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### Abstract

This article argues that religious and secularist identities complement and intersect in political ways with race, class, gender, sexuality, and nationality and that they inform writing center practice because belief exists along a spectrum that involves all writing center inhabitants and affects all writing-centered conversations. We suggest that this spectrum of faith is evocative of the spectrums that theorists of race, gender, and sexuality in particular have discussed, yet often faith has been overlooked in discussions of identity in writing center work (Denny, 2010). We propose that theories of race, gender, sexuality and other identities that have served as springboards for professional development in writing centers can help to facilitate the development of a greater literacy of faith and secularism as complicated and nuanced identities. Specifically, we believe theories involving intersectional social justice work and hybridity can help to facilitate self-reflective and productive interfaith dialogue or dialogue about faith and secularism. Thus, such theories can help writing center professionals dismantle stereotypes about believers and secularists and problematic notions of what faith, or a conversation about faith, is or should be.

A Jewish-American tutor announces on social media that anyone who supports the academic boycott of Israel should unfriend her. Several writing tutors from the center at which she works see her post and say nothing to her about it, perhaps because they lack a literacy of politics in the Middle East and the academic boycott or perhaps because they see the volatile way in which her Zionist perspective comes into conflict with the perspective of a tutor of Palestinian heritage who is also a member of the writing center's staff. Meanwhile, a conservative evangelical Christian tutor regularly speaks openly with writing tutors about her opposition to abortion and her frustration with any woman who would opt to have one. At least one of her secular colleagues on staff has had an abortion, and the two never engage in dialogue about the subject, their different faiths, or their dramatically different political perspectives. A gay tutor of Catholic heritage on the same staff assumes that this evangelical Christian tutor likewise holds contempt for him, but he only mentions the issue in confidence to one of his supervisors and never engages in dialogue about religious difference with the evangelical Christian tutor. Elsewhere, a deeply Christian director posts regularly about or alludes to her faith on social media but never makes mention of religion in a formal way with her colleagues and employees in the center. Another director who is secular contemplates whether to raise at a staff meeting her discomfort about the U.S. Senate confirmation of Amy Coney Barrett. Donald Trump's conservative Catholic nominee to the Supreme Court has generated fear about the overturning of *Roe vs. Wade* and other religiously charged rulings that have everything and nothing to do with the work of agnostic, atheist, Catholic, Jewish, Muslim, and Protestant writing center professionals who interact with equally diverse student writers in writing centers.

Distrust, miscommunication, silence, and stereotyping shape nuanced, belief-related experiences such as the ones these everyday scenarios illustrate. And experiences such as these are shaped by public controversies that define our highly politically charged times and our writing centers, where volatile conversations among staff members and writers may erupt. Perhaps in part because of situations such as these, numerous scholars in our field have called for engagement with religion, among them Beth Daniell (1994) and Nancy M. Grimm (1999). Yet in our field, scholarly attention to religion as an intersectional, fluid, and complex feature of social identity is inconsistent and circumscribed. We see scholarly works and conversations about religion that illustrate missed opportunities. These conversations and publications, such as the ones Paul Lynch & Matthew Miller (2017) critiqued in "Twenty-Five Years of Faith in Writing: Religion and Composition, 1992–2017," illustrate failed instances of robust, nuanced, interfaith dialogue between believers and secularists of different kinds and reinforce stereotypes about believers. For instance, as Lynch & Miller put it, a "vast majority of literature on religion in

composition has focused on Christianity” (Method section). Such failures in interfaith dialogue can also result in complete silence around the subject of religious identity—paradoxically so because our field is becoming increasingly attuned to the complex, political, and intersectional identities of individuals who circulate within our centers. For instance, Harry C. Denny’s *Facing the Center: Toward an Identity Politics of One-To-One Mentoring* (2010) galvanized the relevance of identity politics to writing centers; but to appropriate a remark about writing studies at large made by Anne Ruggles Gere in a symposium she co-authored with Deborah Brandt, Ellen Cushman, Anne Herrington, Richard E. Miller, Victor Villanueva, Min-Zhan Lu, & Gesa Kirsch (2001), this book shows ways in which the field has in large part “failed to develop sophisticated and nuanced theoretical discourses to articulate spirituality” (p. 46). Denny articulately explicated the problems and possibilities of race, class, gender, and nationality, but he opted against drawing attention to secularism as an explicit identity, making only passing mention of believers, for instance when he cited oppressive tendencies that shape some believers’ modes of engaging in one-to-one mentoring, observing that “we’ve had Muslim students uncomfortable working with members of the opposite sex, whether Islamic or not, and we’ve also had Hasidim or other orthodox Jewish men refuse to work with women in my centers” (p. 93).

