

Title: A Defense of Faith Statements

Podcast: Heterodox Out Loud

Episode: 39

Transcript

Shirley Mullen

I think there's an opportunity right now for the academy to demonstrate for the larger culture what it means to treat people who think differently from us with dignity. Our larger culture doesn't know how to do that right now. The academy, who already has these larger commitments to respect for human dignity, respect for freedom of ideas, we should be modeling what it means to take those values seriously.

Zach Rausch

Shirley Mullen on Heterodox Out Loud. I'm Zach Rausch. Today, in the true spirit of open inquiry and viewpoint diversity, we look at a deeply counterintuitive claim within the free speech movement in higher education: that mandatory faith statements at universities may actually support and advance academic freedom. Our guest today is Shirley Mullen, who served as President of Houghton College, a Christian liberal arts school, for 15 years. She retired in May of last year. Next week, Shirley will be speaking along with three other university presidents at HxA's 2022 Conference in Denver, which is just days away. In our interview, we discussed the origins of liberal arts education, the tensions and harmonies between religion and higher ed, and why she believes that mandatory faith statements can support open inquiry and constructive disagreement in institutions of higher learning. Before we chat, we'll listen to her blog post, "In Defense of Faith Statements."

The full blog post can be found on our website here: [In Defense of Faith Statements](#)

Zach Rausch

Now, my interview with Shirley.

Shirley, it is such a pleasure to have you on Heterodox Out Loud. I want to start by getting a sense of who you are and what your academic story is.

Shirley Mullen

I was born in a family, a Christian family. My grandfathers and my dad were ministers, but it was also a family that cared a lot about education. And I was a very inquisitive child. From early on, I'll just jump quickly from the family to the educational context. I chose to go to one of a number of small colleges in this country that really seeks to bring together the Liberal arts and the Christian faith. And I studied history and philosophy and became really fascinated with epistemology, that is, how we come to know the things that we believe we know. And I have a kinship with the skeptics over history. I worked with the Victorian free thinkers in my history dissertation and David Hume in my philosophy dissertation. And I'm just a firm believer in cultivating that freedom of ideas and honesty about dealing with people, with their questions. And I never really intended to end up in the administrative side of things, but I would say that that commitment to follow truth, wherever it leads, and to include the tensions between those affirmations of faith and reason. And so, as a historian, I was very interested in the fact that in the 13th century, theology was queen of the sciences.

And by the time we were in the modern period, it's really science and reason. And, while I understand historically that trajectory, I also think that we're better off if we can keep the role of religion and the role of reason and science in tension, rather than trying to keep one of those in the private sphere rather than the arena of public debate.

Zach Rausch

You hit it right on the mark of this theoretical divide that we have of what is the role of religion and education. Should it just be completely separate or, I like the word that you use, to have it as a source of tension that's working with science and reason. Do you feel like your religious background helped lead you to being skeptical, following ideas wherever they lead? Was that part of your religious upbringing?

Shirley Mullen

Well, it was, Zach, but I want to be very careful in how I say this, because I know it has not been for many people. So, in my own tradition and a lot of this with my parents and my professors, they just had that confidence. And I would say it was grounded in their sense of human beings as created with minds as created with reason and created with curiosity. And so, it was really out of that affirmation of human beings as creatures who should be thinking, should be probing their curiosity

that I was taught. And so, I really think that it's a time when we need to bring back that dignity of the human questioner, dignity of the human questions, and any questions that people have should be treated seriously. And any questioner should be treated seriously. And that's how I tried to teach, it's, how I functioned in all of the contexts in which I was as a professor, chief academic officer, and then president. And I'll add one more thing. I haven't used the word fear yet, but I think that part of why many people today find open discussion difficult is they're fearful of people having the wrong answers.

It's like, "Oh, my goodness, I'd rather dismiss you." And we're seeing that in the culture all over the place right now. I'd rather say, "Oh, you shouldn't be thinking that," rather than say, "Okay, you are thinking that. Help me understand why you're thinking that. And let's talk honestly and openly about these questions."

Zach Rausch

And I think this is a good segue into the blog post that you wrote, which was "In Defensive Faith Statements" that you wrote in October for us, because I think many people, on face value, see that and may think, "Isn't that the antithesis of feeling a lack of fear to question dogma or certain ideas?" So, let's start there.

