



Chapel and the Non-Religious

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While the following article points out the evolution of Chapel at an historically Christian independent school, the evolution it points to could be insightful into how a school community can help to satisfy the needs of all students at any school.

Think back two decades to how most schools who had Chapel programs conducted Chapel. For the most part, gatherings were Christocentric, a condensed version of what might be found in a local Church. This fit well with the worldview of the largely Christian students and their parents. That being said, a few people in independent schools drew from other faith traditions. The tendency was to welcome them as 'honoured guests.' Other than this nod, most schools changed little of their actual practice. All of the language, liturgy, and assumptions of the Church were embedded in Chapels.

Eventually practice began to shift. For some, Jesus was no longer emphasized as the *only* way. It wasn't that those presiding no longer believed this doctrinal point, but they weren't going to press it upon students from other faiths. Others began to mark the significant festivals



of other traditions, using Chapel as a bridge to build understanding and acceptance between communities. Over time, some chaplains began to speak openly in services about there being many paths to the divine, explicitly declaring that every tradition had something of value to offer.

Our process hasn't been without hurdles. Many had to rethink what it means to be true to their tradition. They had to reconsider what they were trying to deliver in terms of core message. In some cases, the very purpose of Chapel had to be reframed to address the reality of increasingly diverse student bodies. These explorations often unearthed deep convictions among students, staff, and alumni, and required careful negotiation and navigation.

Today, one would be hard pressed to find a Chapel program in a CSEE school originating in the Christian tradition that has not changed its practice in response to students from other faith groups. Whether subtly or radically, schools that were once distinctly and exclusively Christian now shape their gatherings to make them more accessible for Jewish, Sikh, Buddhist, and other students. More often than not, this diversity is actively celebrated. Many, including myself, would affirm that this shift has created a more relevant and meaningful experience for students of all faiths—a net gain for the entire community.

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It's with this history in mind that I suggest we again cast our collective eye on the students who gather in our Chapels. Another group has emerged, whose members often find themselves disconnected and even alienated from what many independent schools offer.

Drawing parallels between non-religious¹ students and, say, Baha'i students is not a tidy equivalency. Being non-religious is not the same as being of a different faith group. As one of my students puts it, 'Knowing that someone is non-religious tells you as much about who they are as knowing that someone is a non-golfer.'

We do have our perceptions, though. With individuals like Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens in the public eye, some are tempted to transfer their assertive tendencies to other non-religious people. In reality, the Pew Research Center² makes clear that non-religious people who claim the term 'atheist' are far less likely than religious

1. 'Non-religious' is the term preferred by the students of my school who have been most closely involved in these conversations.

2. American statistics in this article are drawn from the Pew Research Center's '2014 Religious Landscape Survey.' Canadian figures are taken from Statistic Canada's 2011 census report.

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people to share their views on God and religion with those who hold different understandings. Compared to religious peoples' willingness to share their views with those who differ, atheists are three times *less* likely on a weekly basis to share their views and over 20% *more* likely to never or seldom share their views, period. Yet, many still hold to the negative perception of assertiveness, feeling that there is too much from the non-religious, while missing the reality that this population often faces substantial discrimination within our societies.

For example, what does it mean for a non-religious person when 45% of Americans say that a belief in God is *necessary* for one to have good values and live a moral life? Or when 51% of Americans say that they are less likely to support an atheist presidential candidate?

It means that roughly half the people in the country view that a person's lack of belief in God as something that makes them *less* able to be a moral member of society and *less* suited to leadership within it.

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This general sense of judgement can pale in comparison to what our students directly experience in their lives.

While some of my students talk about being third generation atheists, reflecting the convictions of their families, a significant number find themselves in situations where they're closeted (yes, 'closeted atheist' is a common term). They feel that they simply cannot come out to their families because the faith stance of their parents will lead to anger, hurt, and possible rejection. It's not something that they're exaggerating in their minds. Rather, it's something that they've witnessed with other relatives. Whether Christian or Muslim, this sense can be particularly acute for boarding students who continue an outward appearance of adhering to their families' traditions lest they be outed and forced home. It entails being careful about what information is shared with which friends...and staff.

