Apathy reflects immaturity

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The so-called “religious scene” on the Rice campus is characterized by a very strange paradox: in the midst of great transition and activity, there is no change.

Among the things that may be listed as “religious activities” that have marked the academic year, no small number are important parts of the Rice community. Some have involved speakers. Others include service projects. But all, with rare exception, point to the fact that religion and religious groups are generally ignored.

The Rice Chapel Series, of course, stands as the “official” form of religion on the campus. This year, as in the past, outstanding speakers have come to the Chapel to be a part of one of the best lecture series available anywhere.

Policy Changes

As well, the arts were well represented in the Chapel this year by the Players’ production of Nemerov’s play ‘Cain’, and the exhibition of paintings by Rice’s Charles Schorre.

Changes in University policy toward religious groups have been of some note. The most outstanding of these was the establishment of the “Campus Clergy” office in the RMC cloister. Five chaplains of recognized denominational groups were asked to provide counseling on a no-appointment basis to Rice students.

Wounds Heal

The Universal Day of Prayer for Students, sponsored by the World Student Christian Federation, was held in the Rice Chapel this year instead of Atrium House.

Both of these instances reflect a mellowing on the part of the University administration. Changes in personnel have healed old wounds left over from the 1961 controversy in which all denominational activities were relegated to off-campus locations. The controversy has now subsided to the point that only occasional reminders of it pop up in relations with the administration.

Service Projects

Although given occasional publicity, the activities of the other religious organizations remain under the surface.

The obscure Inter-Faith Council, made up of students from recognized denominational organizations, continues its sponsorship of the Parkway Tutoring Project on a definitely low-key basis. Unknown to most people is the fact that the IFC was instrumental in having the Student Senate adopt World University Service as the charity fund drive.

Last Drop

As a service to the Rice community, the Last Drop Coffee House was established by campus religious organizations. The Joint Christian Ministry, a board of chaplains, organized an independent student board to run the coffee house in order to provide an inexpensive place for students to congregate on weekends.

As an interesting parallel, the Rice Film Guild was started by a religious organization several years ago. It has now expanded to a full-fledged student service. It is hoped that The Last Drop will develop similarly.

Poverty Tour

Most recently, the Methodists, UCCF, Episcopalians, and Roman Catholics joined efforts with Will Rice College to sponsor a bus tour of the impoverished Third and Fifth Wards of Houston.

Annoyance

Although there has been an abundance of worthwhile religious activity on the Rice campus this year, religion remains something of the remotest sort possible for the majority of the students.

Religion reminds one of the Chapel-Cheerleader controversy at the beginning of the year. It is an amusing annoyance.

No Change

No one complains though. Religion on this campus deserves no more attention than other aspects of university life. And the religious organizations no longer pressure for privileged entrance to the University.

Yet, amid all the activities this year, it is apparent that there has been no substantial change in attitude on the “religious scene.”

Lack of Maturity

My predecessor as the Thresher Religion Editor noted that religion has its place in an academic tradition, a tradition in which names like Tillich, Buber, and Chardin are uttered with respect and in which many find the ground of their scholarship in Faith.

But the lack of respect afforded religion on this campus is nothing more than a symptom that Rice lacks a vibrant academic tradition.

A lack of change in the overall attitude toward religion is but a sign of Rice’s lack of maturity as an academic community.