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Prayer and the Secular University: Can Professors Pray for Students?

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Abstract: Philosophy professors who teach at secular universities are professionally required to respect the mission of their universities, including promoting open and critical engagement of topics in the classroom. This essay explores the boundaries of what professors may do outside the classroom. Specifically, it addresses the question of whether it is permissible for professors to pray for their students outside the classroom.

Many factors should be considered when exploring how to teach responsibly in a secular university. This is especially important for Christian professors, as they must stay true to their university's secular mission while not sacrificing core values of their religious faith. This essay is primarily concerned with what Christian philosophers may or may not do outside the classroom – not what they may or may not do in the secular classroom. Specifically, it addresses the ethics of praying for students outside the classroom.

Everyone believes in something, and all people, including professors, hope for certain things. A professor may hope for things generally in her classroom. For example, she may hope that students participate and do well in class. She may also hope for specific things. For example, she may hope that students become good environmentalists, capitalists, Marxists, or feminists. None of these specific beliefs are value-neutral, and so it may be objected that these hopes are impermissible in the secular university. After all, the search for truth is the central duty of the secular university, and this requires open and free critical inquiry without undue bias that hinders the search for truth.

If a professor has an objective conception of the good, though, then it is natural for her to wish that students be aware of this conception if it is relevant to one's discipline. But this need not involve her sharing with students that she holds this particular conception of the good. Because a professor takes her conception of the good to be true, then it is also natural for her to hope that students adopt her conception of the good. After all, if she possesses a belief

but is ambivalent about whether students are exposed to this belief then it seems that she is ambivalent about whether students are exposed to truth. Likewise, if a professor holds a value-laden belief to be true (and not merely one of many “truths) and she is ambivalent about whether students adopt this belief then it seems that she does not care about the well-being of students. If a professor is genuinely an environmentalist, for example, then she should hold the belief that it is good to be an environmentalist. If she believes in environmentalism, then it seems appropriate for her to hope that others become environmentalists. If she hopes that others become environmentalists, then it seems appropriate for her to hope that students become environmentalists. If a student wishes to destroy the earth through pollution and the professor is indifferent to this, then one can call into question whether the professor really cares about environmentalism or others – including her students. But the professor’s mere hopes are innocuous.

One may have concerns that what has been described amounts to impermissible student coercion that would preclude an open learning environment. Yet one can hope for or against something without coercing others. Hoping for something can and does sometimes result in coercion, but it need not. In fact, hope need not entail any action at all on part of the agent who hopes. It may require strength of will to refrain from overtly sharing and advocating one’s conception of the good when one hopes. But it is possible to refrain, and this concern is a potential danger for a professor regardless of her particular conception of the good. Likewise, a professor may have hidden biases, and she may not be aware of these biases. But, again, this is possible for a professor to have regardless of her conception of the good. And so it is important for her, regardless of her beliefs, to be aware of this potential danger.

It may be objected that a professor should not coerce students, for example, by presenting students only with her views, presenting weak representations of opposing views, mocking opposing views, marginalizing students who disagree with her, or penalizing those who disagree with her by awarding lower grades than merited. But a professor can hope that students appreciate the view that she holds without doing any of these things. Whatever the specific mission of a secular university is, the mission should serve to prevent professors from coercing students to adopting their personal beliefs. A professor’s hopes, then, can be limited in a secular university. Some hope is impermissible, as when one’s hopes manifest in coercive actions in the classroom that preclude an open learning environment. Yet hope that does not manifest in classroom coercion and is compatible with an open learning environment is permissible.

Christians are not exempt from having hope. When Christians hope, they sometimes translate this into a specific type of hope – prayer. That is, when they hope for X they sometimes ask God to help make X true. When a professor prays for X regarding students (in the privacy of her home and without students knowing about these prayers), then this may seem to violate the coercive condition of the secular mission. This may hold even if the professor is not being coercive in the classroom. One question relevant to assessing whether it is permissible for professors to pray for students is asking whether God exists. If God does not exist, then mere prayers are wishes that cannot possibly have any coercive force on students. So, non-theists would have little justification to oppose this.

If God exists, then prayers may be efficacious. If so, then it may appear that God coerces students. If God coerces students, then it seems that God, not professors, coerces students. It could be objected that a professor is responsible for God coercing students when she prays because her prayers initiate a causal chain culminating in action from God. Yet most Christians do not believe that their prayers force God to do anything. And even if prayer did force God to do something, most Christians believe that God does not typically coerce action because God has given humans free will. If God exists and is omnipotent, then He could will and actualize anything – including petitions for prayer. But if God exists and is omnipotent, then He could also choose to not will and actualize prayers as they are petitioned. If God exists and His grace is irresistible in a deep sense, then God’s grace will abound regardless of prayers put forth to Him.

These above concerns, though, are moot because non-theists who may object to prayer do not believe that God exists. If a prayer is offered to God and God does not exist, then God cannot coerce students because God is fictional. It may be conceded by non-theists that general prayers, such that students attend classes and fare well in class, are acceptable. But particular prayers, such that students become Christians, are not acceptable. But if God does not exist then neither general nor particular prayers have any force. Given that Christians believe that they are called to pray and to love everyone, it seems that praying for students is justifiable – if not required – for Christians. And because professors do not coerce students in this process, it seems that praying for students is compatible with the mission of secular universities.

The question of praying for students is particularly important for philosophers. After all, philosophers are, by definition, lovers of wisdom. Socrates has much to say about wisdom, including “real wisdom is the property

of God” (*Apology* 23a, trans. H. Tredennick).¹ And the Bible has much to say about wisdom, from the Psalmist who writes that “the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom” (Psalm 111:10) to the apostle Paul’s claim about Jesus that “in [him] whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge” (Colossians 2:3). A philosopher in the secular university has a responsibility to present competing accounts of wisdom in this pursuit. When presenting material pertaining to wisdom, a Christian cannot pretend to be agnostic about which conception of wisdom she holds, even if she withholds these views from students, without being disingenuous. And a non-theist (or a person who holds any value-based belief) cannot pretend to be agnostic about which conception of wisdom she holds, even if she withholds these views from students, without being disingenuous. Teaching philosophy does not require that one become a skeptic, and even if it did then one may similarly have concerns that a skeptic might hope that students become skeptics and if so then this hope itself might lead to coercion through the promotion of skepticism. In any case, it is the secular university’s responsibility to guard academic freedom by not being partisan towards any ideology, including during philosophical inquiry, while seeking to preclude religious and anti-religious prejudice. Of course, to what degree this is expected may vary from institution to institution – including possible differences between private and public secular universities.

If a philosopher loves wisdom, then she will hope that students value wisdom. If she hopes that students value wisdom, then she will hope that students pursue wisdom. If she hopes that students pursue wisdom, then she will hope that students pursue wisdom ultimately grounded in truth. If she hopes that students pursue wisdom ultimately grounded in truth, then she is justified in hoping that students eventually embrace a conception of wisdom grounded in truth so long as she does so non-coercively. Christian philosophers hold beliefs that they believe are grounded in truth, and their hope sometimes manifests in prayer – a non-coercive activity of hoping. Praying for students is thus itself, given the aforementioned constraints, permissible for philosophy professors.²

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¹ Translated by Hugh Tredennick from *The Collected Works of Plato*, Huntington and Cairns (ed.), Princeton U. Press, 1980, p. 4-26.

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