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Secular universities and religious tolerance

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Working at a public university is a challenge for people of faith.

It seems to be assumed that intelligence and faith cannot be housed in the same brain and thus, believers are often dismissed as dim-witted throwbacks to a less enlightened era. This is especially true of believers who self-identify by wearing certain clothing or jewelry or, heaven forbid, are seen reading a book of scripture.

(Exception made here for anyone in the Department of Religion: expressions of faith are expected, if not completely welcomed.)

Most of the time, this disdain of faith isn't overt; academia prides itself on being able to look askance at entire populations while appearing tolerant and even contemplative. But sometimes, as I observed recently, the religious prejudice is so obvious that people of faith are faced with a choice: Endure or ignore the religious hostility or speak up.

It is an uncomfortable spot in which to be. Just as overhearing a racist joke or observing sexual harassment at the workplace makes the average person squirm, so does watching someone's faith be mocked. Unless, of course, you're participating in the mocking or believe (having those advanced degrees and all) that religious intolerance is the one type of prejudice allowed in the 21st century.

Earlier this week, Gideons appeared on campus. I didn't see any of them, but I saw the pocket-sized New Testaments they left behind. The first one I spotted was on top of a stack of student newspapers. The second one I didn't see -- a coworker who was disgusted it had been brought into our office and left near the front desk pointed it out.

He was so disgusted, in fact, that he made a big show of saying, "Does anyone want this?" before he threw the small scripture towards the office trash can.

He missed twice (read into that what you will about the power of God), but hit the target the third time, which was right about when I said, "I already have one at home, but I'll take it."

I wish I could say I confronted him, but I didn't. I was hired only a month ago and I need -- and like -- this job. Shows rather a lack of faith on my part, I know. But what I said turned out to be enough.

While I continued consulting the calendar with the front-desk secretary and discussing upcoming appointments with another colleague, the man who tossed the scripture in the trash pulled it out and, as he went back to his office, placed it on the front desk near me.

I put it in my satchel, and the next day I left it on a table in a coffee shop, setting it free on campus once again. Perhaps someone in need of hope picked it up; perhaps another too-smart-for-God was offended and threw it away. I'm hoping for the first.

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What I don't understand -- what I will never understand -- is why nonbelievers are so irritated by seeing any expression of faith.

If you don't want the Bible on the counter, pass it by. If you don't care for the Qur'an, don't read it. If you don't want to go to Temple, don't -- but stop dismissing the Jewish kid with the yamaka as less brilliant than you because he believes in a Creator that's bigger than you.

You, after all, could be just as misled as you think he is.

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