

A university convocation shouldn't include a prayer

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The graduates assemble in their gowns, the professors gather on the stage, a cleric recites a prayer of invocation, the valedictorian and honorary-degree recipient each speaks stirring words, we recognize a few particular students and professors for their outstanding academic achievements, and then one by one the graduates cross the stage to receive their parchment.

A prayer of invocation? What's a prayer doing at convocation?

Many, probably most, public, secular universities continue to include a prayer of invocation among their convocation rituals. Through the prayer, the assembled scholars call on the deity to protect, guide, and inspire them in their lives.

No doubt the prayer remains with us mainly through the weight of tradition—that, and the desire not to alienate donors to the university, if the university used to have ties to organized religion. Nonetheless, it is a tradition that has nothing to do with the ethos and mission of a university. It should be abandoned.

One argument against a prayer of invocation is that no matter how vague or general the prayer might be, it will still exclude a good number of students and professors.

To ask a deity to aid us is to presume the existence of a caring and powerful supernatural being. Right away, most Buddhists, deists, and pantheists are left out. That's even before we count atheists and agnostics, those who, at a public university, probably comprise the largest group.

This is a good enough argument, but it points to a deeper one. We should want every element of convocation to speak to all who have assembled, and since prayer doesn't, we shouldn't pray. Even more, though, we should want every element to speak to those assembled specifically in their status as members of a university community. Since prayer and religion are irrelevant to what we do at a university, we shouldn't pray.

This second, deeper, argument applies just as well to convocations at which everyone happens to be a believer. We shouldn't pray even if the prayer includes all of us because we are gathered as academics, not as believers. A reading of hockey scores or a viewing of celebrity photos would be out of place at convocation, even if everyone present is a hockey fan or a lover of celebrities. So, too, then, is a prayer of invocation out of place.

We can call the first argument the inclusion argument against prayer and the second the relevance argument.

One response to the two arguments is that praying honours the history of the university. Many Canadian universities were founded by believers either as an expression of their devotion or to perpetuate their religious tradition. As well, as a matter of world history, the modern university has its origins in the religious institutions of the middle ages.

But an institution can honour its founders and history in ways that don't perpetuate bad traditions. Indeed, perpetuating a bad tradition would be to betray the university's best tradition of self-criticism and improvement. Further, the role of religion in the history of universities should not be exaggerated. Institutions of religion created universities for their own purposes, of course, but right from the beginning the ethos of the university was strongly Greek—that is, sceptical and rationalistic. It's not a little ironic that in inventing universities as places of dispassionate and disputatious enquiry, Christianity came to undermine itself.

It's also worth noting that if we pray merely to honour a tradition, we are not really praying but putting on a pantomime of prayer. I can't see that religious folk should approve.

Another response to the arguments against prayer at convocation is that religion means a great lot to the people to whom it means anything, and it would be churlish not to indulge them. Religious students and professors take their studies, research, and teaching to be important expressions of their devotion to God. Surely because God is central to the academic experience of our religious fellows, we should be happy to reserve a place for religion in our celebrations.

Well, we all come to university for a huge variety of reasons. We are all honouring or expressing something or other in our academic work. Religious reasons don't have a special status. Neither do reasons of family or social amelioration or democracy. Indeed, the only reasons and motivations relevant to the occasion of convocation are the academic ones of education, enquiry, and understanding.

In any case, religious students and professors are free to organize for themselves gatherings at which they celebrate the religious motivation behind their dedication to academic work and life, and to call on God, however they conceive Him, to protect, guide, and inspire them. In fact, religious students already participate in such gatherings in the days before convocation.

Both the inclusion and the relevance arguments stand, I think. A prayer of invocation at convocation excludes many of the students and professors assembled and it is entirely irrelevant to the values and accomplishments they have gathered to honour and celebrate.

There's a third argument that we should dispense with the prayer of invocation. Since faith conflicts with academic values, when at convocation we call on a deity to protect, guide, or inspire us, we necessarily express disdain for the very values we have gathered to celebrate.