Similarly, scholarship that attends to tutors’ religious discourses offers insight into how observant tutors of different faiths understand tutoring through the lenses of their respective religious communities, but this work does not directly address secular writing center communities. This scholarship tends to suggest that conversations about religion in writing centers are most relevant for those who identify as religious according to specific orthodoxies. For instance, Lauren Fitzgerald’s “‘Torah Is Not Learned but in a Group’: Collaborative Learning and Talmud Study” (2008) examines ways in which religion informs the praxis of observant Jewish Orthodox writing center tutors. Fitzgerald framed religious discourse as a productive part of observant tutors’ literacy practices and pointed out commonality “between collaborative Talmud study and collaborative [tutoring] practices” (p. 35). Similarly, Christopher LeCluyse & David Stock (2018), in “Religious Identity and Writing Center Tutoring: Perceptions from Latter-day Saint (LDS) Tutors,” identified ways in which LDS tutors named meaningful connections between their church’s doctrine and writing center work. Andrea Rosso Efthymiou & Fitzgerald (2016) as well as Lisa Zimmerelli (2015) foreshadowed LeCluyse & Stock’s arguments. In “Negotiating Institutional Mission: Writing Center Tutors as Rhetorical Actors,” Efthymiou & Fitzgerald suggested that tutors who work specifically at religious colleges and universities listen to the “institutional mission and engage with that [religious-driven] mission in their writing center work” (p. 171). And in “A Place to Begin: Service-Learning Tutor Education and Writing

Center Social Justice,” Zimmerelli argued for “the efficacy of service-learning tutor education for social justice” (p. 60) at a Catholic institution with a Jesuit mission involving “Discernment, Community, Magis, Eloquentia Perfecta, [and] Cura Personalis” (p. 58).

This article showcases to an audience of our full community of writing center professionals, including secularists and those working at public, non-denominational institutions, the relevance of nuanced dialogue about religion as an intersectional and complex phenomenon beyond the bounds of specific religious groups. Our project builds on existing scholarship about faith by considering faith and secularism as inherently political identities that pertain to and inform writing center inhabitants’ work in noteworthy ways, particularly when believers and nonbelievers of different kinds engage in everyday cross-talk within our centers. We begin by presenting a picture of the thorny realities of faith and secularism in an American context, suggesting that we consider believers and secularists as engaging in rhetorical acts from their positions along a nuanced spectrum of belief that challenges the binaristic assumptions Sharon Crowley (2006) made in *Toward a Civil Discourse: Rhetoric and Fundamentalism*. In turn, we consider the ways in which points along this spectrum of belief intersect with other features of identity that present challenges to writing center practitioners who attempt to engage in interfaith dialogue, which we define as dialogue between any and all believers and nonbelievers or dialogue about religion or secularism as subjects. Finally, we offer recommendations for interfaith dialogue among writing center professionals who can enter into professional development in organic ways by drawing attention to the intersectional nature of faith, or lack thereof, as a politically charged identity, particularly in a twenty-first century American context. Through the use of different theoretical frameworks on intersectional identity, social justice, and hybridity (Crenshaw, 1989; Bhabha, 1994; Ahmed, 2006; Martinez, 2014, 2016; Collins & Bilge, 2016; García, 2017), which point to how faith exists on a spectrum, we can engage in thoughtful dialogue about faith and secularism as complex and intersectional concepts, and we can begin the work of dismantling stereotypes about believers, secularists, and their local and national contexts. We, too, can dismantle problematic existing notions of what faith, or a conversation about faith, is or should be, and we can re-see believers and non-believers alike in writing centers. Hence, we can bolster equity, inclusion, and understanding about faith and secularism at private and public institutions of higher education.

