

## The Pepperdine Table: Reflections on the University's Christian Identity

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When asking what makes a university Christian, we should start by acknowledging that there is no blueprint or one-size-fits-all answer. There are, in fact, multiple ways for communities to embody a Christian identity which highlights a central aspect of the faith itself: *faithfulness is always incarnational*. Even while guided by a universal vision of faith, hope, and love, we expect communities in different contexts to reflect those differences. Christian practices and pedagogies will look very different in the Egyptian desert of the fifth century than in twenty-first century Cairo, or between rural Uganda and urban China, or between a Midwestern Catholic university and a Bible-belt Protestant college, or among institutions affiliated with Churches of Christ in West Texas, Metro Detroit, and Southern California. The same holds true in the history of a single institution such as Pepperdine in 1940, 1980, and 2020.

The big question for us today, therefore, is not, "What is a Christian university?" in some abstract standardized sense, but rather, "What *kind* of Christian university is Pepperdine called to be at *this* time and in *this* place?"<sup>1</sup> That question invites us to explore what makes Pepperdine distinctive in light of its founding vision and changing contexts.

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In 1937, George Pepperdine cast a vision for an institution marked by both rigorous academics and Christian commitments. Now in its ninth decade, Pepperdine clearly has been successful in that quest. On one hand, Pepperdine has a pervasive Christian ethos and institutional identity framed by an affirmation statement that starts,

*As a Christian University Pepperdine affirms: That God is...That God is revealed uniquely in Christ...That the educational process may not, with impunity, be divorced from the divine process.*<sup>2</sup>

On the other hand, Pepperdine's reputation for rigorous academics is evidenced by the fact that *US News & World Report* ranks it higher than any other Protestant-affiliated institution in the nation.<sup>3</sup> But while Pepperdine's affirmations are clear and accomplishments remarkable, that does not necessarily reflect distinctiveness. After all, of the approximately 900 religious institutions of higher learning in the U.S., it would be difficult to find one that does *not* aspire to some blend of faith and rigor, and many achieve that aim with excellence. In other words, Pepperdine's "quest for distinction" requires more than a mere mix of Christian identity and favorable rankings in the national pecking order.

So what, if anything, is distinctive about Pepperdine's commitment to faith and rigor? A good candidate is what we can call Pepperdine's "open-table experiment."<sup>4</sup> The open-table metaphor has been used in recent years by Provost Rick Marrs in a 2014 White Paper on Pepperdine's historical identity, by President Andrew K. Benton in his *2016 President's Report*, "The Open Table," and by President James A. Gash's in his 2019 inaugural address. The metaphor draws on Christian themes of the "Lord's Table" with its open ecumenism as well as the domestic table as the site of human solidarity and Christian hospitality. In what follows, I explore the metaphor and Pepperdine's quest for distinction by addressing two questions: What is "open" about Pepperdine's open-table? And how is the "table" metaphor best imagined and understood?

### **The "Open" Table**

Pepperdine's open-table experiment reflects a peculiar blend of non-denominational and non-creedal commitments inherent to the university's original framing. That blend creates what can be called a "faith-framed latitude" that is more supple than often found at institutions with denominational or creedal gatekeeping policies. As a result, Pepperdine has a Christian framing that is, in many ways, typical of religiously conservative institutions, while simultaneously featuring diversities that are not typical at such institutions.

Consider student experience. Some Christian colleges require a signed statement of faith for students to enroll. While such institutions may celebrate other kinds of diversity (i.e., racial, ethnic, cultural etc.), the signed statement guarantees a level of religious homogeneity in the student body and a more uniform kind of religious experience. Pepperdine, however, is among the numerous faith-based institutions that do not have such requirements and thus enrolls students from many different religious backgrounds.<sup>5</sup> While Pepperdine has a Christian-majority student body, global diversities are not merely realities "out there" but are part of the fabric of the student experience itself. In other words, Pepperdine offers an educational experience that is both religiously diverse and framed by Christian faith. So while life at Pepperdine features various spiritual-life initiatives, university-sponsored worship and prayer services, required religion courses, and other features common to the Christian college experience, it also has a Muslim Student Association, a Jewish Club, a chapter of the Interfaith Youth Core (IFYC), the Glazer Institute for Jewish Studies, a part-time rabbi in residence, student-led celebrations of Holi, a monthly Mass in the chapel for Catholics, and other features not as typical at conservative Protestant colleges.<sup>6</sup>

