

## Abandoned, Pursued, or Safely Stowed?

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There is certainly no shortage of passionate opinions about what happens to the religious commitments of college students. Some religious conservatives allege that liberal professors undermine student faith, that college administrators permit conditions that foster sexual promiscuity and alcohol abuse, and that the result is a deliberate weakening of students' religious commitments. College professors and administrators respond that college is a time when students explore new possibilities and reflect critically on their new *adult* lives, and that any change in religious commitment is a result of these adults' own choices and individual learning processes. Left unstated, of course, is the opinion of many professors that traditional religious faiths are incompatible with liberal education, and the opinion of many religious conservatives that professors lead morally vacuous lives. This longstanding and deeply-rooted difference of opinion has undoubtedly helped to fuel the two-decade-plus expansion of religious college and university enrollments; that is, expansion at educational institutions that combine faith development with a liberal arts education.<sup>1</sup>

But popular recognition of religion's influence in America, especially after the 2004 election, has given rise to a new interpretation. Several observers, who previously ignored religion, now argue that the vast majority of American college students "report high levels of spiritual interest and involvement," that over half affirm "reducing pain and suffering in the world" as a life goal, that "nearly half" of American college students "are on a quest" to identify a spiritual purpose for their lives, and that spiritual traditions provide resources which can inspire students' educational efforts.<sup>2</sup> By framing religion as "spirituality," this interpretation grants religious life legitimacy as an (optional) component in college student "wellness," and provides market-savvy colleges with a rationale for expanding support of religious life on their campuses.

There is just one problem with this view, which is the same problem that the longer-standing views have: woefully inadequate evidence. For all the fears of religious conservatives, and all the claims of students' critical thinking by professors and college administrators, there is precious little evidence that college students either abandon their faith commitments *or* develop intellectual curiosity. And the evidence offered in support of claims about widespread pursuit of spiritual purpose or social justice among college students is as compelling as a survey about world peace

completed by beauty pageant contestants. The real issue is not how many college students check off “an interest in spirituality,” but how many actualize that interest in their everyday priorities. Social survey results need to be checked against grounded and contextualized understandings of college student lives—particularly if one wishes to draw conclusions about the lived culture of American college students. Such grounded and contextualized understandings are what this author has undertaken and summarizes here.<sup>3</sup>

What in-depth, longitudinal interviews and field research with college freshmen reveal is that most freshmen are thoroughly consumed with the everyday matters of navigating relationships, managing gratifications, handling finances, and earning diplomas—and that they stow their (often vague) religious and spiritual identities in an *identity lockbox* well before entering college. This lockbox protects religious identities, along with political, racial, gender, and civic identities, from tampering that might affect their holders’ future entry into the American cultural mainstream. If religious identities were to shift to a religious or anti-religious extreme, for example, they could ruin a teen’s mainstream standing and future trajectory. The same holds true for political, racial, gender, and civic identities. “Wrong” choices in any of these areas could put freshmen seriously out of step with mainstream culture, and endanger their odds of attaining the privatized, consumer happiness that American youth have long been socialized to seek.

Not all college students make use of the lockbox to store religious identities, and these exceptions deserve close attention. But most college students do so because they view religion not unlike vegetables—as something that is “good for you” and part of adult life, but not as something all that relevant to their current stage as college students. As one freshman put it, “I feel like God dropped me off at college and said, ‘I’ll be back to pick you up in four years.’” Note that this student, like many of his peers, planned to be picked up when he graduated—in the same place and by the same driver. It is not that his religious identity was unimportant (quite the contrary), only that he did not see its relevancy to his college education and campus experience. The same holds true of students’ political, civic, racial, and gender identities. These identities, as undeveloped as they often are, play a critical role in guiding youth into the cultural mainstream of the United States. College students, of course, are not one-dimensional. There are those who peek inside their identity lockboxes, with varying frequency, and who consider some or all of its contents. Those who do this in a sustained manner, however, are proportionately few, and qualify as one of three exceptional types described below.

