Rice cannot accept religion yet

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While the question whether God is dead or not may create some discussion, the controversy between the University and campus religious organizations has all but faded into oblivion.

An article in the November 12, 1964 Thresher by my predecessor summarized the relations of hostility since May, 1961. In a University ruling the old Student Religious Council was dissolved and all denominational groups were forbidden to meet on campus. Last year’s controversy flared up in reaction to a speech given in the Association of Ministers of Greater Houston by Dr. Paul E. Pfeiffer, then chairman of the Faculty Committee on Religious Activities.

Neutrality Returns

In his speech Dr. Pfeiffer pointed to the 1961 ruling as a return to the traditionally “neutral” position held by the University in regard to religious groups. Only after 1948 were these groups allowed to meet in the library, and this had been done at the request of Mrs. W. W. Fondren, a prominent Methodist laywoman and a Rice benefactor. The 1961 suspension of this policy was due, it was said, to the action of “irresponsible” groups.

Dr. Pfeiffer was then asked to elaborate on his earlier remarks at the invitation of the Rev. Lane Denson, Episcopal chaplain until March of 1965. Two weeks later, in the Collegiate Chapel of St. Bede, Denson denounced the University and its absurd “neutrality” which builds chapels and sponsors Religious Emphasis Weeks.

Regret Refusal

Denson went on to say that there is an inescapable connection between a man’s faith and his life as a member of this University. He regretted that Rice refused to recognize this connection and to deal with it with intellectual honesty, according to last year’s article.

The expulsion of the religious groups in 1961 led to the dissolution of the Student Religious Council and to the formation of the Rice Chapel Committee, a group of “interested students.” It was claimed that the SRC had been trying to “shoot down” the chapel series. The SRC had been very vocal in its dislike of the program of a lecture in the context of a “simple worship service” and had been hoping to hold a service of the speaker’s denomination in conjunction with his talk.

Brings Reply

In last year’s debate Dr. Pfeiffer’s speech brought a swift reply from Dr. Louis Mackey, faculty advisor to the SRC in 1961. It was Dr. Mackey’s feeling that far from trying to “shoot down” the chapel series, the SRC had been doing its best to strengthen it. Dr. Mackey continued by saying that “Rice is not yet old enough, nor mature enough, to be wholly objective about religion.”

Yet, just since last year, an age has passed. New faces have come and old ones have gone; the general hostility once found in the religious realm has been replaced.

Thaw Begins

A general thaw has set in between the University and the religious groups.

The return of Dr. Niels Nelson from Germany to head the Committee on Religious Activities and the coming of Rev. John Worrall to replace Lane Denson as Episcopal chaplain have highlighted the change in personal relations between the University and the religious groups.

At the same time that the University has begun loosening its tight reign on the groups, the religious organizations themselves have begun to appreciate their “non-established” position in regard to the campus. There are few, if any, cries of religious intolerance, and no groups have issued pleas for special privileges.

Vote ‘No’

This is shown in that at a recent meeting of the Interfaith Council, representatives of recognized groups voted, with only one voice of dissension, not to ask the administration to allow them the use of campus facilities. This is a clear reversal of past IFC policy.

Overtures to “come on campus” have been heard from the University end of communication. The campus clergy were invited to provide counseling for Rice students in the Rice Memorial Center. Five chaplains were asked by the Committee on Religious Activities to provide this service to the Rice community.

As well, the Chapel Committee gave its cooperation to the campus Christian groups in holding of the Universal Day of Prayer for students in the Rice Chapel. In the past the observation was held at Antry House.

The Rice Chapel Series itself has provided exceptional speakers this year. Top men in their fields have spoken to regular chapel-goers, and, with only one exception, the lectures have been well received. It is dubious that any other university in the nation offers such a fine series of regular lecture programs.

Yet, when one begins to examine the attitude toward religion on the Rice campus, it is not difficult to see that something is still not “right,” even in this time of outstanding speakers and the “era of good feeling” between the University and the denominational groups. Everyone seems to be content with the way the situation is being handled. Then, what is there that makes the attitude toward religion somehow incomplete?

There are, to be sure, vestiges of the administration’s conclusion, after seeing book-burning sectarians in Texas, that religion is fundamentally opposed to the spirit of free inquiry.

Stigma Remains

What remains is the stigma of religion, a stigma I tried to present with some satire in the last issue of this paper. From reports, my satire may have been a bit too subtle.

At any rate, this stigma and its outward representation in the Rice Memorial Chapel seem to strike a note of discord in the period of religious harmony we now enjoy. How else can the small crowds in the chapel be explained? Lack of planning? No Lack of publicity? Hardly.

The chapel program and its “simple worship service” seem to scare people away. And I for one cannot help but think that what Dr. Mackey said last year under different circumstances still applies. Rice is just not old enough, not mature enough to take religion in a tradition of scholarship as a serious discipline.