TO PROMOTE NO CREED: RELIGION AT UT

Chronicles of UT's history have often applauded the University as one of the first non-denominational institutions of higher learning in the United States. The original 1794 charter from the Tennessee territorial legislature to UT's predecessor, Blount College, did indeed instruct the board of trustees to "take effectual care that students of all denominations may and shall be admitted to the equal advantages of a liberal arts education." To this day, the University still "seeks to promote no creed nor exclude any," as indicated in the current catalog. Yet, Protestant Christianity has always been a pervasive influence on the campus. In spite of the University's secular mission, sectarian religious studies have influenced much of its history.

Despite Blount College's non-denominational origin, its president and first teacher, Samuel Carrick, was a Presbyterian minister who founded the First Presbyterian Church in Knoxville. Early in its history the University came under public attack for being too much of a Presbyterian institution, since two of the five members of the faculty were Presbyterian ministers and the president, Joseph Estabrook, had studied for that profession. After Carrick, six of the University's next nine presidents were clergymen who required students to attend two Sunday worship services at the church of their choice. As early as 1821, all students were "enjoined to observe the Lord's day as sacred" and "obliged to attend" prayer sessions every morning and evening. University trustees in the pre-Civil War period were convinced "that no institution for education can enjoy permanent prosperity without the influence of religion." Well into the 1950s, the University professed its interest in doing "everything in its power to promote the religious spirit and life" of students, and until 1940, they were required to attend chapel services.

Protestantism remained an important influence at the University after the Civil War. The Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) played a central role in spiritual affairs after a chapter was established on the campus in 1877. Fifteen years later, the University dedicated a new YMCA building that served as the religious, social, and athletic headquarters for UT students and faculty for the next fifty years. The YMCA published student handbooks (or, as they were called, "Freshman Bibles") that highlighted religious activities on campus and urged students to "GO TO CHURCH ON SUNDAY."

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In addition, many UT students took advantage of the Bible study sessions and worship services offered by the YMCA. The "Y" was such an integral part of campus life that, as late as 1949, all students were automatically enrolled as members of the YMCA or YWCA upon registration at the University. Dr. C.E. Brehm, who was president of the University from 1946 to 1959, urged students to acquire "a church home" while at UT. Religious fervor even pervaded UT's favorite recreational diversion, football. "Religion is an essential part of a football team's morale," remarked Johnny Majors, the Vol All-American tailback, in 1956. At about the same time, a visiting clergyman who lectured frequently at American colleges declared that the religious atmosphere at UT was "better than on any other state university campus" he had visited.

In spite of the strong presence of religion on campus, many outside religious groups charged that UT was a "godless" institution. A local farmer once commented that "religious training is one thing, and a university education is something else. One is for the Lord, the other is opposed to Him." Knoxville evangelist attacked UT by preaching that the quickest route to the "Devilish life" was "by way of College Hill." Such charges of godlessness tarnished the image of the University in the minds of many East Tennesseans. Even the father of James D. Hoskins, the future UT dean and president, was reluctant to allow his son to attend UT because he feared that it was "equivalent to sending me to hell."

In the 1920s amid the larger campaign led by southern fundamentalists to ban the teaching of evolution and infuse public education with Christianity, UT administrators responded to the charges of godlessness and took steps to change the University's image. In 1923 the University fired seven faculty members for a variety of reasons; one of those dismissed was charged with using a textbook that allegedly endorsed the theory of evolution. A few years later, the University supported campus YMCA leaders and local churches in their effort to establish a school of religion on the campus.

The idea for a school of religion originated in 1926 as an extension of compulsory chapel. In 1926 the UT administration began to give excuses from chapel to students who attended Bible study courses taught by Dr. Harvey C. Brown, associate pastor of Church Street Methodist Church. Out of this grew the idea for the Tennessee School of Religion.

By the 1920s, a number of state universities were offering courses in religion. The University of Virginia included religion courses as part of its curriculum as early as 1897. Schools of religion with informal ties to state universities already existed in Iowa, Texas, Missouri, and North Carolina. Inspired by these precedents, a group of campus YMCA leaders met with local pastors early in 1928 to draft a constitution and organize fund-raising efforts for the proposed...
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"That's exactly the plan for which I've been looking." Chartered by the State of Tennessee in 1928, the Tennessee School of Religion was a cooperative effort of eight Knoxville Protestant churches that sought “to give religion its proper educational place in a state school of higher education.” More specifically, the school aimed at fostering “zealous personal Christian living” among students and leading them “into Christian service.”

