

Should colleges teach the practice of faith?

By [Steve Thorngate](#)

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I have mixed feelings about [this idea of Marshall Poe's](#):

I think religion should be taught in college. I'm not talking about "religious studies," that is, the study of the phenomenon of religion. I'm talking about having imams, priests, pastors, rabbis, and other clerics teach the practice of their faiths. In college classrooms. To college students. For credit. I think religion should be taught in college because I believe it can help save floundering undergraduates. I'm not talking about "saving" them in Christian sense. I'm talking about teaching them how to live so they do not have to suffer an endless stream of miseries.

On the one hand, it sounds a bit ludicrous. First of all, whose religion will be taught? The [Flying Spaghetti Monster's](#)? I certainly don't share the entirety of [atheist blogger Cuttlefish's take](#), but this part's right:

Once a state university opens the door to one [religious tradition], any sect can demand equal treatment, and if [Poe] wants *some* available for academic credit, then he is really proposing that every university employ a cadre of religious teachers of all conceivable denominations. To pass constitutional muster, it would have to be an open forum, independent of the percentage of adherents, subsidized by the university (and undergraduate tuition) as needed.

Anticipating this objection, Poe offers that a school need not offer a class on every religion ever: "It seems sensible simply to mandate that it make a reasonable effort to cover the spread of faiths represented in the student body." But this assumes that the students in such a class would be existing adherents of the faith in question, not potential seekers and/or learners. Now it's starting to sound a bit like a church-based discipleship class.

Except that Poe gets around First Amendment objections by insisting this would be teaching *about* religion, not teaching religion itself. Taking [the \*Schempp decision\*](#) as his starting point, Poe maintains that this his idea is not about proselytizing:

As a condition of their employment, [clergy hired as teachers] would be required to teach students how to practice their religion: what they should believe in terms of dogma, how and when to perform necessary rituals, and how they should live their daily lives in accordance with the ethical principles of the religion. These instructors would be forbidden from pressuring students to join their faiths, from discriminating on the basis of church membership (or non-membership), and from suggesting that their faiths are in some way superior to others. In other words, the cleric-instructors would be asked to assume a position of neutrality with reference to their own religion and the religion (or lack thereof) of the students in the class. Their purpose would only be to *inform* students about how to practice the religion, that's all.

So, the how without the why. Maybe that's constitutional, but it sounds horribly dull and ineffective. Sure, "pressuring students to join their faiths" is a bad idea, for a college-town parish pastor as much as for an instructor. But clergy would really be asked to explain a belief system, a set of practices, an ethical framework—all the while emphasizing the how-to—without betraying any actual preferential investment in the tradition that they, in their vocational capacity as faith leaders, are there to talk about?

Now it's starting to sound like a church-based discipleship class...taught by simply reading an encyclopedia article. Why would faith leaders want to teach such a class, and why would anyone care if they did?

And yet, the other hand. I'm not convinced that colleges could get away with offering such a class, find able and willing teachers, register enough students to pay those teachers, or create an engaging classroom experience while mandating that the teachers feign complete neutrality. But if they did figure all this out, it sure would be a good thing for young adults to learn actual facts about the practice of faith—whether their own tradition or someone else's. It's not clear that colleges are better situated to do this than, say, congregations. But Poe gives clear personal testimony as to why this matters to him:

I began to attend what might generically be called a “spiritual program.” . . . The people in this spiritual program embraced me, identified with me, and told me to *do* a specific set of things. There was talk of God, but they explained that *talking* was secondary to *doing*. I didn’t have to believe in God, they said, all I had to do was practice the teachings of the “religion.” If I did that, they said, I would be relieved of much of my suffering.

I practiced, and indeed I was relieved. When people ask me why this spiritual program worked for me, I usually say that it gave me a “way of life.”

Here’s where I agree wholeheartedly with Poe: the spiritually adrift need a way of life. I’m skeptical that college courses taught by officially indifferent clergy will be a big part of the solution, but I’d be glad to be proven wrong.