REMARKS BY GEORGIA TECH PRESIDENT G. WAYNE CLOUGH
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"Spirituality in the Public University"

The meaning of the phrase, "spirituality in a public university" is likely to depend strongly on the viewpoint of the observer. To some it may relate to religion and religious belief and how this is taught or not taught. To others it concerns ethics, morals and values without reference to religion. The subject is complex; hundreds of learned papers have been written on the topic and famous legal opinions have been issued about it. I do not intend to tread into this territory, because I am certainly not qualified as an expert. And as an engineer at heart, I tend to tire of debates with few answers and instead lean towards taking action around reason that makes common sense. It is in the latter vein I will make my comments.

It is useful to take a short look at some history on the subject of the link between universities and religion. Almost all of the first universities in the U.S. were founded with affiliations to Christian religions. One of the reasons was that their mission in these early times included educating preachers, because it was not possible to import enough from Europe for the burgeoning population of our young nation. America was a veritable gold mine for a newly minted minister. His flock was faced with a hard life where the consumption of alcoholic beverages was high and life expectancy was low.

The first U.S. university, Harvard, was founded in 1636 based on an affiliation with the Puritans of New England. Harvard was, and is, private. The College of William and Mary, chartered in 1693 by the King William of England on the basis of an affiliation with the Church of England, was our second university. William and Mary was also the first public university. While both Harvard and William and Mary were founded with ties to a single religion, over time both of these universities opened their doors to students of all religions.

Thomas Jefferson, who was no fan of the Church of England or any state-based religion, helped speed the loosening of William and Mary's ties to its founding religion when he became Governor of Virginia. In 1779 he led an effort to reform the curriculum of the College of William and Mary, which included abolishing the school of theology and another school designed to teach Christianity to the Indians. In their place he proposed a professorship in "moral philosophy" and one in "history, civil and ecclesiastical." Interestingly, as governor he also served as head of the Board of Trustees of the College of William and Mary. Apparently he saw no conflict of interest in doing so, but today we find it appropriate to separate political power from that required to govern a public university.

Jefferson later founded the University of Virginia as a public school and he wrote in a report, "In conformity with the principles of our Constitution, which places all sects of religion on an equal footing, we have proposed no professor of divinity…" Although Jefferson did allow for a building that all religious sects could use in conducting religious activities, he was accused by a number of well know preachers of creating a "godless" institution. And eventually allowances were made for different sects to fund professorships and allow for access to spaces for the

teaching of religious principles. He did make sure however, that no public money was used to fund the teaching any particular religion.

It is important to note that Jefferson was not "anti-religion" but was adamantly opposed to the establishment of a formal relationship between the university and any particular religion. He was an advocate of the university as a place of open dialog and free inquiry. In 1820 he wrote to a friend about the University of Virginia, "This institution will be based on the illimitable freedom of the human mind. For here we are not afraid to follow truth wherever it may lead, and not to tolerate any error so long as reason is left free to combat it." What this high ideal has in common with many of Jefferson's remarkable writings and thoughts, is that it was easier to express in the abstract than to accomplish in fact. Still, as with the noble words he expressed in our Constitution that "all men are created equal," his ideal for a university sets a standard worth aspiring to.

As was the case in the early days of our nation, the role of religion in our public universities has been a subject that has never quite come to a full equilibrium point. This is also true of the role of spirituality in our universities. Here I use the term spirituality as separate from religion, although I appreciate that many would not make such a distinction. I am not going to debate the merits of having religion and spirituality mix, since they can, but rather will separate them for this discussion, because I believe we should take as a given that a public university should not advocate the teaching of any specific religion.

Several years ago in the magazine *Educational Leadership*, master teacher Parker Palmer wrote: "I reject the imposition of any form of religion in public education… But I advocate any way we can find to explore the spiritual dimensions of teaching, learning, and living. By 'spiritual' I do not mean the creedal formulations of any faith tradition, as much as I respect those traditions and as helpful as their insights can be. I mean the ancient and abiding human quest for connectedness with something larger and more trustworthy than our egos – with our own souls, with one another, with the invisible winds of the spirit, with the mystery of being alive." His words are close to my own thoughts on this matter.