### **Religious Involvement vs. Religious Identification**

There is, to be sure, well-documented research on college students’ decline in attendance at religious services and in other forms of involvement in organized religious life. This is not in dispute. But a decline in religious involvement is not equivalent to a decline in religious identification, and needs to be understood carefully. Freshmen whose religious involvements declined offer various reasons for their reduced involvement: a few choose to behave in keeping with the nonreligious identities they had established previously, though as high school students they attended religious services to please their parents. Others visit a few religious services “out at college,” do not find a service they “like,” but still attend “every time” they are “back home.” And

many continue to attend worship services—just “a little less often” because “it can be really hard to get up that early on Sundays.” (A national survey of college freshmen, in fact, found 57 percent reported attending religious services “frequently” or “occasionally” at the *end* of their first year of college.<sup>4</sup>) What freshmen do *not* say, however, is that they have gained a critical perspective on religion because of attending college, and thus have ceased to identify themselves as a religious person. Religious identifications are not questioned during the freshman year, not because they are held to in widespread piety, but because doing so would require freshmen to give attention to these identities, and few have any interest in doing so.

Asking students the summer after their freshman year to describe their spiritual and religious beliefs brought forth nearly identical answers to those they gave as high school seniors. Post-freshman year interviewees still did not relate to the terms “spiritual” or “spirituality,” and they still struggled to define such terms. “Being spiritual” meant “having morals” or “being religious,” and fewer than half offered even that definition. As others have well-documented, the vast majority of American teens are *not* spiritual seekers,<sup>5</sup> and the few interviewees who identified as spiritual did so within established religious traditions (e.g., “I pray the rosary and meditate every night”). Likewise, freshmen’s religious identifications had not shifted in the slightest. It was as if these rising sophomores peeked inside their identity lockboxes, dusted off their religious identifications, and reported, “Yeah, I’m still religious.” This was quite striking. Why would freshmen choose to preserve what were often vague religious identifications, and which often diminished as aspects of their regular activities? The answer lies in understanding the powerful effects of popular American moral culture on mainstream American teens.

## **Religion & Popular American Moral Culture**

The American mainstream can be defined in many ways; it is defined here as including American households earning \$25,000 or more a year, but excluding independently wealthy households. Members of mainstream households have a toehold (or better) in the “American dream,” and they have been fully socialized into American culture. Culture, to use a computer analogy, is humanity’s operating system. Without it, there would be no language, no communication, no knowledge, and no meaning. And like a computer operating system, culture gets installed with certain “default” settings that, unless overridden, determine how humans view their world and structure their everyday behavior. In the United States, the current default settings install a popular American moral culture that: celebrates personal effort and individual achievement, demonstrates patriotism, believes in God and a spiritual afterlife, values loyalty to family, friends, and co-workers, expects personal moral freedom, distrusts large organizations and bureaucracies, and conveys that happiness is found primarily in personal relationships and individual consumption. Unless these default settings are altered, typically to install more specific religious or nonreligious sub-cultural settings, this constellation of beliefs and practices is characteristic of most Americans.

Thus, one national study reports that most American teens consider religion to be “a very nice thing,” and despite their specific religious tradition, essentially adhere to a faith in “divinely underwritten personal happiness and interpersonal niceness.”<sup>6</sup> There are, to be sure, nonreligious teens who have no need for the divine and theistic elements of popular American moral culture:

national surveys estimate 12-18 percent of American teens consider themselves *nonreligious*. And there are also, to be sure, strongly religious teens who subscribe to elaborate religious doctrines and particular moral codes: national surveys estimate 25-35 percent of American teens are *strongly religious*. The majority of American teens, however, about 55 percent, comprise the *semireligious* middle ground.<sup>7</sup> These teens believe in God and identify with a religious tradition, but their practical creed is essentially a combination of Benjamin Franklin's "God helps those who help themselves" and the "Golden Rule." In other words, their semireligious identities provide divine reinforcement for pursuing individual achievement and, as one interviewee put it, for "trying to be a nice person."

