The United States has been committed since its founding to religious liberty according to the provisions of the First Amendment of the Constitution, and its public institutions have been careful to walk the line between "free exercise" and "establishment." Coupled with an individual tendency to hold religion as a private matter, that cautious, laissez-faire approach has relegated most discussion of religion to locally initiated programs in churches, synagogues, temples, mosques, and other community settings. The attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, however, underscored the need for global understanding of religious motivation and conviction. And many voices across the country question the adequacy of the ad hoc approach to religious studies in light of the pervasive impact religion has on the lives of the citizenry of the world. An increasing number of voices call for religious literacy to foster broader understanding, whether cross-cultural, cross-campus, or cross-town. This paper is such a call—one that focuses on preparation programs for educators including PK-12 teachers, administrators, counselors; school and district staff; and college and university student affairs professionals.

Although many initiatives at the individual district, campus, or even the state level focus primarily on in-service or professional development approaches, “upstream” pre-service preparation of educators is still rare. The numerous obstacles include an already overburdened system for educating teachers and administrators, comprised of a wary and unprepared collection of program providers from public higher education to private and for-profit schools, as well as a diverse public divided or uncertain about the appropriateness of addressing religion and spirituality in public settings. This essay describes major environmental conditions that might influence the development of religious literacy initiatives and that pre-
service educator preparation leadership and improvement strategies must accommodate when introducing such programs. Those conditions include parochialism and Christian privilege; challenging foreign traditions; the legacy of church-state separation; shifting bases of authority; an ethos of individualism; and the overwhelming complexity of public education from PK–12 through higher education.

Parochialism and Christian Privilege

The September 11, 2001, attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon spectacularly focused the world’s attention on the power of religion to shape worldview, and in turn, to impact world events and daily life. Of course, one need not look far to see the influence of religion throughout history, around the world, and in the United States. What is curious is why it took such a dramatic event to awaken so many to the importance of understanding religion. The experience in the United States with school prayer and evolution, to name just two issues, has occasioned comment and criticism over the years about the implications of religious worldviews for public life and education. These discussions, however, have not risen to the level of violence seen on 9/11, nor have foreign belief systems figured so prominently in our ideological landscape.

Religious parochialism in the United States stems in part from pervasive Christian privilege: that is, an evolved system of cultural referents derived from Christian assumptions. The referents influence the social order, however subtly or directly, toward a normative Christian worldview. Christian privilege results in an environment permeated by Christian assumptions that, at a minimum, fail to acknowledge more and diverse perspectives from different ideological or religious traditions, or when full blown, create a social power hierarchy that favors Christianity. So pervasive is Christian privilege in the United States that many of its citizens seem oblivious to the growing religious diversity within its borders.

The Challenge of Foreign Traditions

Since the Immigration Act of 1965, a new wave of immigrants has been coming to the United States. One way they differ from earlier immigrants is that many of the newcomers have brought non-Western faith traditions from Asia and the Middle East. Gradually, mosques and temples have altered the architectural and ideological landscape in many places. Beginning about the same time in the 1960s and 1970s, a growing counterculture movement challenged traditional authorities by introducing new resources for spiritual development into the heretofore predominantly Christian culture. For the most part, however, our public education
system has not kept pace with these changes; for example, social studies textbooks tend to skew the representation of or ignore religious traditions other than Christianity. But the lack of discussion of these issues stems in part from concerns about the separation of church and state.

Religious parochialism in the United States stems in part from pervasive Christian privilege.

Separating Church and State

The first schools and colleges prepared clergy to propagate an underlying Christian ethos for their new society. As colonies grew—becoming economically viable, then profitable—changing societal and workplace needs led to vocational diversification of the educational mission. At the same time, emerging economic and Enlightenment intellectual forces challenged religion’s privileged position as the dominant worldview in education. By the time of the country’s legal establishment in the late eighteenth century, those competing ideologies resolved themselves into concepts of religious liberty and the separation of church and state that found expression in the First Amendment to the Constitution: “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.”