As a result, embracing and navigating religious diversity is part of the Pepperdine student experience especially for its residential programs. Non-Christian students learn to navigate a Christian-majority culture. Conservative Christians learn to engage diversities of religion, worldview, and lifestyle. Pepperdine's large Roman Catholic population negotiates a pervasively Protestant ethos. Mainline Protestant students navigate a "low church" culture. And significantly, students from Pepperdine's own heritage of Churches of Christ experience both religious familiarity and significant minority status.<sup>7</sup>

Similar dynamics play out among the faculty and staff. In fact, the open-table latitude is clearly represented in employee and especially faculty hiring practices. Unlike many Christian universities, Pepperdine does not require faculty to sign or consent to a faith statement or demonstrate specific denominational allegiances. In fact, while Pepperdine's institutional faith affirmations are typical of many Christian institutions, the lack of confessional or creedal requirements for faculty hiring renders the university ineligible for full membership in the Council for Christian Colleges and Universities (CCCU).<sup>8</sup> As with student enrollment, Pepperdine's religious identity draws a Christian-majority faculty and staff, but its open-table latitude draws from the full spectrum of Christian traditions as well as a multitude of non-Christian traditions. As a result, I have colleagues from Pepperdine's various schools who identify as Church of Christ, non-denominational, Evangelical, Mainline Protestant, African Methodist Episcopal, Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, Ethiopian Orthodox, Adventist, Mormon, Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist, Sikh, Zoroastrian, unaffiliated, and agnostic, among others.

Some fear that Pepperdine's non-creedal openness has been too open and that the resulting pluralism represents "mission-drift." Does the openness need to be closed, limited, or more closely monitored? Others, myself included, consider religious diversity among students, staff, and faculty to signal part of Pepperdine's distinctiveness. But it also raises important questions about how the university's Christian identity is understood and maintained. There is much more to say about that than space allows, but here I offer two brief starting reflections.

First, starting with George Pepperdine himself, the university's most astute leaders have been clear that Pepperdine is not a church. The university's Christian identity and educational mission must be imagined and communicated differently from the identity and mission of a congregation, denomination, or campus ministry.<sup>9</sup> When that distinction is blurred, Pepperdine's mission suffers.

Second, the non-creedal, open-table experiment implies that there are different ways to support Pepperdine's Christian identity.<sup>10</sup> On one hand, that identity relies on ecumenically-minded Christian faculty and staff who contribute to the Christian mission *directly* and *actively*. On the other hand, it also requires those who support the mission *generally* and *tacitly*, including some who might not personally endorse all the institutional faith affirmations. To be clear, I am claiming that non-Christian employees who are generally supportive of Pepperdine's Christian identity are indispensable to the university's religious and academic distinctiveness, not merely tolerated when circumstances make it necessary. Pepperdine would not be Pepperdine without them.

### **An Interlude on Churches of Christ**

How does all this reflect Pepperdine's relationship with its religious heritage (i.e., the Churches of Christ and the wider Stone-Campbell Movement)? While that relationship has always been complicated, the heritage continues to make an enduring imprint on institutional personality. That imprint includes the tradition's historical emphases on rationality, education, and

entrepreneurial American optimism, but here I briefly focus on a few points about its non-denominational, non-creedal impulse.