Semireligious identities therefore serve a specific purpose: they underwrite a popular American moral culture that has been inculcated since birth. Semireligious identities reinforce the mainstream cultural script that graduating from college leads to a good job, which leads to marriage, which leads to children, comfortable housing, and a good standard of living. To question these religious identities is thus to question the whole of the mainstream cultural script and the popular American moral culture that created it, and these college students see no benefit in doing so. Besides, given the myriad of personal relationships to navigate, gratifications to manage, money to earn and spend, and credentials to complete—there are more pressing daily matters to which college students must attend. Semireligious identities are therefore stowed in college students' identity lockboxes, often alongside political, racial, gender, and civic identities, and all are left undisturbed.

It is not just semireligious college freshmen who stow identities, however. So do many strongly religious and nonreligious freshmen. Many strongly religious freshmen do so because they have become proficient *compartmentalizers*. That is, they stow religious identities when in educational settings, and stow educational identities when in religious settings, and readily switch one with the other. And most nonreligious freshmen stow identities because they not only lack interest in religion, they also lack interest in their *non-religion*. Issues of religion, philosophy, ethics or meaning are of no concern to them. These nonreligious, religious and strongly religious freshmen use identity lockboxes for the same reasons as semireligious teens: they too subscribe to popular American moral culture (with a few minor adjustments), and they too possess more than enough everyday concerns to occupy their attentions.

Hence, the vast majority of college freshmen approach their education not as intellectual explorers but as *practical credentialists*; they focus on degree completion (and on grades if they seek high-status credentials), and view the rest of their education as little more than a necessary nuisance. Popular American moral culture is dubious of large organizations and bureaucracies, and especially of higher education, and college students are both products and proponents of this moral culture.

## **Religious & Educational Exceptions**

There *are* exceptions to the above pattern. There are teens who enter college seeking to understand their own lives more fully and the wider world more thoughtfully. They take advantage

of educational opportunities because they enjoy learning for its own sake, they pursue creative opportunities because these express deeper realities, or they serve needy communities because they desire a more just society. In short, they refuse to stow critical identities in identity lockboxes. Who are they? Some are the *future intelligentsia*—that is, the next generation of professors and allied professionals like psychologists, deans, journalists, and guidance counselors. Some are *religious skeptics* and atheists—that is, a subset of nonreligious teens who consider religion to be the chief obstacle to achieving social justice and equity. And some are *religious emissaries*—that is, a subset of strongly religious teens who refuse to stow or compartmentalize faith but are driven to understand it and engage it with the world. The existence and inclusion of this last category here may be surprising to some, but as scholars of contemporary American religion demonstrate repeatedly, religious communities thrive in American pluralism because they engage it thoughtfully, not retreat from it.<sup>8</sup> Even members of the most conservative religious communities know they possess the option to pursue any religion, or none—thus religious communities put much effort into attracting and keeping adherents, including intellectual appeals, and their teen emissaries become quite conversant in these matters.

What all of these teen exceptions share is a critical perspective on popular American moral culture. That perspective may be rooted in their possession of inquisitive and self-reflective minds, and in parental and educational nurturance of the same. It may be rooted in their alienation from “mindless” theism and in their relationships with like-minded mentors. Or it may be rooted in their personal and deep identification with a religious community that decries the superficiality of American culture. (Those in the first category, in fact, frequently qualify for one of the latter two categories.) Whatever its cause, these teens grow up doubting core elements of popular American moral culture and thus reflecting upon their deeper identities and broader perspectives on the world regularly. When they enter college, this does not change. They become highly-desirable students, because they genuinely engage with class materials and because they demonstrate intellectual curiosity, creative engagement, social awareness, or all three.

