

## DIVERSITY LEARNINGS IN RELIGIOUS LIFE

**Robert L. Johnson, CURW Director, 1982-2001**

Diversity is a long-standing tradition at Cornell United Religious Work. As Temple University historian Franklin Littell puts it, "CURW was the first official restructuring of inter-religious extra-curricular cooperation on a university campus." That action in 1929, was a big step for an Ivy League institution founded "as a Christian university" and rooted in mainline Protestantism in the "burnt-over district" of upstate New York.

And yet, when I arrived as Director of CURW in 1982, CURW's membership range pretty much included the usual players in American religion: Protestants, Catholics and Jews -- plus a growing Muslim community then about 15 years old. Protestant evangelicals were notably absent as were Buddhists and the many variations on nature-based religions which flourished during the late 1960s.

One of the first new groups to be admitted to CURW during my time were the Southern Baptists. They had been turned down earlier and told CURW already had Baptist representation (meaning Northern Baptists). As a Southerner, I knew there were some 16 million Southern Baptists out there and a strong and growing Ithaca congregation deserved recognition. They quickly became valued colleagues in our work and all our assumptions were violated when the first Southern Baptist representation to CURW turned out to be a Black graduate student!

The other ministry groups that operated on the fringes of CURW were the evangelical groups: Campus Crusade, Inter-Varsity, and the Navigators. Some in Anabel Taylor thought them beyond the pale, fundamentalists in theology and practice and ill-suited to a university ministry. To be sure, Cornell had experienced difficulties with some of these groups in terms of hassling students in residential halls and unsophisticated counseling with students in crisis.

We had a standard set of procedures for admission to CURW, which included a covenant to work cooperatively and not to demean others by way of advancing one's own faith tradition. The other standards called for recognition by a national sponsoring agency and at least ten full-time Cornell students as participants. The evangelicals clearly met these tests and their admission to CURW has not only enriched our dialogue among staff but I believe it has strengthened their work on campus. For Cornellians who see no distinction between evangelicals and fundamentalists, I remind them that Vincent Van Gogh and Jimmy Carter are certified evangelicals!

These standards were also applied when we turned down groups for membership in CURW. We rejected the application of the Unification Church of Reverend Moon three times - chiefly because they never could muster 10 Cornell students as members.

Probably our most recent and contentious new member would be the United Pagan Ministry, which was admitted to CURW three years ago. Our Advisory Board gave long and careful consideration to their application as the group included Druids, Wiccans and a range of people attracted to earth-based religion. All our fears and doubts were eventually resolved and the group had support from the Unitarian/Universalist Church and more than 30 students and staff. After they were admitted, CURW received critical mail from alumni suggesting that "animal sacrifice would be next" and a Reader's Digest article implied that Cornell organized and funded the Pagan group.

Just at the time we were struggling with this decision, an eerie voice from the grave brought a moment of illumination. Ezra Cornell's letter in the cornerstone of Sage Hall, written in 1873, was opened with the

renovation of the building for the Johnson School. Ezra spoke with great force: "From these halls, sectarianism must be forever excluded... all persons of any creed or all creeds must find free and easy access, and a hearty and equal welcome, to the educational facilities possessed by the Cornell University." That settled the issue.

The United Pagan group has proved to be good colleagues. They are a palpable reminder that pagans from Plato to Alice Walker have found a lively place in the academy. For years, I used to joke with people who asked me about which was the largest religious group at Cornell by responding: "The Druids!" And now they are organized and present at our table.

## **BEYOND DIVERSITY**

One factor that has made for constructive engagement at CURW has been our understanding that there is an immense qualitative gulf between diversity and genuine pluralism. Diversity is a given condition of modern culture; pluralism is a condition that requires collective and individual will to be realized. For many, diversity can mean a collection of separatist communities. If often results in relativism and indifference. Pluralism - and especially religious pluralism - requires a confessing element that is empowered to speak in a distinctive voice.

So we work hard at honoring the confessional integrity of our member groups. While they commit themselves to work together in common projects, they are urged to speak out of their historic theological tradition. That means we have many areas of disagreement - about sin and salvation, about abortion and homosexuality, about the role of reason in religion. That means we have lively and straightforward dialogues. Several years ago, a visiting A.C.E. scholar from a Western university sat in on our staff meeting and later told me: "In my month of being at Cornell, the liveliest intellectual exchange I observed was at your staff."

That respect for confessional pluralism also applies to the range of speakers we invite to Sage Chapel. We do not ask our speakers to trim their convictions to our religious or political notions. They are encouraged to speak with passion and particularity of their own faith. (And we have had full blown atheists such as Carl Sagan and L. Pearce Williams speak from that pulpit.) Similarly, we have had recent Baccalaureate speakers who by no means are of a safe, p.c. consensus (witness Harold Bloom of Yale last year and William F. Buckley, Jr. this year).

I would hope that CURW might continue to serve as a model for confessional pluralism. Cornell could benefit from a greater degree of confessional (academics probably would prefer professional to confessional) pluralism. Students learn best when they experience a real contest of ideas and political correctness can be a stifling, deadening influence. Conservative, traditional values are experiencing a resurgence in the larger world and those voices should be as present in academe as in society. CURW should always be a place where there is a critical, intelligent dialogue between the ancient faiths and the new conditions of modernity. Both education and religion live in a tension between conserving and liberating forces. The tension is what makes for learning.