A.U.B. and Religion
Never the Twain Shall Meet…Again?*

George Sabra

Preliminary Remarks
The title I have given this lecture evoked two different initial reactions from friends and acquaintances who heard about it or read it in the announcement. The first reaction was that of yearning coupled with lament: this is usually the feeling of many Lebanese, especially, Ras Beirut Protestants, who lament the total loss of the religious, specifically Protestant, character of AUB, and who yearn for the good old days when AUB was a Protestant institution. The second reaction was one of worry and apprehension. This came from people who are relieved that AUB no longer has anything to do with the Christian religion; and they are worried about any attempt to revive a Christian missionary character or role because it is simply either outdated or dangerous or wrong, or all of the above together. Let me begin by assuring you that this lecture is motivated neither by a lament over a lost Protestant institution nor by the desire to revive AUB’s original missionary role. My concern is, first, to tell the story of AUB and religion and to interpret it, then to raise some questions about its ending. This is an attempt – on the part of someone deeply appreciative of, and involved in, both religion (it is my commitment, training and career) and AUB (as a graduate, a former lecturer and one whose family has been associated with this institution in one form or another for the last 117 years of its existence!) – an attempt to reflect on that marriage between religion and a Middle Eastern institution of higher learning that has ended up in divorce. Is it contextually and intellectually a defensible divorce? In other words, can an institution such as AUB – being what it is and located where it is – afford to continue ignoring “religion”?

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AUB and Religion: the Story

Before attempting to answer such questions, it is necessary to understand the place of religion in this university throughout its history – a history of some 139 years now. I would like to suggest that the relationship between the Syrian Protestant College (SPC)/AUB and religion has gone through four phases.

The first phase could be entitled the “classical missionary concern”; it covers the early history of the SPC under the presidency of Daniel Bliss (1866-1902). SPC here is quite openly and unashamedly “a Christian College founded as a Missionary Institution in the fear of God and on the work of God.”, whose main goals were to provide the most modern western form of higher education combined with “devotion to Christian ideals.” Its American missionary founders certainly viewed it as one of their many institutions which would also witness to the truth of the Evangelical faith, but, given the nature of the enterprise – an educational one for all kinds of people – it could not be directly and overtly evangelistic. For that reason the decision was taken from the very outset that the proposed college be governed and sponsored by a board that was – institutionally – unconnected to the American mission. SPC was indeed a missionary institution, but only indirectly so, thus it should not be the responsibility of the American Protestant Mission, especially financially. The SPC was founded as a body independent of the American Protestant mission, and its first president, Daniel Bliss, had to resign from the Mission in order to be the president. This institutional distinction from the mission did not at all affect the structuring of the new college along Evangelical principles or its being as Protestant an institution as any Protestant college in the USA. The president was to be chosen from among the missionaries of the American mission to Syria, the institution had to be strictly Evangelical in character, every professor had to be Evangelical, and all the members of the Board of Managers should belong to some branch of the Evangelical Church. And so it was in the earliest years. The first three professors, in addition to Bliss: Cornelius van Dyck, George Post and John Wortabet were not only Evangelical – they were ordained Protestant ministers.

At the inauguration of College Hall in 1871, Daniel Bliss uttered his famous and since then oft-repeated declaration:
“This College is for all conditions and classes of men without regard to color, nationality, race or religion. A man white, black or yellow; Christian, Jew, Mohammedan or heathen, may enter and enjoy all the advantages of this institution for three, four, or eight years; and go out believing in one God, in many gods, or in no God. But it will be impossible for anyone to continue with us long without knowing what we believe to be truth and our reasons for that belief.”

This statement was applied seriously and faithfully. There was no pressure put on any student to convert to Protestantism, but Christian Evangelical principles were emphasized wherever possible. Most certainly students could not miss knowing what Protestantism was all about – and more importantly – how Protestants lived and behaved. The professors were expected to provide the main models here.

As for religion in the curriculum and campus life, all students were required to take Bible classes, and boarding students had to attend regular Bible classes on Sunday afternoons. There were morning and evening prayers required of all, as was also the Sunday preaching service. In the early years there was even an obligatory midweek prayer meeting. Bliss himself taught the Bible classes – once a week in the Collegiate Department, but for the seniors only in the first term. In the last two terms senior students had to take moral philosophy – also with Bliss. It is important to note that what was taught was the Bible, and not theology. The religious instruction consisted of weekly expositions of Biblical passages and stories “to familiarize the students with the spiritual meaning of its facts and history which the students would have learned in the Preparatory Department.” Bliss himself described this activity by saying that he was anxious to “impress the students with the great truths of the Bible.” The preaching in the Chapel was openly Christian; Bliss writes in one of his letters to his family in December 1873: “I trust that we shall all be wise enough to preach Christ and Him crucified, in the Chapel. The errors will fall themselves before the truth.” In addition to all these religious activities evangelistic revival meetings were sometimes held on campus (e.g., in 1885). These were events where calls for conversion and personal commitment to faith in Jesus Christ were preached and evoked. Moreover, a YMCA was organized on campus in 1886; it involved both religious and social and humanitarian fellowship. The religious activities of the young College were intensive. Even as early as 1873, Bliss could boast: “There is no doubt now that the religious influence of the College is felt far and wide.”
The Faculty feel more and more its importance and their responsibility. The prayers offered at the beginning of our faculty meetings indicate a deep-felt impression that immortal souls are committed to our care. We hear nothing more against our preaching in the Chapel. This language of “immortal souls …committed to our care” reveals the deeply religious and evangelistic missionary character of the early phase of SPC. Education was no doubt very important, but it was all for the sake of leading souls to Christian truth, or at least placing them before that truth. The last comment about “we hear nothing more about our preaching in the Chapel” is not about student or parent protests against such an activity, but it is about the protests of members of the American Mission who were unhappy that the boarding students of the SPC were attending a worship service on Sundays on campus - first in College Hall, then after 1891 in the Chapel, and were not being taken to the Mission Church. Of course at this time, the overwhelming majority of the students were Christians. In 1894, e.g., there were 235 students enrolled at the College; only 7 were non-Christians (5 Muslims and 2 Jews). During Daniel Bliss’ presidency there were some objections to the religious requirements imposed on everybody, but the Board of Trustees, especially under the strictly evangelical William A. Booth, never accepted to relax those requirements.

