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Religious Diversity at Brandeis

Introduction

As the United States becomes more and more religiously diverse, many institutions change the rules, regulations, and the infrastructure of their environments to try and accommodate a wider range of religions. However, these changes are often times not enough to truly incorporate different religions. Many institutions have claimed that they have done what is necessary to make this goal happen, but it usually makes a superficially diverse atmosphere that on the surface is inviting towards different religions. However, when these are fully analyzed, the actual environment is full of bias and advantages for a specific religion. This discussion is an important one to bring to Brandeis University. The school has proclaimed itself to be an environment where all people, regardless of their religion, can feel comfortable and welcomed. It also boasts an education that accommodates and teaches a wide range of perspectives. These claims are emphasized and they are important characteristics when it comes to the identity of Brandeis and the students and faculty here. However, just like the institutions that have made these assertions in the past, there are still problems at Brandeis when it comes to religious diversity. By analyzing the courses on religion and the religious clubs at Brandeis in 1951, 1985, and 2015, I demonstrate that although the number of religious courses and clubs has increased, the actual variety of religions that are discussed in those courses and clubs has not become significantly more diverse. I argue that even though Brandeis promises an all-encompassing religious environment, it does not fulfill that promise and may even be trying to preserve its

Jewish roots by increasing attention to Judaism as the student body becomes more religiously diverse.

Motives

The main idea for this essay came about when I started hearing complaints from people at Brandeis minoring in Religious Studies. One of the complaints was that it was extremely difficult for people to schedule out their classes because the selection of courses for the minor was limited; not only were there very few religious courses outside of the Near Eastern and Judaic Studies program, but those limited amount of courses also were not offered every semester. People expressed that it was virtually impossible to minor in Religious Studies without going through a heavily Jewish-centered curriculum.

This made me rethink the goals and image of Brandeis as a university; Brandeis has always emphasized its value on an open-minded academic setting and looking at things from various perspectives. On the Religious Studies page of the Brandeis website, it describes how “Brandeis, with its commitment to ethical responsibility, and the wide range of religious and ethnic backgrounds represented in its student body, provides a unique context for examining religion with open-minded curiosity and sympathetic understanding” (“Religious Studies Program”). It even goes on to say that “this approach exposes students to several scholarly and pedagogical perspectives in a variety of religious phenomena” (“Religious Studies Program”). Even with these goals and general attitudes towards religion in the university, it did not seem like Brandeis was fully providing the resources for students to achieve these goals.

As a student I also realized that this extended beyond just the Religious Studies program; the general campus in my opinion has not been doing well in integrating the different religions

that make up the campus. Most of the campus activities seem to be done by Jewish affiliated clubs and so many of the students here have taken Jewish related courses but have not taken courses on any other types of religions. However, there did not seem to be much dialogue on this issue.

These ideas started to become more organized and fleshed out when I started reading about religious spaces in my “Sociology of Religion” course. The Army’s religious spaces reminded me of Brandeis; it was observed that “While the military guidelines make clear the importance of welcoming diverse religious traditions, the existence of formal codes allows us to see more clearly who may be being implicitly excluded from these "neutral" and "diverse" spaces” (Cadge, Friedman, Johnson, Clendenen 10). This was very similar to what I saw in the Religious Studies curriculum. Although it set goals to give a very wide range of religious perspectives to students, the fact that courses based on Judaism were almost unavoidable implicitly focused the Religious Studies program into a primarily Jewish lens. The Army also made many additions to the religious spaces available. However, it seemed like the motives behind making those changes were just to fulfill requirements and keep the other religions satisfied. I started to wonder whether or not Brandeis was doing the same thing; was it just creating a superficial religious diversity to have a good image by boasting its religious diversity while not actually integrating the various religions on campus? This question led me to research whether or not Brandeis has given the proper resources needed in terms of the curriculum and student activities to provide a truly religiously accommodating environment.

Methods

As I started to do my research, I realized that I wanted to do a comparative study between religious diversity from the founding of the school to the more recent school years. After

considering the fact that it would be impossible to look at every year, I narrowed down the research to the 1950 to 1951, 1984 to 1985, and 2014 to 2015 school years because there was around a thirty year gap between them.

