

The High Calling of Christian Higher Education to Advance Religious Freedom for Themselves and Others

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Faith-based institutions of higher education are not motivated primarily by political goals nor by avoidance of legal or reputational losses. Christian colleges and universities have a more transcendent calling: to live out their transformative, Gospel-centered, missions in every aspect of their institutional lives. Christian colleges adopt organizational practices, take up public policy work, and cultivate a positive public witness in order comprehensively to incarnate their Christ-centered *raison-d'être* in public life. As David Brooks [said](#) recently: “You [Christian colleges] have what everybody else is desperate to have: a way of talking about and educating the human person in a way that integrates faith, emotion and intellect. ... Almost no other set of institutions in American society has that, and everyone wants it.”

So what religious freedom changes should Christian institutions of higher education anticipate in the coming years?

During the campaign and the transition period, in scattered public statements and in off-the-record conversations, President Donald Trump and advisors close to him have spoken positively about religion in American life and about various religious freedom issues. And yet, President Trump arrives without a comprehensive announced agenda, his nominees are diverse in interests and approaches, and the Republicans who dominate Congress are themselves internally divided. Moreover, the “religious freedom” landscape is becoming ever-more challenging. The United States continues to become more religiously and morally diverse, and less understanding of the positive impact of religion in society. Moreover, the extensive conflicts involving religious institutions and the advance of LGBT protections are particularly polarizing and complex.

Christian colleges must resist the urge to believe that the election of Trump and Republican majorities in Congress signal the advent of a new moral majority or conservative and religious ascendancy. We suggest that the election has not reversed the cultural and religious trends that make protecting religious freedom ever more challenging. Rather, it has opened the possibility for policymakers, religious institutions, and public opinion to consider whether there are better ways to protect the rights of everyone and every institution than by constricting religious freedom. With respect to the apparent conflicts between LGBT interests and religious freedom, for instance, a “fairness for all” approach such as was advanced in Utah by LGBT groups and leaders of the LDS Church represents an important constructive alternative to the binary, winner-takes-all, approaches that have been prevalent in Washington DC.

We propose that religious colleges, along with other religious institutions, such as faith-based health clinics, housing programs, shelters, and more, should *actively engage* in helping our society to better protect religious freedom in our changing and challenging environment, not leaving this vital responsibility to lawyers, lawmakers, regulators, and courts. Religious institutions should become *active organizational citizens*, helping to shape the environment they need.

So, yes, Christian institutions of higher education should engage in shaping a public policy environment that protects their capacity to holistically live out their faith-based missions. Christ-centered colleges and universities are in fact called by their faith to engage as citizens in the public square to advance their own freedoms, and also the religious freedom of other institutions of faith.

That means, we believe, being active for religious freedom via what we call the 3Ps: public **perception**, organizational **practices**, and public **policy**.

We propose that religious colleges and universities—with prudence but without forgetting their great inherent resources as institutions of teaching, learning, research, imagination, and communications—should actively work to shape the public’s **perception** of religion. The public needs to understand that the good works that they admire are the fruit of a religious root, so that, whether or not they value religion, they ought to support religious freedom.

Religious colleges and universities should systematically review their policies and practices for alignment with the stated religious mission and identity of the respective institutions. Organizational **practices** must reflect an institution’s religious commitments for legal reasons—and, even more, for reasons of mission: if being a duck is the institution’s mission, then everyone should see the waddle.

An institution that is proactively showing itself to the world as religious, that knows its religious rights, and that has adopted organizational practices that reflect its religious commitments is well-placed to urge public **policies** that protect the religious freedom that it—and other institutions—needs. When we talk with Hill staff, federal regulators, or White House officials, the first question is this: if the concern is so important, why aren’t we hearing from religious organizations? Of course, speaking up can spark opposition. But regulators and legislators need to hear, if they are to be able to act justly. The danger of becoming a target is best overcome by coordinating with others so that there are multiple voices.

Christian institutions, out of a Gospel calling both to honor God and to treat their neighbors as they would like to be treated, should engage the new Administration with both hope and persistence. In our diverse and polarized society, speak up for the freedom that colleges and universities of every kind of mission require. Respect for our neighbors requires being inclusive. And so does the most effective advocacy: we must speak up not only for our own rights but also for the rights of others—for the right of every higher education institution to be free to maintain curricula, employment policies, and community standards that reflect their unique missions.

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