Any discussion of the place of religion in the structure and the life of the College from 1866-1902 cannot overlook the events of 1882. The “Lewis Affair”, as it came to be called, is often portrayed as a struggle between religious conservatives and religious liberals about Darwin’s ideas on evolution. In a sense it was such a struggle, one that had taken place – and would still take place – on many American campuses in the USA. Yet, it would be somewhat simplistic to conceive the whole affair and its repercussions, namely, the resignation of Lewis, the student protests, the resignation of van Dyck and the expulsion of some students, as merely a result of a religious controversy. This not the place to go into it here, but my research has led me to conclude that, for President Bliss at least and for the internal repercussions of the crisis, the religious aspect was not the main issue. The Lewis Commencement Address which mentioned Darwin, his subsequent resignation and the student protests were merely the occasion used by Bliss and G. Post for settling accounts with van Dyck and Lewis. The latter had been critical of Bliss’
administration; there was also a hidden rivalry between Bliss and van Dyck which secretly fueled the crisis. I don’t have time to elaborate on this here, but a clear indication that “evolution” was not so important a religious issue for Bliss himself – though it certainly was for some of his old missionary friends and also for W. Booth the chairman of the Board of Trustees – is that a few years later, Bliss himself refers to Darwin positively in an address. Be that as it may, the 1882 affair did have one important consequence for the place and role of religion on campus. The Board of Trustees decided to require all faculty members to sign a “Declaration of Principles.” This declaration was actually the creed of the American International Evangelical Alliance; it consisted of 10 points that began with a strict affirmation of the “Divine inspiration, authority, and sufficiency of the Holy Scriptures”, affirmed the central Christian doctrines of Trinity, fall of man, incarnation, atonement, justification by faith alone, ... conversion, resurrection, judgment, church, sacraments and ended with insistence on the inspired word of God and rejection of Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox teachings and practices. It also contained a pledge to cooperate “in advancing the chief aim of this Institution, which, as a missionary agency, is to train up young men in the knowledge of Christian truth, and if possible, secure their intelligent and hearty acceptance of the Bible as the Word of God, and of Christ as the only Saviour, and at the same time inspire them with high moral purposes and consecrated aims in life.” Here we have a strong reiteration of the self-understanding of SPC as a “missionary tool” whose aim, if possible, is conversion to biblical Christianity, namely, Protestantism.

Two more things need to be mentioned at this period concerning religion at SPC. The first is “The School of Biblical Archaeology and Philology in connection with SPC”. It was established by the Board of Trustees in January 1887 and aimed at “enabling ministers and other scholars to pursue biblical, philological and archaeological studies in the lands of the Bible, and facilitating the further exploration of the geography, archaeology … in the service of Biblical scholarship.” In some years between 1887 and 1924, there are course offerings listed – Greek, Hebrew, Aramaic, Biblical Literature, Ecclesiastical History, History of Religions; in some others a couple of students or research scholars are listed. Apparently, the university museum was an offspring of this
project, but there is no trace of the School itself after the academic year 1923-24. It seemed to have lasted until 1924, but then it simply drops out of existence.

The other thing is the Theological Seminary of the American Protestant Mission. This was founded in 1869 in Abeih – 3 years after the founding of SPC – for the specific purpose of training “native” young men for the ministry. At the founding of SPC it was consciously decided to keep the theological training in a separate institution from the College, but the two institutions cooperated closely. In 1882, the Seminary was moved to Beirut, and the College gave it grounds for erecting a building – the Theological Hall, completed in 1883. At that time it was the last building on campus to the south and it had a separate entrance directly from the street. It functioned as the Theological Seminary from 1883-1892 when it was closed and transferred to Souk el Gharb. The Theological Seminary was listed in the SPC catalog from 1886-87 until 1890-91 but always with the note “This Institution is not organically connected with the College.” Although it was foreseen that Seminary students join classes at the College to improve their literary training, and it was also hoped that by the mingling of the two types of students – College and Seminary – and by personal contact and acquaintance, a mutual benefit would be gained in promoting religious toleration, removing prejudices and broadening views on religious and scientific matters, the experiment seems to have failed. Supply of theological students ran very low by 1891; SPC graduates were not being attracted to the ministry, so the Mission decided to discontinue theological training in Beirut. Theological Hall remained closed for some years then it was bought by the College in 1898 and re-named Jessup Hall (after a major donor for its purchase, William Jessup, chairman of Board of Trustees) Theology, or theological studies and reflection, thus did not find a place in the College.