In order to look at the religious diversity of the curriculum, I looked at the course catalogs of each of the school years in the archives as well as the course catalogs on the school's website for the 2014 to 2015 school year. They provided not only the course names, but also a description of the courses which helped me decide if the course was actually a religious course or not. Although each course was determined on a case by case basis, the general way that I went about picking out religious courses was seeing if the course taught the religion's ideologies and taught the students about thinking in the religion's perspective and lens. For example, "The Jewish Contribution to Modern Western Literature" course was considered as a Jewish course in the 1950 to 1951 school year because it taught students the Jewish ideologies that come from traditional Jewish texts and culture. It also taught how those ideologies were transplanted into Western literature and how students could find these references themselves by applying the Jewish lens on Western literature.

I thought that observing the courses of the school would give a good idea on what religious diversity actually looks like at Brandeis. It would specifically show the structure of the curriculum, showing where Brandeis' focus was throughout the school years in terms of teaching religion through courses. This would help in the discussion of religious diversity at Brandeis because it showed the trends of how the administration of the school prioritized or neglected religious pluralism for the students in terms of courses offered.

Choosing religious clubs was similar to choosing religious courses. I looked at the student-run club section in the yearbooks (the 1950 to 1951 school year had a handbook instead of a yearbook) and also the club list on the Brandeis website and looked at their titles and descriptions in order to determine if they taught the religious ideologies and ways of thinking. All of the clubs listed under the “Religious Activities” section were considered religious as they held religious services and events and were explicitly religious. I also had to take a look at the other clubs to see if they had enough religious influence to be considered a religious club. For example, the “Brandeis Israel Public Affairs Committee” was listed as a political activism club and the name was not explicitly Jewish. However, there was a lot of Jewish influence in it when looking at the club descriptions and the way the club viewed things; it introduced and advanced Judaism and used then Jewish lens in the way they broke down and analyzed political events in order to create a pro-Israeli environment on campus. Clubs like this were considered “religious” because they taught the values of a religion and taught their members on how to think in terms of those values.

I chose clubs as another important way of gauging religious diversity on campus because they reflected the student body’s focus on religion. Clubs are an integral part of the life of a student on campus; they find fellow peers that advocate for the same interest as well as a group that they feel welcome in to share their points of views and ideas. Trying to see religious diversity through the lens of student-run clubs would show if students of varying religious backgrounds had these peer-groups that they could feel comfortable in sharing their religion with, which would not only make them feel welcomed academically, but also socially on campus.

Data on Curriculum

When looking at the course catalogs from the three different school years, there were specific trends that demonstrated what the diversity of religious courses really looked like. Below is a table categorizing religious courses in all three years into the categories of Judaism, Christianity, Islam, multiple and “Other”. The “Other” category represents the courses that discussed religions besides Judaism, Christianity, and Islam while the “multiple” category represents the courses that covered more than one religion. One thing to note is that a course could only be put under one category; for example, if a course talked about Judaism while also talking about other religions, it would be categorized under the “Multiple” category only.

Comparing Religious Courses Between the 1950-1951, 1984-1985, and 2014-2015 School Years

Year (Total Number of Religious Courses)	Judaism	Christianity	Islam	Multiple	Other
1950-1951 (12)	7 (58.3%)	1 (8.3%)	1 (8.3%)	3 (25%)	0 (0%)
1984-1985 (69)	54 (78.3%)	2 (2.9%)	6 (8.7%)	7 (10.1%)	0 (0%)
2014-2015 (73)	48 (65.8%)	1 (1.4%)	9 (12.3%)	12 (16.4%)	3 (4.1%)

*The numbers in parenthesis in each category show what percentage of the total amount of religious courses each category takes up in each year.

When looking at the chart, the 1950 to 1951 school year has the least Judaism focused curriculum between the three years that were looked at. Even though the Jewish specific courses made up most of the religious curriculum consisting of 12 courses, there was still a substantial percentage of other courses, especially in the “multiple” category. However, when taking a closer look at the course descriptions of each of the courses on multiple religions, I observed that all of the courses talked about religion in terms of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam and did not mention any other types of religions (*General Catalogue of Brandeis University, 1951*). I also

observed that three of the Judaism focused courses came from the Hebrew program and that another Jewish course came from the Comparative Literature program. The rest of the religious courses for this school year came from the Social Science program, including courses in sociology and philosophy.