## Contextualizing the Spectrum of Religious and Secularist Identities and Experiences

As Denny, Robert Mundy, Liliana M. Naydan, Richard Sévère, & Anna Sicari (2018) suggested in their introduction to *Out in the Center: Public Controversies and Private Struggles*, public controversies give shape to private struggles that involve identity politics and inform writing center practice. Present-day public controversies involving religion are prevalent in the United States in part because American presidential administrations rely so heavily on religious rhetoric to engage with everyday Americans. Former President Dwight Eisenhower famously suggested that American institutions make no sense without “a deeply felt religious faith—and I don’t care what it is!” (as cited in Allitt, 2003, p. 31). And believers in America obviously come from a diverse range of religious heritages that speak to Eisenhower’s vision of America as a quintessentially faithful nation. According to the Pew Research Center’s (n.d.) *Religious Landscape Study*, at the time of its study, America was seventy percent Christian, with 25.4% of respondents identifying as evangelical Protestants; 14.7% identifying as mainline Protestants; 20.8% identifying as Catholic; and Mormons, Orthodox Christians, Jehovah’s Witnesses, and other kinds of Christians making up the difference. Religious believers of different kinds further complemented this vast Christian majority, as evidenced by 1.9% of study respondents who identified as Jewish, .9% of respondents who identified as Muslim, .7% of respondents who identified as Buddhist, and .7% of respondents who identified as Hindu. To complicate matters, however, America, too, to quote Patrick Allitt (2003), simultaneously exists as a “profoundly secular” nation (p. xii), as in part evidenced by the 22.8% of respondents to the Pew Research Center’s study who identified as being unaffiliated with religious institutions. The United States is a nation filled with non-believers and unaffiliated believers of different kinds, who may feel unsettled by slogans such as “America is a nation of believers,” which the Trump administration relied on alongside “Make America Great Again.” Non-believers and unaffiliated believers may feel unsettled by the notion that American greatness and conservative Christian faith exist as staunchly intertwined. And these groups may feel unsettled by the notion that Christianity exists as inextricably entwined with American national identity and the nationalism and xenophobia that this identity has the enduring capacity to produce.

We see conversations that involve religion in either explicit or implicit ways as relevant to all writing center professionals because these professionals negotiate belief, or lack thereof, through the nuanced rhetorical contexts they inhabit. Certainly, the importance of developing a literacy of faith as a subject makes itself plain in situations such as the one that Elizabeth Vander Lei & Fitzgerald (2007) described in “What in God’s Name? Administering the

Conflicts of Religious Belief in Writing Programs.” In the article, one author was described as previously being in a situation in which she silenced an undergraduate student writer who sought to write a personal narrative about “religious conversion” at a public academic institution because of her then-lack of critical engagement with religion in a writing studies context (p. 186). The importance of religious literacy also makes itself clear when students write perhaps now-exhausted arguments on abortion for first-year writing courses or more shrewd analyses of anti-terrorism legislation in America for political science courses—legislation that since the attacks of 9/11, has become largely synonymous with Islamophobia, enabling violence against Muslims or those assumed to be Muslim. And faith also pertains to everyday writing-centered engagements in more subtle ways because faith, or lack thereof, underpins all aspects of contemporary American life. Faith infuses writers’ thinking about subjects ranging from the politics of everyday or professional dress to climate change, as evidenced, for instance, by the *New Yorker* article by Eliza Griswold (2019), “The Renegade Nuns Who Took on a Pipeline,” which describes Catholic nuns who broke with readings of the Bible that position humans as having dominion over the earth to view environmentalism, a subject often presented by news media in secular terms, as having a religious bent.

Despite the prevalence of issues involving faith in public conversations and in writing-centered work, arguably limited scholarly attention to faith persists because, in an effort to check personal privilege, writing center practitioners may fail to identify themselves as believers or non-believers of different kinds. In part, this lack of identification with faith and secularism as identity categories emerges because everyday Americans, as well as scholars such as Crowley (2006), think about belief and secularism as diametrically juxtaposed. According to Crowley, fundamentalists and secular humanists speak at cross-purposes. The former value stories, in part evidenced by Crowley’s remark that

there is no way to prove to a believer that she is wrong. Arguments from complexity or nuance suggest only that those who make them are confused. And for believers the sower of confusion, the agent of complexity, is Satan. (p. 147)

By contrast, according to Crowley, liberals value enlightenment-era reason, and “liberal pluralism harbors the hope that difference can be erased if only everyone will just be reasonable—which means something like ‘think as we do’” (p. 41).