More than 200 years of practice and constitutional interpretation have shaped the current relationship between religion and education. Through dialogue and confrontation, from the earliest days of Christian consensus through challenging modern and postmodern voices, scholars and lay people alike continue to explore, differentiate, and clarify the respective influences these social forces have on each other. In the 1960s, court decisions developed distinctions between teaching about religion (that is, religion as a legitimate academic field of study) and teaching for religion (educating for belief in a particular faith tradition). Departments of religious studies appeared in public colleges and universities, and today, new practice and legal tests and clarifications continue to challenge boundaries. Those who challenge the boundaries, from both sides, seem satisfied that their particular perspective is valid, despite the sea change recent decades have brought to epistemology—that is, how people think about what they believe is knowledge and truth.

Shifting Bases of Authority

At the founding of the universities almost 1,000 years ago, the prevailing worldview was grounded in religious ideas. This way of knowing guided the development of knowledge and society well into the eighteenth
century, when the successes of science began to challenge the seeming inadequacies of religious explanations of the physical world. The idea of unlimited progress through science evolved from applying scientific discovery to quality of life improvements in health, technology, agriculture, and industry.

U.S. higher education, significantly influenced by nineteenth-century German research, became the predominant engine of science and the embodiment of the idea of progress during the early twentieth century. At the same time, however, several concurrent developments—quantum physics, relativity, and the detrimental effects of technology such as urbanization and modern warfare—called into question both the idea of progress and the unquestioned reliability of science. Religion, though it suffered from the stigma of failing the challenges of modern science, still offered a more complete way of knowing compared to the newly discovered shortcomings of science. This awareness and the resulting desire for a more unified way of knowing, although it fostered often anti-intellectual and reactionary responses, emboldened conciliatory voices to explore
ways of knowing that incorporated modern science while acknowledging other dimensions of experience.4

The erosion of positivism’s exclusive hold on intellectual life and the growing legitimacy of interpretivism have empowered multiple groups to claim that their perspectives are superior.

The debate continues between those asserting a value-free, objective approach to a single knowable reality and those arguing for an interpreted environment that acknowledges context, culture, and perspective. Two reasons make it important to understand the emergent phenomenon of spirituality and religion in higher education and its potential impact upon the development of knowledge and, consequently, national life: 1) the university remains the major agent of discovery and technological development in our society, and 2) both ways of knowing are contending for a place in the future of higher education.

The idea of valid multiple perspectives remains challenging to many who prefer the comfort and certainty of having one answer. However, the erosion of positivism’s exclusive hold on intellectual life and the growing legitimacy of interpretivism have empowered multiple groups to claim that their perspectives are superior. This tendency plays into the hands of the American proclivity for individualism so well documented from the earliest days of the United States.

Individualism as an Article of Faith

American individualism was first and most famously noted by Alexis de Tocqueville in his classic *Democracy in America*. He observed the potential isolating effects of this tendency:

> Individualism is a calm and considered feeling which disposes each citizen to isolate himself from the mass of his fellows and withdraw into the circle of family and friends; with this little society formed to his taste, he gladly leaves the greater society to look after itself.5

Robert N. Bellah et al. began with Tocqueville in their critique of American individualism, *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life*, elaborating modern developments that support the tendencies observed by Tocqueville.6 More recently, Robert D. Putnam added his comment on the ramifications of individualism in his *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, discerning a more optimistic trend.7
Americans' idea of the common good has long been shaped by their perceptions of the preeminent worth of the individual. Charles Taylor identified the sources of this idea in the eighteenth century collapse of European social hierarchies. The resulting assumption of equal worth and respect gave rise to competing politics of equal dignity and difference, the discourse between which continues to clarify the relationship of the individual to the collective. Emphasis on the individual is borne out as well in the founding documents of the United States: the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and the Bill of Rights.