The absence of theological studies from the College as a branch of the academic curriculum was not simply due to the division of labor between the college and the American Mission’s Theological Seminary. In the later years of his presidency, Daniel Bliss’ religious convictions had been evolving and going more in the direction of liberal Protestantism. To be sure, in the 36 years of Bliss’ term as president, religion was central to the life and teaching of the College. It was everywhere: in the classrooms, in the morning and evening prayers, in the persons and example of the faculty, in extra-
curricular activities, in the structure of the week-ends, and in the policies of the Board members. But, whereas Bliss could speak in 1873 of “preaching Christ and Him crucified in the Chapel”, in the late 1880s and 1890s the tone changes. Howard, the son of Daniel Bliss, tells us that in his early years Daniel inherited the Calvinist tradition, but that gradually he adopted the modern views of Lyman Abbot. Lyman Abbot was one of the most famous representatives and popularizers of a liberal evangelical Reformed theology and a form of social Christianity; he was open to modern scientific thought, especially to Darwinism and to biblical criticism. Thus, in the addresses and sermons of the later Bliss we start to find a liberal Protestant definition of religion and of how religion should be in schools of higher education. “The very object of a religion”, said Bliss in an 1885 sermon, “consists in lifting a man out of a bad condition into a good condition or in keeping him from falling from the good into the bad.” Christianity thus becomes for him a transformation of character, a life of morality, and not doctrines and theology and creeds and Biblical facts and laws. The central thing about religion becomes “feeling” and “acting” in view of the right. “Not in church, not in creed, not in sacrament, but in doing God’s will is everlasting life … Life and religion are one, or neither is anything.” Religious is thus the person who feels God and acts according to God’s will, not the one who believes doctrines and creeds. Religion is a state of the soul and salvation is character and life. Jesus’ teaching, in the words of Lyman Abbot, was not theological, but vital.

These later views of the mature Bliss became the foundation and starting point for the second phase – namely the presidencies of Howard Bliss (1902-1920) and Bayard Dodge (1923-1948). If the first period could be called the “classical missionary concern”, this second one – spanning over almost the first half of the 20th century – could be called the “Modern Missionary Ideal”. In fact, the “Modern Missionary” is the title of a seminal article written by Howard Bliss in 1920, but which really characterized the program and vision of his whole presidency as well as that of his son-in-law, Bayard Dodge, as far as the religious message and character of the College/University was concerned.

Howard Bliss took over from his father in 1902. Two significant development mark the transition from the classical missionary concern to the modern missionary ideal in the
very first year of Howard Bliss’ term: first, the local Board of Managers – made up entirely of local missionaries – disbands, leaving the Faculty and the overseas Board of Trustees to take full care of overseeing and running the SPC.30 This, perhaps, was the real independence of the College from the American Protestant mission, not the symbolic resignation of Daniel Bliss from the Mission Board back in 1866. Second, Howard Bliss abolishes the compulsory faculty oath to the Declaration of Principles introduced after the 1882 incident because it went against his convictions.31 Again, this was also the real break with the old missionary project. H. Jessup, the famous missionary who wrote a major history of the work of the Protestant mission in Syria and Lebanon, notes that upon the abolition of the Declaration of Principles, the missionaries hoped that the College Trustees would “continue to make sound judgment in choosing faculty,” but, he ends by saying that “the abolition of the Declaration has never commended itself to the missionaries of Syria, Palestine and Egypt.”32 The SPC began to slip away very quickly from the control of the classical missionary mentality, a development that had already begun in the mind and outlook of the later Daniel Bliss, but now was implemented institutionally by his son. The transition to the new missionary ideal was, however, gradual and slow. There was continuity between the first phase and this second one: Bible classes were still a requirement for all; chapel was daily and required of all students; Sunday morning services were regularly held, and there was even a Sunday evening prayer service held in the West Hall auditorium for the students of the Preparatory Department.33 In fact, in 1902 there was even a proposal to establish a College Church in order to provide “a concrete opportunity to those who have experienced a change of heart to commit themselves to the new course of life.”34 Such a church would be non-denominational, with religious, rather than theological conditions for membership. But the proposal eventually failed because the time was not yet ripe for it.35 The YMCA continued its activities, but, as of 1905, and in line with Howard Bliss’ modern missionary ideals, it was opened to non-Christians on the basis of a vow based on Jesus’ teachings and life, not on faith in Jesus.36 But the number of non-Christian students was steadily growing. In 1908, Muslim students were about 15% of the total student body (128 out of 876). Compulsory Bible classes and Chapel attendance came again under attack. Muslim
students protested, and a major crisis ensued in 1909, which ended by the Faculty and Board reaffirming the Christian character and commitment of the SPC and not relaxing the required nature of both Bible classes and Chapel services. Only 8 Muslim students withdrew from the College, and life returned to normal. The Board of Trustees did not accept to make religious instruction voluntary and did not initiate “Alternative Exercises” except after World War I had begun when the Ottomans forbade SPC to teach religion except to Christians. That was when “Alternative Exercises” were developed for non-Christians who had conscientious objections to attending Christian religious instruction. Also worth mentioning during the presidency of Howard Bliss is that there was some thinking about establishing a theological faculty – an idea suggested by the president himself: “Eventually and in full cooperation with the missionaries of the Near East, we should have a School of Theology. Our School of Archaeology and Biblical Philology should be put on its feet. Post-graduate courses should be established”. No further reference was made to this idea, however; it never materialized as a School within the College.

