

Ten Minute T(ea) with Mr. Mark Scandling

Interview conducted by Manan Krishnamurthy

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Q) Would you consider yourself a religious person?

A) I was raised in the Catholic faith and went to church every Sunday, but I was forced to go. There were moments when I took religion seriously just because it was there and had been part of my life for so long, but once I got out of college I stopped practicing actively. If I were to go back to church I would go to a Catholic church just because.

My issues with religion have more to do with the politics of it than the beliefs of the Christian ideals of turning the other cheek, going the extra mile, and the golden rule; I think those are all great ethical values. I just have problems with the antiquated views on women, and that you can only have male, unmarried priests. So I think the church is too rooted in the past and not always relevant to the modern world.

Q) Do you think that religion plays such a major role in our lives today? Why or why not?

A) I think people want something larger than self to believe in. For example, I would say that I'm not religious but that I am spiritual. There is a belief that there is something precious in our lives, some human essence that we call the soul, but I think there is some human aspiration to be more, to be better, to be more compassionate. So I think that the desire to follow a moral code strongly lends itself to religion because religion allows you to practice with like-minded people. But I think the necessity of a public practice, rather than a private one causes a loss in the humanitarian side of religion. I believe that private practice allows you to be more introspective. I recall while being the head of a community service program in my senior year, I kept hounding the Christian fellowship to get involved and volunteer. The program would meet in the evenings; their excuse was typically that they had to pray at that time. I didn't understand that.

Q) Do you think that it is possible to have a truly secular nation?

A) It seems like most cultures across the world all have some religious origins or belief systems. Interestingly, when we first started discussions about diversity and inclusiveness at Deerfield, approximately forty-five years ago, Exeter came down and we were shooting a program in the Academy library where we were saying Deerfield is a secular school. They said, "what are you talking about?" Deerfield has its Gods. Look over your shoulder at the painting of Frank Boyden. That's your God. That's the person you always look up to as a higher power or a higher authority. So, if you look for some, really any inspiration, in some ways that a kind of religion too. It may not be God, with a capital G, but it is a god-like ideal.

Q) Do you believe that students get carried away by the idea of secularism? Deerfield is a school with Christian roots. Do you think that last year's petition to not have the Christmas tree is fair to the school?

A) I mean I think they have the right to make that complaint but I also think that the Christmas tree is a pagan symbol, and more related to commercialism. Some could argue that, with symbols like the Christmas tree, the true values of Christmas have been lost. Follow the scenario: a group of students are offended and the school decides to remove the Christmas tree, and other students will get the message that the school thinks their religion doesn't matter. So, I think there's a delicate balance between saying we're now going to have a Christmas tree, and we're all going to go Caroling every evening, something which Deerfield did do once upon a time.

Additionally, I would say that any students that are religious at Deerfield could argue that their religion is undervalued.

Mr. Mark Scandling is a faculty member of Deerfield Academy's English Department. He has taught at Deerfield for decades and is a beloved teacher and water polo/wrestling coach. Mr. Scandling has selflessly given his time to Deerfield, and he is known for being a fair teacher, valuing all opinions on any given subject matter equally.