Religion and the Professions

A panel discussion. September 21, 2011 at 3pm.

Wake Forest University, Winston-Salem, NC.

Faculty and students gathered to hear a panel of distinguished professors discuss a nontraditional topic: the importance of religion to professional success. The panel followed Dr. Stephen Prothero’s lecture entitled “The Perils of Religious Ignorance: Religious Literacy for the 21st Century” which took place on the previous evening. Each panel member, representing the fields of medicine, business, and law, was asked to consider the question: Is knowledge of religion important for success in your profession, and if so why?

Kathi Kemper, Director of the Center for Integrative Medicine at Wake Forest University Baptist Medical Center, spoke first, affirming how important it is for doctors to recognize and work with the religious beliefs of their patients. Sharing examples from her own history, Dr. Kemper revealed how a lack of understanding about a patient’s religious worldview can be detrimental to providing their care, and, conversely, how an informed perspective can lead to an open and productive dialogue. Dr. Kathi Kemper’s Remarks
“Many people go into medicine thinking that it’s going to be a scientific career, and in part that’s true, but it’s also true that medicine is an art that involves human beings interacting with each other. If we [as doctors] don’t understand the person, and the culture from which they come, we are impaired in our ability to deliver comprehensive care” – Dr. Kathi Kemper

Ram Baliga, John B. McKinnon Professor of Management, WFU Schools of Business, instructed the room using a series of stories about the effect of religious literacy on management proficiency. Emphasizing the impact religious belief has on context, Dr. Baliga revealed how the religious literacy, or illiteracy, of a business manager has radical consequences for his or her direct reports and, ultimately, the company’s bottom line, especially within today’s increasingly globalized environment. Dr. Ram Baliga’s Remarks

“I think the key challenge for a manager is: How do I make decisions that do not offend the religious sensibilities of people, especially in a multi-religious environment? How do I make sure that I’m not taking my own religious beliefs and using that to judge how other people are doing things?” – Dr. Ram Baliga
Ron Wright, Professor of Law, WFU School of Law, closed the afternoon’s presentations with his examination of the importance of religious literacy to the practice of law. His reflections, based on his own experience as a “traveler through religion,” pointed out the important skills understanding religion can develop within an individual, ranging from mobilizing religious rhetoric to harnessing the power of narrative. Dr. Ron Wright’s Remarks

“The ability to frame a client’s actions through religious language is a highly effective way, for some clients the only way, to add serious value to your ability as a lawyer: to pull the camera back, expand the options considered, and help the client connect their actions today to their values and vision for a lifetime.” – Dr. Ron Wright
The panel concluded as Dr. Stephen Prothero, Boston University, presented the members with questions in response to their remarks. Questions included: What kinds of skills come out of religious literacy beyond simple knowledge? What is the number one danger of religious ignorance in your field? Are the efforts of religious leaders to intervene in the law and politics of America legitimate? Dr. Stephen Prothero as Respondent

“Even if religion doesn’t make sense to you, you can’t make sense of the world without knowing something about religion.”
- Dr. Stephen Prothero