schedules, semester lengths, finals periods and fall and spring breaks around Christian holidays such as Christmas and Easter. Students from other religious traditions, such as Islam, Judaism, Hinduism or Buddhism, find this type of academic calendar not as convenient for them, since it leaves out any breaks or vacations for the observance of their religious holidays or days of worship.

One commuting Muslim student told me that Fridays were his biggest problem, because Friday is the Islamic equivalent of a day of religious observance involving intensive prayer, worship and meditation, and the problem is that most of his labs and classes fall on a Friday. At CWRU, like many other American universities, Saturdays and Sundays are left open, which can be concluded as convenient to the Sabbath observances in Judaism and Christianity, respectively.

- *Gateway for one to know more about one's own religion*

Students who take religion courses at CWRU, especially the ones that teach about certain elements from their own religion, find themselves learning more about their own religion than before entering the university. This can be pretty obvious since CWRU's religion department presents information about a religion from a broad academic perspective, than from a narrowed and biased perspective as that of churches and parochial schools.

How well informed about your own religious tradition?

| <u>Response</u> | <u>Percent</u> |
|-----------------------------------|-----------------------|
| Poorly or not so informed | 12.2% |
| Somewhat informed | 21.9% |
| Pretty much or very well informed | 50.5% |

- *Gateway for everybody to know about each other's religion*

Students and faculty alike seem to have come to the conclusion that knowledge about the many religions represented on campus can not only maintain and enhance the diverse atmosphere of respect and tolerance at CWRU, but also contribute to the solution of many problems in the world today. Many view the religion department as the task force that would begin to solve the problem at home: CWRU.

One Muslim student comments, "It [religion] should play the role of educating people of the similarities and differences between their religion and others, so that religion here will have a

deeper understanding. Example, if someone understands my religion, then they won't be as critical of my religion and its followers.”

A commuting non-traditional student proclaimed that the understanding of religion not only contributes to the values of CWRU, but the values of America. “[CWRU] should continue to have a religious studies department. Man without spiritual guidance is like an amoeba in a big pond devouring species of life different from itself. Religion is the cornerstone of America that makes us such a great country in which everybody has on their ‘that’s where I want to live’ list.

How well informed about other religious traditions?

| <u>Response</u> | <u>Percent</u> |
|-----------------------------------|-----------------------|
| Poorly or not so informed | 36.7% |
| Somewhat informed | 44.2% |
| Pretty much or very well informed | 16.8% |

Themes from professors

- *Religion is a very influential factor in several students that they advise in their respected departments as far as choosing a class, a major or going into a certain profession*

The researchers talked with professors from various departments of academia at CWRU. The non-religion professors revealed that some students that they advise have chosen their respected majors and/or professions in regard to influence by their religious beliefs and/or perspectives on religion.

One professor at CWRU mentioned that she taught a class with a student that chose his major and his course of study in order to learn about science and evolution, in order to overthrow theories such as evolutionary theory and the Big Bang theory. An interview from a biology professor at CWRU stated the following: "many of the students he sees are very influenced by their religion, particularly with premeds, that most aren't driven by materialistic reasons, but rather by deeply held religious beliefs". A classics professor at CWRU also reveals the

incentives of two of his advisees, “Earlier, I had two young men who wanted to learn Greek to learn the New Testament. One of them is currently a minister on the West Side.”

- *Religion is a well-known catalyst for academic discussion*

Most of the professors that we have interviewed give students freedom to do so, as long as it's not out of context with the lecture, lesson or actual course in general. Even in non-religion courses, professors have recalled a time in a semester when there was religious discussion that was incorporated into the respected lecture at the moment. When such discussion occurred in class, the professors evaluated them as very interesting discussions, some of them so interested that they almost get out of hand.

“In Anth 102, we will talk about religion for a week”, states a professor from the Anthropology department. “In my other courses, we discuss it a bit, not a lot. We talk about international health and missionary health, but the discussion is not an essential part of my other courses. There are very serious discussions that almost get violent, but none of them ever resorted to violence.”

