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# Is God Offended? Interfaith Conversations on Campus

Robert M. Randolph

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*This article is a transcript of the William Green Lecture given by Robert M. Randolph at Pepperdine University on September 2, 2015.*

It is an honor to be the thirty-sixth Green Lecturer. I know many of those who have preceded me and I like being in their company. It is also always a privilege to be on this campus. My memories of Pepperdine go back to earliest childhood and hours spent on the Los Angeles campus in the company of dear friends of blessed memory. On a more mundane note, fifteen members of my immediate family have attended Pepperdine and more than a few of those have degrees. Two are currently enrolled. I'll let them remain anonymous less they have to answer for what I have to say today.

You will note in the program the ringing endorsement of Dr. William Green by E. W. McMillan who had an honorary doctorate from Pepperdine. In the interest of transparency, I should tell you that McMillan was my grandfather and the source of the *M* that marks my middle name.

I am probably one of the last lecturers on this program to have actually known Dr. Green. More than that he was on the committee that examined me when I was completing my master's degree in 1964. Knowing he was on the committee, I expected questions about his field of interest. I went back to my church history and reviewed Augustine and the Manicheans. He asked immediate questions and I began to answer, feeling well-prepared. He appeared puzzled by my answers and I realized he did not hear what I was saying so I spoke louder and my sense of being well-prepared evaporated. He began to twist his hearing aid and it began to buzz and beep and I spoke louder. To this day I do not know if he heard anything I had to say, but I do know I passed the exam and went on my way not only rejoicing, but confident that never in my life would I have a more anxiety-provoking exam. That has proven to be true.

One of the phrases that appear repeatedly in the program describing tonight's event talks of *Christian education*. Dr. Green was a supporter of Christian education. That is a phrase understood often according to the intellectual baggage brought to the phrase by the reader. Pepperdine has, however, put the notion into a context that helps the phrase have meaning. "Christian values, firmly rooted in the Church of Christ heritage are at the heart of Pepperdine. We invite you to examine, challenge and grow your faith regardless of your spiritual background." That is a noble ambition. It is what we are about tonight.

The Church of Christ tradition is one not confined by creedal statements but rather by asking questions posed in real time of our sacred texts and of our traditions. To illustrate, when this university was founded, Churches of Christ were deeply rooted in the geographic regions of the Old South where tradition supported segregation of the races in all aspects of life. The leadership of the then college understood that to be wrong and opened its doors and facilities to all regardless of race. These were not easy decisions given our traditions but, viewed from the outside by a child observing from a modest distance, the school provided a living example of how "faith influences work, learning and personal growth." Today the chaplaincy of this institution under the leadership of D'Esta Love and Sarah Barton continues to remind us of the place of women in our religious communities.

Let me let you in on a secret. Education is a process that changes us. You come to college to learn things you did not know but there are lots of people in our lives who think they want us to come back from college unchanged or if changed, only in matters that do not seem to impact daily life. Learn the periodic table, reflect on the sonnets of Shakespeare in your quiet times, but do not suggest any discomfort with the status quo. Some of us will quietly buy into that wish by not studying or working as hard as we might. Being changed is hard, learning is work that lasts a lifetime, and one of the ways to be allowed not to change is to not do the hard work needed and to blame the institution.

The way to manage change is to be part of communities of conversation that keep us honest. Friends who will tell us what we do not want to hear. Teachers who can explain and who tell us we can do better. Families who remind us of values we have made, commitments to uphold. This is a process and we add to the process by sharing our experiences, noticing how we are being challenged, and asking why? When confronted by discomfort we do not back off, but we seek to understand.

Let me illustrate, when Jan and I left Pepperdine in 1964 to attend Yale we did not return for a year. If you remember your American history you know that 1964–65 was a significant year in the civil rights movement. Early in the year the events shown in the film *Selma* had occurred. Yale was an exciting place to be and you did not know from week to week where people were going and what was going to happen. My only regret was that we were not more involved but, truth be told, we were having a hard time keeping our heads above water. But the excitement leaked out in our letters home.