Shirley Mullen

Well, I had picked up that there was some concern within members of the Heterodox Academy that faith statements did have that function. And Zach, I would just say, certainly they could have that function. And I was very clear in my blog post that faith statements can function very negatively or they can function very positively. And I was simply trying to enlarge the imagination of how they might function. I would say that all of us as human beings start out with assumptions that we don't argue for. And frankly, the larger academy is now much more aware of that than maybe at earlier periods in the modern academy. I mean, we're much more attuned to the role of perspective. We're much more attuned to the role of people's context, identity, and background. And what faith statements are really trying to do is identify what are those underlying assumptions of this particular community. You do a faith statement when you are concerned that the larger culture might not understand what you're trying to be doing. These faith statements are ways of signaling to, particularly, I would say, applicants in the job market, that these are the things that this community affirms.

These are the underlying assumptions. And we just want you to know what are the things that we take as those underlying assumptions. And in the case of faith statements, they really are about affirmations or declarations of what this particular religious learning community takes as starting points. The larger academy in the modern world has not historically felt the need to do that because it's more like, "Okay, we all know what we all believe," and it's usually when communities are either trying to differentiate themselves or trying to signal that we have a set of concerns that maybe are not shared by others, that you feel the need to declare themselves.

Zach Rausch

This is really interesting to me, because I'm trying to think about what would, I guess a form of a faith statement look like at a secular university? And is that something like the free expression principles from the University of Chicago? Is that kind of what you're thinking, or is it something a little different?

Shirley Mullen

Well, okay. I mean, this story, and everything I think about has to be rooted in context. So if you think about the roots, particularly the Enlightenment, when the idea of reason and the methods of science were put in the forefront of sources of significant knowledge, and it was assumed that matters of faith and religion would be privatized, the assumption was that the academy is about going for that place of unbiased objective truth. And there's the affirmation, and you could root this in, whether it's John Stewart Mill "On Liberty" or all kinds of other free speech documents in the Western tradition that would argue that the way we come to objective truth is through unfettered pursuit of knowledge. And the assumption is that sources of religion, grounded in revelation, are intrusions on that search rather than elements that might actually be productive and in tension and part of that search. Right now, the academy, while it's still declaring, and I think quite rightly so, that we need to pursue free inquiry, we need to pursue the truth wherever it leads, I'm absolutely committed to those things. What the debate is about, really, is what are the things that contribute to that exploration of truth wherever it leads?

I mean, that's really what's at stake. If we were to ask the modern academy to make a faith statement, I think it would be a lot harder right now because it would have to include not just the earlier assumptions about unfettered objectivity, but it would have to include, right now, all of the concerns of hermeneutics, all of the concerns around perspective, all of the concerns that we link to people's culture and background. And so, it would be a much harder thing to write but it would

include statements about what are the assumptions that we think are going to lead us to that best chance of getting at the deepest, richest, broadest truth about the human experience in its fullness.

Zach Rausch

There's been a shift kind of since the 80s to now about what is, I guess, the best way to be objective, and that these things change over time and evolve. And if that's not made explicit, which is kind of part of your blog post, sometimes we don't even know what is changing and what the assumptions were and where they are.

Shirley Mullen

In the universities, now, there are all kinds of these ideological frameworks that if you're outside them, they feel like closed systems where whoever's inside the system can explain people who don't agree with them away, whether it's Marxism or feminism or any of the ideologies, where someone who is inside can say to you, if you're outside, "Oh, you're one of those people. You're one of those people. And I can explain why you are that way." Well, to me, what I understand the Heterodox of Academy to be trying to do is to say, "No, as academics, we are going to take the pursuit of truth, the pursuit of honest questions, the pursuit of honest questioners with dignity, and we are not going to dismiss you because you are one of those people, whatever those people means to that person. We are going to ask you, "Why do you think that way? And let's enter into dialogue openly." So, those are commitments that ground the work of the Heterodox Academy; I'm not going to say, "Well, that's a faith statement," but in the metaphorical sense, that is the statement of those foundational assumptions that we're going to try to work with.

