

The Inclusion of Religion

*Written by Steven Rhodes, Concord Academy
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Being a liberal and being a Christian is a challenge, especially at a place like Concord Academy. The vast majority of people here are liberal, so my belief that there is a God is sometimes questioned. I felt this to be the case especially when my school tried to embrace the topic of religion in its social justice efforts.

For me it started at a school sponsored event called "Inclusion Council." It's an optional event where students and faculty alike get together to discuss aspects of people's identities in an effort to bring the community together. That week's topic was religion. Religion is a topic that is not ignored but is avoided and often forgotten about in everyday talk. Every religion has its own assumptions prepackaged by society. So in an effort to avoid conflict, we establish an environment where religion is ignored. Real emotion stems from the mention of these conflicts. To me, being fake weighs heavier than being raw and unfiltered. So when I was asked to be on a panel with people of different faiths talking about their specific religion, I accepted.

Since I'm a Christian, since freshman year many people assumed that I was homophobic at the mention of my faith, so I came to this meeting skeptical and prepared to be under fire: as if people's questions were to be bullets and the clip was to be passive-aggressive inquiries. The plan was to speak, then split into small groups and chat. I sat down in front of about 200-220 students and faculty and told them what I believed. I was surprised to see that people did not cringe when I said I loved my religion because of how I can trust, love, and have a relationship with God. I made sure to combat specific popularly believed stereotypes that God hates gays or that Christians think they're better than other people (both of which aren't true). I continued to make the point that my religion was about love and showing love through actions of everyone. I told the crowd that that love was all encompassing, all accepting and non-discriminatory. I really wanted people to feel that my religion complemented who I am as a person: it makes me complete. I was surprised to see people respect my beliefs. It was a very warm feeling.

That feeling lasted until we broke into small groups when I realized that, while many people tried to respect my views, they really didn't understand my religion the way I did. I never expected to convert anyone in that room, but when we broke into small groups, the students I was with were atheistic and wanted to make that crystal clear. One student said: "I feel like people who believe in God just don't want to accept that He's not real." Another said: "They just don't think logically." They seemed to be implying that my religion was founded fantasies rather than faith. Don't get me wrong, I love that my school tried to embrace hard conversations, and I can't expect everyone to be accepting and respectful of what I believe. Yet to have someone insinuate that what I believe isn't real and that I was just reluctant to accept the truth was hurtful. To me those statements indicated a lack of sensitivity and consideration of my feelings. They

were more than declarations of belief, but bullets being unloaded from a clip of criticism, skepticism, and covert hatred.

Obviously, the real world isn't so nice as to even attempt to hear my voice, but to have a school claim to admit students under a code of common trust and respect for one another and hear those comments, I felt more disconnected than included in that Inclusion Council in those particular moments. Maybe I didn't have the nicest people in my group, or maybe I didn't explain my own religion in the best manner. At times I questioned whether I did something wrong to deserve such treatment, and I felt like CA has not legitimized my identity. However, I'm reluctant to believe that most parts of my identity are not legitimate and should be changed to fit the school.

Even if I might ignore and suppress this integral part of my identity to fit in, I feel some other part of my identity could be subject to the same harshness. Being at CA is a challenge in and of itself for most people and has been for me, especially as a Christian. Since that Inclusion Council, I found myself continuously trying to suppress parts of who I am, fearing that they will be subject to critical adolescent minds, in order to fit in.

Like I said, I still respect my school for trying to accept me. Keyword: trying. And I am not so scared of expressing myself that I become a shell. CA has shaped me to have a more open yet shielded mind: one that accepts criticism but knows how to block what isn't constructive and let through what is. Even then, I know that what I consider wrong might be the right thing to think, so I let it stay at the gates of my mind.

In addition to this, I have reasons to keep trying to fit into CA culture when it comes to talking about my religion, and specifically in mediums like Inclusion Council. One student in my group in Inclusion Council understood my response of laughter to the other student's harsh, as what they really were, a response of hurt. She thought for a few seconds then said to the group "I find people who believe in God to be brave, even though I don't believe in Him, I believe people who dare to be brave because they take the criticism, judgements and assumptions people make and don't let it break their beliefs. That must mean it means something, that it means alot, to them" It is people like her who inspire me to hope. She was Jewish. Even though I might not agree with what she believes in and she may not believe in what I believe in, we can still be friends. The purpose of the conversation was not to debate conflicting views and decide who's right: Inclusion Council wasn't the space for that. The point was to realize there is beauty in diversity. That girl acknowledged it. The point was to move past the assumptions and get to know the person you're talking to and validate them by hearing about a part of who they are, solely because they are a member of our community.

My hope was restored in CA even though my wounds from hearing hurtful comments over three years haven't healed. Scars may have formed from these experiences, but I also felt reborn in the presence of welcoming and accepting people, like that girl at CA.