Howard Bliss’ views on religion were those of Protestant liberalism, a theological direction that had been quickly gaining ground in major theological seminaries and divinity schools in the USA in the last quarter of the 19th century. Mention was made earlier of Lyman Abbot, a major representative of Protestant Liberalism who had influenced the later Daniel Bliss. Howard Bliss, before becoming president of SPC, had been an associate pastor of Rev. Abbot in a church in Brooklyn, N.Y. He worked and trained with Abbot. The Liberal Protestant school of thought stresses the basically ethical essence of Christianity, the priority of spiritual experience over any form of external authority – be it that of church or creed or Bible, and the centrality of Jesus’ life and teachings as guidelines and example over against dogma and metaphysics. In Protestant Liberalism there is an abandonment of proselytism, an openness to a critical study of the Bible, an inclusiveness of other religions along with Christianity as also ways to the one truth. Howard Bliss’ famous “manifesto” “The Modern Missionary” is one of the best expressions of liberal Protestantism. The SPC is missionary, affirms Bliss, and so its real aim is to make known to its students “the adoption of the Christian
Ideal.” Required was not the adoption of the Christian faith – as was the classical missionary concern – but the ‘Christian Ideal’, which is obviously an ethical ideal. SPC is missionary in a modern sense, so it celebrates as an institution, the birth of the prophet Mohammad along with its Muslim and Baha’i students. Christianity is unique, but it respects all other religions, and it does not believe that it is “the sole channel through which divine and saving truth has been conveyed”; Christians can learn from others; the modern missionary is neither apologetic nor judgmental, for he emphasizes only the positive in the others and points to the kernel of truth in their religions, rather than to their errors. The Bible is not God’s only vehicle for divine expression; authentic echoes of God’s voice are found in other books. Dogma and theology are not pursued and stressed, but rather the inward consciousness of divine power in the soul and the Jesus-like conduct of the person. The spirit of Jesus is the heart of the matter, not right doctrines and creeds. The “central essential thing” the modern missionary insists on is “the personal assimilation in the disciple’s life of the teaching and the spirit of Jesus. It is this deliberate purpose, it is this passion that counts.”

It is this powerful message of liberal Protestantism that was put into action by Howard Bliss, even at the beginning of his term by his abolishing the oath to the Declaration of Principles. The First World War disrupted the course of the College for a while, but Bliss’ program was really the charter for his son-in-law, Bayard Dodge, who totally espoused this ideal of the modern missionary and carried it through for a quarter of a century.

Bayard Dodge took over in 1923. He too had studied theology and had been aiming for the ministry, but he never did become ordained. He got his Bachelor of Divinity from Union Theological Seminary just before World War I, at a time when Union was a major center of theological liberalism and social gospel Christianity. In his inaugural address of 1923, Dodge states:

To develop the spiritual natures of our students, we do not propose to proselytize or to emphasize names and forms. To us Protestantism means religious freedom, and as a Protestant institution we wish to give our students freedom of worship and freedom of belief.
We feel that religion is not an ulterior aim of education; it is not a quantity of tangible facts to be taught, or a creed to be subscribed to: - it is something much more fundamental; it is the consciousness of a spiritual power, controlling life and seeking good. Religion is not for the chapel alone, but can be found in the spirit of honest study, good sportsmanship, and consecration to the welfare of mankind. It must be learned in every phase of the university life.46

Dodge’s liberal view of religion had come quite a way from the original missionary conception. Protestantism now means religious freedom, not religious truth; religion is something very internal – a consciousness of a spiritual power; religion is no longer the ulterior aim of education, which it was in the early years of SPC; and religion is not only in chapel, in worship and prayer, but it is a way of living, of doing everything, especially as devotion and service to the “welfare of mankind.” Bible classes continue to be required, but now students have a choice between Bible or Ethics; courses in religion are offered, and these include “History of Religions”, “Origin and Development of Religions”, “Religions of the Near East” in addition to courses in Biblical studies about the Old and New Testament and Early Church History.47 In the 1930s, and after the Near East School of Theology is established in Beirut (1932) as a result of the merger of the former Theological Seminary of the American Mission with the Armenian Seminary – the School of Athens, NEST is affiliated with AUB, and begins to appear in the AUB catalogue as of 1936. AUB students are allowed to take courses at NEST. In fact, NEST now serves as the Department of Religion for AUB in this period.48 Daily chapel and religious services continue; non-Christians who object could still go to alternative services.49 There were campus lectures on religious topics and a series of special religious meetings “to deepen the spiritual consciousness of students”. Prominent Christian, as well as Muslim, speakers were invited: Henry Sloane Coffin (1935), John Mott (1937), Bixler from Harvard University. In 1935 lectureship was established by a former graduate Dr. Daud Himadi to establish a series of lectures by representatives of different religions – Christians and Muslims.50

A few years after Howard Bliss took over, the text in the university catalogue under “Religious Exercises and Instruction” was changed, and it remains so throughout the Dodge Presidency,. It stated now that the “purpose of the College [later University] is to impart strength of character and purity of personal character, in the hope that its students
maybe fitted to become leaders in a movement towards righteousness in society.” 51 The College/University is still affirmed to be a “Christian Institution” and teaching the principles of the Christian religion, but the Christian religion now means a high moral character that issues in dedicated service. Dodge was a thoroughgoing adherent of the social gospel theology: Christianity and true religion are not doctrines or creeds or theology, but service to the neighbour, to the community. God is the persistent impulse for the good in the human heart; the kingdom of God is an ethical ideal to be realized in society.

There is a saying from the early 20th century that “the distinguishing mark of the German university is scholarship,…and so it produced scholars; the spirit of the English university is culture, and so it produced gentlemen” 52 well, it could be said about AUB under Howard Bliss and Dodge that the American University of Beirut aspired to produce men of character dedicated to service.

