SSRC

Introduction

By Damon Mayrl
Published on: Apr 20, 2007

Damon Mayrl is a Ph.D. candidate in the Department of Sociology at the University of California, Berkeley, and a research associate with the Social Science Research Council. His research interests include the sociology of religion, political sociology, and historical and comparative methods. His dissertation compares the evolution of institutional connections between government and religious organizations in Australia and the United States.

On campuses across the country, faculty and administrators are increasingly noticing the religious beliefs and practices of their students. Student religious organizations are prominent on religious and non-religious campuses alike, and conflicts between religious groups, or between religious groups and college administrators, often reach the pages of American newspapers. What do American undergraduates believe? And how do their religious and spiritual commitments interact with their professors' goals?

These questions have begun to draw the attention of scholars from a number of disciplines. In this essay, I attempt to explain why the study of student religiosity has reemerged as a topic of scholarly interest and why it matters for all those concerned with the mission of American colleges and universities. I begin by laying out some of the historical and disciplinary factors that have led to this renewed interest. I then lay out the broader stakes that the study of undergraduate religion speaks to. I conclude with a consideration of potential directions for future research that will further enhance our understanding of the religious engagements of American undergraduates.

History and Context

Why has scholarly attention returned to religion in the academy in recent years? This renewed interest has its roots in changes in both the broader sociopolitical context and in the academy.

Sociopolitical Context

The last quarter of the twentieth century saw the resurgence of "public religion" around the world, as religious individuals and groups asserted their position as active contributors to public debates.[1] In the United States, religion's return to the public square was heralded by the reentry of religious conservatives into politics in an organized and influential fashion. Religion consequently became a central feature of American politics, and the debate about the appropriate role of religion in politics spurred broader discussion about the appropriate role of religion in public life.

Higher education also increasingly became a political flashpoint. Conservative activists attacked the university as being unfriendly to conservatives and too protective of "dangerous" liberal professors. In response, several state legislatures considered "academic bills of rights" which would entitle students to an education free of "political, ideological, or religious orthodoxy."[2] Meanwhile, inspired by identity politics, religious groups increasingly asserted their place on campus as just as legitimate as those of racial and sexual minorities.[3]

These political changes were accompanied by two major demographic trends. First, the relaxation of immigration laws in the 1960s led to a marked increase in religious diversity, as immigrants from Asia and the Middle East brought Muslims, Hindus, and Buddhists to the United States in unprecedented numbers.[4] The increased visibility of non-Christian, non-Jewish religions posed a series of new dilemmas for college administrators seeking to be "inclusive."[5] At the same time, enrollments in higher education soared as the twentieth century progressed. More students from different backgrounds increased the likelihood that devout students would enter the university, as did increasing enrollments of women and blacks, two groups whose levels of religiosity have traditionally been higher than average.[6]

Combined, these trends ensured that college campuses would be increasingly attuned to religious dynamics, and that they would be more likely to have to confront the issue of religious diversity. These practical considerations were complemented by intellectual trends in disciplines such as history, sociology, student affairs, and education.

Academic Context

The current academic interest in collegiate religion is part and parcel of a broader revival of scholarly interest in religion.[7] But it is also more specifically the product of the convergence of at least three separate streams of scholarly inquiry: the reconsideration of the venerable "secularization thesis," the elaboration of new theories in student development, and the extension of existing sociological studies into collegiate populations. At the same time, these intellectual trends have been enabled by the activities of several philanthropic foundations, whose support has facilitated an explosion of work on religion in the academy.

Revisiting Secularization. For much of the twentieth century, scholarship on religion was heavily influenced by the theory that society would inevitably secularize, or grow less religious, as it modernized.[8] This theory has come under sustained attack since the early 1990s,[9] however, with two important effects on the study of religion and higher education. First, scholars began to notice signs of religious life where previously they had assumed it did not exist. Inspired by the work of historians of higher education who argued that religion had suffered a serious decline in the academy over the course of the twentieth century, scholars of education began to take a closer look at the contemporary role of religion on campus. To their surprise, they found that religion appeared to be thriving on college campuses, and student interest in religion and spirituality seemed quite high.[10] The finding that campuses were alive with religion prompted researchers to

look more closely at the beliefs and practices of students, long assumed to be largely irreligious.[11] Large-scale surveys revealed, however, that students reported being both highly spiritual and highly religious;[12] and that they did not report losing their religion in great numbers as a result of attending college—in fact, they were often just as likely to report becoming more religious than less religious.[13] These studies have refocused attention on the role played by religion and spirituality among college students. [14]

Second, scholars increasingly began to separate secularization as historical fact from secularization as a theory of inevitable social change. As historians of education began to establish the extent to which religion and higher education came to be divorced during the early twentieth century,[15] sociologists began to emphasize the political and historically contingent nature of that change.[16] As a result (and as I discuss below in greater detail), scholars and administrators have started to question the secular ethos of the modern university, to challenge long-standing understandings about the role of religion in liberal education, and to discuss the parameters and characteristics of a "post-secular" university.[17]

Rethinking Student Development. Increased interest in religion on campus also emerges from the field of student affairs, spurred by changes in theories of student development. Although initially student development was understood to include spiritual as well as occupational and intellectual development, these concerns fell by the wayside during the 1970s and 1980s as student affairs officers focused on the more instrumental aspects of student development.[18] However, beginning in the late 1990s, a movement emerged to try to reintegrate "spiritual development" back into the overall concept of "student development." This movement reached an important milestone with the publication of Sharon Parks' *Big Questions, Worthy Dreams*, a book that made the explicit case for a spiritually-enhanced vision of student development. [19]

Since the publication of Parks' book, the "holistic student development" approach has gained a great deal of momentum and now constitutes a center of active research and publication.[20] Holistic student development scholars argue that students develop holistically, all aspects of the self developing in tandem.[21] From this perspective, failing to attend to students' spiritual lives leads to incomplete development. Advocates of holistic student development have played a major role in pushing forward studies of student "spirituality," which is defined very broadly as "the search for meaning" and is distinguished from more doctrinaire and dogmatic aspects associated with religion.[22] Holistic student development scholars have had considerable influence on proponents of recent efforts to discover ways to help students address the "big questions" in their college experience.[23]