When we did return to California for a brief visit, the Watts riots (August 11–17, 1965) were at their peak. The flight pattern of our plane was disrupted by reports that some were firing at planes landing at LAX. The old campus was locked down; troops and tanks were present to protect students in campus housing. Parts of our family were on campus and other members of the family in the San Fernando Valley were worried about them.

Our homecoming was not pretty. Within moments my father and I were at each other as we drove home. He said, “It is your friend Martin Luther King’s fault.” I replied with touching sensitivity that he was a bigot. Jan, the only one in the car to keep her head, threatened to leave the car as we drove down the freeway. Dad did not want to lose her so the argument stopped to later continue at a more measured decibel level.

We could not go back to who we were before. We were left to integrate new realities into our lives but we also had to bring along our families of origin and they needed to be engaged in the conversation. The conversation was lively but it was also healthy. Our families might wish we had not been changed by our experiences at Yale; we might hope they had had opportunities to broaden their worldview before Watts broke into the conversation, but love allowed us all to speak truth to one another and to integrate what we/they had learned. A short time later my parents hosted an interracial, interfaith marriage ceremony in our backyard for friends who could not get married in a church. That too was probably Martin Luther King’s fault.

Today with less intimacy the same sort of conversations go on social media. The conversation continues with hash tags like “Black Lives Matter” and “Hands up, don’t shoot.” The conversation is different from what it was on Vermont Avenue in 1965, but the topic is no less important and no less challenging and you are all part of the ongoing dialogue.

Let me be even more specific. In this day when we are more aware of the diverse nature of our world and the importance of recognizing diversity in all of its expressions, the importance of Pepperdine as a model of what the kingdom of God might look like cannot be overstated. Education is a complicated process that does not end when we leave school, but the intensity of these years makes the experience of profound importance so long as we are paying attention.

But let’s get back to you. You are here at Pepperdine from all over the world. You come from a variety of Christian traditions. Many of you do not identify with a religious tradition, some holding to the generous definition of “spiritual, not religious” which in my experience tells me that you are wise enough to know that there is more to the human experience than you can see or measure in a test tube, but you are wary of the ideology of organized religion.

Others of you represent diverse traditions of the world that introduce new dimensions into a community that once was dependably Protestant, Catholic or Jewish (Will Herberg, 1960). When I went off to graduate

school, that was the description of the American religious story. At MIT it was not until 1983 that we noticed the Muslim presence.

As I suggested earlier, each of us brings baggage to the idea that faith influences the decisions of everyday life. You have been shaped by your families of origin sometimes intentionally and sometimes unintentionally. In our dining room in Massachusetts is a photograph I took over thirty years ago at our dining room table in Wellesley. It is a lovely picture of two women separated by cereal engaged in the shaping process. Jan is telling Margaret to eat her cereal; Margaret has no intention of eating her cereal. Later Margaret found Pepperdine a fine place to go to college. Pepperdine did not tell her to eat her cereal but did teach her to make wise choices when choosing cereal to eat. That is what education is supposed to do.

Over countless issues over the course of your life thus far you have made decisions sometimes in reaction, sometimes in accord with the goals and values of your family and your shaping culture. Now you are in a place where the immediacy of family is a step removed and the university is the most immediate influence—unless you count the ever-present temptation offered by the Pacific Ocean!

At MIT we cannot swim in the Charles River, much less surf on it, but there is pressure nevertheless to conform, to be a nerd: to study all the time, to work harder than anyone else to the exclusion of developing social skills. The individual is valued above all else. The entrepreneur is the hero; the hacker who places the mock-up of the police car on the dome, the Hanukah wreath made of test tubes to counterbalance the holiday shrub, the exploding rubber ball at mid-field of the Harvard-Yale Football game, is the hero.

At the same time the Institute is talking about the importance of cooperation and community and quietly a sea change is taking place where values of respect for differences are integrated into the current ethos. We are trying to shape a new ethic that supports and values the individual, but never forgets that we very seldom actually do things alone. We may sometimes feel alone and may sometimes be lonely but we are not alone.

The other evening I talked with a very proud parent who had had three children graduate from MIT. The family valued education, but their resources were meager and their corner of the world was very poor. Yet they had three MIT degrees, good jobs, and bright futures. I commented that the family had accomplished a great feat. She responded, “Do not forget that God helped make this possible.” A Catholic with a strong sense of religious identity, she knows she had not done it alone. I was appropriately corrected.

