

Welcomed: Building Communities of Faith at Stanford, Volume I

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This inaugural volume of *Welcomed* began with a pervasive question at Stanford University. Many of us had heard some version of the late Professor Richard Rorty's claim that universities receive students from conservative and religious backgrounds and help turn them into liberal, secular citizens. Rorty remains a beloved and legendary figure here, so we begin with an essay about him and end with a tribute to his wife Dr. Mary V. Rorty, a long-time medical ethicist at Stanford Medical School. We believe Rorty identified a real tendency of the modern American university: its public language often asks students to translate their deepest commitments into an institutional vocabulary of procedure, professionalism, and shared civic life. As we listened to people at Stanford, we found that this description was too narrow for the lives actually being lived here. Every day at Stanford, our community members test, revise, rediscover, carry quietly, argue over, and sometimes feel newly urgent about faith.

That realization shaped the form of the journal itself. We found that no single kind of writing could capture religious life as it is actually lived, argued over, inherited, and interpreted at Stanford. Some contributions take up large intellectual and institutional questions directly. Others turn to interviews and lived experience to show how faith, doubt, ritual, and belonging are carried through ordinary life. Still others return to sacred texts as living sources for reflection on contemporary moral and civic questions.

Welcomed therefore brings together three forms of writing: research articles, lived experience narratives, and hermeneutics of sacred texts. We wanted all three because each does something the others cannot. Research clarifies how faith traditions meet broader ethical, political, academic, and social questions. Lived narratives show how those questions are actually experienced in bodies, families, schedules, friendships, and communities. Hermeneutic essays return to foundational texts and ask what they illuminate in the present. Taken together, these forms let us present faith as inquiry, inheritance, practice, and argument.

In Ian Dalmas's essay on Rorty and Girard, he examines how Stanford philosophers Rorty and René Girard help us understand our culture of ambition, rivalry, exclusion, and moral injury. After showing Rorty's nuanced perspective on faith, Dalmas argues that Rorty rightly identifies cruelty as a central moral problem, but that his secular pragmatism remains unable to explain

how people are actually formed against it, while Girard more sharply identifies rivalry, accusation, and exclusion in ambitious communities.

Other essays inquire about the purpose of a university. Emily Geigh Nichols's essay on W. E. B. Du Bois challenges the thin public language of elite education and asks what happens when universities avoid thicker questions of character, moral inheritance, and judgment. Du Bois, in her telling, asks what kind of people a university is shaping, whether education forms self-respect and moral seriousness, and whether students are being prepared merely to succeed in the world as it is or to judge it and resist its injustices.

Still other pieces in this volume turn to grief, vulnerability, and survival. In "Losing a Parent During College," Casey Nguyen and Angela Nguyen write from within the experience of first-generation Vietnamese American students whose encounters with parental illness and loss reopened questions of ritual, continuity, and belonging. One of the strongest claims in the essay is that secular campus language often fails to address what bereavement actually does to a student's sense of time, work, hope, and inherited practice. Faith in this account may remain fragile, incomplete, or uncertain, yet grief can still make ritual and inherited forms of belonging newly meaningful.

Across the interviews, we encountered a wide range of Stanford faith experiences. Some students are still searching, testing what they inherited against the pressures and freedoms of university life. Some have converted or passed through more than one tradition. Some remain deeply rooted in inherited practices that continue to shape daily life. Some have become leaders, chaplains, teachers, and mentors whose work gives institutional presence to communities that might otherwise remain diffuse. One first-generation queer Catholic student describes faith as something lived in community rather than as a private idea, something that guides moral character, public service, and responsibility toward marginalized people. At the same time, he speaks candidly about the tensions of being queer in relation to the Church, about the difficulty of finding one's place within a conservative religious environment, and about the fact that faith at Stanford is often chosen more intentionally than it was at home. He hopes readers understand that a relationship with faith "does not have to be linear."

That nonlinearity proved one of the most consistent patterns of the volume. We heard from students whose faith had grown stronger at Stanford, from others whose beliefs had become more complicated, and from some who now inhabit religious life as a site of tension rather than certainty. We also found that many of the most compelling accounts were bound up with questions of identity, family, migration, sexuality, race, and service. Faith here often appeared as memory, discipline, ritual, longing, duty, hospitality, dissent, mourning, and the search for a form of life that could hold together both conviction and honesty.

The title *Welcomed* expresses both a hope and a challenge. It describes the kind of community many contributors seek. It also depicts the barriers to feeling welcomed at Stanford. One essay in

this volume appears anonymously because the student's relationship to family in Iran makes public identification unsafe. Two queer student contributors also required protection because they are not out to everyone in their communities. Those conditions reveal the challenges of faith and belonging. For some people, to speak honestly about belief, doubt, or identity is also to risk misunderstanding, estrangement, or personal safety. A journal committed to truth about religious life must make room for courage in more than one form, including the courage to speak under partial concealment.

This volume is also only a beginning, and it reflects the partiality of any beginning. The traditions represented here are those of the people who answered our invitations when we contacted every religious community on campus. Some never responded and are not yet present in this first issue, and we would very much like them to be represented in future volumes. We reached out several times to Stanford's Department of Religious Studies and to the Office of Religious and Spiritual Life. We understand that faculty have demanding research commitments and that the ORSL carries many responsibilities, especially during periods of transition. We are grateful for responses from Dr. Zandra Jordan and Rabbi Goldhaber-Gordon. We also received three strong pitches from Muslim community members, including essays on visas, women doctors, and the demoralizing lack of food during Ramadan at Stanford. Those pieces are still in development as their authors complete interviews, gather permissions, and work through IRB-related processes, and we expect them to be ready in our next issue.

We also want to be explicit that *Welcomed* welcomes religious and secular readers alike. The essays in this issue move between faith and secular intellectual life rather than treating them as sealed worlds. That interconnection was important to us from the start. Stanford includes many students who are secular, skeptical, uncertain, in transition, or shaped by religion more culturally or ethically than devotionally. We welcome that range. No perspective here proselytizes. We hope rather to create space for honest reflection on how people at Stanford think about meaning, obligation, service, and the good life. We are interested in serious dialogue about the purpose of a Stanford education, what a good life might be, how one should serve others, and what kind of public moral language can do justice to human beings in all their complexity. Religious traditions have much to say about those questions, but they do not exhaust them. A university worthy of the name should make room for both faith and serious secular moral reflection by letting them encounter one another honestly.

Faith at Stanford is changed by the university and it changes the university in return. Sometimes faith appears as critique, asking whether our ambitions have flattened our moral language or concealed ordinary forms of cruelty. Sometimes it appears as inheritance, carried from a pueblo in southern Mexico, from Vietnamese ritual memory, from Black traditions of character and struggle, or from communities shaped by migration, loss, and hope. Sometimes it appears as a way of serving others. Sometimes it appears as a source of strain, when identity and community fail to align.

We offer this first volume, then, as an opening. We hope it widens the conversation about life at Stanford, what sustains us, and what kind of people this university is helping us become. We hope it makes room for students and readers who feel devout, doubtful, divided, grateful, wounded, searching, or all of these at once. Most of all, we hope it helps build a Stanford in which people with different faiths, and people with no faith, can speak more truthfully to one another about meaning, character, grief, service, and the difficult work of living well together.