The third phase of the story of religion at AUB begins after the Dodge era ends. In the 1950-51 University catalogue, the text under the item “Religious Activities” changes. There is no more mention of the purpose of the University is “to import strength of character and purity of personal character … in a movement towards righteousness in society.” Now it only asserts that “the University has no connection with any religious body” but “it believes the religious life is an essential part of the student’s experience.” Chapel services continue, but these had been for a very long time now daily assemblies for some moral or edifying talks. They were not religious in the strict sense of the word. And in 1958-1959, required Chapel services are discontinued, most probably as a consequence of the sectarian events of 1958. Students are encouraged to develop their own interests in their own religious denominations, not on campus, and the subsequent catalogues even name those denominational institutions that students can go to. 53 The classic statement of D. Bliss is still quoted, but is obviously out of place because it is no longer true that “it will be impossible for anyone to continue with us long without knowing what we believe to be the truth and our reasons for that belief”. In fact, the students are expressly told to go to their denominations for their religious needs because
“these are better able than the university itself to stimulate the religious interests of students…” In other words, if you want religion, go outside the campus!

Courses in religion are still offered, and the Near East School of Theology still serves as a department of religion for the AUB until the 1968-69, for, in the early 1960s, there is not yet a department of religion proper, but religious courses are offered under other departments – History, Philosophy, Psychology and Sociology. There is thus a Committee on Religion with representatives from each of the above-mentioned departments. This continues until 1967-68, when a proper Department of Religious Studies is established. It offers B.A., then in the 1974-75 becomes only a graduate program, with B.A. becoming interdepartmental. That department, however, soon acquired the reputation, at least it was so in my student days in the early 1970s, of being the best department to go to for the highest grades with the least effort.

Interestingly, the 1964-65 catalogue drops out completely any section on Religious or Spiritual Activities. The 1965-66 Introduction to Catalogue finds Bliss’ founding statement is placed under the heading “History”. The Statement of Policy briefly states that “the AUB was founded to assist in the spiritual, intellectual and social development of students in the Middle East.” Reference to religious interests is subsumed under student life in later catalogues, and students are given addresses to seek for such religious activities. The mention of religious interests of students drops out of the catalog in the 1975-76 catalogue.

This third period is the period of growing “secularization” of the university. Things religious become privatized, and the topic of religion assumes a modest place in the academic curriculum as an optional topic. Indeed, as Munro rightly observed, “The AUB was changing from an institution which prided itself on developing men’s souls as well as their minds, to one whose concern was above all academic. There was less emphasis on the development of the whole personality.” This was the end of the “Modern Missionary” ideal. The last great attempt to relate the whole university to religious thought and reflection is in the centennial celebrations of 1966-67, when the Philosophy Department, headed by Professor Charles Malik, organized two symposia and invited
some of the most distinguished Christian and Muslim theologians and thinkers speak on “God and Man in Contemporary Muslim and Christian Thought”, respectively. But that was a lone event with no consequences for the place of religion or religious thought at AUB. Another series of centennial lectures was held during 1966-67 under the title “The University and the Man of Tomorrow”. Not one lecturer mentioned the topic of religion in relation to university education or research. The “man of tomorrow” in the view of a host of internationally renowned and local scholars will, apparently have no place or thought for religion.

The early years of the war in Lebanon mark the beginning of the fourth and last phase. In 1978-79, there is no more mention of “religious interests” of students under Student Life; there is no more a university chaplain; the Department of Religion disappears. The practice of beginning the Commencement Exercises with prayer (Invocation) – performed since the first commencement in 1870, is discontinued in the early 1980s. The religious services held for the university community in the Chapel (ever since the founding of SPC) are no longer held. The end of all religious activities on campus comes in late ‘80s when a university decision is taking to ban all religious functions in the Chapel or Assembly Hall. The death blow to any widespread exposure to the study of religion was in 1986-87, when the readings and discussion of the Bible and the Koran were completely removed from the Civilization Sequence required courses. Since the late 1980s and up until today, “religion” has been completely eradicated from the life and curriculum of the university.

Making Sense of the Story
How does one account for the story of religion at AUB – a story that began with religious missionary zeal in 1866, shifted to a moral missionary ideal in the early 1900s, got reduced to elective courses in religion and a modest department in the mid 20th century, to finally disappear completely from AUB in the last quarter of the 20th century – and up until this very day?
A popular and widespread explanation of the shift from the first phase to the second is that the earliest missionary founders of SPC soon discovered that they could not convert people to Protestantism; there were too many “nominal Christians”, i.e., non-Protestants, and a growing number of non-Christian students. The classical missionary enterprise failed, so they shifted to preaching moral ideals, to a social gospel type of religion. This is the same explanation that is usually given for the fact that Protestant missionaries founded so many schools and engaged in social work. It is purported that they failed at conversion, so they turned to education. This explanation is too simplistic, although it does have elements of truth in it. To be sure, they failed in converting on a large scale and not everybody who received an education at Protestant school or at SPC became a Protestant. But what happened at AUB, at least in the first three phases I described above – from 1866 until 1976 or so, was actually the same story that was played out in most American Christian colleges and universities. The AUB went the way of all flesh – i.e. it suffered the fate of all similar denominational as well as non-denomination Christian institutions of higher learning in the USA in the 19th and early 20th centuries, as far as religion is concerned. Since the early 1990s there has been an increasing interest in the relation between religion and higher education in US colleges and universities, and many studies have been produced about this topic. It is impossible to understand the history and development of the SPC/AUB, especially concerning the place and role of religion, without knowing the U.S. story on campuses there. It is basically the same story. The parallels with the AUB developments are amazing. Most Protestant colleges and universities in the US started out with required chapel services, required Bible courses, required faculty oaths to doctrinal statements, almost all of them had YMCAs and organized revival meetings on campus. And almost all of them gradually relaxed chapel services and Bible courses until they dropped out of the curriculum; almost all abolished the faculty oaths, insisted on religion as a builder of moral character and a dedication to service, almost all shifted to the liberal Protestant approach which emphasized Christianity not as a system of theology or ritual, but as a life: Christianity is “something caught, not taught.” What J. Marsden concludes concerning the US situation, applies literally to the AUB of Howard Bliss and Bayard Dodge: “Christianity in academia was located either in the subjective lives of individuals or in ideals of service.
to humanity with which no one was to quarrel.” The similarity of the story with American institutions continues in the post-Dodge phase: in the later 20th century, as the influence of religion and religious life starts to recede in the overall aims and structures of colleges and universities, departments of religion begin to be established, and this “became the pattern for teaching religion in American higher education.” That is also the time in the 1960s when a department of religion is established at AUB.