Although in some circles the non-religious are depicted as possessing an almost flip-pant disregard for religion, I've found the opposite to be true with my students. For those from religious families, the high cost of adopting a different viewpoint compels them to undertake a serious reflection process. They are walking away from a part of their identity that has been theirs from birth, a formerly vibrant avenue of connection to those they love. These students tend to be well versed in their traditions and have often explored other faiths as well. Even among those whose parents are also non-religious,



there's a near universal respect for the best of what religion offers and an interest in the concept of belief itself.

Of course, some non-believers are not respectful or thoughtful in their approach, just as some religious folk are narrow in their perceptions.

The fact remains that within Chapel programs, there is a growing population of individuals who don't connect with traditional Christian language, liturgy, and assumptions about belief. This leaves a choice, one that's been made before. We can welcome the non-religious as 'honoured guests' without altering the traditional approach or we can expand the conversation to include respect for other traditions.

These discussions will be challenging, perhaps more so than the ones that led to the fuller inclusion of other faith traditions. We'll need to navigate and negotiate deeply held convictions, including our own. Yet, 20 years from now, perhaps the majority of independent schools will affirm that such a shift has created a more relevant and meaningful experience for students of all variations of faith—another net gain for all.

How this process unfolds will depend on our various schools, their cultures, and their emerging demographics, both within and beyond our walls. Here in Canada, the population claiming 'no religious affiliation' has grown from less than one percent in 1971

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to 24% in 2011. My home province, British Columbia, sits at 44%. Given this context, it's not surprising that my school has had to give consideration to this issue. We've come to the point of making public statements about Chapel's purpose, tying into the language of 'promise' found in our vision.

If Chapel didn't exist at the school, we would need to invent it. Every community that strives to be intentional in its work requires a time and place to gather as a whole. Especially in the context of cultural, economic, and geographical diversity, we need regular reminders of our common aspirations and foibles, along with the values that hold us together. Each time we give

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these ideas voice through a wisdom story, a nuanced question, or a student reflection, we further strengthen our ability to discover our individual and collective promise—which is exactly what Chapel is about.

We've also answered the direct question, "Is SMUS Chapel a religious gathering?"

No. Although overtly religious in the past, Chapel no longer promotes a particular doctrine or tradition. The only divergence from this statement is the continued presence on occasion of a few Christian hymns. We sing them out of respect for our heritage and because the music is beautiful.

Although this might seem to be a departure from our 110+ years of tradition, we've come to understand it as being consistent. Back then, *Chapel reflected the students who attended the school*, almost all of whom were Christian and most of whom were Anglican. Today, the tradition stands. *Chapel reflects the students who attend the school*, some of whom are devout Christians, some of whom

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identify with faith communities but aren't active, and some of whom are non-religious.

This particular way-stop on our journey is the result of more than ten years of transition, leading to measured shifts in language, form, and assumptions.³ Where once we broadened our practice to include students of other faiths, we're now benefiting from further extending ourselves to consider the experience of those who are non-religious.

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3. Feel free to contact me if you'd like to know the specifics of how we conduct Chapel at our school.

Keven Fletcher serves as the Chaplain and Faculty Mentor at St. Michaels University School in Victoria, BC, where he divides his time between public speaking, process facilitation, and exploring life choices with staff and students. The 1,000 strong community of SMUS draws from five continents and 25 countries. As an ordained minister within the United Church of Canada, his former role centered on congregational ministry in the midst of crisis. An avid teller of wisdom stories, Keven drew his favorites together to form the core of a novel, When It Matters Most, and investigated the ethical implications in a paper, 'Cultural Appropriation and the Telling of Wisdom Stories.'