



UNIVERSITY OF MARYLAND

GLENN L. MARTIN INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY
A. JAMES CLARK SCHOOL OF ENGINEERING

*Institute for Systems Research
Gemstone Program*

A. V. Williams Building (115)
College Park, Maryland 20742
301.405.6564 TEL 301.314.9920 FAX
<http://www.isr.umd.edu/gemstone/>

Christopher C. Davis
Professor of Electrical and Computer Engineering
(301)405-3637, FAX (301)314-9281
e-mail: davis@umd.edu

October 3, 2005

Professor Vincent Brannigan
Chair, Human Relations Committee
University Senate

Dear Vince,

I regularly serve as Faculty Marshall at Commencement ceremonies for the Clark School of Engineering, and over the years have attended a large number of University Commencements. A significant feature of these events, which in my view has always been inappropriate, is the religious benediction, or equivalent, given by a representative of a major or minor religion. The practice of religion, or not, is a fundamental right, but it should not be imposed on anybody at a secular, official University event. A public display of religious preference perhaps does not offend many at such events, but even so it has no place there. The University of Maryland is a public university, with a pluralistic, and diverse community, and should not be involved in the promotion of any religion. It is a fact that our current practice defers to certain religions, but ignores others. I have never attended a commencement where the "benediction" was given by a Wiccan, Druid, or Atheist. In fairness to all, the University should abandon the practice of inviting any religious representative to participate in any official University ceremony. I am sure that I would be supported in this by, for example, the American Civil Liberties Union, and Americans United for Separation of Church and State.

Let me enlarge on my feelings of discomfort about our current practices. I was raised as a Catholic and over the years I have come to appreciate more and more that religion is an intensely personal issue, not one that should be worn too openly on one's sleeve. Many of the world's religions do not accept pluralism: they believe that only their way is the right one. They also practice discrimination against groups in our society. I cite for example the non-acceptance of gays and lesbians by many religions, the open antagonism of extreme Islam to all other religions, and the subjugation of women that occurs in many major religions. To support the latter observation I cite the absence of any female priests in the Catholic Church, the lack of civil liberties afforded to women in much of the Islamic world, and the brutality of some aspects of Sharia law. Almost no organized religion is free from criticisms of this sort, and our society often condones dangerous religious zealotry. We have a President talking about "Crusades," imams preaching holy war, Hindus burning mosques, and the list goes on.

Members of the University community should absolutely be allowed to practice

their religions at appropriate venues, but these should not include official University events with a secular purpose. Recognitions of academic achievement, such as the completion of degree requirements, or the celebration of academic, teaching, or service honors at the Faculty and Staff Convocation should occur in a secular setting. Such achievements involve real, tangible accomplishments, and are separate from the business of religion, which involves faith.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Chris", written in black ink.

Christopher C. Davis
Professor