



DIVINE DIVERSITY

An MU Scholar Aims to
Make Room for Religion
in Professional Education

By Charlotte Overby

AS SHE WALKED HER DOGS along a woody park path last spring, religion scholar Jill Raitt — who is not at all shy about talking to strangers — found herself chatting up a fellow pet-walker. After introductions, and a brief chronicling of the lives of their canines, the man offered that he was a devout Christian who had recently finished medical school and was about to begin his practice in Colorado.

At this point Professor Raitt, the recently retired chair of MU's Department of Religious Studies and the driving force behind the University's new Center for Religion, the Professions and the Public, couldn't help conducting a little off-the-cuff research. Soon she had drawn the young doctor into a discussion touching on certain conundrums that have consumed much of her professorial energy during her long academic career.

The short version of these serves as a *raison d'être* for the new center: How might professionals learn to better understand how their own opinions and attitudes — views often subtly swayed by Protestantism's long-standing influence on American higher education — affect the way they regard the religious beliefs of others? What religious knowledge might professionals need to better serve a public with increasingly diverse religious faiths? And how might all of this change for the better the way doctors, lawyers, teachers and other professionals interact with the people they spend their careers serving?"

"Suppose you have a Muslim patient who is dying," Raitt recalls asking her new acquaintance, "and he asks for an imam. Would you do that? The young doctor told me, 'I would find that offensive.'"

The forthright answer gave Raitt pause: "I thought, 'Is his first duty to ensure the physical and spiritual comfort of his patient, or to his belief that as an evangelical Christian he has the right — even obligation — to evangelize a dying person who is not Christian?'"

"We have to talk about these kinds of situations," she continues. "We have to foster these kinds of discussions among faculty and professionals who will be teaching and training young people going into various professional careers."

Raitt isn't the only one interested in establishing a center for such discussions. Last December, The Pew Charitable Trusts, one of the nation's most respected philanthropic organizations, named MU as one of 10 national "centers of excellence" that will receive Pew funding to study the influence of religion on U.S. society.

Pew has committed \$1.4 million to the center, which will be made up of faculty, students and professional fellows who will come to campus for cross-disciplinary seminars and research exploring religions, culture and secularization within professional life. The center will be housed in Cornell Hall.

"The Pew Charitable Trusts are known to be among the most discerning groups from which one can receive a grant," says Raitt. "But once you have, you've got a real credential that should help to permanently endow the center." Other Pew-funded centers include Boston University's Institute for Religion and World Affairs, New York University's Center for Religion and Media and Yale University's Center for Religion and American Life.

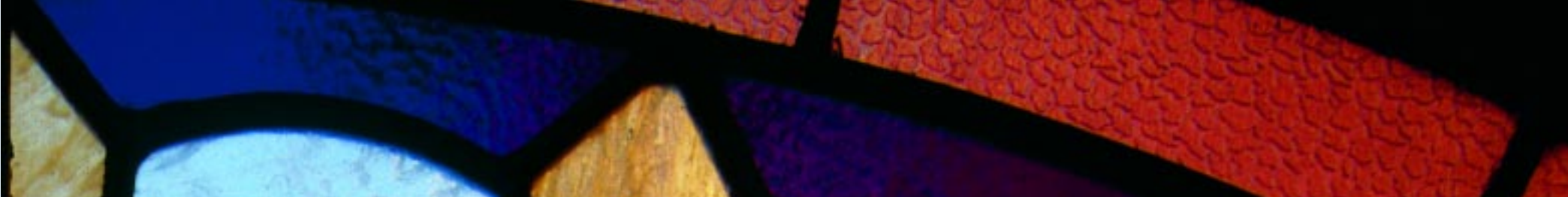
Raitt says scholars associated with MU's center will perhaps be most concerned with this quandary: Today millions of Americans call upon a diversity of religious and spiritual beliefs when making important decisions, among them medical, legal and financial judgements. Yet these beliefs are often given short shrift by the professionals with whom they are dealing. Why? Professional schools in America tend to emphasize empirical approaches to problem solving, Raitt says, producing graduates prone to discounting religious concerns.

Another reason may be that some working professionals — like the dog-walking doctor — are unconsciously, or perhaps not so unconsciously, viewing clients through the prism of their own religious orientation.

It is time for change, says Raitt. As the United States grows ever more religiously and culturally diverse, doctors, lawyers, engineers, nurses, journalists, business people and others need to do a better job of understanding both their own and the world's religions and customs. This is particularly true for professionals working within what Raitt has described as America's "dominant Judeo-Christian tradition."

Christian underpinnings, transformed as they are by decades of institutional and individual secularization, underlie and impinge upon the relationship between professionals and the clients they serve, Raitt says. The result, she adds, is that people from non-Western religious traditions, as well as those with fundamentalist and evangelical Christian beliefs, are poorly served.

Raitt came to MU in 1981 to build from scratch the University's first religious studies department. Traditionally, programs of religious study were organized by geographic region (religions of the Indian subconti-



nent, for example) or by particular scriptural traditions (Islam, Christianity, Buddhism and Judaism). Raitt had something different in mind. She built a department that emphasized how religion has and continues to influence the world's cultural norms and traditions, and how these influences have, in turn, affected interactions among disparate people and cultures.