Bellah saw American individualism expressed in utilitarian and expressive forms. The former assumes that in a "society where each vigorously pursued his own interest, the social good would automatically emerge." With the latter, "the ultimate use of the American's independence was to cultivate and express the self and explore its vast social and cosmic identity." In either form the worth of the individual self is fundamental to the ethos of the American way of life, and it must be factored into any strategy of change that would propose religious literacy in public education. Taken with other environmental conditions, particularly when mixed with proprietary religious belief, individualism can become a potent force for change or resistance. And individuals of all stripes make up the commons of public education—the setting in which a program of religious literacy must be worked out.

The Public Education Context

The current education environment is a milieu of competing authorities, multiple constituent expectations, inequitable distribution of diminishing resources, and yet, enormous human capital to shape the future. It is in such a context that the foregoing conditions must be considered and that any strategy for religious literacy must be fashioned. The two major components of this aspect of the environment are the PK–12 and higher education systems.

PK–12 System

The dominant preoccupation of the PK–12 system currently is the anticipated effect of the No Child Left Behind Act. Mandating school accountability for student achievement through high-stakes standardized testing, the NCLBA threatens to penalize underperforming schools. The requirements imposed by this legislation are largely unfunded mandates of, many say, dubious education viability. The result would be greater strain on teachers and administrators to do more with the same or less funding. In addition, the use of vouchers may increase following the Supreme
Court's *Zelman* decision of 2002, threatening public schools with the loss of more students and funding. As a result, thousands of school boards across the United States are preoccupied more with survival issues than with such issues as religious literacy. In addition, many teachers, administrators, school board members, and parents still believe that the Constitution prohibits such discussion or fear the unpredictable outcome of such discussions.

**Higher Education System**

The higher education system has its own idiosyncrasies that complicate the development of approaches to religious literacy in educator preparation. Central to those dynamics is the faculty member. The college professor has control of the curriculum, enjoys high autonomy in areas of increasing specialization (some say disjointed fragmentation), and works within an incentive system that discourages collaboration with colleagues outside their own disciplines. Furthermore, faculty trained in an intellectual climate dominated by the positivist paradigm (discussed above) may dismiss religion as a mere palliative for the ill effects of modernity, and is therefore unworthy of treatment as a serious subject. Those who do practice religion and work in public school or higher education settings find it prudent to compartmentalize this aspect of their life, keeping it well away from their academic work.

Those combined influences on faculty have discouraged attempts to introduce religious literacy into the public professional-education curriculum. Faculty are themselves unprepared to introduce it, both educationally and personally, and they are often wary of their colleagues' opinions were they to broach the topic. The professional-education curriculum for the pre-service preparation of teachers and administrators is already overburdened due, in part, to the pressures of the standards movement and the No Child Left Behind Act. In addition, scholarship standards among religious studies specialists make their expertise difficult to access. That said, there are some hopeful signs.

**Encouraging Signs**

On the PK–12 front, a task force of the American Academy of Religion on religion in the schools promotes religious literacy, among other objectives. The AAR is also encouraging religious studies faculty to collaborate with their education colleagues in religious literacy projects. Several
national leaders, most notably Charles Haynes of the First Amendment Center, have spearheaded such efforts in recent years. One interesting case that has more history than most is a collaborative project of the First Amendment Center—a multi-faceted initiative in California begun in 1993 involving partnerships among several constituencies regarding religious literacy with ramifications for the PK–12 curriculum, educator pre-service preparation, and in-service professional development.14

Professional literature reflects interests in these topics as well. Major publications have devoted entire issues to spirituality: Educational Leadership (December 1998–January 1999) and The School Administrator (September 2002). Several books have also garnered attention, including Lee G. Bolman and Terrence E. Deal, Leading with Soul: An Uncommon Journey of Spirit (1995); Rachael Kessler, The Soul of Education: Helping Students Find Connection, Compassion, and Character at School (2000); and Linda Lantieri, Schools with Spirit: Nurturing the Inner Lives of Children and Teachers (2001). The work of Parker Palmer, discussed below, is particularly influential.