Extending Sociological Research. A third avenue leading to renewed interest in religion and higher education extends from the work of sociologists of religion. These studies tend to be extensions of inquiries into particular social groups and organizations. During the 1990s and early 2000s, a number of sociologists undertook studies designed to better understand evangelical

Christians, one of the groups most responsible for the resurgence of public religion in the late twentieth century.[24] Other sociologists focused on exploring the constitution and dynamics of religious communities, especially congregations and “new immigrant” religious communities.[25] The study of campus religious organizations, and particularly evangelical groups, is a logical outgrowth of these two lines of inquiry.[26]

Additionally, other sociologists have focused on the role played by religion among adolescents.[27] Longitudinal studies began to yield comprehensive datasets and publications about the religious lives of teenagers.[28] As these studies progressed, many of their subjects entered college. These studies, which promise to provide a wealth of new information about religion among college students in the coming years, have also led in due course to a reevaluation of how college affects students’ religious lives, and vice versa. In recent years, undergraduate religion has attracted the attention of sociologists of education and political sociologists as well, as the implications of research and theorizing in those subdisciplines have carried over into the academy. Current research on faculty attitudes and evangelical students has been inspired by trends in these subdisciplines as well.

Extramural Support. Scholarship on religion and higher education from all three of these streams has been greatly amplified and facilitated by the activities of several philanthropies.[29] Organizations such as the Lilly Endowment, Pew Charitable Trusts, Ford Foundation, Templeton Foundation, and Teagle Foundation have sponsored scholarly dialogue and cutting-edge research on this topic. During the 1990s, for example, Lilly alone spent $15.6 million on its Religion and Higher Education initiative.[30] Foundations have played a particularly influential role in funding scholarship by Catholic and evangelical historians, philosophers, and sociologists.[31] These scholars have led the way in rejuvenating the study of religion in their respective disciplines. Likewise, philanthropies have laid the institutional groundwork for the study of religion, sponsoring the ongoing work of academic centers such as the Institute for the Study of American Evangelicals, the Center for the Philosophy of Religion, and the Institute for Advanced Studies in Culture.[32] As the amount of extramural support for the study of religion and higher education has expanded, scholars interested in the role of religion in the academy have found themselves with the time and resources to complete and publish their research.

Religion and Undergraduate Life: Surveying the Stakes

The religious engagements of college students have justifiably attracted the attention of scholars because they pose a number of discipline-specific puzzles and challenges. But the religious engagements of undergraduates are also important because they raise broader questions about the purpose of higher education in contemporary society. As religious students and groups have become more visible on today’s campuses, they have challenged deeply held beliefs about the possibility of liberal education, the nature of scholarly knowledge, and the role of religion in modern life.

Student Religion and Liberal Education

Many colleges and universities in the United States are characterized by a commitment to "liberal education," the broad-ranging education of young adults with the goal of creating intellectually capable and morally responsible citizens. For most of the history of the university, religion and liberal education were seen to be two facets of the same enterprise, working hand-in-hand to mold the student. However, the two increasingly became separated and even estranged over the course of the twentieth century, to the point where the assumption in many quarters was that religion was irrelevant to the broader project of liberal education, if not counterproductive. Today's renewed scholarly interest in the role of religion in the academy has revived discussion about whether and on what terms religious belief and liberal education can coexist. This is because the prospect of a more religiously inflected campus raises questions about and poses challenges to three central principles of liberal education—encouraging critical thinking, appreciating difference, and instilling civic responsibility—in conflicting and at times contradictory ways.

Critical Thinking. Critical thinking is possibly the foremost goal of liberal education. Students across disciplines are encouraged to evaluate evidence, look for biases, and question assumptions. But what happens when students arrive with strongly-held beliefs that they are unwilling or unable to question? Pedagogically, this dilemma raises the question of whether faculty should treat students' deeply held religious commitments as off-limits to criticism. Professors who challenge their students' religious beliefs and encourage students to question their own beliefs are sometimes accused of attempting to undermine, attack, or destroy faith.[33] On the other hand, evidence that students place their religious identities and beliefs in a "lockbox;"[34] or that they say what they think professors expect to hear, and then attend "countercurricular" classes that reinforce old beliefs,[35] tends to elicit objections precisely because it violates expectations about critical thinking. More broadly, however, this dilemma reflects disagreement about the relationship between critical thinking and faith. Religion has often been seen as an obstacle to critical thinking, but, in an era of epistemological fluidity, some educators and philosophers have tried to consider how religion can serve as an ally in critical thinking by providing students a set of grounding commitments from which to approach complex issues.[36] These attempts to span the gap between reason and faith raise a different set of concerns related to a second tenet of liberal education, the appreciation of difference.

The Appreciation of Difference. The contemporary college curriculum is often designed with the goal of exposing students to a diverse array of cultures, ideas, and perspectives. Courses are designed to enable students to appreciate different cultural traditions for what they are, not to judge them using exogenous criteria, and to appreciate diversity. Yet deeply held religious commitments potentially challenge the appreciation of difference in two ways. First, religious commitments that are premised on "absolutes" can lead students to reject other traditions that violate those absolutes. Robert Nash has described as "the paradox of religious pluralism," the problem that arises when appreciating diverse religious traditions means appreciating "religiously monist" groups who believe "unalterably that there is *One* Truth in *one* set of doctrines rather than *several* truths in *many*."[37] What is the appropriate position to take vis-à-vis religious groups

who reject the premise of the appreciation of difference? While there is nothing *necessarily* religious about this dilemma, it is nevertheless often conceived of in religious terms, and functions as a possible drawback to attempts to enlist faith as an ally of critical thought.

