

## **iFaith in the Amen Corner: How Gen Y is Rethinking Religion on Campus**

By Diane Winston

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I had to ask.

If you saw one student, then another and another wearing an “I Am A Whore” tee shirt around campus, wouldn’t you want to ask?

My chance came when a young woman wore the eye-popping black shirt to class. But a big red patch now hid the bold letters of sexual provocation. The new message? “FORGIVEN.”

Was it an upcoming film? A fabulous new scent? A velvet-roped all-night bar?

No, the reference was to the Biblical story of Hosea, the Hebrew prophet whom God commanded to marry a faithless prostitute. The account, understood as an allegory of God’s unwavering love for Israel, is shocking on many levels—which is why 250 students chose it for their religious witness that spring.

The students, members of Campus Crusade for Christ, wanted to be asked what the shirts meant. That opening would allow them to share the good news that God loves and forgives us, whether or not we deserve it.

I work at the University of Southern California (USC) where 77 religious groups, representing everyone from Asian evangelicals to Wiccans vie for student support. That support is both greater and more tenuous than in years past. According to recent surveys, members of Generation Y-- which includes today’s college students—exhibit a deep and thoughtful commitment to religion and spirituality. But since they also are, in the words of one study, “redefining faith in the iPod era,”<sup>1</sup> they’re not in the market for package deals. Instead they want to create their own playlists. So even if youthful fervor is growing, don’t count on a new crop of listeners for the Old Time Gospel Hour.

The combination of religious commitment and intellectual independence initially confounded me. As a journalist and historian, I have tracked American religion for more than two decades. I

thought I knew what an evangelical was. Sarah Glass, who'd worn the black tee to the class I teach on American religious history, obviously was one. She'd averred the need to reach people—however, wherever—with the gospel message. But then she said she wanted to be a minister—an unlikely career choice for a female true believer.

“You can't limit God to whom he's going to call,” Sarah told me, explaining why she did not agree with the evangelical prohibition against ordaining women. “The Bible is full of contradictions. In I Timothy, women are told to submit to men, but in Acts women teach men. God changes his mind all the time.”

That's not the standard view at Campus Crusade, a 56-year old mission “to turn lost students into Christ-centered laborers.” One of the largest Christian ministries in the world, the US arm of the international organization works on 1,300 campuses with over 55,000 students. Still, despite its immersion in the edgy richness of campus life, the group is not known for pushing the envelope on either social or theological issues.

But Sarah's mix of religious commitment and social progressivism squares with the findings of “OMG! How Generation Y is Redefining Faith in the iPod Era,” as well as data collected by UCLA's Higher Education Research Institute on collegiate religion and spirituality.<sup>2</sup> Both studies found a high level of religious tolerance and acceptance among college students. The UCLA survey focused more on beliefs, while Greenberg examined social and political attitudes, too. Her bottom line? “Respect for difference and diversity” is a core value. Members of Generation Y—even the most “Godly”—tend to be more liberal on social issues than their elders. Recent HERI data supports similar findings.<sup>3</sup>

This coincides with what I've heard in classes. These new religious conservatives are eloquent in defense of gay rights and women's ordination. They are happy, even eager, to discuss their own faith, but go to great lengths to understand others: a staunch Catholic gingerly explained Mormonism's three-tiered heaven, an evangelical explored why some Muslim women choose to veil, and a young Jew grappled with the Religious Right. I teach in three different departments—Religion, Journalism and Communications—and students in each one invariably are curious about what others believe and why.

While other contributors to the SSRC Forum on Religion and Higher Education have analyzed the sociological, historical, theological and pedagogical issues surrounding religion on campus; the relationship between faith and reason, and the moral development of today's young people, my focus is the classroom. I am interested in how my colleagues' analyses look on the ground. And having compared my own observations with those from a range of colleges and universities nationwide, my experiences do not appear out of the ordinary.<sup>4</sup>

Here at USC some 10,000 out of 33,000 undergraduate and graduate students are on the campus' religious organization listserv, and 4,200 of these are actively involved in faith groups. Forty-seven percent of students consider themselves “above average” in seeking to integrate spirituality into their lives, and 67 percent say they understand other religions better since coming to USC.

