Ten Minute T(ea) with Mr. Kurt Prescott

Interview conducted by Young Ha Yoo
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Q) What role do you think religion plays in student's lives at Andover?

A) So I think there's the piece about the general visibility of religious practices. I think where things start to break down is how you define the term religion. My background is in comparative religion, so I'm really interested in sort of common themes, common terms and how you define them when you put everything side by side to be called religion. I think one of the things that happens is when we line up all the traditions that we traditionally sought to a category, we run into some problems with definitions. You can't say religion is a belief in a god because of religions like Buddhism. With like worship spaces, it breaks down really fast. So the definition that's often used sort of in the study of religion is sort of a cultural system that orients people towards some sort of purpose of the meaning in life. When you use that definition then, religious life is pervasive, all over the place. Like we engage in activities where we construct meaning all the time. So in that sense, I think that's another piece that fits with every student to some capacity, but I don't know that it's something that with the way we sort of built our lives.

I think it depends on how you define it. I think if we're definition religion as some sort of institution that you do as a practice, I think that's more limited in terms of a category. That's working with something like Christianity, Islam, Judaism. But if we define religion in this broader sense in terms of a way of creating meaning in your life, I think that's something that applies to everyone.

Q) From your experience thus far, do you think students have the opportunities to fully express and celebrate their religions at Andover?

A) So I think one of the biggest challenges—and this is a challenge that I think is endemic to many of New England boarding schools—is that many of these schools are the product of white, Anglo-Saxon Protestantism. They were formed to train people to become good Christians. Andover itself was a Calvinist seminary just as NMH was founded as an Evangelical school. And you see this with colleges too. And so I think what's happened is that vestiges of that tradition are still very present in school. So if we think of sacred spaces on campus, we think of the chapel. The chapel is a Christian space. I think you can practice other traditions in there, we can call it a nondenominational space, but at the end of the day, it looks like a church. It smells like a church. It's probably a church. So I think one of the things that a lot of these schools struggle with is accommodating for religious diversity on your campuses and recognizing that different traditions have different needs in terms of practice and that when you ask, say, your Hindu students to use a worship space in a church, you are asking them to make compromises that you are not asking of your Christian students. And so I think one of the real challenges to Andover and to many of these schools is how do you create spaces that accommodate religious diversity.

So one of the things that I really wish I would see more of here and that I've noticed is the absence of sort of these tradition-specific prayer spaces. Do we have a Musallas for Muslim students? Do we have a Puja for Hindi students? Do we have a temple space for Jewish students? And I think those are questions that we should be asking.

Q) In terms of compromises, what do you mean?

A) I don't necessarily want to speak for students that ascribe to these states or traditions. With that said, I don't think that it's necessarily a decision that they should even have to make. Again the decision of just walking into a Church, the physical act, versus the act of walking into a space if you are a Muslim student, if there is a Musalla on campus, a specific room for you to do your prayer, that emphasizes a certain intentionality on the part of the institution which basically says that your presence here is valued and we want to accommodate this aspect of your life. Without these specific spaces, it's hard to get that same sort of intentionality in terms of the message that the institution itself is sending.

You could think about this with other demographics too. And this is when we think about things like safe spaces. What is it like to have a space where you feel comfortable without having to create it yourself? The fact that is is already there and you can go and it is already set up and you can be in your space. I think the ability to be able to do that is an important one. And I think it signals a commitment on part of the institution to that idea of equity.

Q) What do you think Christmas has become? Do you think that people think about the true meaning of Christmas? Or do you think that it has become a universal celebration?

A) I take an unconventional approach. I don't think as we practice it today, it is certainly not as it was originally intended. I think more than anything it's more of a cultural holiday, which does not mean that it's not serving a religious function. And I think in many ways it still does serve a Christian function. But I think one of the things we've seen—and so in many of my classes we've talked about the notion of American civil religion—are institutions in America that function very similarly to how a religion does, except rather than being Christian, it is about being an American. I see Christmas as very much serving that role. It's something that is a relatively common experience for Americans. I think seventy percent of our country identifies as Christian. Many come from Christian backgrounds. So I think with that said, it's much more wrapped up in American values than it is in Christian values. And so specifically what are those values? Capitalism is one of them. America loves its capitalism. I think that Christmas has sort of become an intense celebration of that. You can kind of level your own critique on whether that's a good thing or bad thing. I think one of the things it does is that it brings people together. I think that's ultimately one of the primary function of rituals. It's that they bring people together for a shared experience. We can certainly critique the nature of that experience and what sort of message that's ultimately reinforcing. I would say that it is still a religious holiday although not in the way that we would typically think. I think it's less about celebrating the birth of Christ,

even though Christ himself wasn't born on Christmas day, but more a celebration of American identity. Specifically, with Christian American identity.