There was a large increase in courses on religion in general from the 1950 to 1951 school year to the 1984 to 1985 school year. There was a total of 91 courses relating to religion in the 1984 to 1985 school year. An overwhelming majority of those courses were based on Judaism and the percentages of Christianity and Islam courses go down and so do the courses that teach multiple religions. However, in the “Multiple” category, I observed that the classes started to talk about and focus on a wider range of religions. For example, there was a class called “Comparative Religion” which taught Buddhism as one of the points of view in the class and another class called “Ancient Egyptian Religion” that had a focus on polytheistic religions in ancient Egypt. The other courses in this category included: “Ethnicity and Religion in the U.S”, “Judaism and Christianity in the First Centuries”, “Modern Jewish-Christian Religious Thought”, “Sociology of Religion”, and “Philosophy of Religion” (*Brandeis University Bulletin*, 1984).

This school year had a much wider variety of programs compared to the 1950 to 1951 school year. An interesting trend was that 52 of the Jewish courses came from the Near Eastern and Judaic Studies program. The Near Eastern and Judaic Studies courses overlapped with a lot of requirements for other majors like Philosophy, Politics, Sociology, History, and Islamic and Middle Eastern Studies. The courses were also cross listed often under programs like Anthropology and American Studies (*Brandeis University Bulletin*, 1984).

In the 2014-2015 school year, the percentage of Jewish courses becomes lower but it is still a majority. The Islam, “multiple”, and “Other” category reach their highest numbers in this year. However, only one of the “multiple” category courses does not have Judaism in the course description. It is “Chinese Religion and Thought” and it focuses mainly on Confucianism and Taoism (“Class Search”). The rest have Judaism integrated into them, usually accompanied with Islam and Christianity. These courses include: “Between Conflict and Cooperation: Muslims, Christians, and Jews in Medieval Spain”, “Ancient Near Eastern Religion and Mythology”, “Islam and Religious Diversity”, “Idea of God”, “Introduction to World Religions”, “Sociology of Religion”, “Evangelical Christians and the Jewish State”, “Religion in American Life”, “Religion and Development”, “Towards Religious Pluralism”, “Religion, Ethnicity, and Nationalism” (“Class Search”).

41 of the Jewish courses come from the Near Eastern and Judaic Studies department. These courses on Judaism are often cross-listed under other departments and also fulfill a range of requirements for programs like Film, University Writing Seminar, Islamic and Middle Eastern Studies, Fine Arts, Philosophy, Sociology, American Studies, Anthropology, and History (“Class Search”). This is also the only school year out of the three to have courses in the Other category. Two of them, “Buddhist Art” under the Fine Arts department and “Buddha and His Teachings” under the Philosophy department, cover Buddhism. The other course called “Introduction to Hinduism” in the South Asian Studies department covers Hinduism (“Class Search”).

Data on Student Activism

The student run clubs showed very similar trends compared to the curriculum. The data on clubs will be split up into three categories: Jewish, Christian, and Other. The “Other” category will again represent any club affiliated with a religion that is not Jewish or Christian. The chart

below shows the data on clubs for the same three school years that the data on curriculum was based on.

Comparing Religious Clubs Between the 1950-1951, 1984-1985, and 2014-2015 School Years

Year (Total number of religious clubs)	Jewish	Christian	Other
1950-1951 (1)	1 (100%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
1984-1985 (6)	3 (60%)	2 (40%)	0 (0%)
2014-2015 (24)	15 (62.5%)	4 (16.7%)	5 (20.8%)

*The numbers in parenthesis in each category show what percentage of the total amount of religious clubs on campus each category takes up in each year.

In the 1950-1951 school year, there were only 11 official clubs on campus which consequently showed a low number of religious clubs. There was only one, and that club was “The Hillel Society”. It was a club that aimed “to stimulate interest in the values of the Jewish heritage...impart knowledge of the Jewish historical past” (*University Handbook*, 1951). All of the other clubs were based on student council or academic programs.