A second challenge strongly held religious beliefs pose to the principle of the appreciation of difference is that positing cultural traditions as valid and legitimate in and of themselves requires faculty and students alike to, in a sense, treat religion with kid gloves. To truly accept another culture as it is, and not to judge it using exogenous criteria, is to embrace its peculiarities even when one disagrees with it. But to what extent should religious identities and cultures be immune from criticism? The politics of multiculturalism makes the question tricky; a surfeit of groups have begun to claim recognition for their cultural traditions over the past forty years, and religious groups have similarly come to position themselves as legitimate cultural minorities on pluralistic campuses.[38] For faculty and students alike, the question becomes how to walk the line between criticism and appreciation—a delicate balance that may be, as has been suggested, effectively impossible[39] —and on what grounds to criticize or appreciate.

Molding Citizens. The third relevant principle is that of molding responsible citizens. From very early on, moral education and American democracy were seen as closely connected; the morals and values that religion inculcated in students were seen to be essential to civic responsibility. As universities came to take on their modern form during the first part of the twentieth century, this link was broken.[40] However, renewed concerns about whether universities are doing enough to create responsible citizens has called this separation into question. Some critics have argued that democracy is at risk because universities have become too instrumentally oriented and have failed to teach students how to engage in moral reasoning.[41] These critics argue that moral judgment-making is an essential democratic skill, and call for a reengagement with "the big questions" in order to foster citizenship among students. Meanwhile, other critics have argued that failing to pay attention to religion has created "religiously illiterate" students insufficiently prepared to sustain democracy in a context of religious pluralism.[42] These critics argue that it is impossible to mold responsible citizens without making the study of religion more central to education.

Both of these lines of criticisms raise a similar question: Do colleges do more to encourage responsible citizenship by ignoring, or engaging with, religion? Yet the difference between them highlights a further question: Are the civic benefits that accrue to teaching *about* religion preferable to or sufficient compared with those garnered by *teaching* religion? And is there room for compromise—can one teach religion "objectively" and still treat it as a springboard for ethical reflection? As colleges and universities increasingly modify their curricula to include a greater focus on service learning and civic education, the question of what role religion ought to play in such enterprises is becoming increasingly important.[43]

Religion and Scholarly Knowledge

For most of the twentieth century, religious and scientific knowledge have been treated as epistemologically distinct, and intellectual credibility has been linked to faith in reason and

skepticism of religious truth-claims.[44] The arrival of students (and faculty) who challenge the supremacy of scientific, rationalist truth comes at a time of epistemological uncertainty in the social sciences and humanities, and raises a number of important questions about the relationship between religious belief and scholarly knowledge.

The aftermath of World War II saw the ascendancy of an era of "high modernism."[45] Across disciplines, academics placed great faith in planning, progress, and modernization to bring about social change and to solve social problems. The last quarter of the twentieth century saw the breakdown of this optimism and the emergence of post-positivist, post-structural, and post-modern accounts of knowledge and social life. Philosophers and social scientists increasingly questioned the premise of "objective" knowledge, arguing that knowledge was instead fundamentally socially constructed and situated.[46] As a consequence, scholarly authority fragmented, and the rules governing which knowledge would be understood as legitimate came to be contested.

In this context, religious knowledge came to be seen as more legitimate in two senses. On the one hand, it could be treated as another competing epistemology alongside positivism, feminism, and others. In the context of the "flowering of particularist scholarship," the perspective of religious authors could be treated as distinctive and equally worthy of consideration.[47] On the other hand, religious knowledge could be treated as an important conditioning influence on the construction of truth claims themselves. Viewed this way, assertions about religion and society previously understood as "objective" came to be understood instead as fundamentally biased by the non- or anti-religious perspectives of high modernist authors. The loosening of the distinction between facts and values opened the door to scholarly works that, from the vantage point of a religious tradition, blurred the boundary between social ethics and research.[48]

On a deeper level, the destabilization of epistemological consensus reopened the question of whether religious texts and experiences could themselves be treated as sources of truth.[49] The idea that sacred ideas, rituals, and texts allow access to an aspect of truth that is inaccessible through scientific reason poses a fundamental challenge to the empiricist foundations of philosophy, history, and the social sciences. Yet in a variety of disciplines, some scholars have begun crafting arguments that leave open providential explanations for social and historical phenomena.[50] At the institutional level, the growth of evangelical colleges during this period also reflects, in part, the belief that the Bible should be treated as an important source of truth in itself, not just as a historical document.[51] While the possibility of treating religious texts and experience as sources of truth challenges the naturalistic epistemological basis of many disciplines, it also poses a thorny set of legal questions to faculty and administrators at public universities. If religious texts are sources of truth in themselves—even if only for their believers—how can public universities, charged with avoiding endorsement of particular religions, address the truths contained therein?

Student Religion and the Modern University

As a central feature of contemporary society, it is not surprising that the university has become a forum for the reassertion of "public religion," nor that this religious resurgence has changed the tenor and politics of the modern university. On a prosaic level, the explosion of new collegiate religious groups has reshaped the organizational terrain of student life, providing havens for religious communities and bases from which those communities can respond to changes and controversies on campus.[52] They have also created new governing headaches for administrators at public universities, who have to walk the line between disestablishment and neutrality among student groups.[53]

Perhaps more profoundly, however, the intersection of newfound religious assertiveness and religious pluralism has raised the question of where religion lies, or ought to lie: in the individual, or in the university? As Sam Speers has noted,[54] many modern universities—indeed, even many religiously affiliated colleges and universities—are organized in ways that presume that religion is a private, rather than a communal, affair. However, the presence of groups who presume religion to be more of a communal and thoroughly public phenomenon challenge this assumption. Moreover, the distinction between "private" religion and "public" academic inquiry can often leave faculty and students alike feeling uncertain about where the private ends and the public begins.

While religious colleges have more leeway to create religious communities around shared tenets and symbols, public universities do not have this luxury. If full incorporation into campus life for these groups and individuals requires a communal component—and if these groups and individuals have different ideas about what, in practice, this would look like—it is far from clear how any pluralistic university, much less a public university, can go about making all parties happy.

