

## **Ten Minute T(ea) with Mr. Freeman-Coppadge**

*Interview conducted by Fran Saldivar  
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Q) What is the main reason we practice religion?

A) In general, I think people practice religion because they are looking for a way to make sense of the world we see and ourselves. I think there are longings within us for relationships and connections that are not necessarily fulfilled by the kinds of connections that are offered in everyday life, and I think people are looking for a way to make sense of the world beyond their own small world.

Q) Do you think religion and spirituality are the same concept?

A) No, I don't. I guess if I were to go back and qualify my answer, I would say everything I just said [in the previous question], about spirituality. If you're separating those or differentiating between religion and spirituality, then I think religion can be all of those things, and I think often it is. I also think people participate in religious communities or subscribe to different religious beliefs in part because they offer them a community where they can feel that they belong.

Q) What is your opinion on the religious requirement at Groton?

A) I think it's good that we have one. I think Groton still has some working out of answers to be done about what it means to be a community that requires its students to participate in a certain religious activity and yet still be a place that is open to people of all or no religious faith.

Q) What is the importance of religion at Groton?

A) I'm going to be perfectly honest and say I don't fully know. I think in some ways our episcopal heritage drives decision about our character as a school. I say that in regards to things like social justice. I think our background as an episcopal school allows itself to be given a large story or narrative about why we care about social justice. I think that works very well. In other ways I feel like Groton is essentially a secular school with a religious program added on that doesn't always seem to understand its purpose.

Q) Does it shape our culture?

A) I think it does. I think anything you do on a regular basis shapes the culture of a place both in its individuals and as a collective. I think this is true of Groton as well as other schools that have religious traditions.

I think another way that the practice for a religious requirement at Groton shapes it that often when teenagers are in an environment that requires them to be religious, it ends up shaping their

relationship with religion in antagonistic terms. This means that people, because it has been mandated, especially young people, feel resistant to it. [The religious requirement] shapes us in positive and negative ways.

Q) Does practicing religion shape the morality of students?

A) I hope so and I think it does. This is not necessarily part of the religious requirement, but our weekday chapel program, which I would say is spiritual, is a sacred space for our community. Our gatherings there are sacred and I think that as much as people are tired and half-asleep and you sometimes think you don't know what you're getting out of it, [at Chapel] people are real and authentic in ways that challenge us in terms of who we want to be as individuals and as a community. In that way, it does shape our moral culture.

Q) Do different religions at Groton contribute to diversity and inclusion?

A) Absolutely. That's the first step. You don't know where your blind spots are as a community until you're able to bring people in that can say "The way we are doing this doesn't make me welcome." Bringing students from diverse places, traditions, and backgrounds is absolutely essential to creating the community we want to be.

[Groton] is a pretty diverse community in terms of composition and now I think our next step is to talk about some really hard issues of culture because I think, as diverse as we are, there is still a fairly dominant culture that shows up in various aspects. Our culture is still dominant in a way that makes the people who coincide with the dominant culture feel uncomfortable. Those are the types of conversations we need to have next now that we have people from different parts of the world. How do we continue to make our community a place that feels like home to them too?

*Mr. Freeman-Coppadge teaches English at Groton School. He has been at the school for four years, and enjoys running, writing, and being a dad.*