"This meant making indigenous religions based on oral traditions equal partners with what were once referred to as 'world religions' that are text-based," Raitt says. It was a method that placed less emphasis on theology — analysis of the nuts and bolts of individual scriptures and texts — and more on religious rituals and their influences on society. This approach was reflected in the proposal to The Pew Charitable Trusts and part of what made it successful.

"We were impressed with the professional aspects of Dr. Raitt's proposal, and by that I mean that it deals with the real world and issues facing professionals in the working world," says Diane Winston, program officer for religion at the Pew Trusts. "It addresses the training that students receive and how those people are going to go about doing their jobs. All the centers we have funded are interdisciplinary, and they are designed to bring academic disciplines together and figure out how to put religious studies into mainstream education."

Raitt will serve as interim director until a national search for a permanent director is completed. "This center is a wonderful culmination of all Jill has worked for over the last 20 years, and it's the next logical step," continues Winston. "It takes religious studies out of a so-called 'academic ghetto' and moves it into the realm of other disciplines."

Religious values, says Raitt, come from the interpretation of oral traditions and written texts: If you happen to be from the Middle East, your spiritual sense most likely arises from the Holy Quran; if you grew up in the Far East, the writings of Buddhist and Confucian sages are likely to be important influences; for many of those born on the Indian subcontinent, the sacred texts of Hinduism play an important role.

If you are of North American or European descent, your values most likely come from the Bible. This is true, Raitt says, whether or not you practice Christianity. "The biblical text shaped Western European culture, and therefore the culture that grew from the American colonies. What the person on the street — including the

atheist, the agnostic, the Jew who has come to America and pretty much conformed — doesn't think about is that the values that determine the interactions between people in our society are shaped by the biblical text and the Christian commentaries that have been made on it since. It's that basic," she explains.

In short, our nation's underlying Protestant religious values have a huge effect on professional behavior and practice. "You can only push people so far. People who are ill or people who give a reporter a story deserve respect for their beliefs, and the beliefs or non-beliefs of the professionals who are serving them should not be imposed on them," she says. "Yet they are."

Thus the focus of the center's effort will involve helping professionals learn to recognize, and eventually minimize, the potential for such impositions.

"Even engineering is going to get involved," she says. "Would it help, even if they just had a week in an introductory course, to discuss, say, approaches to architecture or mineral rights? What you do to the sea, the land, a river and how different cultures and religions view these activities? Would their service be improved? Is there something we can teach engineers to make them more sensitive to issues that might arise before the fact, before drilling begins?"

Raitt explains how the center might go about answering such questions. MU sociologists, for example, could elicit survey data establishing a baseline for the extent to which professionals do or do not see their behaviors and attitudes as religion-influenced. They can randomly sample clients to determine their attitudes, expectations, and experiences in relation to the service they received.

Data will foster seminar topics and discussions among visiting fellows, faculty and students. "We're not only going to foster the discussion, but we're also going to come to some kind of understanding. One of the results, or duties, ... is to create modules or entire courses that will go into introductory years in professional schools."

Changes are long overdue, says Raitt. "When professional schools were formed between about 1870 and 1920, they were not formed with the sense of religious pluralism that much of our country has now. They were built on Christian-Protestant traditions. All the Ivy Leagues were first founded as divinity schools, for example." And although the University of Missouri was founded as a public institution, Raitt adds, "all of its early presidents — until Richard Jesse took office in 1891 — were devout

Presbyterians. Attending Green Chapel was a requirement." As improvements in technology and the advent of scientific management principles ushered in America's age of industrialism, overtly religious training declined. But this did not always alter the attitudes and assumptions that lay at the core of even the most secularized programs of study.

In fact, Raitt says, many scholars contend that the underlying culture on which they were founded is still represented in traditions and training methods. "It would help these schools' service to the public if they would bring these [attitudes] to the surface and look at them honestly and evaluate them," says Raitt.

"The depth and importance of what the center will do can't be overstated, even if you just consider the diversity of our own student body and faculty," says Rose Porter, dean of MU's Sinclair School of Nursing.

"In health care professions, if you don't understand how a person's cultural and religious beliefs come to bear, you might design a health intervention that is completely inappropriate for that person." Once faculty and fellows from the professions come together in seminars, Porter says, they will find they have much more in common than they realize.

Ken Evans, associate dean of the MU College of Business, couldn't agree more. "Many of the issues about diversity and religious beliefs facing journalism, nursing or medical professionals also involve certain business practices in those respective settings," he says. The center's interdisciplinary structure, he adds, will allow business students to see those scenarios firsthand.

"I'm sure it won't be without some controversy," says Winston, "because that is generally what happens when professionals start talking about religion. But this center won't be about sectarianism, proselytizing or putting the study of one religion above another. It's about religion as a social and cultural force in our society."

And this is an appropriate role for a public university, especially a land-grant institution, according to Raitt and others involved with the center.

"In a country as diverse as ours, assumptions arising from the long-dominant religious and cultural base need to be examined and measured in regard to professional training and service," Raitt says. "It is absolutely right for a land-grant university to be doing this. We have a responsibility to the people of the state and an obligation to serve our public as it exists, in its plurality." ☆