We can first highlight an ironic reversal of trends in recent years in higher education. In the past, when religious institutions severed ties with their church constituencies it was usually a sign of secularization, a moving away from the founding faith commitments. Today, increasingly, religious institutions sever or loosen ties to church structures for the opposite reason: to gain autonomy from restrictive denominational structures in order to revive and reimagine their Christian identities for a changing world.<sup>11</sup>

Not only does this reversal challenge classic understandings of secularization and demonstrate what Schmalzbauer and Mahoney call the “resilience of religion in American higher education,” it also highlights what is distinctive about Pepperdine’s situation.<sup>12</sup> From its founding, George Pepperdine insisted that his college was “church-affiliated” but not “church-controlled.” Significantly, that represented not a loosening of ties to Churches of Christ but a direct affirmation of those ties. One of the originating principles of the heritage – part of its DNA – from which Churches of Christ were formed in the mid-nineteenth century is the decentralized, non-denominational autonomy of congregations and their institutions. And while George Pepperdine couldn’t have foreseen the future, his principled insistence on these Church of Christ principles actually positions the university ahead of the curve in today’s increasingly post-denominational and religiously diverse world.

From another angle, because of the heritage contacts and commitments, the expectation in 1937 was that faculty and staff would be from Churches of Christ as was true at other heritage institutions at the time (and remains true for many today). Even so, the original roster of twenty-one faculty members included a Mennonite. This immediately set Pepperdine apart from other Church of Christ institutions and modeled a less sectarian side of the heritage.<sup>13</sup> Today, heritage commitments remain evident as there are still many faculty, staff, and students from heritage churches, and a heritage requirement for several key positions that offer intellectual and spiritual leadership.<sup>14</sup> But it is also true that the current diversity among faculty and staff, including religious pluralities, traces back to these heritage-framed open-table beginnings, even if the founders could not have imagined how it would play out over time in the context of Southern California and Pepperdine’s expanding international reputation.

Finally, it is important to acknowledge that Churches of Christ are in sharp numeric decline and the future of the movement is uncertain.<sup>15</sup> What are the implications of this for Pepperdine’s identity? Certainly, as Church of Christ representation continues to diminish, the university will lose valuable historical, cultural, and relational connections to its roots. But while demographic decline is inevitable, it would be tragic for Pepperdine to lose the distinctive non-creedal, faith-framed, open-table ideals that it inherited from the heritage.

### **The Open “Table”**

Metaphors are blunt tools. What they lack in precision, however, they make up in helping us imagine and communicate important ideas. So far, I have focused on what it means to say that Pepperdine's open-table is "open." Now I turn to the imagery of the "table" itself.

In recent years, I have had the opportunity to present the notion of Pepperdine's open-table to different audiences and have received a variety of responses and helpful critiques. For example, some critique the table metaphor because of its inherent insider/outsider framework which, they say, implies that some community members sit at the head of the table while others sit along the sides or at the foot. Even the otherwise inclusive notion of hospitality comes under critique because of its inherent host/guest hierarchy. A faculty colleague from another university who is Buddhist personalized this point for me. She noted that if she were hired at the "hospitable" Pepperdine I describe, she still would never be more than a visitor who pulls up a chair at someone else's table. In other words, because of her religious identity, she could not be a full stakeholder in the institution's mission.

This is an important point that deserves careful attention. One response is to note that hospitality is best understood as a form of reciprocity that assumes the agency of both host and guest, and often blurs the distinctions between the two.<sup>16</sup> But we might also adjust the metaphor by depicting the open-table as round so that everyone sits "equally" and there are no head-of-table privileges. Or consider the way Eboo Patel extends the metaphor to address social and religious pluralism on the national scale. Rather than imagining the United States as the proverbial "melting pot," Patel promotes the notion of a "potluck nation" in which different people bring their different cultural and religious "dishes," all contributing equally to a pluralistic feast at a big, round, American table.<sup>17</sup> Can we translate this and imagine Pepperdine as a "potluck university?" I will come back to that idea shortly, but first let me note a different kind of critique I have received with regard to the open-table picture.

While some find the host/guest framework too exclusive and hierarchical and prefer more open potluck-type images, others resist the open-table metaphor for opposite reasons. They feel that such pictures are at risk of promoting uncritical diversity, a kind of open-border paradigm that sacrifices distinct identity on the altars of political correctness and sentimental tolerance. Ostensibly, the concern here is not with diversity itself, but with shallow and misdirected forms of diversity.