In the 1984 to 1985 school year the total amount of clubs was increased to 72 but the total number of religious clubs stayed low. The explicitly religious clubs were either Jewish or Christian. The Jewish clubs were named “The Hillel Society”, “Brandeis Zionist Alliance” and “Student Coalition for Soviet Jewry” and the Christian clubs were called “Brandeis Gospel Choir” and “Catholic Student Organization” (*Brandeis University Yearbook*, 1985). Like the 1950 to 1951 school year, there was no mention of any other religions in clubs. An interesting observation that was made while looking at this school year’s clubs was that the “Student Union Judiciary” club mentioned Judaism in it. It was not an explicitly religious and mostly had to do with the student council, so it was not counted as a religious club. However, in its description it

said that it was “characterized by a pluralistic Jewish atmosphere and individual expression of Jewish commitment” (*Brandeis University Yearbook*, 1985). The actual religious clubs did not have anything surprising about them; they mostly just provided services and events based on their respective religions and gave students resources to practice their religion when they needed to.

The only school year out of the three observed to have religious clubs in the “Other” category is the 2014 to 2015 school year. There was a huge increase in this category compared to the other two years; the “Other” clubs made up more than a fifth of all religious clubs. They were listed as: “Common Ground”, “Namaskar”, “Sangha Meditation Club”, “Brandeis Interfaith Group” and “Brandeis Muslim Students Association”. There was also a substantial amount of Christian clubs. They are: “Asian Baptist Student Koinonia”, “Catholic Student Organization”, “Cru Brandeis Christian Fellowship” and “Church Choir” (*Brandeis University Yearbook*, 2015). However, the Jewish clubs’ percentage still remained the majority and actually increased slightly from the 1984 to 1985 school year.

As the club descriptions were looked at, I also noticed that there was a distinguishing characteristic amongst the clubs in the “Jewish” category that the other categories did not have. Unlike the “Christian” and “Other” clubs that were geared towards providing religious services and events like most conventional religious clubs, the Jewish clubs preserved and advanced the religious through various and more “secular” means. The “Ba’ Note” and “Manginah” acapella groups were a good example; they introduced traditional Hebrew songs, songs by American Jewish songwriters, and Jewish prayers as a Jewish acapella group (*Brandeis University Yearbook*, 2015). This was also the case for some political clubs like the “Brandeis Israel Public

Affairs Committee”, where students wanted to create a pro-Israel environment on campus by examining the political issues in Israel through the Jewish lens while advancing Judaism (“Clubs and Organizations”).

Analysis

When looking at the trends in the data for the curriculum, it can be seen that the religious courses offered at Brandeis has always been and still is overwhelmingly Jewish. The lowest percentage of Jewish courses can be seen in the 1950 to 1951 school year. However, the Jewish courses still made up more than half of the religious courses that were offered that year, and Judaism was also seen in all of the courses that taught multiple religious courses. The fact that the least “Jewish” school year in terms of classes at Brandeis still had a majority of Jewish courses is telling of how much Jewish influence is in the curriculum.

We see a huge increase in the percentage of Jewish courses from the 1950 to 1951 school year to the 1984 to 1985 school year; this can mostly be explained by the fact that the amount of religious courses in general increased and that unlike the 1950 to 1951 school year, there was a program specifically for these religious courses in 1985. It should also be noted that most of the courses that taught about multiple religions also included Judaism. Not only were the religious courses mostly Jewish, but these Jewish courses also fulfilled requirements for a variety of the majors mentioned in the data section at Brandeis. This suggests that Brandeis wanted to integrate the Jewish culture to a wide range of students of different majors, even if their field of study did not necessarily have to do with religion. The push of Jewish influence in the 1984 to 1985 curriculum was not only prevalent through numbers, but also through the wide availability and universal incentive of fulfilling major requirements through the Jewish based courses.

From the data, it may be easy to assume that there was actually a substantial increase in diversity from the 1984 to 1985 school year to the 2014 to 2015 school year, especially with the emergence of new religions in courses and the decrease of Jewish courses. However, careful analysis of the course descriptions tells a different story. The Jewish classes at Brandeis are very well integrated into the actual academic culture; there are Judaism based classes on film, fine art, music, politics, and philosophy that go beyond the Near Eastern and Judaic Studies program (“Class Search”). Not only do these courses count towards several different major requirements, but the actual content of the courses vary greatly and teach many different sects of Judaism while teaching students how to use the Jewish lens in a wide range of situations and topics.