However, the sort of juxtaposition that Crowley (2006) opted to highlight fails to consider the gray areas in which belief and non-belief exist and also simplifies the way political and ideological values are inherently attached to belief. Hence Crowley opted against entertaining the notion that faith exists along a spectrum that is akin, for example, to the racial spectrum that

Romeo García (2017) illuminated in “Unmaking Gringo-Centers.” Much as García drew attention to the way in which writing center scholarship reduces understanding of race to the categories of Black and White (ignoring Mexican American identity in the center and encouraging binary frameworks), Crowley failed to recognize the everyday ways in which believers and secularists exist along a spectrum that includes belief systems such as agnosticism.

And believers and secularists engage in negotiations with orthodoxies and heterodoxies in and beyond the writing center. In other words, faith and secularism alike exist as relative phenomena because believers and secularists believe or avoid belief to different degrees. Believers may doubt and doubters may believe at different moments and in different contexts or conversations because religious identity is not fixed. Individual engagement with religious ideologies ebbs, flows, and intersects with other aspects of identity, as evidenced by the fact that many who claim a religious identity may also eschew important values and beliefs associated with religion or learn to reconcile with practices and beliefs that go against individual values and mindsets. For example, consider a feminist who also claims a Catholic identity—one that traditionally espouses a patriarchal ideology—yet the feminist believes in a woman’s right to choose and in marriage equality. How does this individual enter into a conversation on faith and belief and complicated intersections with dominant aspects of identity? How does this individual justify the juxtaposed ideologies they hold in the different discourse communities through which they move? Can this individual be a Catholic and a feminist, beyond the bounds of self-perception, at the same time?

### **Theoretical Approaches to Interfaith Dialogue: Intersectional Social Justice and Identity Work**

We encourage writing center practitioners to view faith and secularism as syncretic phenomena, as inherently hybridized, to use Homi Bhabha’s (1994) term. As Bhabha explained in *The Location of Culture*, to be hybrid is to be “neither the one thing nor the other” (p. 49). And for Bhabha, hybridity involves “temporal movement and passage” that “prevents identities at either end of it from settling into primordial polarities” (p. 5). As a result, for Bhabha, “This interstitial passage between fixed identifications opens up the possibility of cultural hybridity that entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy” (p. 5). In accord with Bhabha’s conceptualization of hybridity, believers of different kinds merge beliefs in different ways in and beyond the writing center, as evidenced, for instance, by the hybridized Ukrainian (Greek) Catholic heritage of one of the American authors of this article. This heritage merges Roman Catholic with Byzantine Rite symbols and practices and, in America, may incorporate English language elements and may involve



secularists who seek a connection with Ukrainian culture. Generally, believers who exist as hybrid might celebrate a mix of religious holidays if their families opt to blend religious heritages of different kinds, for instance Muslim and Christian ones. Or believers might change their beliefs over time as a result of experiences believers have with one another, with traumatic events, and with extant orthodoxies. In other words, over the courses of their lives, believers may change their positions along a spectrum of faith much as religions change as a result of different leadership and world events that inevitably function to influence faith. Or believers might turn to religion as a means by which to meditate on everyday personal challenges while functioning as stereotypically secular in other ways, for example holding liberal values that counter conservative orthodox ones that religious institutions bolster, such as the Catholic feminist we discussed earlier. As Stephen Spector (2009) observed in *Evangelicals and Israel: The Story of American Christian Zionism*, evangelicals may hold notably progressive politics that resemble, for instance, those of former President Jimmy Carter, an evangelical American, contradicting stereotypes that evangelical Protestant Christians are typically marked as politically conservative, perhaps in part due to the prevalence of a figure such as born-again former President George W. Bush (p. 42).