Where Next? An Agenda for Future Research

The return of scholarly attention to religious life on campus has already produced important insights into the religious engagements of American undergraduates and has led to the reconsideration of some cherished assumptions. However, it has also revealed that our knowledge of undergraduate religious engagements is seriously limited in some important ways. I devote the remainder of this essay to considering how researchers might best contribute to our understanding of spirituality and faith on campus.

Basic Knowledge-Building Projects

As an emerging field of knowledge, the religious engagements of American undergraduates raises more questions than it answers. Scholars need to devote attention to building basic knowledge in three main areas. First, scholars need to expand their focus to look at student religious engagements in longer historical context. Second, scholars need to pay greater attention to variations in religiosity and spirituality among students. Finally, scholars need to pay more attention to the cultural and organizational contexts that impact undergraduate religious engagements.

Historical Trends. Has there been an actual increase in student religiosity, or just an increase in the visibility of student religion? Despite the many claims one way or the other, there is a paucity of good historical information about collegiate religion. Consequently, we are on very shaky ground whenever we attempt to say that some aspect of religious life on campus is "new."[55] Historical research can help us answer some of these questions. It should entertain a number of hypotheses about religion's newfound prominence on campus. Is it a result of increased religiosity, or the product of changes in the organization of campus religious life?[56] If it is merely the product of reorganization and increased visibility, is this reorganization the result of greater availability of funds, greater participation, better communications technology, or simply more clubs on campus overall?

Elaborating "Religion" and "Spirituality." Much of the current research that attempts to speak generally about college students addresses religious commitments in overly-broad and insufficiently specific terms. It is often unclear what students themselves mean when they claim to be "religious" or "spiritual," as the content of their beliefs is often overlooked or cast in familiar "belief in God" or "attending services" terms. Yet these broad catch-all categories can obscure important differences in meaning.[57] Future studies should be designed to explore the content of student religiosity and spirituality more deeply by focusing on specific measures of belief and practice that will allow differences to be more clearly seen.

Cross-college Differences. "Colleges and universities" are often treated as an undifferentiated category, and studies of "college students" have traditionally been done at relatively prestigious four-year campuses. Yet institutions of higher education vary considerably, and the role of student religion may vary widely across type. While some limited attention has been paid to differences between church-related and non-church-related campuses, other important variations have gone almost entirely unexplored. These include those between public and private universities; large versus small schools; elite research universities, teaching colleges, and community colleges;[58] and urban and rural campuses. There are reasons to believe the dynamics of religion will vary considerably across these dimensions along with the institution's legal and financial constraints, institutional mission, and student body composition. Comparative work that disaggregates these types of colleges and explores the particular role of religion will improve our knowledge considerably.

Variation by Race, Gender and Class. Additional research needs to be conducted on the role played by race, gender, and class in college student religion. It is well known that women and blacks are more religious than the population at large, a pattern that holds for the college student population in general.[59] How do religious engagements vary by race and gender, and how do these variations lead to different interaction in classrooms, dormitories, and other campus settings? Class differences are almost entirely overlooked in studies of college student religion. Additional studies of community colleges and other universities that cater to part-time and non-traditional students will help shed further light on how student religiosity and spirituality vary by class.

Religious Pluralism. There is a noticeable lack of basic research on the effects and dynamics of increased religious pluralism on campuses. This is perhaps all the more obvious because religious diversity is one of the foremost challenges to teachers and administrators. While there is an abundance of excellent research on evangelical students and evangelical organizations, we know far less about the experiences and commitments of Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, Jews, and atheists—and even of Catholics and Mainline Protestants. Future research should build on the studies of evangelicals to explore the community dynamics, rituals and boundaries, and meaning systems of these student groups. But it should also focus on how the needs and understandings of non-Christian groups challenge the structures of colleges and universities—many of which were founded as either explicitly Christian or in a cultural climate heavily influenced by Christian assumptions—as well as how the pluralistic college setting affects these groups' own self-understanding.[60] A related line of research could focus on how established religious groups (such as Mainline Protestants) have adapted (or failed to adapt) to religious pluralism.

Christian Colleges. Evangelical Christian colleges grew rapidly throughout the 1990s, drawing the attention of journalists.[61] Yet few scholars have taken a look at Christian colleges. We know little about the internal culture and organization of these campuses, or how they compare with other church-related and non-church-related campuses. Nor do we know much about the historical development of these campuses, or the role they play in the overall field of American higher education. As an increasingly important part of the landscape of American higher education, and one that in many ways is consciously designed to differ from traditional colleges and universities, these campuses and their religious dynamics are important subjects for future research.

"Secular" Culture. Arguments about the appropriate role of religion in colleges and universities (religious colleges excepted) presume the existence of a largely secular context. Yet we have surprisingly few studies of this "secular" culture. How, and in what sense, is the typical college campus "secular?" What is it about universities that makes religious vitality noteworthy? Many studies of evangelicals indicate that evangelicals draw boundaries against the "secular" campus.[62] How accurately does their understanding of the "secular" campus match up with the objective reality of campus life? How is secularism understood subjectively by religious and non-religious students alike, and how do these understandings affect the politics of religion on campus?

How Does College Affect Student Religion (and Vice Versa)?

Beyond these basic knowledge-building projects, there is further important research to be done on how college affects student religiosity. While it is now increasingly clear that college attendance does not create apostasy among most students,[63] exactly what happens to college students' beliefs remains unclear. On the one hand are a group of scholars who claim that most college students disengage from religion upon entering campus, place their beliefs on the back burner, and pick them up, more or less as they were, after graduating.[64] On the other hand are a group of scholars who claim that the content of students' beliefs is transformed through their exposure to education and the pluralistic campus setting.[65] In short, the question has changed. No longer is it whether

students' commitments are maintained or abandoned, but whether they are ignored or reconstituted. Future research, paying close attention to the content of student beliefs across the course of college, is needed to adjudicate among these hypotheses.