Some professors will point to these intellectually-engaged students as evidence of the value of liberal education. But these students’ patterns of engagement pre-date their arrival at college, and while they take advantage of educational, creative and service opportunities during their college years, college is not the cause of their engagement. Further confounding some professors’ perceptions is the temporary nature of the intellectual curiosity, creative engagement, or social awareness that many students demonstrate in class. Sometimes this temporariness has more genuine roots—for example, the marketing student who becomes enraptured with her opera performance course, but who subsequently pushes aside that interest to concentrate on her “more realistic” educational goals. And sometimes this temporariness is more Machiavellian—that is, a pose that grade-obsessed practical credentialists strike because they know intellectual curiosity, creative engagement, and social awareness are precisely what their professors want to see.

The actual proportion of American teens who possess both genuine and sustained intellectual curiosity, creative engagement, or social awareness is quite small. About 1-2 percent of American teens are atheists or religious skeptics (i.e., nonreligious teens with an active and sustained interest in their non-religiosity), another 10-15 percent are religious emissaries (i.e., non-

compartmentalizing, religiously-driven teens), and perhaps one percent more are future intelligentsia (i.e., intellectually-engaged teens not already included above, often in semireligious transition), giving a total estimate of 12-18 percent.<sup>9</sup> Their representation on college campuses, moreover, is uneven. These exceptional teens often enroll in more selective colleges, with religious skeptics gravitating to nonreligious colleges, and religious emissaries to religious colleges. None of this should undermine the importance of professors' efforts to encourage intellectual, creative, or social engagement among students, only professors' self-aggrandizing assumptions that liberal education is the cause of such engagement.

## **Implications**

The enemy of developing critical thinking, creative engagement, and social awareness among college students is therefore not students' possession of religious identities—it is their widespread use of identity lockboxes. So, too, the enemy of a thoughtful and lasting religiosity among college students is not their pursuit of college education, but their widespread use of identity lockboxes. Thus, what hinders college students' development is neither religion nor liberal education, but the use of these lockboxes. College educators need to understand that religion, and devout religion in particular, can indeed be an ally in the cause of critical thinking and social awareness. Correspondingly, religious leaders need to understand that college education, and a liberal education in particular, can aid in the development of a thoughtful and meaningful religious identity.

College students are not, however, likely to end their use of identity lockboxes anytime soon. The power of college students' desire to keep within the American cultural mainstream is not likely to diminish, and may even enlarge, as America's new economic realities make entering the cultural mainstream even more difficult. College students know that companies are quick to reorganize, to relocate to less costly areas or nations, and to release even diligent and long-term employees. They know that downward mobility is a real possibility, and that better odds of attaining economic security come with a college diploma. Thus, college students are not, save for the exceptions above, going to risk using college as a time for developing intellectual curiosity, reflecting on identities—religious or otherwise, or understanding their interdependence with communities large and small. Doing so could move students outside the cultural mainstream and jeopardize their long-term futures—a risk too great for most college students to take.

Pleading with freshmen to swim against these economic and cultural currents is not the solution. Colleges and religious communities already do this extensively, and have likely seen as much gain as they will from such appeals. Freshman interviewees were quite aware of these appeals, and had long developed immunity to them. There is anecdotal evidence that once the daily life management project of freshman year is mastered, a window of opportunity opens to engage sophomores and juniors more deeply in both religious and nonreligious pursuits. But the established, everyday patterns of college student lives, combined with the narrowing of social circles during the freshman year, makes this a narrow window indeed.<sup>10</sup>

Rather than “curse the cards” American culture has dealt, college educators and religious leaders

should play the hand they have. Because higher education does not possess the cultural authority in America that it does in other societies, its educators need to become public intellectuals. College educators need to realize that the same cultural pluralism that challenges religious truth claims also challenges scholarly truth claims. It is not enough for college educators to be members of scholarly disciplines, where knowledge claims are accepted when they meet the criteria of that discipline. College educators must also earn the right to be heard by larger publics because they speak plainly, marshal evidence, evaluate dispassionately, and lead their audience to logical conclusions. And the first place where that right must be earned is with their most immediate audience: college students. In the same way, religious leaders must earn the right to be heard by larger publics by the same methods. College students should be respected as the individual arbiters of truth that they are, and encouraged to see that the skills of critical thinking, creative expression, and social engagement are as useful for faith as they are for learning.

