Religion and the University
by RPLP undergraduate student fellow Michael McDowell

“Religion intersects every other factor of our social life.” Bob Thomson, RPLP postdoctoral fellow and panelist, made this claim during the RPLP’s panel event on January 29, 2019. Before coming to Rice University, Thomson was working on his Ph.D. at Baylor University and teaching undergraduate courses, where he noticed religion forming and shaping how students thought about the concepts he was teaching. Engaging religion in the classroom, and in the larger university context, was the focus of the January 29th RPLP event, which was cosponsored with the Boniuk Council and held during Rice’s annual interfaith week.

In addition to Thomson, two more RPLP fellows sat on the panel to discuss the appearance, role, and challenges of religion in the university context. Elaine Howard Ecklund, founder and director of RPLP, Sharan Mehta, RPLP graduate student fellow, and Thomson answered questions in a discussion facilitated by Sophie D’Amico, a Rice senior and co-president of the Boniuk Council.

Ecklund stated that it is important for academics and students to wrestle with the place of religion in the university. “U.S. society is incredibly religious,” Ecklund said, adding that it is “still one of the primary means by which people make meaning out of their lives.” Because of this, and because the university is not insulated from the outside world, religion is going to show up on campuses through the beliefs of its students, staff, and faculty. When asked how they personally handle religion appearing in the classroom, the panelists shared several personal anecdotes. For example Mehta, who majored in chemistry as an undergraduate student, wishes she and fellow classmates had opted to discuss religion in the classroom more; they were each wrestling with the tension they felt between faith and science individually, and Mehta says now that it would have been productive to discuss the doubts they had together. Rather than shying away from these kinds of conversations, Mehta believes that professors should act as facilitators. Ecklund answered that she is very careful when religion comes up in the classroom. “As professors, we need to understand our particular kind of power position within the university,” she said.

When asked how they would advise other students and faculty on navigating these topics with their students, each of the panelists stressed sensitivity. “Morality is very visceral,” said Thomson. “The tension we have as educators is that we don’t want to compromise what we teach, but we do want to be sensitive to moral contours.” He recommends being sensitive to students’ beliefs and always “hearing them out.” Ecklund agreed, adding that professors should be careful not to inadvertently marginalize students who may have a minority position in the discussion. Further, she said that educators should be conscious of disciplinary limitations. She explained that, for example, “sociology cannot tell you whether God really exists, or what kind of god really exists, but it can explain how people understand God.”

Moving to the relationship between the academy and religious communities, Ecklund said that, in general, people love universities, just like everyone love sciences. However panelists agreed that evangelical Christians while mostly in favor of universities as institutions, are suspicious
about the individual actors in them, like professors and scientists. Ecklund went on to say that this antipathy is overplayed. Thomson agreed, citing research conducted by the RPLP: a roughly equal proportion of each major religious group in the U.S.—only 17 percent—distrusts universities. Ecklund added that many scientists and professors are religious themselves.

Panelists also addressed the “echo chamber of social media,” explaining that many people consume media that portrays the relationship between religion and the university the way they already see it. Thomson said it is important to exit the echo chamber and have these discussions, because, at the end of the day, these conversations are about “building common ground for the common good.”