There have been ebbs and flows in our perceptions about the importance of spirituality over time. In the 1960's and 70's our nation went through a period of experimentation with the limits of personal freedom as it related to sexuality and behavior. The ambivalence about the war in Vietnam contributed to the breakdown in trust between citizens and authority figures. Universities were caught up in this ambivalence and tended to see their roles as divorced from the lives of students when they were not in the classroom. No longer serving as "in loco parentis," the university often became an impersonal place where spirituality was not encouraged or deemed important. Over time we recognized that the pendulum had swung too far, for while students at universities were "adults" in some sense, this approach left them with little moral guidance or advice at a time when they were very impressionable and prone to making choices that could negatively affect their lives forever – the consequences of binge drinking, non-consensual sexual behavior, and the piling up of massive credit card debt to name just a few.

Today, most universities, and I would like to include Georgia Tech among them, appreciate the important role that spirituality and morals play in helping students develop themselves as persons

who have values that respect human dignity and the important tenets of civil society. The question is how to achieve the balance needed to inculcate the growth of values and spirituality without crossing over the line that would require mandatory religious instruction or create a religious segregation between students.

The population of the United States today includes more religious and ethnic diversity than at any time in the past. At Georgia Tech our community includes Christians, Jews, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, agnostics and atheists. The largest single denomination represented in our freshman class is Catholic, but combined, protestant religions are the greatest numbers. Even so, upwards of 15 percent of our student body professes to be Jewish, Hindu, Buddhist, and Muslim. I believe that it is our duty to create a campus environment of respect and acceptance for all of our students regardless of their religion and that we have an opportunity to use their time on our campus as a teachable moment. Indeed, given our diversity, we have a ready venue to show that all religions are based on many common values and tenets and to help our students to see the humanity in those who profess different religions than their own.

From my point of view, I believe it is important to see our students as individuals, not as members of groups, be they secular or non-secular. This need is driven home to me each year as some three to five of our students die from disease or are killed in accidents. Each of these deaths pains me deeply and I personally write notes to the families. In one case the family was from India, and I received a long note of thanks from them for my letter of condolence. They noted how much their son had enjoyed being a Tech student and how the chance to experience life on our campus enriched his life. A few years ago we started a ceremony to honor those who died while active as a student, staff member or faculty at Tech, and I have a chance to meet the parents of students and their friends at this time. There are no religious trappings involved, and no distinction is made as to the religious belief of the families, but all the same there is deep spirituality as we celebrate the lives of those who passed.

I think this type of activity is one of the many that we can undertake that helps demonstrate our understanding of our moral responsibility to our students and community and the fragility and precious nature of life. Unfortunately, we live in an age of polarization, fed by the news media and the political process. We hear language like “Either you are for us or you are against us.” We hear people identify themselves as “good” and others as “evil.” On the news the other night I heard one supporter of President Bush state that the President was a more godly man than his opponent, John Kerry. Now both President Bush and Senator Kerry are Christians and attend church regularly, so I am not sure how one measures the “godliness” of one against the other. What was particularly sad to me was to see a Christian disparage the belief of another Christian within a political context.

The great comedian Charlie Chaplin was at the end of his career in the early days of World War II when he made a movie called “The Great Dictator.” While it was seen as a comedy at the time, its message was profound and has application today. Chaplin said, “More than machinery, we need humanity. More than cleverness, we need kindness and gentleness. Without these qualities, life will be violent and all will be lost.” Martin Luther King, Jr. echoed that message a few decades later: “Returning violence for violence multiplies violence, adding deeper darkness to a

night already devoid of stars. Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that."

The university is an institution with a heritage of openness and respect. Universities have long been oases in a troubled world in this respect – places where people with differing beliefs and opinions can sit down together and converse together rather than shooting each other. Even though Georgia Tech can have no bias or preferences for particular religions, we can still embrace this fundamental sense of respect for all people, for justice, and for ethics that underlies religion. Ethics are essential to education. The Ancient Greeks said "Character is destiny," and Plato stated, "If you ask, what is the good of education, the answer is easy – that education makes good men [and I would add women] and that good men act nobly." Ralph Waldo Emerson while lecturing at Harvard said, "Character is higher than intellect." Can education truly take place without decency, respect for others, integrity, self-discipline, thoughtfulness, and hard work? I think not.