Stowed identities benefit no one—not educators, not religious communities, and certainly not college freshmen. There exists no quick fix, either. Broad cultural and economic forces will ensure that the vast majority of American college freshmen continue to follow mainstream scripts that offer no guarantee of success or satisfaction. Still, it is better to know the real problem confronting freshmen development than to continually waste energy and resources addressing the wrong issues.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Naomi Schaefer Riley, *God on the Quad: How Religious Colleges and the Missionary Generation are Changing America* (New York: St. Martins Press, 2005).

<sup>2</sup> Alexander W. Astin & Helen S. Astin, "The Spiritual Life of College Students: A National Study of College Students' Search for Meaning and Purpose," (Los Angeles: Higher Education Research Institute at University of California, 2004); see also Alexander W. Astin, "Why Spirituality Deserves a Central Place in Liberal Education," *HERI Spirituality Newsletter* (Los Angeles: Higher Education Research Institute at University of California, Spring 2004).

<sup>3</sup> The author conducted 125 in-depth interviews and did a year of field research during his research for *The First Year Out: Understanding American Teens after High School*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, forthcoming 2007). That project's panel interviews with teens were particularly insightful (i.e., two-wave interviews conducted just prior to a young person's high school graduation, then repeated 15 months later). The author has also interviewed 40 additional college students to date as part of his current "Life and Vocation of American Youth Project;" this project will eventually include more than 200 college students of varied religious backgrounds.

<sup>4</sup> It is interesting to observe how this is often framed: declension becomes the headline rather than the more representative story of persistence. This national and longitudinal survey of American college freshmen reported 83 percent attend religious services frequently or occasionally at the start of their first year of college, and 57 percent did so at the end of their first year of college. The 26 percent decline got labeled "a precipitous drop," while the on-going attendance of a clear majority of freshmen received nary a word. (See p. 33 of Jennifer R. Keup and Ellen Bara

Stolzenberg, *The 2003 Your First College Year Survey: Exploring the Academic and Personal Experiences of First-Year Students*, Monograph No. 40 (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina, National Resource Center for the First-Year Experience and Students in Transition, 2004). Emphasizing the decline does, of course, reinforce many intellectuals' presumption that traditional religiosity is incompatible with liberal education and that a college education liberalizes students. And failing to analyze the decline in any detail further allows readers to project their own explanation onto the phenomenon.

<sup>5</sup> Lynn Clark, *From Angels to Aliens: Teenagers, the Media, and the Supernatural* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003); Christian Smith with Melinda Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

<sup>6</sup> Smith 2005, p. 124, 171.

<sup>7</sup> See Smith 2005; Astin and Astin 2004; Christian Smith, Robert Faris, and Mark Regnerus, "Mapping American Adolescent Religious Participation," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 41(4): 597-612 (December 2002).

<sup>8</sup> Robert Wuthnow, *America and the Challenges of Religious Diversity* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005); Christian Smith, *American Evangelicalism: Embattled and Thriving* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988).

<sup>9</sup> These figures are extrapolated from the national survey results cited above, from the author's own in-depth interviews with college freshmen (in which about one-third to one-half of strongly religious teens qualified as religious emissaries), and from other qualitative studies of teen religion: Clark 2003; Carol Lytch, *Choosing Church: What Makes a Difference for Teens* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004).

<sup>10</sup> Rebekah Nathan, *My Freshman Year: What a Professor Learned by Becoming a Student* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005); Duane Alwin and Jon Krosnick, "Aging, Cohorts, and the Stability of Sociopolitical Orientations Over the Life Span," *American Journal of Sociology*, 97(1): 169-95 (1991).