The paradox of this relationship, however, was often difficult to conceal. In a 1931 report to the board of directors of the Tennessee School of Religion, director H.C. Brown explained that the school was "an undisguised effort of 50-50 cooperation between our churches and the University, in an attempt to provide a high grade program of religion in a tax-supported institution." In the next paragraph, however, he indicated that "our enterprise is in no way connected with the university." Similarly, nearly forty years later, the UT Record included the school's faculty and course offerings but insisted that the school had "no organic connection" with the University.

Without any direct state or federal funding, the Tennessee School of Religion depended heavily upon the cooperation of the University. Until the 1960s, the relationship between the University and the school was generally very cordial and cooperative. Prominent members of the faculty and administration often gave guest lectures. Additionally, some of the most influential people on the UT campus served on the school's board of directors, including Deans of Students John Mosley and Ralph Dunford, Graduate

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founders of the Tennessee School of Religion. After he became UT's president in 1934, Hoskins served as an active member of the school's board of directors for more than twenty years and did everything in his power to improve spiritual life on the campus. Not only did he write fundraising letters for the school but he also invited the school's instructors to...
attend UT faculty meetings. Furthermore, it was his idea for the school to distribute pamphlets entitled “Reasons for Studying the Bible” to every UT student. On a number of occasions, Hoskins claimed it would be a "calamity" if the Tennessee School of Religion ceased its operations. One

ers, it remained a predominantly Protestant organization with course offerings focused mainly on the life and teachings of Jesus Christ. The Tennessee School of Religion also depended heavily upon the cooperation and support of Ralph Frost, the secretary of the UT Christian Associations, UT students studying liberal arts, education, or agriculture. Since religion courses were purely elective, the School of Religion rarely reached more than 3 percent of the student body in any given year. Enrollment hovered around fifty students for the first twelve years of the school's existence but then increased to over two hundred when many students turned to religion at the beginning of World War II. Thereafter, the increased enrollment in religion courses paralleled the growth of the UT student body in the 1950s and 1960s. By the mid-1960s, enrollment in the Tennessee School of Religion exceeded six hundred students, which represented about 3.5 percent of the student body.

While the Tennessee School of Religion centered its attention on Bible study courses, it also helped to organize other campus religious activities and outreach programs. Beginning in 1931, Hoskins's longtime but unfulfilled dreams was to build a chapel on the campus “to be the headquarters of the spiritual life of the institution.” In the waning months of his life early in 1960, President Emeritus Hoskins was busily raising funds from private sources for the chapel that never was to be. While the Tennessee School of Religion relied heavily on Hoskins for administrative assistance, it depended on local churches for financial support. Since fund-raising campaigns in Knoxville's churches barely yielded enough money to pay their own overhead expenses, the school called upon local pastors to volunteer their time to teach Bible courses without remuneration. Faculty members were required to have a M.A. or an equivalent amount of postgraduate work from an accredited institution. The denominational makeup of the school's faculty mirrored that of the UT student body—primarily Methodist, Baptist, and Presbyterian. Although the school revised its constitution in 1958 and invited a Catholic priest and a Jewish rabbi to become faculty members, who spent much of his life promoting religion at the University of Tennessee. As a student at UT in the early 1920s, Frost shared Hoskins's concerns about the "godless" image of the University. He decided to champion religious life on the campus by becoming a student YMCA leader. In 1926 he returned to UT to occupy the position of assistant secretary of the YMCA and two years later became the association's co-executive secretary, a position he shared with Victor Davis. When the YMCA and YWCA united in 1934 to become the UT Christian Associations, Frost assumed the position of general secretary.

Frost was vigilant in fostering Christianity and the School of Religion during his forty-two-year tenure at UT. He spearheaded the movement to create the Tennessee School of Religion and was one of four members on the planning committee that founded the school. Frost served on the school's board of trustees for forty years, was one of its staunch defenders, and encouraged countless numbers of students to take its courses. Those who enrolled in the school were mostly staff members write a weekly "Sunday School Lesson" that was distributed to all faculty and students and published in over fifty newspapers all over Tennessee. In addition, the school's trustees worked closely with Ralph Frost in planning campus religious activities, particularly the Mid-Winter Convocation.