The upshot of all this is that the shifting place and role of religion at SPC/AUB followed the pattern and the developments taking place in American colleges and universities: SPC/AUB was living its “American” life here in Beirut; it was adapting to, and accompanying, developments in the concept, mission and structure of American institutions of higher learning, and not simply or even primarily responding to its context of increasing non-Protestants and non-Christians among students and faculty. No doubt the local context played some role, but it was not decisive concerning religion except in the last phase, which witnessed the disappearance of religion from the university. The AUB chaplaincy was abolished, prayer before the commencement were stopped at the beginning of the Lebanese war; and the Bible and Koran dropped out of the CS program as a result of a conflict in class and also as a reaction to the kidnapping of an AUB professor in the 1980s.

The “way of all flesh” for American universities, including the well-known universities such as Harvard, Yale, Princeton, Chicago and many others, is that they were all founded and shaped by church bodies; all gradually moved through several phases: first, making education “nonsectarian” by “identifying with a general, generic Christianity; then by an appeal to spiritual and moral ideals” of a vaguely religious type, “and finally by the exclusion of specifically Christian religious values and practices in the name of allegedly universal intellectual, moral, and democratic qualities.” That is exactly what happened at SPC/AUB, with the difference that AUB, mainly due to the 15-year Lebanese war went on to eliminate religion completely from any aspect of university life and practice. This process of secularization has been studied and analyzed in depth in many American publications recently – as I have already indicated above. Many factors go into the
process, including financial considerations and fundraising issues, but the most important factor for the demise of the Protestant character of colleges and universities was their espousal of liberal Protestantism and the assumptions of the Enlightenment about “real knowledge as that which comes only through experiment and verifiable experience, while faith is relegated to a private and subjective sphere.”

Very briefly – for this is a vast topic, the effect of modernity’s [Enlightenment in the wide sense] attack on the epistemological claims of classical Christian theology, as well as Deistic or rationalistic theology, was devastating at least in the academic and intellectual theological sphere. Many, primarily in the Anglo-American world, felt that it was no longer possible to defend or express the Christian faith in terms of knowledge claims and truth claims. The Christian faith was no longer viable for many as a form of knowing, so theologies were developed in which the Christian faith was basically conceived as either a form of doing (morality) or a form of feeling (consciousness) or both together. Christianity became either moral action or a spiritual experience (a consciousness of the Divine). If you read the later D. Bliss, Howard Bliss and Bayard Dodge, you will find that they all belonged to the school of thought that considered the Christian faith not so much as embodying truths to be known, formulated, studied, reflected upon, explained, and critiqued, but as a life that ought to be lived, a consciousness of a higher spiritual power that shapes personality and urges service to fellow human beings. And all three reflected that in their conceptions of what it means to be a Christian college/university. All three – and these were really the towering founders of SPC/AUB, always emphasized moral life over truth, religious feeling over doctrines, spiritual consciousness over theological knowledge. Religion was not really something to be studied in the university; it was to be practiced. “Christianity is life, not doctrine, it is something caught more than taught.” Thus, religion at AUB was in their time “a grand moral vision based on the selfless example of Jesus; superiority to other religions is not intellectual and dogmatic but moral. No need to ask, discuss and argue whether Christianity was true or not. No need to ask whether one could continue to believe the Bible in the face of biblical criticism and the challenges of modern science and philosophy – because religion does not really belong in the domain of knowledge.
It is this basic outlook that excludes religion from the realm of thought, reflection and critique that eventually ousted religion very smoothly and quietly from the university’s academic vision. It was this initial policy of promoting the practice but avoiding the study of religion that resulted in neither practice nor study, for there came a time when there was no one to practice and nothing to study.

Never the Twain Shall Meet … Again?
In this concluding part I want to end by raising questions- questions which I believe are fundamental and require discussion and serious reflection. I would have loved to spend more time on a longer elaboration of the issues I want to raise here, but that would really require a second lecture.

Can AUB or any university in the Middle East worthy of the name, afford to exclude religion from its academic and intellectual vision? Who can deny the centrality of religion for the Middle East and its peoples? AUB is located in the heart of a region that has given birth to three great world religions – Judaism, Islam and Christianity – all three of which are still alive and well and vigorously shaping lives, structures, policies, behavior and actions in this region and beyond. Religion is the main donor of identity in Lebanon and the surrounding countries; it is the most basic shaper of people’s beliefs and of public life. One can understand the early policy of AUB that opted for religion as “a benign and enlightened ethicism”71 to use the words of Kenneth Cragg, but one could nevertheless regret the fact that SPC and AUB merely reflected Lebanon’s (and the Middle East’s) religious diversity and make-up rather than reflected upon it. The events and developments of the last quarter of the 20th century have witnessed a resurgence of religion in the Middle East beginning with the increasingly religious and theological discourse of Israeli politics in the mid 1970s, through the Iranian Islamic Revolution of 1979 and the subsequent revival of all kinds of fundamentalisms, including a western Christian fundamentalism that has also affected our region in the form of what is known as Christian Zionism. In the midst of all of this, can AUB simply continue to function as though “religion” does not exist or is not a topic of academic discussion, research, reflection and critique? Can AUB continue to graduate students who enter the university...
ignorant and prejudiced about the religious beliefs of their fellow students and co-citizens and leave it with the same ignorance and prejudices? Are students seriously expected to park their religion and religious convictions outside the campus and spend 3-4 years or more on a campus and in an environment that pretends religion does not exist? Can AUB continue to function while totally oblivious to the fundamentally religious matrix of the society and the region it wants to serve?