We further encourage writing center practitioners to understand faith and secularism as intersectional phenomena as opposed to isolated ones: phenomena that exist in dynamic interplay with race, class, gender, sexuality, nationality, and other identity categories. These phenomena hence require those engaged in interfaith dialogue or in dialogue about faith and secularism to have some semblance of literacy in numerous features of identity. Coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989, *intersectionality* originates as a term that sheds light on the nuances of oppression faced by Black women, not on intersectional religious identities such as those that, for example, American Black Protestants, Russian Jews, or Palestinian Muslims represent. Feminist scholars such as Gloria Anzaldúa (1987), bell hooks (2000), Audre Lorde (2017), and Sara Ahmed (2017) have used the concept of intersectionality in their own respective theoretical works to extend its importance and relevance. These authors have advocated for an intersectional feminism towards social justice work, arguing that gender is only one lens through which to view inequity and systemic oppression, and they have asked their readers to move past binaristic thinking to instead think with and through a thorny matrix of difference. As Patricia Hill Collins & Sirma Bilge (2016) wrote, summarizing contemporary conceptions of the term as we understand it in thinking about religious difference, “Intersectionality is a way of understanding and analyzing the complexity in the world, in people, and in human experiences” (p. 193). As Collins & Bilge continued, intersectionality functions “as an analytic tool” that “gives people better access to the complexity of the world and of themselves” (p. 193). And

as Brittany Cooper (2016) indicated, intersectionality opens itself to critique and is not deserving of our “religious devotion,” while remaining “one of the most useful and expansive paradigms we have” (p. 404). Hence, in the context of interfaith dialogue and dialogue about religion, intersectionality stretches beyond what Cooper identified as its main sphere of influence: its contribution to “the intellectual scope of black feminism as an institutional project” (p. 397). Intersectionality illuminates ways in which faiths collide, dovetail, and are shaped by and are shaping other aspects of individuals’ identities.

Taking an intersectional approach to religion requires seeing ways in which religious identity is shaped by community-based notions of social identity; thus, we conceive of facilitating interfaith dialogue in writing centers as part of a social justice imperative for our spaces. Such an imperative compels us to push the boundaries of our actual and conceptual spaces to build more inclusive centers along intersectional lines. This work must also be done with an understanding that each center’s local concerns demand different models for supporting writers, consultants, and our centers broadly. In redefining writing center work as radical, Laura Greenfield (2019) encouraged us to question all frameworks for engaging writers. For example, she claimed a radical writing center would “call into question the dominance of any single method for teaching and learning” (p. 119), whether directive or non-directive tutoring, individualized learning, or group-work. This radical reframing destabilizes hierarchies, pushing the boundaries of physical and conceptual space, demanding that we reconceive how we engage difference. Greenfield also asked writing center practitioners to be open to engaging in a continual learning process, doing their homework by reading scholarship on race, gender, class, sexuality, disability, and other aspects of identity and listening to the divergent lived experiences of all institutional stakeholders.

We posit that faith, somewhat paradoxically, exists as eminently relevant and therefore perhaps as threatening or overwhelming as a result. In other words, perhaps writing center practitioners feel an aversion to taking on faith as an identity category in the way we have other identity categories because we feel the weight of faith as a supremely volatile subject, particularly in the post-9/11 United States, a nation that, to reference the title of Tariq Ali’s 2002 book, has borne witness to a clash of fundamentalisms of religious and secular varieties. As Ali explained in *The Clash of Fundamentalisms: Crusades, Jihads and Modernity*, thereby drawing attention to existing tension between religious and non-religious fundamentalisms, “the ‘mother of all fundamentalisms’ is American imperialism,” and it is responsible for the construction of “Islamic terrorism” (p. xiii). As preeminent scholar of religion Martin E. Marty (2005) suggested in *When Faiths Collide*, a work that dovetails with Ali’s for its focus on the volatility of conflict involving religion, “the collisions of faiths, or the collisions of peoples of faith, are among the most threatening conflicts around

the world in the new millennium” (p. 1). To engage in interfaith dialogue or to talk about religion and secularism as subjects inevitably involves risking contention and metaphorical collision, even though, as David R. Smock (2002) suggested in his introduction to *Interfaith Dialogue and Peacebuilding*, “rarely is religion the principal cause of conflict, even when the opposing groups, such as Protestants and Catholics in Northern Ireland, are differentiated by religious identities” (p. 3). Rarely does interfaith dialogue or dialogue about religion begin organically with what Amos Oz (2002) in *How to Cure a Fanatic* called “imagining the other,” as opposed to feeling anxiety about ways in which faith or lack thereof might function as a tool of oppression, particularly of religious Others (p. 90).