The convocation, an annual three-day religious event held on the campus, began in 1929. Each year the UT Christian Associations invited one of the nation's leading theologians "to preach to students about the importance of Christian values in their lives." During the event, the administration suspended classes for one hour each of these days to enable students and faculty to attend the lectures. UT presidents usually presided over the assemblages, which attracted thousands of students, faculty members, and townspeople each year. Mid-Winter Convocation remained a tradition on UT's campus for nearly forty years.

For decades few openly questioned the legality of holding Christian services at a state university. Consequently, the Mid-Winter Convocation and the activities of the Tennessee School of Religion continued largely unchallenged throughout the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s. In the 1960s, however, a spirit of change swept over the campus.

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versity should terminate the arrangement with the school.

Those affiliated with the Tennessee School of Religion were divided in their reaction to the Faculty Senate's report. Ralph Frost, Dr. Charles Trentham, dean of the school, and UT President Emeritus C.E. Brehm were all opposed to the plan because they realized that the school could not survive without the cooperation of the University. On the other hand, Ewell Reagin, the school's director, and Second Presbyterian Church minister Joseph Copeland supported the creation of a religious studies department and served on the advisory committee appointed by UT President Andy Holt to organize the new department. Reagin believed that the transition to a department "was so right it had to prevail."

The UT Board of Trustees unanimously approved the establishment of a Religious Studies Department on June 17, 1965, and Academic Vice President Herman E. Spivey initiated a search for funds and faculty. A grant from the Danforth Foundation enabled the University to appoint Dr. Ralph Norman as professor and head of the Religious Studies Department in 1966.

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Initially with only three full-time members in the department, Dr. Norman drew upon scholars in other disciplines to fill out the course offerings. He cross-listed courses in philosophy, history, literature, sociology, classical languages, and anthropology to put together a diversified religious studies curriculum with nearly fifty courses.

Although the University no longer accepted many Tennessee School of Religion courses for credit in the 1966-1967 academic year, the school still attracted several hundred students. Enrollment, however, dropped off sharply the next year as fewer students were willing to take Bible study courses without receiving University credit. Meanwhile the Senate approved Dr. Norman's proposal for a religious studies curriculum and moved to terminate the association with the Tennessee School of Religion. By the fall of 1968, the University had witheld credit for all the school's courses and the operations of the Tennessee School of Religion effectively came to an end.

In the process of ending the relationship with the Tennessee School of Religion, some faculty members, administrators, and students began to raise questions about other religious activities on campus, particularly the Mid-Winter Convocation. One of the first stirrings against convocation came in response to the 1967 convocation speaker Dr. William Elliott, who by his own admission was conservative and "not very hipped on some of the popular fads of the day." Following Elliott's sermon which called upon students to be saved from hell, representatives from each of the campus denominational associations spoke at a faculty luncheon. Dr. Richard Marius, a UT history professor and ordained Baptist minister, candidly expressed his disappointment that Dr. Elliott did not address how Christians should react to the pressing social issues of the day, such as racism and Vietnam. Believing "Dr. Marius was rude, crude, and inexcusable," Ralph Frost complained to Vice President for Academic Affairs Herman Spivey about Marius's treatment of the convocation speaker. Spivey responded to Frost's charge by questioning the propriety of a University-sponsored religious revival. Spivey reportedly asked, "What are we doing as a state university having this sermonizing going on here?"

Spivey was not alone in challenging the propriety and efficacy of the Mid-Winter Convocation. Following the 1968 convocation speaker who urged students to be chaste and save themselves for marriage, the Presbyterian Student Center submitted a petition to the Student Government Association calling convocation an "absurd piece of nonsense and meaningless tradition." The petition expressed the feelings of many UT students who found convocation to be "ineffective and irrelevant" and wanted more "meaningful speakers." The issue of convocation became embroiled in the then-contentious issue of University policy regarding campus speakers. While the University had allowed conservative religious speakers at convocation for years, it had recently barred more liberal figures from speaking on campus, such as book, Hilltops. Prayers are said before football games and at a number of social functions. Clergy offer invocations and benedictions at commencement exercises. The University catalog commits the institution to "promoting the spiritual life of its students"; yet the same catalog recognizes that the University, "established by a government that recognizes no distinction among religious beliefs, seeks to promote no creed or exclude any." Like the nation itself, the University struggles to achieve a delicate balance between its obligation to provide an atmosphere in which students and faculty are free to pursue their own religious beliefs and its duty under the U.S. Constitution to preserve the tradi-