A related vein of research could attempt to solve a curious empirical puzzle. Studies of teenagers have shown that high school students are remarkably conventional in their religious beliefs, and exhibit no tendency toward spiritual "seeking" or "questing."[66] Interviews conducted with students after their freshman year similarly reveal little tendency to identify as "spiritual" or to be engaged in questing or seeking.[67] Yet other interview-based studies have uncovered students who claim to be "spiritual but not religious," or who see themselves as active agents piecing together spiritual meaning.[68] More generally, scholars of spiritual seeking and the deinstitutionalization of religion often point to the effect of higher college and university enrollments in bringing more ideas and information to a wider audience as a key mechanism explaining the rise of new patterns of believing.[69] Future studies should attempt to explain what impact (if any) college has on creating "spiritual seekers," as well as to identify any identifiable pathways (such as, for example, choice of major) by which college students transform from conventionally religious to "spiritual but not religious."

In general, future studies should be couched in strong comparative designs that allow researchers to isolate the impact of college attendance. Amazingly, studies of this sort are virtually nonexistent. Uecker and colleagues' study comparing college students and non-college students is exemplary because it isolates the independent impact of college attendance on student belief.[70] We need more research that compares college students with those who do not attend college. These new studies should be guided by the desire to isolate the effect of college on religious beliefs. What, if anything, is special about the college setting?

Religion, Liberal Education, and Campus Governance

Finally, turning to questions inspired by the bigger stakes outlined above, there are a number of research opportunities that address the question of student religiosity and liberal education. Foremost among these are studies that compare different types of colleges and universities on outcomes aspired to by liberal education, such as critical thinking, openness to diversity, and responsible citizenship. As it is, there are very few studies that compare religious, private, and public campuses in terms of outcomes. Does a college's religious orientation make a difference?

Similarly, as efforts to incorporate religion more centrally into the college curriculum proceed, it will be essential to learn what types of outcomes these new programs generate. These studies will have to be reflexive in their design, because there is likely to be considerable disagreement about measurement. How should critical thinking, openness, and civic responsibility be measured, for instance? Recent attempts to measure students' "spiritual growth" during college have led to the development and deployment of wildly varying metrics.[71] This may be inevitable, given the different missions and student bodies of America's colleges and universities. Yet being up-front

about goals and measures will be essential if we are to draw firm conclusions about the effects of incorporating religion and spirituality further into the curriculum.

Another possible line of work draws inspiration from recent research that suggests that many students appear to be looking for guidance from their professors in their religious and spiritual pursuits.[72] What sort of concrete pedagogical problems does this pose for faculty, and how widespread are they? Is the desire for engagement with "the big questions" the same across disciplines, or are student expectations higher, for example, in the humanities or the natural sciences, as opposed to mathematics or computer science? Such studies might also investigate in a more systematic fashion how the practice of teaching is, or is not, being transformed by contemporary student interest in religion. Do faculty members feel that spiritual guidance should be part of their role as professors? What strategies to reconcile the goals of liberal education and students' spiritual and religious development are emergent among faculty, and how widely held are these strategies?

Last but not least, research is needed to understand how college administrations respond to the challenges presented to them by increased religious vitality and diversity. How widespread are religiously-based conflicts on college campuses today? What, if any, administrative changes have been made to accommodate the increased number of religious groups on campus? How have conflicts between religious observances and examination schedules, for instance, been accommodated? Have these accommodations varied by institutional type, and to what effect? Since ultimately the shape and direction of universities is decided by campus administrators, we should increase our knowledge of the problems they confront and the solutions they devise in dealing with religion on campus.

Conclusion

The religious engagements of American undergraduates are varied and increasingly important. While good research into the content and effects of student religiosity and spirituality is ongoing, more is needed. This research can help to improve our understanding not just of college students, but of the overall project of educating in an era of larger and more diverse student populations.

I would like to thank Larry Braskamp, Tim Clydesdale, William Mayrl, Freeden Oeur, Paul Price, John Schmalzbauer, Mitchell Stevens, Jonathan VanAntwerpen, and Nick Wilson for helpful feedback on an earlier version of this essay.

Endnotes

[1] Jose Casanova. 1994. *Public Religions in the Modern World*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press; Peter Berger, ed. 1999. *The Desecularization of the World: Resurgent Religion and World Politics*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans.

[2] Neil Gross and Solon Simmons. 2007. "Is Anyone Listening? Academic Freedom, 'Intellectual

Diversity,' and Conservative Critiques of the American Professoriate." Unpublished manuscript. Department of Sociology, Harvard University.

[3] Robert Wuthnow. Forthcoming, 2007. "Can Faith Be More than a Side Show in the Contemporary Academy?" In Douglas Jacobsen and Rhonda H. Jacobsen, eds., *The American University in a Postsecular Age: Religion and Higher Education*. New York: Oxford University Press. Available online at **http://religion.ssrc.org/reforum/Wuthnow/**; Kathleen Mahoney, John Schmalzbauer, and James Younis. 2001. "Religion: A Comeback on Campus." *Liberal Education* 87: 36-41.

[4] Diana Eck. 2001. *A New Religious America: How a "Christian Country" Has Become the World's Most Religiously Diverse Nation*. San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco.

[5] Beth McMurtrie. 1999. "Pluralism and Prayer under One Roof." *Chronicle of Higher Education* 46: A48-A50.

[6] On the impact of rising enrollments on the number of devout students on campus, see Robert Wuthnow. 1990. "Living the Question: Evangelical Christianity and Critical Thought." *Cross Currents* 40: 160-175. Available online at **http://www.crosscurrents.org/wuthnow.htm**; and John Schmalzbauer. 2003. *People of Faith: Religious Conviction in American Journalism and Higher Education*. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press. On its impact on the number of female and black students, see Darren Sherkat. 2007. "Religion and Higher Education: The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly." SSRC Web Forum on the Religious Engagements of American Undergraduates. Available online at **http://religion.ssrc.org/reforum/Sherkat/**. It should be noted that increased numbers of Catholics, evangelicals, women, and blacks in higher education also eventually increased the number of *faculty* from those groups, a major contributing factor to increased scholarly interest in religion. See Nancy T. Ammerman. 2002. "Sociology and the Study of Religion." Pp. 76-88 in Andrea Sterk, ed., *Religion, Scholarship, and Higher Education: Perspectives, Models, and Future Prospects*. Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, pp. 82-83.