With all this in mind, the interaction with my Buddhist colleague still raises the operative question for the Pepperdine experiment: Can a "religious other" (i.e., Muslim, Mormon, agnostic, Buddhist, etc.) be a full stakeholder in Pepperdine's mission? I answer that question with an unhesitating "yes" and, building on what I have argued already, I offer two additional reasons for this response, one drawn from personal experiences and one drawn from current Pepperdine realities.

First, I have been the "religious other" as both professor and student.<sup>18</sup> In the late 1990s, I taught philosophy at one of Uganda's primary Catholic seminaries for students training to be

priests. As a Protestant, there certainly was a sense in which I was a religious guest, but I also enthusiastically accepted the opportunity to contribute to the school's academic and religious mission. More recently, to enhance my own religious literacy, I enrolled as the only non-Muslim student at an Islamic graduate school that trains imams and Muslim chaplains. For three years, I was welcomed as a Jesus follower into a community that is defined, in part, by the denial of Jesus' Lordship. Without compromising themselves or requiring me to compromise myself, they welcomed me as a full contributing and, sometimes, contending guest at their Muslim-hosted open table.

Second, Pepperdine boasts many analogous examples among its students and employees. A few years ago, *The Jewish Standard* ran a feature story on Pepperdine law professor and Orthodox Jew, Michael Helfand. In the piece, the author wondered if Helfand felt out of place at a Christian university "where a 50-foot crucifix stands out at the campus's entrance."<sup>19</sup> For the record, Pepperdine's theme tower is 125-feet tall and features a cross, not a crucifix! Nevertheless, Helfand expressed solidarity with Pepperdine's values and said that he found enough resonance with its mission to feel at home both professionally and religiously. I would add that Prof. Helfand and colleagues like him contribute to Pepperdine's mission in ways I cannot. The institution would be poorer and less distinctive without them and without principled commitments that enable, and even prioritize, the hiring of future "Helfands."

How does all this help us think about the table metaphor? For one thing, there is a sense in which there is no such thing as a hostless table. There are no social or educational spaces that are purely neutral. Every institution, organization, and community is characterized by certain hosting identities, commitments, stories, and *teloi* (i.e., goals or purposes). Even round-table potlucks must be organized by someone and hosted somewhere. In fact, we might think of Patel's description of the U.S. as a "potluck nation" as not only a celebration of the valued contributions of diverse citizens, but also a celebration of the American vision that hosts the potluck and makes it possible in the first place. While Pepperdine's context is clearly different, a meaningful analogy can be drawn. On one hand, we can describe Pepperdine as a "potluck university" in the sense that it values and relies on diverse people who contribute, directly or tacitly, to the university's mission. On the other hand, we can describe Pepperdine's open-table as "hosted" by principled Christian commitments, as long as those commitments are not held captive by sectarian or mono-cultural visions of the Christian faith.

### **Conclusion**

In 2017, Sara Barton, who serves as University Chaplain (and also happens to be my wife!), spoke to a large gathering of incoming Seaver students and parents. In her presentation, she talked about Pepperdine as a place of Christ-centered faith that welcomes, respects, and invites the contributions of people from many different backgrounds and identities. While the event was a success and most of the crowd of several thousand people happily migrated to the next item on the day's agenda, two mothers approached Sara afterwards. Both were visibly upset.

The first mother was upset because of how overtly religious Sara's presentation was. She was now worried that she was dropping her son off at a rigid fundamentalist school where he would not be welcomed or respected, and his education would not be sufficiently liberal. We can speculate about how she missed the Christian themes that permeate Pepperdine's website and publications, or why she was surprised that a Chaplain sounded religious, or how she missed Sara's emphasis on Pepperdine's desire to embrace her son as he is. But before Sara had time to speculate about any of that, the second mother approached, equally upset. Unlike the first mother, however, she had brought her daughter to Pepperdine specifically because of its Christian identity, but felt that Sara's talk had betrayed that identity. When Sara asked why she felt that way, the woman asserted that Sara had not mentioned Jesus. Again, we can speculate on many things here especially since Sara had referred to faith and "Christ" multiple times in her presentation. But, for whatever reasons, that did not connect with the concerns of this mother illustrating how religious perspectives and language, even specific ways of referring to Jesus Christ, are often polarized in our nation.