I believe our goal should be to create a climate in which individuals have the opportunity discover and develop their own spirituality. A story helps illustrate the point: An art professor made a beautiful bowl, then asked students what its most important characteristic was. One student suggested its perfect shape. No, the professor said, that was not it. Another suggested the beauty of the colors and patterns of the glaze. But that was not it, either. A third student suggested the nature and quality of the clay. No again. A fourth said quality of process that produced bowl. No again. The students were baffled. Then the professor said, "The most important attribute of this bowl is the space it defines – space in which something important and treasured can be held."

Georgia Tech cannot tell students what to put into their personal bowl like private church-affiliated, private colleges and universities can, but we can help them shape the bowl and give them the opportunities to find treasures to put into it. As we do so, we have to add to the mix the importance of being accountable for one's actions and respect for the tradition of our laws and societal norms.

At Georgia Tech we do that through:

- Religious organizations: Georgia Tech Jewish Student Union, Baptist Student Union, Catholic Center, Asian Christian Fellowship, Campus Crusade for Christ, Muslim Student Association – to name just a few. These offer students the opportunity to develop their spiritual lives according to the religion of their choosing.
- Servant Leadership programs that demonstrate that leadership has a moral component that is essential – honesty, integrity, respect, putting needs of others ahead of your own. Servant leadership also emphasizes the importance of listening. In *The Art of Leadership* Max DePree wrote, "The first responsibility of a leader is to define reality. The last is to say thank you. In between, the leader is a servant."
- Volunteer programs, community service programs, study abroad programs that sensitize students to the needs of others and the ways they can contribute to making the world a better place.
- Educational forums on religions and their influence and issues of current debate.

- Teaching principles like sustainable technology through the lens of respect for all of the creatures who occupy this small planet with us.
- And, perhaps the most important opportunity: the educational experiences we offer our students. Many of the moments or experiences that college students describe as "spiritual" do not involve religious denominations or doctrines.

Victor Kazanjian, dean of Religious and Spiritual Life at Wellesley College, asked students about "spiritual moments" they experienced. One student described a moment in a molecular biology class when she suddenly made the connection between the smallest forms of life and the largest ecosystems of the planet. In that class, she learned that the world is not just an objectified system of empirical objects, but an organic body of personal relations and responses, a living and evolving community that embraces creativity and compassion. Another related how her political science studies came alive for her and took on new meaning during a class trip to Mexico and she experience first hand the effects of another culture and conditions of poverty. According to students, moments of meaning like these add a "spiritual" dimension to their education, because they provide understandings about themselves and the world around them that connect to their personal faith.

A college education must be more than an item of currency to trade on the job market. Even though we are a secular institution, we need to recognize that the life of the mind and the life of the spirit are not mutually exclusive, and create educational experiences that nurture the spirits of our students as well as their intellect – experiences that develop their capacity for the kind of understanding and sense of inter-connectedness that is at the heart of an ethical life. When the education process helps students find the knowledge that is hidden in information, and then the wisdom that is hidden in the knowledge, then it contributes to their spiritual well-being and personal growth as a human being. For us here at Georgia Tech this takes on a special meaning because our students are very smart and technologically advanced. If they are to use their talents and education to the best ends, they need to understand moral precepts, ethics, and the power of inner spiritual strength.

None of us controls the life journey of another human being; none of us has the power to order the moment of redemption for another human being. Although we don't tell people what to believe, Georgia Tech can give our students the opportunity to ask questions about the meaning of life, to test the limits, to make mistakes, to experience the consequences of their actions, to learn from that experience, and to find forgiveness. That is a much more subtle and nuanced undertaking than a church-affiliated college espousing a particular denomination or doctrine, but it provides opportunities for redemption nonetheless.