[7] For a good overview of this wide-ranging return to religion in the academy, see John Schmalzbauer and Kathleen A. Mahoney. Forthcoming. "The Return of Religion in the Academy." *Contexts*.

[8] For classic statements of the secularization thesis, see Peter Berger. 1969. *The Sacred Canopy*. New York: Doubleday; and Max Weber. 1946. "Science as a Vocation." Pp. 129-156 in Hans H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills, eds., *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

[9] See Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World*; Philip S. Gorski. 2000. "Historicizing the Secularization Debate: Church, State, and Society in Late Medieval and Early Modern Europe, ca. 1300 to 1700." *American Sociological Review* 65: 138-167; and Rodney Stark and Roger Finke. 2000. *Acts of Faith: Explaining the Human Side of Religion*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

[10] Conrad Cherry, Betty A. DeBerg, and Amanda Porterfield. 2001. *Religion on Campus*. Chapel

Hill: University of North Carolina Press.

[11] An earlier generation of scholars considered universities to be "a breeding ground for apostasy," in the words of David Caplovitz and Fred Sherrow. 1977. *The Religious Drop-Outs: Apostasy among College Graduates*. Sage Publications; see also James Davison Hunter. 1983. *American Evangelicalism: Conservative Religion and the Quandary of Modernity*. Rutgers University Press.

[12] Higher Education Research Institute. 2004. *The Spiritual Life of College Students: A National Study of College Students' Search for Meaning and Purpose (Full Report)*. Los Angeles: Higher Education Research Institute at the University of California, Los Angeles. Available online at: **http://www.spirituality.ucla.edu/spirituality/reports/FINAL%20REPORT.pdf**

[13] Jenny J. Lee. 2002. "Religion and College Attendance: Change among Students." *Review of Higher Education* 25: 369-384; Alyssa N. Bryant, Jeung Yun Choi, and Maiko Yasuno. 2003. "Understanding the Spiritual and Religious Dimension of Students' Lives in the First Year of College." *Journal of College Student Development* 44: 723-745.

[14] Increased interest in student spirituality has also led to increased interest in faculty spirituality. Here, too, faculty turn out to be more interested in religion and spirituality than is commonly thought, although it should be noted that (1) rates of unbelief remain elevated compared to the general population, and (2) scientists at elite research universities tend to be far less religious—and more in line with assumptions about the secularized university—than either their students or their counterparts at less prestigious institutions. On the relatively high interest in religion and spirituality among faculty, see Neil Gross and Solon Simmons. 2007. "How Religious Are America's College and University Professors?" SSRC Web Forum on the Religious Engagements of American Undergraduates. Available online at **http://religion.ssrc.org/reforum/Gross_Simmons/**; and Higher Education Research Institute. 2006. *Spirituality and the Professoriate: A National Study of Faculty Beliefs, Attitudes, and Behaviors*. Los Angeles: Higher Education Research Institute at the University of California, Los Angeles, p. 3. For a study of the more irreligious elite scientists, see Elaine Howard Ecklund. 2007. "Religion and Spirituality among University Scientists." SSRC Web Forum on the Religious Engagements of American Undergraduates. Available online at **http://religion.ssrc.org/reforum/Ecklund/**.

[15] See, e.g., George Marsden. 1994. *The Soul of the American University: From Protestant Establishment to Established Nonbelief*. New York: Oxford University Press; James T. Burtchaell. 1998. *The Dying of the Light: The Disengagement of Colleges and Universities from their Christian Churches*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans; Mark Schwehn. 1993. *Exiles from Eden: Religion and the Academic Vocation in America*. New York: Oxford University Press.

[16] Christian Smith, ed. 2003. *The Secular Revolution: Power, Interests, and Conflict in the Secularization of American Public Life*, especially chs. 1-2.

[17] See, e.g., Douglas Jacobsen and Rhonda H. Jacobsen, eds. Forthcoming. *The American University in a Postsecular Age: Religion and Higher Education*. New York: Oxford University Press; John Schmalzbauer and Kathleen Mahoney. 2007. "Religion and Knowledge in the Post-Secular Academy." Unpublished manuscript. Department of Sociology, Missouri State University; C. John Sommerville. 2006. *The Decline of the Secular University*. New York: Oxford University Press; and

Sam Speers. 2007. “Secularity, Spirituality, and Liberal Arts Education.” SSRC Web Forum on the Religious Engagements of American Undergraduates. Available online at **http://religion.ssrc.org/reforum/Speers/**.

[18] Margaret Jablonski. 2001. “Editor’s Notes.” New Directions for Student Services. Issue 95, *The Implications of Student Spirituality for Student Affairs Practice*. 95: 1-5.

[19] Sharon Deloz Parks. 2000. *Big Questions, Worthy Dreams: Mentoring Young Adults in Their Search for Meaning, Purpose, and Faith*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

[20] E.g., Larry A. Braskamp, Lois Calian Trautvetter, and Kelly Ward. 2006. *Putting Students First: How Colleges Develop Students Purposively*. Boston: Anker Books; George Kuh and Robert Gonyea. 2006. “Spirituality, Liberal Learning, and College Student Engagement.” *Liberal Education* 92: 40-47.

[21] Larry A. Braskamp. Forthcoming, 2007. “The Religious and Spiritual Journey of College Students.” In Douglas Jacobsen and Rhonda H. Jacobsen, eds., *The American University in a Postsecular Age: Religion and Higher Education*. NewYork: Oxford University Press.

[22] Patrick Love. 2001. “Spirituality and Student Development: Theoretical Connections.” New Directions for Student Services. Issue 95, *The Implications of Student Spirituality for Student Affairs Practice*. 95: 7-16.