Define God however you might—a personal force; the “ground of being,” to borrow a phrase from Paul Tillich; the “my best friend” from popular religious sentiment. Over the course of the next few years there will emerge a notion of guiding principles to live your lives by. The principles may be little changed from what you brought with you this evening, but I expect there will be changes as your experiences in and out of the classroom give you new information and insights. Integration of such experiences is challenging and there will be moments when you will wish to pull back from the effort, but I hope your quest for meaning is a lifelong effort. I hope that is the case and I am confident of the resources this institution will provide as partners in the process.

I also know that from time to time you will hear other voices telling you that you are making things far too difficult. The voices will say it is a black-and-white world where ambiguity and new insights are the enemy. Some will try to tell you that the greatest enemy is education itself and that you must not be affected by the process. “Get it and forget it” is the advice of some and it is bad advice. Educated people integrate what they learn and experience into the persons they become and it is a process that will continue until that day when there is not sunset or dawning, to borrow from a familiar benediction.

A few years ago I spent some travel time with a good friend who is a Buddhist monk. We were on our way to Syracuse, New York, to meet with the Dalai Lama to personally invite him to visit MIT and to interact with some of our scientists looking at issues related to mindfulness. The drive was long and, as we talked, I realized that I had never asked him about the process that led to his becoming a monk. I knew that he was from a well-regarded Indian family and that from time to time he referenced conflicts with family over his choice of vocation.

Never open a door you are not willing to walk through. In the course of a few moments he told me of a childhood haunted by dreams and a sense of being called. And one day he simply got up and left; he was all

of nine years old. He went to the train station, got on a train, and did not get off until he was at the monastery, a house he had only seen in his dreams, where he would spend the next few years of his life studying with the Dalai Lama. The monks in the monastery saw in him the likeness of a venerated teacher who had recently died.

When his family finally tracked him down, an arrangement was made that allowed him to complete his education and then come to Syracuse, where he studied physics and found his emotional support with the Jesuits. From there he found his way to Harvard Divinity School and ultimately to MIT. I needed to add another wing to my house of understanding.

There is half a century between our going to Yale and the story of my friend, the student of His Holiness the Dalai Lama. The experiences bookend years filled with experiences that challenge the sense of purpose that has guided my life, and along the way I have been challenged to integrate those experiences and others into a coherent understanding of the world I live and work in. At the same time my efforts impacted those nearest and dearest to me. My parents made peace with my friend Martin Luther King, broadening their notions of justice and the arc of history. When asked about His Holiness, the Dalai Lama, I tell people that he reminds me of my grandfather with his curiosity and inclination to pursue the unconventional.

Both stories have the seeds of betrayal within them. The world I knew valued traditions that paid homage to barriers that the civil rights movements tore down. The world that I knew valued religious ideas that, while noble, were far too narrow. My own rationalism had little room for visions of distant houses and departed teachers. I have had to make room for new insights.

That is the message of the evening. The conversations you have with those who differ with you are the heart of education. Spend time in conversation with those who view the Koran as sacred Scripture and learn why it is read in Arabic. Spend time in conversation with our Jewish brothers and sisters and learn about Shabbat and what it might mean to honor the Sabbath. Give attention to what it means to be spiritual but not religious; can one indeed be good without God? Consider why a young girl might pray, “Lord, make all bad people good, and all good people nice.”

The story of the prodigal is well-known. We understand it as a parable of the relationship between Jews and Christians. We also understand it to tell us that we can always return home and, for those of us who have dared wander, it tells us that we can bring back our experiences and integrate them into the life of the wider family. No questions asked, no apologies required. We are loved. We are welcomed home.

I am confident that God is not offended when we take time to consider the dimensions of righteousness. Doing so may help us as well to think through the essence of our faith and the implications of the prayer that Christians share often in worship, “Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” Those on the margins of Western religious life know well the message and meaning of their faith; those of us spoiled by majority status do not give it the sort of attention it deserves. May we all do better.

Amen.

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