We believe that writing centers, particularly those that aim to promote social justice work, need to embrace the difficult and possibly overwhelming conversations that religion and secularism involve, specifically if we are to take on the call of Rebecca Hallman Martini & Travis Webster (2017) to create braver spaces and embrace discomfort in our writing centers. We believe that when discussing religion, we must start with differences as we recognize the complexities of belief and non-belief existing on a spectrum—differences that exist across religions and cultures, but also differences that exist in an individual’s own religious beliefs—including atheism and agnosticism—and other aspects of an individual’s identity. As García (2017) claimed in his own contention with the progressive narrative of writing center work as it pertains to social justice work,

we cannot just accommodate difference nor should we approach differences as that to be solved. I suggest that we consider and “check” tutoring practices and contemporary pedagogies for how they maintain center/periphery binaries and uphold other forms of management and control. (p. 49)

Like García in his discussion of race, we in our discussion of religion believe that religious differences need not be solved but rather can serve as an opening for critical conversations about identity and power. As writing center directors, we need to be more prepared in allowing for these conversations about difference to happen, and we propose that an attention to different theories of race, gender, sexuality, and class can help create a productive interfaith dialogue, one that asks us to learn with and from difference, to understand how the personal often interferes and intersects with the political, to reconcile with public controversies that inform our private thoughts and beliefs, and to better dialogue with those with whom we disagree. Faith further adds complexity and nuance to our conversations about identity, highlighting intersectional components often in flux or in contradiction to other aspects of identity.

Much like writing center practice that reverberates with what Sonja K. Foss & Cindy L. Griffin (1995) referred to as invitational rhetoric, or rhetoric

that prioritizes understanding as opposed to persuasion, interfaith dialogue and dialogue about religion and secularism require a commitment to understanding positions and circumstances quite different from our own as well as a commitment to feeling and responding to discomfort with the goal of further facilitating understanding. Our approach to facilitating interfaith dialogue in writing centers is informed by the intersectional social justice work of Aja Y. Martinez (2014, 2016), specifically drawing on the power of understanding stock stories in relationship to counterstory as a method of engaging difference. In opening spaces for voices that have only recently been heard in writing centers, Martinez and García (2017) both drew attention to marginalized voices of Latinx people in higher education. Similarly, we approach facilitating interfaith dialogue as an invitation to position voices alongside each other. Yet understanding the fluidity of religious identity—and intersectionality more broadly—also encourages us to resist compartmentalizing faith merely into stock stories and counter stories (to use terminology from the critical race methodology of counterstory), as people of faith can be racialized, gendered, and sexed along lines that move fluidly from dominant to non-dominant social positions. Likewise, we seek to bring writing center practitioners who identify as non-believers into our conversations. In order to have these informed conversations, we believe that we need to learn not only from scholarship such as García's work on decolonial theory and Martinez's work on critical race theory but also from work by feminist theorists, queer theorists, theorists of disability, and theorists of class. This range of lenses helps participants in dialogue about faith better understand how faith is fluid and exists on a spectrum.

We highlight the fluidity of the intersectional identities of believers and non-believers to demonstrate the way faith enacts a spectrum of power relations between a center and its margins. In their article in *The Writing Center Journal*, "A Page From Our Book: Social Justice Lessons From the HBCU Writing Center," Kendra L. Mitchell & Robert E. Randolph (2019) performed, as their title suggests, "social justice lessons" from an HBCU writing center that push us to recenter our writing center gaze away from predominantly white institutions to HBCUs. Mitchell & Randolph defined how Black identities exist on the margins of a society that terrorizes Black bodies, noting that "the margin does not exist without the center, and this powerful binary reifies power relations and social hierarchies" (p. 29). This work informs discussions of faith as involving a constant pivot or perhaps a fluid movement from understanding the privilege of Christianity in the United States to the marginalization of Black and queer bodies within Christianity. Mitchell & Randolph spoke to the notion that to engage in meaningful interfaith dialogue or in dialogue about religion and secularism requires a commitment to attaining what Marty (2005) termed "education about the faiths of strangers" (p. 10). Such conversational movement between believers, non-believers, and believers of different kinds

performs the rhetorical listening (Ratcliffe, 2005) involved in understanding interfaith dialogue as social justice work.