Earlier I mentioned that Pepperdine's non-creedalism makes the university ineligible for full membership in the Council for Christian Colleges and Universities (CCCU). To add to the irony, despite being a top-ranked university, Pepperdine has also been turned down in several bids to establish a chapter of the national honor society, Phi Beta Kappa, specifically because of the university's faith affirmations.<sup>20</sup> As was true with the two mothers, it seems that Pepperdine is too religious for some in the secular academy and too open for some in Christian academy! And yet, as I have been arguing, that is part of Pepperdine's secret sauce: a faith-framed latitude and open-table distinctiveness.

George Pepperdine would not have been able to imagine the world of the twenty-first century. Nevertheless, he had the wisdom and foresight to frame the Pepperdine vision in a way that is both principled and contextually flexible. Today, that vision enables Pepperdine to be a top-tier university that is academically rigorous, capaciously Christian, rooted in its heritage, and radically hospitable. It is a vision that requires astute leadership, community buy-in, nuanced messaging, and fervent prayer. When we succeed, not only do we embody what is most distinctive about Pepperdine in this time and at this place, we also honor the long range vision of our founder.

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<sup>1</sup> See David Cunningham, "Time and Place; Why Vocation is Crucial to Undergraduate Education Today," in *At This Time and In This Place: Vocation and Higher Education*, ed. David Cunningham (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015); also David Cunningham, "Colleges Have Callings, Too: Vocational Reflection at the Institutional Level," in *Vocation Across the Academy: A New Vocabulary for Higher Education*, ed. David Cunningham (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 249-271.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.pepperdine.edu/about/our-story/mission-vision/>

<sup>3</sup> Pepperdine ranked #50 in “National Universities,” *U.S. News and World Report* (2019), <https://www.usnews.com/best-colleges/pepperdine-university-1264>.

<sup>4</sup> In addition to the primary examples offered here, see the following interview in the Pepperdine Magazine showing the way I have used the open-table metaphor for defining the work of the Center for Faith and Learning. “Setting the Open Table” (April 24, 2017). <https://www.pepperdine.edu/magazine/2017/04/setting-open-table/>

<sup>5</sup> About 75 percent of Pepperdine students identify as Christian. See “Fall Enrollment Census,” *Institutional Research* (2019), [https://www.pepperdine.edu/oie/institutional-research/Ostudent\\_fall\\_semester\\_enrollment\\_census.htm](https://www.pepperdine.edu/oie/institutional-research/Ostudent_fall_semester_enrollment_census.htm). I am focusing on religious demographics here, but we could also address relevant gender, ethnic, political, and national diversities (which cannot be fully untangled from the religious). For one example, during its first few decades while still located in Los Angeles, Pepperdine received national recognition for its racial diversity. By 1969, 17 percent of the student body was African American which far exceeded other Church of Christ institutions and regional universities, such as UCLA, USC, and LMU. By 1972, that percentage was 40 percent but also reflected the fact that the LA campus had largely become a commuter campus for older, part-time, working students. All of that changed significantly when Pepperdine moved to Malibu, increased in cost and prestige, and became predominantly white. See Baird, *Quest for Distinction*, 151-152, 187-188, 267ff. Today, however, more than 50 percent of the student body is non-white. For outside indexes and assessments, see “Pepperdine Demographics: How Diverse Is It?” *College Factual*, <https://www.collegefactual.com/colleges/pepperdine-university/student-life/diversity/>.

<sup>6</sup> I can also mention groups like Crossroads for LGBTQ+ students which, while not a religious example, is relevant since issues related to gender identity and sexual orientation are often sensitive topics at religiously-affiliated institutions. It is also worth noting that the Muslim Student Association has struggled in recent years because of low numbers and participation, but the point here is that it is a formerly recognized entity that is available when needed or desired.