Modernity thought that religion would disappear: “from Voltaire to Marx every Enlightenment thinker thought that religion would disappear in the 20th century because religion was fetishism, animistic superstition, irrationalism… Every nationalistic ideology – including Arab nationalism and Syrian nationalism, which were rampant at AUB from the 1950s till the 1970s – thought that religion could be privatized and individualized so that the public sphere could be managed without it. Well, it turns out they were all wrong. Religion did not disappear and it could not be privatized for ever. Atheistic ideologies have crumbled, nationalistic ideologies are waning, empires have fallen, economic systems have disintegrated, but the great historical religions have survived. Shouldn’t all of this be material for research and reflection in a contemporary university that seeks to be relevant to, and claims to be in the service of, society?

Furthermore, is AUB, and the contemporary university in the Middle East and elsewhere, aware of the eclipse of the Enlightenment paradigm and the failure of its views on religion, truth and science? The traditional Enlightenment claim was that religion and religious thought (theology) is based on the authority of ancient texts and was assumed to serve the interests of a particular (church) group. Religious viewpoints were considered unscientific because they were not “objective”. Today, it is well-known and accepted in intellectual circles that are no longer imprisoned in the positivistic and ‘scientistic’ outlook of the Enlightenment that every claim – not only religious ones – serves an interest. Isn’t the “hermeneutics of suspicion” applicable to all intellectual claims, not simply religious ones? Few serious academicians today still naively believe in a neutral objective science anymore. Most would admit that every intellectual inquiry, including the scientific one – takes place “in a framework of communities that shape prior
commitments.” And those prior commitments might be arrived at on formal religious grounds or in some more informal way, but they are prior commitments nonetheless. There is, thus, little reason for excluding a priori all religiously based claims on the grounds that they are unscientific. Can it still be naively maintained today, in this post-modern age, that religious perspectives have to nothing to do with the intellectual life of universities?

Is AUB aware that, not only in the Middle East, but in the west – the American and the European West – there is such a thing as “the return of the religious in the public sphere”? Of course, in the Middle East we do not speak of the return of the religious because it never went away in the first place, but the west thought that religion and the religious were put behind it and that secularization was irreversible. Twenty or thirty years ago “secularization” was the key general concept that described the times, and by that was meant the loss of the influence of religion in the public sphere. With the Iranian Islamic revolution the situation changed radically, even for the West. According to one western scholar, economic, social and political categories alone failed to interpret the phenomenon of the Iranian Revolution; it had to be understood primarily as a religious phenomenon, so that the other dimensions could be understood. Today, it is increasingly being recognized that “without the alphabet of religions, one cannot read the map of the political struggles on this earth.” We, in the Middle East, invented the alphabet of religions. Have we nothing to contribute to the world in this matter? The “religious” has returned to the west, not only through religious resurgence in other countries but also through immigrants who bring their religious identity with them to secularized societies – migrant workers, refugees, asylum seekers. The “religious” has also returned in the resurgence of post-secular religious movement, new forms of religiosity and spirituality that are attracting people every where – the esoteric, New Age, etc. The world is full of religious conflicts; religion is the cause of major controversies today. If, as President Waterbury himself stated a few years ago, universities are to be “at the centre of great controversies and should arouse passions and the struggle to defend one’s ideas”, and if, again quoting President Waterbury, “universities that are not at the frontiers of scientific and ethical [could I add religious?] debates are but a step from
death,” then AUB cannot afford to continue ignoring “religion”, if it wants, not only to live, but to live abundantly!