Seventeen percent list their religious choice as different from either of their parents.

In 2006, freshmen completed an online assignment as part of orientation and were invited to state their religious interests. Of the 3,637 new students, 1,087 used the website to state a religious interest and 149 chose instead to fill in a low-tech postcard. Of the 1,236 responses, the largest number (1,072) identified as Christian: 235 Roman Catholics, 126 non-denominational and 99 Presbyterian (followed by 23 other denominations). The next largest number of freshman were Jewish (198), Buddhist (99) and atheist/agnostic (77) –followed by 14 other designations including Falun Gong, Pagan, Unitarian and Zoroastrian.

My own classes do not reflect such diversity. Although I teach in three different areas, the subject matter of my classes (writing about religion, religion in American history, religion and the entertainment media) leads to self-selection among students. The majority has some religious inclination (ranging from deeply committed to marginally identified) and a minority want to know why religion is such a big deal. This year's class in American religious history—the same one Sarah Glass attended two years ago—had 21 students who identified as Protestant (8), Jewish (5), Catholic (4), Muslim (1) and None (3).

This spring I also taught “Religion, Media and Hollywood,” a Communications class that explored religion, spirituality and ethics in post 9/11 television drama. At the end of the semester I asked the 33 students to answer a short questionnaire I had written. Of the 20 who participated 13 identified as Christian, 5 as nothing, one as Muslim and one as Jewish. Asked to select how religious and spiritual they were on a scale of 1 to 5 (one being the lowest and five highest), they arrayed themselves evenly over the religious spectrum,<sup>5</sup> but clustered at the high end of the one measuring spirituality.<sup>6</sup> Twelve said this was their first college religion course while two were Religion majors or minors.

When I gave the Religion class the same questionnaire, 16 responded. Eight were taking a religion course for the first time while six were Religion majors or minors. This group skewed less religious<sup>7</sup> and less spiritual<sup>8</sup> than the Comm. students. Members of both classes listed prayer as a central religious practice, and several said they followed their own spiritual practices. A handful expressed a preference for the term religion over spirituality, noting the two were intertwined. Those who listed a religious affiliation were quite clear: They were Catholic, Methodist, Lutheran, Jewish or Muslim. Evangelicals called themselves Christian. But no one identified with more than one faith tradition. Overall, my modest data collection tracked with UCLA's findings from 112,232 students.

That was far from the experience I had when interviewing college students about religion and spirituality in the late 1990s. Working on a research project for Robert Wuthnow, I found many young people (and older ones too) who had constructed a spiritual regime based on religious sampling. One young woman—the epitome of this trend—was a Methodist, Taoist, Native American, Quaker, Russian Orthodox, Jew. But she was faithful in her fashion. She worked for world peace, practiced yoga and meditation, attended church, sat in sweat lodges, and participated

in additional spiritual activities with her housemates.<sup>9</sup>

At the time, I speculated that the growth of religious diversity in our society was paralleled by an increased diversity in individual religious practice. Inveighing against language that demeaned such eclecticism—specifically the whimsical yet market-driven description of “cafeteria-style” religion, I suggested the term “transreligiosity,” a concept used by African scholars to describe conjoined spiritual beliefs and ritual practices.

Sadly, my bid to expand our descriptive vocabulary was no more prescient than my prediction of a new religious phenomenon. There has been no groundswell of students identifying in religious multiples. They are interested in learning about others’ practices but not in adopting them. When I send out my class to explore local religious sites—visiting hitherto unfamiliar traditions from Sikhism and Hinduism to Wiccan and Self-Realization, they come back enthused by new discoveries but disinclined to integrate them into their lives.

Rather, students will try out variations within a familiar theme—Christians will go to InterVarsity, Campus Crusade, and a Bible student fellowship—and stick with the one that feels right for them. If there aren’t a lot of options, students make do with what exists: Jewish students attend Hillel, and Muslims gather at on-campus Islamic groups or nearby mosques. Religious students don’t mix and match, they practice and participate. Even those from interfaith marriages fall on one side of the fence or the other.

At least most do, and those who don’t are often seeking.