<sup>7</sup> In 2018, the Church of Christ populations were at 12 percent for Seaver College and 9 percent across all five Pepperdine schools, and they are dropping over time.

<sup>8</sup> Faculty interviews at Pepperdine typically ask candidates to describe their commitment and participation in faith communities, whether Christian or not, and to express at least general support for Pepperdine’s mission. Occasional attempts to implement more formal and specific measures have been actively rejected by university leaders based on heritage principles. See Baird, *Quest for Distinction*, 401-405.

<sup>9</sup> This is what is distinctive about Pepperdine’s *Vision for Spiritual Formation* document developed over several years by the University Spiritual Life Committee. While the vision is unapologetically Christian in its framing, it is clearly not the product of a church or a religiously homogenous institution. See “Vision for Spiritual Life: Spiritual Formation at Pepperdine University,” <https://www.pepperdine.edu/spiritual-life/vision.htm>.

<sup>10</sup> I draw here from a helpful discussion by sociologist Christian Smith about parallel dynamics at Notre Dame in *Building Catholic Higher Education* (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2014), 38-63.

<sup>11</sup> VanZanten discusses the various Baptist institutions — including, most prominently, Baylor — that have severed legal and financial ties to their state conventions while deepening and reimagining their Christian identities. See VanZanten, *Joining the Mission*, 10. See also *The Baylor Project: Taking Christian Higher Education to the Next Level*, eds. Barry G. Hankins and Donald D. Schmeltekopf (South Bend: St. Augustine’s Press, 2007). There are also institutions that seek resources from within their traditions in order to reimagine their mission for a changing world. See “Rooted and Open: The Common Calling of the Network of ELCA Colleges and Universities,” *Evangelical Lutheran Church in America* (January 4, 2018), [http://download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/Rooted\\_and\\_Open.pdf?\\_ga=2.256284559.527606236.1563828371-2127416611.1534523954](http://download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/Rooted_and_Open.pdf?_ga=2.256284559.527606236.1563828371-2127416611.1534523954)

<sup>12</sup> John Schmalzbauer and Kathleen A. Mahoney, *The Resilience of Religion in American Higher Education* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2018).

<sup>13</sup> From the start, the Stone/Campbell Movement displayed a tension between the principles of ecumenical unity and the quest for restoration. In terms of heritage institutions, most do not require signed faith statements from faculty, but many employ a heritage requirement (i.e., all faculty must be active members of a local Church of Christ congregation). Occasionally, formal policies have been enacted at Pepperdine, especially at Seaver College, to incentivize efforts to appoint and retain faculty from Churches of Christ. See Baird, *Quest for Distinction*, 22. And personal correspondence with Baird (December 7, 2019).

<sup>14</sup> Examples of leadership positions that require members of Churches of Christ include the “faith and heritage committee” on the Board of Regents, senior administrators such as the president and provost, the University Chaplain, leadership in the Office of Church Relations, and full-time members of the religion faculty.

<sup>15</sup> In the past twenty years, Churches of Christ in the U.S. have lost more than a quarter-million active members, or 15 percent of its overall population, and such trends do not seem to be slowing.



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<sup>16</sup> Christians even talk about making room in their hearts, being hospitable hosts, of Jesus, thus giving an example of a host submitting to the authority of the guest. For a nuanced treatment of Christian hospitality, see Christine D. Pohl, *Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999).

<sup>17</sup> Eboo Patel, *Out of Many Faiths: Religious Diversity and the American Promise* (Princeton University Press, 2018), 107-109.

<sup>18</sup> This paragraph refers to The Queen of Apostles Philosophy Centre in Jinja, Uganda, and Bayan Claremont Islamic Graduate School in Claremont, California.

<sup>19</sup> See Larry Yudelson, "An Orthodox Lawyer at a Christian Law School," *The Jewish Standard* (December 2015), <https://jewishstandard.timesofisrael.com/an-orthodox-lawyer-at-a-christian-law-school/>.

<sup>20</sup> I draw here on observations and reflections that Provost Rick Marrs has made in various settings.