Zach Rausch

In the past ten years, we've seen a large rise of student activism around issues of diversity, equity, inclusion. How has that played out at Houghton College or at other religious universities? Is that a source of tension between some of the perhaps faith statements coming into conflict with certain progressive ideals?

Shirley Mullen

When faith statements are what they ought to be, they should actually provide grounding for making statements about diversity, equity, and inclusion. And so, for example, at Houghton College,

our college was abolitionist in its tradition. Admitted women, ordained women. I mean, a lot of the issues around women and abolition and race issues, Houghton was actually very much part of the progressive end of things in the 19th century when it was founded. Most of the issues of tension right now Zach are around issues of sexual ethic and not just issues related to LGBTQ issues, which is what sometimes people assume. It's really about larger questions of sexual ethic. And our larger culture right now really does believe that sexual behavior is linked to matters of individual rights and that as long as there's mutual consent, and people know what they're doing as adults, everything's fine. And a lot of the debate right now is, "Are there other aspects that ought to be part of commitments of sexual behavior?" So, are there obligations or other things in addition to mutual consent that ought to be part of what we're dealing with? Broadly speaking, the issues around sexual behavior, sexual ethics, those are really where many of the issues are in tension right now in the larger culture.

I mean, not just in colleges with faith statements, but in the larger culture. I would argue that the faith statements ought to ground our commitment to basic respect for human persons and treating people with dignity. So, I don't see faith statements as much in conflict with DEI statements as much as their, DEI statements are more about the what and how faith statements are about the why. It's the why's that we're wrestling with as a culture right now.

Zach Rausch

So, just to end here, I'd like you to quickly talk through what lessons do you think secular universities can take from religious universities about the values that HxA really cares about? Viewpoint diversity, constructive disagreement, free inquiry?

Shirley Mullen

There's no perfect religious institution and no perfect secular institution. I do think that all of us right now need to recognize the importance of underlying assumptions. So, in the modern period, particularly in the 19th and 20th century, institutions with faith statements have recognized that they are a minority position within the larger academy. So, we're trying to function with integrity within the larger academy, but also with these convictions around a particular faith perspective. And so I think what religious institutions can be instructive on, if I can put it that way, is let's all recognize that we have assumptions that we start with and name those and seek to be transparent about those ideals and seek to draw others into dialogue and discussion about those differences, rather than simply either assume they're not there or assume they ought not to be there. So that

recognition that we cannot assume that everybody else thinks the way we do. So, for example, any graduate of an institution with a faith statement knows that the larger academy would not share all of those assumptions. And my point is, why don't we all recognize that there are many people within the academy who don't share our assumptions about many things. Let's name those things.

Let's respect disagreement. All of these institutions with faith statements take education seriously. They understand the difference between indoctrination and education. And I think that that is a really important distinction. And sometimes people that have not, or people that are suspicious of these institutions, assume that they're doing indoctrination. Actually, I would argue that institutions with faith statements are especially careful not to be doing indoctrination because they know that if they're doing that, they're violating everything about their integrity, which is part of their faith statement. So, to really recommit to education, not indoctrination, and I'm going to say here what I mean by that is when someone raises a question, instead of saying about that, "You shouldn't have that question," or, "You shouldn't be saying that," you take the question seriously and seek to engage it. And to me, that's one of the fundamental differences between education and indoctrination. Part of what I'm so passionate about with the Heterodox Academy is I think there's an opportunity right now for the academy to demonstrate for the larger culture what it means to treat people who think differently from us with dignity. Our larger culture doesn't know how to do that right now.

The academy who already has these larger commitments to respect for human dignity, respect for freedom of ideas, we should be modeling what it means to take those values seriously. If the academy cannot do that, I don't know where else it's going to happen right now in our culture.

Zach Rausch

Shirley Mullen on Heterodox Out Loud. Our conversation is one of the many thoughtful and provocative interviews we've recorded on our podcast. Find more and listen at our website, HeterodoxAcademy.org. We also love those five-star reviews on Apple, Google, or wherever you get your podcast. Thanks to Davies Content for producing this show and to Kara Boyer on our communications team. I'm Zach Rausch, until next time.