On the other hand, the courses in the “Other” category were very much introductory courses. For example, the “Introduction to Hinduism” course taught students vocabulary and the laws of Hinduism (“Class Search”). There was no mention of a political or sociological aspect of the class and from the syllabi, it seemed like these courses only covered the basics of the religion. My point here is not to undermine or devalue any of the lessons taught in these courses, but it is to show the difference in depth between them and the Jewish courses offered at Brandeis. These courses also seemed to only be needed in their specific programs and did not overlap with any other majors. These “Other” religions were also not included in the discussions of the “Multiple category” very often; the only classes that specifically talked about going in depth about both Buddhism and Hinduism were the “Islam and Religious Diversity” and “Religion, Ethnicity, and Nationalism” classes , and even then the focus was more on Islam, Judaism, and Christianity (“Class Search”). Even though Brandeis may have slightly increased the types of religions learned in courses, it is very clear that the university’s focus is on teaching Judaism through the religious curriculum.

I also argue that the fact that the very existence of programs like the Near Eastern Judaic Studies program shows how Jewish focused the curriculum is. Arguments can be made that Brandeis' Islamic and Middle Eastern Studies is a counter example to this, but many of the classes in that curriculum also relate to Judaism in some way, especially in classes that talk about the politics in the Middle East. Even the program that was explicitly made to educate the students about Islam has a strong Jewish influence in it. At Brandeis there are no other programs that are geared towards teaching about a single religion. This again points at the fact that Brandeis has a clear emphasis on Judaism when it comes to religious courses offered at the school.

Another important source of religion at Brandeis is the group of student run religious clubs. For the religious clubs during the 1950 to 1951 school year, we only see one, and that is the "The Hillel Society" (*University Handbook*, 1951). It would be impossible to make a clear argument based on just this data as the University's club life was not fully developed at this point in time which is pointed out by the fact that there were only 11 student run clubs in total. However, the fact that the first religious club that was made on campus was a Jewish one does add to the argument that Brandeis is heavily Jewish focused.

There is also not that much growth in religious clubs in the 1984 to 1985 school year. However, we see that Christian clubs have been made and that the percentage of Jewish clubs has actually decreased. Still, it is hard to consider this as a diverse and all-encompassing club environment when two religions make up all of the religious clubs on campus. This is especially apparent when one realizes that the Jewish influence is still prevalent in other secular clubs like the "Student Union Judiciary" club discussed in the data section. Just like the 1950 to 1951

school year, the campus' religious climate in terms of the clubs available was still not significantly diverse enough to accommodate the student body in the 1984 to 1985 school year.

In the 2014 to 2015 school year we actually see a 2.5% increase in the percentage of Jewish clubs compared to the 1984 to 1985 school year. However, there is also a 20.8% increase in the percentage of "Other" religious clubs. When looking at just the numbers, it may seem like the new diversity in the club culture may be enough to overlook the fact that there was a slight increase in the percentage of Jewish clubs. However, when taking a closer look at the integration of the Jewish clubs in student life, it is evident that the emphasis is still on the Jewish religion. The trend of how varied Jewish clubs are and how well assimilated they are in the more secular part of clubs is similar to the trend of the curriculum; the Jewish point of view is being used for more than just religious worship and events, it is being used for things like art, music, and politics. There are no other religions that are incorporated into these types of clubs besides a "Church Choir" club and they usually only perform during church events. Although the actual number of Jewish clubs may not seem overwhelming, the Jewish presence in the club life as a whole on campus is prevalent compared to the other types of religious because they are integrated into a wider range of student activities.

The fact that there is a percentage increase at all also shows how strong the Jewish influence is on religious clubs at Brandeis. The university becomes increasingly diverse in terms of race and religion as the years go on, so it would be natural to assume that the amount of Jewish clubs would go down as the percentage of Jewish students gets smaller. This is not the case for Brandeis, and I argue that this increase of Jewish clubs is a counter to the diversity of the increasing diversity of the school. Although there is no clear way of gathering data to specifically

prove this argument, it is still valid. When looking at the descriptions of the Jewish clubs, they usually talk about preserving and advancing the Jewish religion (“Clubs and Organizations”). There would not be a need to save the religion if there was no threat in the conservation of its members. The religious diversity can be seen as that “threat”. More research would be needed to support this point; surveys or interviews with students based on how difficult they find it is to keep their religion traditions on campus and how they feel about the other religious clubs on campus would be helpful.