Many professors would conclude that it is appropriate to discuss religion depending on the type of class or the lecture. If so, they would approve that the nature of engaging in religious discussion should also have its purpose examined. CWRU’s chair of the religion department stated, “Depends on the class and how it’s done. In advocacy, no, but in spiritual inquiry, yes. I would find it problematic if people were promoting it.” Another professor from CWRU’s religion also concluded the following: “... it depends very much on the topic...in most cases, [she] can’t imagine it would be needed and should therefore be avoided. In many classes, she said, there aren’t questions of value. However, in situations where a technical class is considering questions of value, these are the exceptions, [she] said, in which religion should be discusses; its necessary then. Also...it should definitely be discussed in other humanities classes.”

- *Religion courses not vital to the success of non-religion majors in their respected fields, but are interesting classes to take in which they can benefit in a way that doesn't have to be academic.*

One interesting finding in this research was that there were just as many science and technical faculty members, as there were humanities majors, who feel that religious studies were beneficial for their students in a way. Most see religious studies, like many other academic disciplines, as a venue that will help students be more well rounded and open-minded. One geology professor stated the following opinion on students taking religion courses, "...it's definitely important for technical majors to take philosophy and religion courses as they tend to be too narrow minded at this school."

Many professors view that religious studies are not directly vital to the success of a student in their respected program, but the overall importance of such courses in one's personal journey should not be overlooked. A psychology professor also concludes that, "religion and philosophy courses are important for anybody. I wouldn't say if it's particularly nearly important for psychology. I don't think it would be particularly important for psychology. Generally, I think they are very important courses."

An interview with a physics professor revealed similar opinions about the integration of religion into the academic journey of science students. He said that while he would not mandate that students take such courses he is very much in favor of it. Not just philosophy and religion, though, he told me. He thinks that students should take courses in religion, philosophy, theater, dance, foreign languages, phys education. He believes that it's very important for students to be as well rounded as possible and that all these areas of study are important to their growth. He feels that not enough options for such things are offered by the university and that more interdisciplinary study should be available and encouraged.

A philosophy professor believes, "most students before coming to CWRU have had no real experience talking to people who hold different beliefs than they do, and that prior to coming to a university there were no venues for discussing issues that people disagree on. Taking these kinds of classes exposes students to these different beliefs and provides a non-condemning venue for discussion. This...is the most important function of a University."

Other professors believe that studying religion will not develop sensitivity and understanding of different people, but of the world around them. One religion professor says, "My argument would be to look around, read the paper, and we will see that religion has an enormous perspective on the world".

- *Although the professors that we talked to have never witnessed any hands-on tension, they are well aware of the possibility of potential biases and tensions among students and faculty regarding religious beliefs*

Most professors, like most students, are not aware of every potential spark of tension that can arise between every religious and academic group on campus. Professors are obviously more aware of the religious-academic tensions, if any, that arise in their classrooms and departments. However, they all are very aware that there is a possibility that such tension is circulating throughout the university.

- *Religious studies as an unlearning process*

Many religion professors would conclude that students enroll in certain courses with biases and preconceived notions of their own religion (which is especially obvious for students who take courses on their own religious tradition). A religious course at the secular, academic level is designed to look at religions from an outside perspective, a perspective that not too many students are used to looking from, especially at their own religion. Students at CWRU are expected to “unlearn” their previous, biased ideas about religions in order to succeed in a particular course. A religion professor at CWRU greatly supports this concept, as she states, “preconceived notions of Christianity make it hard for students to learn academically”

Several courses in the religion department reveal the tough transition for most students to abandon their ideas on their religion. In “RLGN 202: Christian Origins in the New Testament”, the previous instructor of the course revealed that most students would make too many “faith statements” in their assignments and in most papers, she felt as though she was reading “sermons”. In “RLGN 208: Introduction to Western Religions” (a course that teaches the basics of Christianity, Islam & Judaism), the instructor evaluated that Christian students had poorer performance in the Christian section of the course, Muslim students did poor in the section on Islam and Jewish students did poor in the Judaism part of the course.