## Recommendations for Interfaith Dialogue and Dialogue About Faith and Secularism in the Writing Center

In twenty-first century American culture, religion is often operationalized as a tool of power and oppression in higher education, the political sector, and beyond. For writing center practitioners and scholars to fully attend to the realities of all who enter and exist in our spaces, we believe religious belief, which includes a spectrum of believers and non-believers, should be viewed as a relevant identity category within the writing center. We recommend that writing center practitioners and scholars value religious identity, including faith and secularism, on par with race, gender, sexuality, ability, and class as the field continues to have conversations about the values of learning with and from difference (as discussed in our previous section). We view religious identity as intersecting with these other more commonly discussed identities in writing center work and have aimed to reclaim it from the rhetoric of the right for the purpose of helping to realize social justice. And we suggest that writing center professionals engage in and support the development of educational curricula and professional development experiences that foreground intersectionality and interfaith dialogue for a similar purpose. In this section, we have several recommendations that will help writing center professionals engage in the kind of dialogue we envision to develop their own perspectives and the quality of their centers.

We recommend that writing center professionals take actions to prepare sufficiently for interfaith dialogue prior to engaging in dialogue. For example, speaking from our own limitations, we encourage writing center directors to develop a diverse group of facilitators for workshops and/or staff meetings on the topic of faith. The diversity of the believers and secularists who guide the conversations during the workshops or meetings will help to reify the notion that the conversations aim to facilitate understanding about religious and secular Others. We then posit that it is important to develop and provide a clear list of goals or objectives for the conversations that will take place during the workshops or meetings. All writing center professionals need a sense of why we are doing this identity-oriented work because the notion that writing and identity are intertwined is not readily apparent to all writing center professionals. Goals for the conversations might make mention of the need to create brave spaces; the need to better prepare consultants and administrators for difficult conversations; the value of acknowledging our own privileges and positionalities in writing center work; the importance of establishing critical collaborations and working with difference; or the need to develop more

nuanced rhetorical abilities, such as deep listening, embodied knowing, and empathy.

In addition to setting goals with writing center professionals participating in such conversations taking place during workshops or meetings, it is also crucial to introduce key terms, among them intersectionality, faith, and secularism, and to bring theory into dialogue with staff experiences. Writing center professionals must have a literacy of intersectionality because it explains not only the relationship among identity features but also the existence of multiple forms of oppression that might exist for inherently hybrid individuals. Indeed, faith intersects with culture, nationality, race, sexuality, and other identities, and this is why we advocate for writing center directors to read and understand different theories on identity before having and encouraging conversations on difference and asking us to learn from difference. For example, in discussing racism, we might also be discussing Islamophobia. And in discussing homophobia, we might also be discussing xenophobia. Intersectionality reveals that oppression of one group of people will inevitably lead to oppression for multiple groups of people; thus, it is helpful to learn and incorporate different theories—such as those on race, sexuality, gender, class, and ability—in order to be better informed. In coming to understand intersectionality, participants in the kinds of conversations we are advocating come to see it as a tool that illuminates the complexities of oppression, identity, and power dynamics. Intersectionality also functions as a tool that helps foster the eradication of power imbalances. Therefore, writing center professionals must have an understanding of intersectionality, faith, and secularism as broad terms that speak to their beliefs regardless of where they fall on the spectrum of belief. In other words, everyone has a belief system, even if that belief system constitutes non-belief, involves uncertainty, or changes over time.

Once these terms are introduced and discussed with staff, workshop or meeting facilitators can introduce specific theorists' methodologies that underscore identity as intersectional. In particular, we suggest that writing center professionals turn to critical race theorists such as Martinez (2014) and García (2017); queer theorists who encourage working with the unknown to better recognize one's own complicity in domination (Ahmed, 2006; Halberstam, 2011; Alexander & Rhodes 2012); scholars who work in disability theory (Kerschbaum, 2012; Yergeau, 2016) and ask us to recognize the ableist institutional structures we have created in order to radically revise the spaces in which we work; theorists of class (Bloom, 1996; LeCourt, 2004) who shed light on the experiences of working-class students; and feminist theorists such as Michelle Miley (2020), who claimed in "Bringing Feminist Theory Home" that writing center researchers should return to feminist theory to "give voice to those who do not have a voice in our institutions" (p.56). While we identify the need for interfaith dialogue and more serious interrogations of faith as an

underexplored aspect of identity, we also call for a deepened understanding of theory, especially if we are to do social justice work and create a new vision for learning in higher education. Interrogating faith allows us to examine power dynamics and dialogue through a new lens, and, we argue, those willing to do so can have nuanced conversations in our writing centers.