Conclusion

Based on the trends shown in the religious courses and clubs offered throughout the years at Brandeis University, it can be concluded that Brandeis has not fulfilled its promise of a fully religiously diverse and all-encompassing campus. The numbers of religious courses that aren’t Jewish have gone up, but the overwhelming majority of religious courses are still based on Judaism. In addition to that fact, the other religious courses provide a minimal and basic understanding of the other religions compared to the courses provided by the Near Eastern and Judaic Studies program where the Jewish courses cover several topics and are cross-listed under several different programs. The club trends also reveal that the majority of religious clubs on campus has always been and still is Jewish. Just like what was seen in the religious courses, the Jewish clubs also extended to different fields like politics and music while most of the other religious clubs only provided religious services and events.

The data contradict the claims that Brandeis University make in its description of the Religious Studies program and also the campus environment as a whole. However, it seems that both the student body and the administration has grown comfortable with the superficial religious “inclusiveness” that exists in the university; even with a religiously diverse student

body, nothing is actually being done to bring these religions together. There is almost nothing that is being done by the students and the administration in bringing all of the other religions on campus into the discussion. The university is still heavily focused on Judaism.

This essay is in no way trying to undermine or blame a specific group or religion in the university. I acknowledge the fact that Brandeis University was founded in a Jewish context and is continually funded by many Jewish donors. It is only natural that there is a strong Jewish tradition on campus and also classes on Jewish studies. However, I am trying to start a discussion as to what it means that Brandeis has the carefully structured Near Eastern and Judaic Studies program with so much administrative support and funding while there are very few courses for other religions and a scattered and less defined Religious Studies program. What does it mean that most of the religious clubs on campus are Jewish and that the Jewish clubs are so well integrated into student life on campus? Why is there such a small amount of other religious clubs on campus and why are they not nearly as “advertised” as the Jewish ones? What does this say about the religious climate of the university?

These questions must be discussed in order to make the campus an actually religiously diverse and fully encompassing environment. This is especially true with the increasing religious diversity of the campus; with an influx of international students, especially from China, Brandeis is becoming less Jewish in student population and more religiously diverse. It is the university’s job to provide these students with the same resources that the Jewish students have. As of now, it is both intimidating and difficult for people of the other religions at Brandeis to find the proper means to worship and practice their religion, which is not a religiously egalitarian environment at all.

In order to remedy these problems, I suggest shifting the focus in both the curriculum and clubs from a Jewish focused lens to a more religiously pluralistic one. This could include doing things like making religious studies courses that take a more diverse approach by teaching about religions beyond the major ones like Christianity, Judaism, and Islam and making some of them mandatory for all undergraduate students. This will not only make students feel like their religion has more of a voice in the curriculum, but it will also give students the tools and knowledge to better interact with students of other religions. This will create an academic environment where a variety of religions can be included in conversation. I also think that there needs to be serious administrative work done on the Religious Studies department; this program seems to have been made by the university just to say that it exists. The university needs professional teachers of different religions in this program to offer not only a more diverse, but also a more extensive and in-depth experience for those who want to study religion at Brandeis. Only then can the program be more structured and actually provide the courses that the university claims it provides on the website.

I also suggest expanding the variety of religious clubs on campus. There are still many religions that do not have their own religious clubs on campus which can make it extremely difficult for students to practice their religion if there is no place of worship for their particular religion around the area. The religious clubs that are not Jewish also need to be focused on more; there have been complaints about students not realizing that certain religious clubs and spaces existed on campus due to the lack of advertisement for the clubs and the lack of maintenance on things like web pages. There is also a lack of full-time chaplaincy for all of the religions except Judaism, which also makes it hard for the other religious clubs to form and maintain their clubs and organizations.

I understand that these changes will take a substantial amount of time and effort from both the administration and the students. However, as long as the dialogue continues about this process and the questions and problems presented by the data of this essay are constantly brought up, there is hope that Brandeis University will fulfill its promise of a truly religiously diverse and inclusive campus.

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