[23] W. Robert Connor. 2007 [2005]. “The Right Time and Place for Big Questions.” SSRC Web Forum on the Religious Engagements of American Undergraduates. Available online at **http://religion.ssrc.org/reforum/Connor/**

[24] E.g., Christian Smith. 1998. *American Evangelicalism: Embattled and Thriving*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

[25] E.g., Nancy Tatom Ammerman. 1997. *Congregation and Community*. New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press; R. Stephen Warner and Judith Wittner, eds. 1998. *Gatherings in Diaspora: Religious Communities and the New Immigration*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

[26] E.g., Alyssa N. Bryant. 2007. “A Portrait of Evangelical Christian Students in College.” SSRC Web Forum on the Religious Engagements of American Undergraduates. Available online at **http://religion.ssrc.org/reforum/Bryant/**; Rebecca Y. Kim. 2007. “Asian Americans for Jesus: Changing the Face of Campus Evangelicalism.” SSRC Web Forum on the Religious Engagements of American Undergraduates. Available online at **http://religion.ssrc.org/reforum/Kim/**; Rebecca Y. Kim. 2006. *God’s New Whiz Kids: Korean American Evangelicals on Campus*. New York: New York University Press; Evelyn Perry and Elizabeth Armstrong. 2007. “Evangelicals on Campus.” SSRC Web Forum on the Religious Engagements of American Undergraduates. Available online at **http://religion.ssrc.org/reforum/Perry_Armstrong/**; Prema Kurien. 2007. “Hindu Student Organizations.” SSRC Web Forum on the Religious Engagements of American Undergraduates. Available online at **http://religion.ssrc.org/reforum/Kurien/**.

[27] E.g., Mark D. Regnerus. 2003. “Religion and Positive Adolescent Outcomes: A Review of

Research and Theory." *Review of Religious Research* 44: 394-413.

28 Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton. 2005. *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers*. New York: Oxford University Press; Tim Clydesdale. 2007. *The First Year Out: Understanding American Teens after High School*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

29 Mahoney et al., "Religion: A Comeback on Campus."

30 Schmalzbauer and Mahoney, "The Return of Religion in the Academy," p. 11.

31 Schmalzbauer, People of Faith, p. 198.

32 Michael S. Hamilton and Johanna G. Yngvason. 2002. "Patrons of the Evangelical Mind." *Christianity Today* (July 8), pp. 42-47

33 Mark Taylor. 2006. "The Devoted Student." *The New York Times*, December 21.

34 Tim Clydesdale. 2007. "Abandoned, Pursued, or Safely Stowed?" SSRC Web Forum on the Religious Engagements of American Undergraduates. Available online at **http://religion.ssrc.org/reforum/Clydesdale/**

35 Connor, "The Right Time and Place for Big Questions." See also Bryant, "A Portrait of Evangelical Christian Students in College."

36 See, e.g., Clydesdale, "Abandoned, Pursued, or Safely Stowed;" Richard T. Hughes. 2001. *How Christian Faith Can Sustain the Life of the Mind*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans; Schwehn, *Exiles from Eden*; and Wuthnow, "Living the Question."

37 Robert J. Nash. 2001. *Religious Pluralism in the Academy: Opening the Dialogue*. New York: Peter Lang, p. 37.

38 Wuthnow, "Can Faith Be More than a Side Show in the Contemporary Academy?"

39 See, e.g., Stanley Fish. 1997. "Boutique Liberalism, or Why Liberals Are Incapable of Thinking about Hate Speech." *Critical Inquiry* 23: 378-395.

40 This modern form was largely inspired by German universities, and is characterized by "graduate studies, disciplinary specialization, faculty research, elective courses, seminar instruction, student independence, and laboratory and clinical methods." See Christian Smith. 2003. "Introduction: Rethinking the Secularization of American Public Life." Pp. 1-96 in Christian Smith, ed., *The Secular Revolution: Power, Interests, and Conflict in the Secularization of American Public Life*. Berkeley: University of California Press, p. 57.

41 See, e.g., Anne Colby and Thomas Ehrlich. No date. "Undergraduate Education and the Development of Moral and Civic Responsibility." Available online at **http://www.gwu.edu/~ccps/Colby.html**. See also Anne Colby, Thomas Ehrlich, Elizabeth

Beaumont, and Jason Stephens. 2003. *Educating Citizens: Preparing America's Undergraduates for Lives of Moral and Civic Responsibility*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

42 See, e.g., Society for Values in Higher Education. 2005. *The Wingspread Declaration on Religion and Public Life: Engaging Higher Education*. Portland, Ore.: Society for Values in Higher Education. Available online at **http://www.svhe.org/files/Declaration%20on%20Religion%20and%20Public%20Life.pdf**.

43 For an overview of the rise of service learning and civic education, see Schmalzbauer and Mahoney, "Religion and Knowledge in the Post-Secular Academy," pp. 24-27.

44 Smith, *The Secular Revolution*, chs. 1-2.

45 James C. Scott. 1998. *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed*. New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press.

46 See, e.g., Michel Foucault. 1984. "What Is Enlightenment?" Pp. 32-50 in Paul Rabinow, ed., *The Foucault Reader*. New York: Pantheon; Donna Haraway. 1988. "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective." *Feminist Studies* 14:3; and Thomas S. Kuhn. 1962. *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

47 Nicholas Wolterstorff. 2002. "Scholarship Grounded in Religion." Pp. 3-15 in Andrea Sterk, ed., *Religion, Scholarship, and Higher Education: Perspectives, Models, and Future Prospects*. Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, p. 13. For a skeptical take on the idea that there is anything particularly distinctive about the "religious perspective," see David A. Hollinger. 2002. "Enough Already: Universities Do Not Need More Christianity." Pp. 40-49 in Andrea Sterk, ed., *Religion, Scholarship, and Higher Education: Perspectives, Models, and Future Prospects*. Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, p. 48.

48 Schmalzbauer, *People of Faith*, ch. 6.

49 For a discussion of how religious scholarship challenges the "epistemic rules" of scientific communities, see Hollinger, "Enough Already," p. 43.