1 “Resolutions of the Board of Managers at the Thirty-Sixth Annual Meeting, July 9th, 1902” in Annual Reports to the Board of Managers of the SPC 1866/67-1901/02. (Beirut), p. 246.
5 Penrose, That They May Have Life, pp. 36-39.
6 Quoted from Penrose, p. 28.
7 Catalogue of the Syrian Protestant College 1881-82, p. 32; also Penrose, p. 146.
10 Ibid., p. 166.
11 Penrose, That They May Have Life, p. 50.
12 D. Bliss, Letters from a New Campus, p. 165.
13 Penrose, That They May Have Life, p. 52.
14 Objections to the religion requirements of the College were raised to the Board of Trustees more than once, e.g., in 1888 and 1895: see Penrose, p. 52.
15 For example: Vanderbilt’s Board terminated the lectureship of Professor Winchell in 1878 for his Darwinistic views which were seen to undermine biblical authority; the Controversy at Princeton took place also in the 1870s: see George Marsden, The Soul of the American University: From Protestant Establishment to Established Non-Belief. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), pp. 189-190 (for Vanderbilt) and pp. 202-205 (for Princeton).
16 Professor Edwin Lewis, much to Bliss’ irritation, used to write the Board of Trustees on his own, and in this incident, again he communicated with its Chairman, William Booth, without informing the President or the Faculty; see the President’s annual report of 1883 in Annual Reports to the Board of Managers of the SPC 1866/67-1901/02, p. 69. That van Dyck was more popular than Bliss and Post is attested by Jurgi Zeydan, as quoted by J. Munro, A Mutual Concern: The Story of the American University of Beirut. (New York: Caravan Books, 1977), p. 26. Another indication that the van Dyck resignation had little to do with a “religious controversy” between conservatives and liberals is that he continues to teach at the Theological Seminary after the 1882 affair and his resignation from the SPC. The Seminary was far more conservative theologically than the College: see Jessup, Fifty-Three Years in Syria, vol. II, p. 496, where van Dyck is reported as teaching at the Seminary in 1884.
17 “No man is superior to another in all respects. Linguists and grammarians learn much from common people. Darwin in obtaining his vast knowledge of the habits of plants, fishes and animals, was aided by farmers, fishermen, hunters and shepherds.” D. Bliss, “The Race of Life” A Baccalaureate sermon delivered by Dr. Daniel Bliss at SPC in July 1888 and again on April 7, 1895 in The Voice of Daniel Bliss. (Beirut: The American Press, 1956), p. 5.
19 The full text of the “Declaration of Principles” was appended to the President’s annual report of July 10, 1883, in Annual Reports to the Board of Managers of the SPC 1866/67-1901/02, p. 80.
20 SPC Catalogue 1886-87, pp. 41 f.
21 The SPC catalogue of 1920-21 lists the following courses under the School of Archaeology: Greek, Hebrew, Aramaic, Biblical Literature, Ecclesiastical History, History of Religions (p. 132). In the 1899-1900 Catalogue, 3 students are listed; 1900-01: 1 student; 1901-02: no students; 1902-03: 1 student.
22 The account about the Theological Seminary and its relation to SPC is based on: Al-Kulliyah, vol 16 (1930), pp. 162-164, and on Penrose, That They May Have Life, pp. 53-56.
22 The Reminiscences of Daniel Bliss, p. 254.
25 The Voice of Daniel Bliss, p. 36.
26 Ibid., p. 44 (Sermon in 1896).
27 Ibid., p. 69.
30 Ibid., p. 708.
31 Ibid., p. 132.
32 Ibid., p. 132 f.
33 The special covenant that Muslims, Jews and Druzes had to assent to in order to join the YMCA was as follows: “In becoming a Fellowship Member of this Association, you desire to testify to the help you have received in your daily life from the teachings and life of Jesus, and you desire to associate yourself with those who are learning from Him. You promise that you will attend regularly the weekly meetings of the Association Bible Classes, and that you will make it a special object of your prayers and endeavors to help your fellow students, particularly through the advancement of the spiritual life among them.”
37 The whole story of the non-Christian student protests and its consequences is narrated in detail by Howard Bliss in the “Forty-Third Annual Report of the Syrian Protestant to the Board of Trustees 1908-09”, in Annual Reports to the Board of Managers of the SPC 1866/67-1901/02, pp. 4-16. See also Penrose, That They May Have Life, pp. 134-142.
38 Penrose, That They May Have Life, pp. 143-145.
39 Howard Bliss, The SPC During the Great War and After. 1914-1920, p. 10.
40 In his spiritual autobiography, What Christianity Means to Me, Abbot mentions both Daniel and Howard Bliss, recalling that the latter was his colleague in pasturing a church in Brooklyn: p. 143.
41 H. Bliss, “The Modern Missionary”, as found in Penrose, That They May Have Life, p. 181.
42 Ibid., p. 179.
43 Ibid., pp. 182 f.
44 Ibid., p. 184.
45 Ibid., p. 188.
46 Inaugural Address Delivered by President Bayard Dodge at the American University of Beirut. June 28, 1923, p. 7.
47 Courses in Religion begin to appear in the AUB Catalogues as of 1919-20.
48 As of 1936-37, the course offerings of the Near East School of Theology start to be included in the AUB Catalogues under “Religion” courses in the Faculty of Arts and Sciences. Later, in the 1940s and up until the early 1960s, there is a joint program between AUB and NEST called the “Combined Course in Theology and Arts” which involves taking courses from NEST and the School of Arts and Sciences.
49 Apparently, the “Alternative Services” were not very popular. Penrose, That They May Have Life, p. 294, notes that in 1938-39, only 13 students opted for them.
50 Penrose, That They May Have Life, p. 297.
51 SPC Catalogue 1908-09.
52 A statement attributed to L. Abbot. I quote it from J. Marsden, The Soul of the American University, p. 248.
53 The AUB Catalogue of 1963-64 (p. 19) informs Protestants that they can go to the University Christian Center (on Makhoul Street), Catholics to the Newman Center (Makhoul Street), Orthodox to the Orthodox Youth Center; and Muslims to the Islamic Center of Beirut.
54 AUB Catalogue 1965-66, p. 11.
55 J. Munro, A Mutual Concern, p. 98.

*The University and the Man of Tomorrow*. The Centennial Lectures. General Editor Fuad Sarruf. (Beirut: AUB, 1967)

The last mention of an opening Invocation at Commencement is in the printed program of 1981.

The truth is that education was an essential component of the Protestant missionary activity, for, to be a Protestant or to see the Christian truth in the Protestant way, one had to be able to read the Bible. The whole Protestant missionary enterprise depended on the ability to read and understand texts, specifically, those of Holy Scripture.


Ibid., p. 20.


Ibid., pp. 347-348; 173.

Ibid., p. 410.


Benne, *Quality with Soul*, p. 4

Ibid.


Marsden, *The Soul of the American University*, p.43.


Ibid., p. 3.

John Waterbury, “Convocation Address” delivered on October 6, 1999, p. 4.
Bibliography


3. *Annual Reports to the Board of Managers of the SPC 1866-67 ---1901-02*


19. Pelikan, Jaroslav, *The Idea of the University and Theology*