Conferences and scholarly writing in the past five years have seen significantly increased interest in religion and spirituality in higher education. In fall 1998, Wellesley College hosted a conference entitled “Education as Transformation: Religious Pluralism, Spirituality, and Higher Education.” Planned for 300 registrants, registration closed at 800 three days before the event. The conference organizers, Victor Kazanjian and Peter Laurence, later edited a book by a similar title, to which many of the presenters contributed.15 Conferences cosponsored by the same group followed at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, in 2000 and in North Carolina in 2003. Higher education professional associations have picked up this thread as well. The American Association of Higher Education’s Conference on Faculty Rewards featured a session on spirituality. The Fall 2001 issue of Liberal Education, published by the Association of American Colleges and Universities, carried the theme “Religion on Campus,” and the association sponsored an entire conference on the topic on the West Coast in spring 2002. The National Association of Student Personnel Administrators also sponsored a conference on this topic in New Orleans in December 2002. Other major associations increasingly have featured keynote speakers and sessions on issues surrounding religion and spirituality.

Before the mid-1990s, there was scant mention of spirituality or religion in mainstream higher education scholarship. One must go back to 1987 to find such a reference.16 Although many factors have combined to prepare the ground for discussing religion and spirituality in higher
education, perhaps the greatest initial influence was the work of Parker Palmer. Among his many important works, *The Courage to Teach* (1998) struck a responsive chord and became a best-seller among PK–12 through higher education teachers.


Leading higher education journals also have begun publishing work on these topics. Patrick Love and Donna Talbot were among the first to call attention to the omission of this topic in their 1999 article “Defining Spiritual Development: A Missing Consideration for Student Affairs.” Peter Laurence also raised the question in a 1999 *About Campus* article, “Can Religion and Spirituality Find a Place in Higher Education?” Senior scholar Laura Rendon stated her position in “Academics of the Heart: Reconnecting the Scientific Mind with the Spirit’s Artistry” in the *Review of Higher Education*. This same journal later published Professor Jenny J. Lee’s research in her “Religion and College Attendance: Change among
Students." Professors Carney Strange and Judy Rogers articulated a case for "Teaching Spirituality in Public Higher Education" in *Religion and Education*.

Given this increased attention, spirituality and religion is at least a current high-interest topic in education. If not yet established as a long-term mainstream field of study, it appears to be making strides in that direction, particularly as it becomes associated with issues of campus diversity.

**Conclusion**

There are a formidable array of environmental conditions in which to attempt a religious literacy initiative in educator preparation programs: parochialism and Christian privilege; challenging foreign traditions; the legacy of church-state separation; shifting bases of authority; an ethos of individualism; and the overwhelming complexity of public education from PK–12 through higher education.

As with most strategies of change, the introduction of religious literacy into educator preparation programs is a leadership issue. An organization must have a champion of this idea with an uncommon combination of commitment, power, and skill. Consummate communication and group skills are needed to bring disparate groups together to fashion a common agenda. One must be a cultural-symbolic leader, that is, able to interpret an apparently chaotic environment to provide meaning to those involved in the initiative. And the leader will need as many of the types of power, as described by French and Raven, as possible: legitimate (positional power), reward (resource allocation in return for desired behavior), expert (knowledge), referent (charisma or association), and perhaps even coercive. But the purpose of this article has been to focus on the initial phase of "reading the terrain"—gaining an appreciation of the complex environmental conditions in which the work must take place. The next phase will be to "prepare the ground," and that is where local leadership must take up the task.

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**Notes**

10. Ibid., 35.
14. A description is available online at <http://www.csuchico.edu/rs/rperc/proj.html#threeR>.