50 See, e.g., George Marsden. 1980. *Fundamentalism and American Culture: The Shaping of Twentieth-Century Evangelicalism*, 1870-1925. New York: Oxford University Press; and Christian Smith. 2003. *Moral, Believing Animals: Human Personhood and Culture*. New York: Oxford University Press.

51 These evangelical schools take a diverse array of approaches to balancing competing truth claims, however. See Alan Wolfe. 2007 [2006]. "The Evangelical Mind Revisited." SSRC Web Forum on the Religious Engagements of American Undergraduates. Available online at **http://religion.ssrc.org/reforum/Wolfe/**

52 See, e.g., David Epstein. 2006. "To Show or Not to Show Muhammad Cartoon." InsideHigherEd.com, March 30. Available online at

http://insidehighered.com/news/2006/03/30/cartoon; Scott Jaschik. 2006. "Signs of the Cross (and Its Removal)." InsideHigherEd.com, December 27. Available online at **http://insidehighered.com/news/2006/12/27/cross**.

53 See, e.g., Scott Jaschik. 2006. "Church, State, and Campus." InsideHigherEd.com, August 11. Available online at **http://insidehighered.com/news/2006/08/11/religion**; Hadia Mubarak. 2007. "How Muslim Students Negotiate Their Religious Identity and Practices in an Undergraduate Setting." SSRC Web Forum on the Religious Engagements of American Undergraduates. Available online at **http://religion.ssrc.org/reforum/Mubarak/**

54 Speers, "Secularity, Spirituality, and Liberal Arts Education."

55 Wuthnow, "Can Faith Be More than a Side Show in the Contemporary Academy?" The best historical data we currently have are limited to a small number of colleges and suffer from methodological limitations that make generalizing difficult. See Dean R. Hoge. 1974. *Commitment on Campus: Changes in Religion and Values Over Five Decades*. Philadelphia: Westminster Press; and Dean R. Hoge, Jann L. Hoge, and Janet Wittenberg. 1987. "The Return of the Fifties: Trends in College Students' Values between 1952 and 1984." *Sociological Forum* 2: 500-519.

56 On the reorganization of collegiate religion, see John Schmalzbauer. 2007. "Campus Ministry by the Numbers." SSRC Web Forum on the Religious Engagements of American Undergraduates. Available online at **http://religion.ssrc.org/reforum/Schmalzbauer/**.

57 Courtney Bender. 2007. "Religion and Spirituality: History, Discourse, Measurement." SSRC Web Forum on the Religious Engagements of American Undergraduates. Available online at **http://religion.ssrc.org/reforum/Bender/**

58 Neil Gross and Solon Simmons find stark differences in the religious beliefs of the faculty at these three different types of institutions. Their work suggests that this may be a particularly important axis of difference. See Gross and Simmons, "How Religious Are America's College and University Professors?"

59 Thomas Bartlett. 2005. "Religious Views Vary by Race, Survey Finds." *Chronicle of Higher Education* 52. Bartlett's article refers to findings released by the Higher Education Research Institute.

60 Prema Kurien's work, for instance, suggests that Hindu students are forced to articulate Hinduism in a language of Christian assumptions foreign to Hinduism. See Kurien, "Hindu Student Organizations." For an in-depth discussion of some of the Christian assumptions organizing campus life, see Mubarak, "How Muslim Students Negotiate Their Religious Identity and Practices in an Undergraduate Setting."

61 See, e.g., Leo Reisberg. 1999. "Enrollments Surge at Christian Colleges." *Chronicle of Higher Education* 45(20): A42-A43; Naomi Schaefer Riley. 2005. *God on the Quad: How Religious Colleges and the Missionary Generation Are Changing America*. New York: St. Martin's Press; and Hannah Rosin. 2005. "God and Country." The New Yorker 81: 44.

[62] Perry and Armstrong, "Evangelicals on Campus;" Alyssa Bryant. 2004. *Campus Religious Communities and the College Student Experience*. Ph.D. Dissertation. Higher Education Research Institute, University of California, Los Angeles

[63] Jeremy Uecker, Mark D. Regnerus, and Margaret Vaaler. Forthcoming. "Losing My Religion: The Social Sources of Religious Decline in Early Adulthood." *Social Forces*; Ernest Pascarella and Patrick Terenzini. 2005. *How College Affects Students*. Vol. 2, *A Third Decade of Research*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

[64] Clydesdale, "Abandoned, Pursued, or Safely Stowed?"; Mark Regnerus and Jeremy Uecker. 2007. "How Corrosive Is College to Religious Faith?" SSRC Web Forum on the Religious Engagements of American Undergraduates. Available online at **http://religion.ssrc.org/reforum/Regnerus_Uecker/**

[65] Larry A. Braskamp. 2007. "Fostering Religious and Spiritual Development of Students during College." SSRC Web Forum on the Religious Engagements of American Undergraduates. Available online at **http://religion.ssrc.org/reforum/Braskamp/**; Pascarella and Terenzini, *How College Affects Students*.

[66] Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching*

[67] Clydesdale, "Abandoned, Pursued, or Safely Stowed?"

[68] Jeffrey Jensen Arnett. 2004. *Emerging Adulthood: The Winding Road from the Late Teens through the Twenties*. New York: Oxford University Press; Cherry et al., Religion on Campus.

[69] Robert Wuthnow. 1998. *After Heaven: Spirituality in America since the 1950s*. Berkeley: University of California Press; Wade Clark Roof. 1993. *A Generation of Seekers: The Spiritual Journeys of the Baby Boom Generation*. New York: HarperCollins.

[70] Uecker et al., "Losing My Religion."

[71] Elizabeth Redden. 2007. "Spiritual Accountability." I*nsideHigherEd.com*, February 1. Available online at **http://insidehighered.com/news/2007/02/01/assessment**.

[72] Barbara Walvoord's forthcoming work on this phenomenon is previewed in Scott Jaschik. 2006. "The 'Great Divide' in Religious Studies." *InsideHigherEd.com*, November 20. Available online at **http://insidehighered.com/news/2006/11/20/religion**. See also Higher Education Research Institute, *The Spiritual Lives of College Students*.