Q) How do you think that Christmas, a universally dominant religious holiday, affects the celebration of other religions around this time?

A) So I think one of the things that Andover does well is that it recognizes religious holidays from other traditions. So we didn't have class on Eid in September. We didn't have class on Yom Kippur. I think at the end of the day one of the real challenges is that our calendar in our country is based on the Christian system. We do not work on Sundays. There's nothing natural about that. That's sort of structurally imposed on our lives because you would worship on Sunday. I think immediately one of the challenges is that Christian students again aren't necessarily asked to make similar compromises as other traditions. I think the example of our sort of point or break is that we are not going to be here over the Christmas holidays. There's undoubtedly other reasons why, but the point is that Christianity is the largest religious denomination in our country, and I think it reflects the way we structure our time.

Q) What is the role of Religious and Philosophy department at Andover?

A) I sort of see it as two-fold. On one hand is the element of religious literacy. We live in a democratic republic, where at the age eighteen you are given the right to vote. So in order for that to work, the basic premise is that you have to understand the effects of your vote not just on yourself but other people. What that necessitates is an understanding of other people. In order to understand how my vote impacts people that are not me—for example Christians or Muslims or Hindus—I need to understand their experiences. And so religious literacy is important collectively for us to understand the way people think, the way people make their decisions, particularly because we have the power to impact their lives. So when I go to the poles, for example, I need to understand how my vote might impact someone that is Muslim or Hindu. So I see the department fulfilling that as sort of one piece: this attempt to create greater religious literacy and understanding of traditions that are similar or different from our own. The second piece is that byproduct of that, but I see it as a sort of personal religious literacy. So when you step into a classroom or religion philosophy, you could be the most atheistic person in the world, but in the end the subject matter is grappling with larger existential questions. You don't have to necessarily answer, but you are going to be thinking about them. So to sit down and tease those apart, I think it's very difficult not to ask where you stand in relation to those either systems of thought or larger philosophical questions. And so one of my goals as a teacher is that not only do my students develop an understanding of other people's religious systems, but that they start to ask these question of themselves. What gives my life purpose? What gives my life meaning? What sorts of morals do I live by? And then take ownership of those things. And so in that sense when you say personal religious literacy, that's what it means: understanding how my students relate to those questions too. It's not something I'll directly ask of them. I think it is an inevitable byproduct of taking a course.

When I was taking religious studies in school, I wasn't thinking of it that way. It wasn't until later, until several years on in retrospect, that I was able to pause and realize what those courses did for me. I imagine that's the case with students here. That down the road when you're in college and you're like "oh, I'm really glad I know where I stand on the issue of free will!" That to me is a religious question. And so my hope is that we have a stronger sense of how we relate.

Q) You said you worked at Exeter for a little bit and taught religious and philosophy classes there. What are some primary differences between the two schools?
A) So the Exeter program is bigger. Students [at Andover] have to take one course to graduate. Students at Exeter have to take two. So what that meant for me as a teacher was that I was often seeing certain students multiple times. A lot of students take one class early on and then come back again in their junior and senior year. I think one of the things that that allowed is a certain degree of perspective. So on the one hand, you would get used to the subject, and then as a senior, you could really immerse yourself in it.

The other piece that I would say that is specific to Exeter that doesn't necessarily happen here is there is a program within their chapel called meditation that is very much wrapped up with English curriculum, where someone from the community leads what' is called a meditation. It is basically a reflective piece that they read in the chapel, and people come reflect on it. Seniors all write one, and then ten are selected to give a meditation in the chapel that spring. They tend to be very powerful pieces. I would argue that that's a cornerstone of the spiritual life on campus. That is grappling with larger questions, deeper issues, and sharing them with the community.

Mr. Kurt Prescott, a fierce advocate of religious literacy and understanding, is a first-year teacher and professor of religious and philosophical studies at Phillips Academy in Andover. Hailing from rival school Phillips Exeter Academy, Prescott has devoted much of his early life outside of his own schooling to the education and nurturing of young minds ready to take on the world. A scholar with a clear and hopeful mission, Mr. Prescott has built a foundation of knowledge and human connection in the minds of countless students, and he plans to continue to do so during the near future. The Tavern *insisted on taking advantage of his availability to ask a few simple questions about the role and manifestation of religion on Andover's campus*.