In addition to cultivating language and methodologies derived from this range of theoretical framing, we encourage facilitation leaders to set ground rules (Gorski, n.d.) and develop activities that invite introspective reflection as well as encourage respectful dialogue about religious difference, ideally dialogue that allows all participants' ideas to be heard or seen in some capacity. Activities such as freewrites that respond to carefully constructed guiding questions and to brief theoretically informed articles, pair-and-shares, gallery walks, small-group discussions, and full-group discussions allow writing center professionals to reflect on their experiences, articulate their ideas, listen to or see the ideas of others, and begin the process of understanding how their experiences fit into a broader context. During such workshops and meetings, writing center directors should speak out about feelings of personal discomfort and encourage others to do the same through modeling and explicit instruction. Faith and secularism are difficult subjects about which to dialogue, and discomfort functions as a means by which to learn and educate others involved in the conversation. By speaking about feelings of discomfort, believers and nonbelievers involved in the conversation can help to create a brave space that works to counter oppression of underrepresented Others in and beyond the room.

After the workshop or meeting is over, we encourage writing center professionals to keep reflection and dialogue going. Although online platforms and discussion boards can be locations in which cyberbullying and rhetorics of oppression manifest, we believe that writing center professionals can continue conversations about faith and secularism through digital means and through face-to-face, in-person exchanges. Writing center professionals might begin thinking about ways in which the initial exchanges they had about faith and secularism inform the way they work with the writers they consult. Writing center professionals might establish research endeavors or projects involving faith and secularism in the writing center. And writing center professionals might explore different methodologies that can intersect with and complicate the ones they used in their initial conversation. We believe that faith differs from other aspects of identity because it is both private and public, visible and invisible, ideological and pragmatic, constructed and ingrained. Investigations into the topic of faith can allow for writing center professionals to see that identities are ever in flux, ever changing, and often overlapping, especially if professionals are willing to continue the discussion.



## Conclusion

Ultimately, we believe that dialogue about faith and secularism in political and social contexts is essential to enacting social justice work, particularly in this national political climate at a moment in history during which we see faith being represented through problematic stock stories that filter faith and secularism through the lens of extremism and may appear in the media. These stories inevitably make their way into writing centers. The kind of dialogue we encourage can complement what is taught in conventional writing classrooms to educate a diverse nation. This dialogue can allow writing centers to home in on the personal and inherently political experiences that shape their inhabitants' perspectives on issues that explicitly and implicitly relate to belief. And this dialogue can allow writing centers to develop a deeper engagement with ongoing local, national, and international conversations beyond the bounds of academia—conversations that writers, consultants, faculty, and staff engage with in tacit or overt ways. However, as writing center professionals work through professional development conversations to develop a literacy of faithful and secularist perspectives that manifest in writing and inform our views of one another, writing center professionals must remember that power and privilege, which pertain to belief, morph organically as political conversations change direction, involve new issues, and engage new participants. In other words, writing center rhetors engaged in dialogue about faith and secularism must embrace the fiction of sure-footing, especially as our field is currently recognizing its Whiteness. They must both embrace flexibility as the guiding principle for constructing workshops about identity exploration and embrace uncertainty and curiosity about religious Others. Such uncertainty and curiosity should function as a key feature of interfaith dialogue. Professionals committed to learning about religion as an intersectional identity and writing center work might develop greater understanding of, and perhaps empathy with, those who occupy different positions along the spectrum of belief. As professionals embrace flexibility and a deeper sense of empathy, we believe they will make stronger commitments to social justice work in writing centers through inclusive hiring practices that help to create braver spaces for consultants to learn through difference and through better mentoring of marginalized writers who enter our spaces. And professionals might develop a clearer picture of the vast, variegated, and religiously infused terrain that diversity, equity, and inclusion constitute.



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