The Religious Climate at CWRU:

The final section of our investigation on how religion fits into undergraduate curricular life is to examine the religious climate here at CWRU. This particular investigation included a number of topics within itself, and many themes that were both expected and unexpected. The themes the

Tensions Between Science and Religion

Due to some of the recent debate about Intelligent Design in Ohio, as well as a general conception of science and religion being at odds, we asked a number of professors if they had seen or could think of any tensions between academic groups and religious groups on campus. Within our interviews, we found that while most professors could think of one or two minor examples, most often something dealing with Intelligent Design or Spectrum, others saw no tension. Of those who did mention instances, none felt that there was a major split between the two. Another point that was brought up was that there were individuals on campus who did create some tension that was sometimes dismaying, but groups as a whole do not. One professor mentioned that there were always extreme individuals and there was no easy cure for it, but it was possible to “widen the bell curve”.

Dialogue Between Science and Religion

Another theme, not specifically asked about, was the theme of wanting more dialogue between science and religion. Some professors indicated quite strongly the importance of encouraging positive dialogue between people with different viewpoints, particularly with science and religion. The ‘you do your thing, I’ll do mine’ feeling on campus, while creating a tolerantly diverse atmosphere, isn’t felt to be sufficient. Many professors felt that ignoring differences doesn’t make the difference disappear, but dialogue may help create understanding. One professor even expressed a wish that there were more outspoken people on campus creating a fuss to stimulate this kind of discussion. In the investigation, we came across a group on

campus created for just this purpose, an UPCaM sponsored discussion group that reads an article, then meets to discuss both it and science and religion, one researcher attended a discussion and found it to be an interesting and positive experience. Unfortunately, this group doesn't seem to be very well advertised, and has much lower attendance than desired. Of course, while the science and religion interaction was a large part of our concern in the curricular group, a number of people expressed desire for the discussion to include inter religious issues as well.

How the Religion Department is Viewed

The final thing we looked at was the Religion Department's perception of itself, as well as students and other professors' perceptions. This investigation started from the concerns of some Religion faculty on fearing being observed as more of a Theology Department, or a department serving as a sort of moral center for the University, instead of being a truly academic discipline. Along with this concern is the general disdain that the humanities at CWRU receive, and the small size of the department.

We investigated the merits of this concern and found some very interesting trends. First, all the professors we spoke with understood that the purpose of the Religion Department at CWRU is the academic study of religion. Also, they all had respect for the Religion faculty as scholars. However, our surveys given out to undergraduates seem to indicate that a number don't understand its function. Some indicated they felt that the Religion Department taught theology, others indicated the exact opposite, that the Religion Department was there to belittle religion and destroy faith.

The feeling that the humanities in general were looked down upon, not just the Religion Department, did come up a number of times from professors in the humanities. However, the value of the humanities, and the Religion Department in particular, was made quite clear from many. One professor we interviewed found religion itself to be "an assault on human dignity and an impediment to progress", but that teaching students about religion, and for students to understand religion, was an important thing. This professor said that it would be hard to understand history, or how different people approach different issues, without understanding religion. This last sentiment was echoed by many other professors, anti-religious, indifferent and religious alike. Again, we found that students at CWRU were not as unanimous as the

professors, though most did see value in religion classes and the Religion Department, others were sometimes quite strongly opposed, again, for numbers see Figure 5.

Conclusion

In conclusion, a number of themes came up in our study. First, religion, while an ever present concern, is not discussed on campus as it is felt to be a ‘taboo’ subject at a research university such as CWRU. Most people felt that it was inappropriate to discuss religious in technical courses, but for different reasons, and with certain exceptions, such as understanding the history of the discovery of some principle, or in questions of morality. Another important theme is that religious diversity is tolerated often by ignoring it, and that creating discussion between science and religion as well as between different religions is an important endeavor, and should be focused on. A third theme is that religion classes and the understanding of different religious traditions is an important endeavor for students at CWRU, especially for students in more technical majors such as engineering. Finally, the theme that the Religion Department at CWRU is perceived by most as an academic department and is important in broadening the minds of students, however there is some need for improving understanding of the department’s function for some undergraduates.