“My dad comes from a Jewish family in New York and my mom is a German Methodist,” said one senior, who grew up in Santa Monica. Although his parents celebrated holidays from both traditions, he identified as a Christian—partly to distinguish himself in his heavily Jewish neighborhood. “Now I don’t associate with a church but I’m graduating in two weeks so I’ve been thinking a lot about spirituality. I want something to hold onto before my life falls apart so I’m on a quest.”<sup>10</sup>

The USC students seem similar to their peers nationwide. The UCLA/HERI results—on the heels of 9/11, the Iraqi war and the upsurge of “values voters”—inspired a spate of stories on campus religion. Most reported an upswing in student interest and activity. At Stanford University, the Office of Religious Life reported half of the student body claim religious affiliation. The Rev. Scotty McLennan, Dean of Religious Life and a Unitarian Universalist minister told Stanford magazine that student interest in religion had doubled over the past 20 years, “The immigration laws of the ‘60s brought a lot of people from other religious traditions and our student body mirrors that. And another part is the failure of science and rationality to answer and solve all our problems.”<sup>11</sup>

At Oberlin College, Catholic chaplain Father Edward Kordas saw a similar rise in religious interest. “Some of them are flipping back to the spiritual forms of their grandparents,” he told the college alumni magazine. Erica Seager, a senior when interviewed, agreed, “There has always been spirituality here. Ties to nature, service to others, people doing yoga. But definitely, in the last

several years, there has been more interest in traditional religion and, along with that, an increasing desire of religions to work together.”<sup>11</sup>

It's the same story further east at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute. According to the university magazine, “the Institute's religious population is larger, more active and more diverse than it was a decade ago.”<sup>13</sup> Rick Hartt, director of the Rensselaer Union and a member of RPI's class of 1970, reported significant differences between religion on campus then and now, “It used to be that your religious beliefs were private—except for Mass on Sunday morning. Now we try to create an environment where [students] can feel comfortable exploring their faith. I've really seen interest grow in the last five years. These students see the big picture.”

The big picture, as the UCLA/HERI survey suggests, is that today's students “show a high degree of spiritual interest and involvement.” To understand why, I tried an in-class experiment. After lecturing on the large sweep of 20th century American religion--highlighting post-war events including the Second Vatican Council, changed immigration laws, the Age of Aquarius, the integration of Jews and Catholics into the religious mainstream and the rise of evangelicalism--I asked students how their own family histories fit in.

Nick Street, my teaching assistant, and I began by discussing how our religious odysseys crossed paths with the Vietnam anti-war movement, psychedelicism, feminism, gay liberation, new religious movements, Southern Baptists, yoga, Buddhism and Reconstructionist Judaism.

I'd never before asked students to speak personally about their families or their religious identities, but the stories that Nick and I told established a level of trust and intimacy that enabled class members to speak freely. We subsequently discovered that five were children of first generation immigrants (who tended to have strong religious backgrounds) while another five had parents who had been “60s hippies” and wanted nothing to do with organized religion. Three were from intermarried families (one was raised Jewish and the other two Christian) and another five, who came from conservative Christian homes, remained so. Students raised in non-religious homes had little interest in becoming religious; several who had some religious education were still “searching.”

“I'm open to everything,” said a student who had attended Catholic, Lutheran and Baptist primary and secondary schools. “I've done lots of reading in Christian apologetics but I still have no idea what I believe.”<sup>14</sup>

Afterwards, students questioned each other. A non-believer asked an evangelical, “Can you accept me?” A Jew asked a Christian how she reconciled religious truths that were different from her own. A born-again asked an atheist why she got out of bed in the morning; in other words, what gave her life meaning. Great questions all, they underscored the challenges that religion poses in a secular, pluralist environment as well as the reasons why its study and practice has experienced a renaissance on many American campuses.

Two years ago, Stanley Fish, Dean Emeritus at the University of Illinois at Chicago, opined that

religion “is now where the action is.”<sup>15</sup> While some may agree, others—steeped in the culture of secular fundamentalism—remain unconverted. Last fall, when a Harvard task force on curriculum reform proposed a “faith and reason” requirement, many faculty responded as if Al Qaeda had breached the ivy-covered walls.<sup>16</sup>

Given longstanding intellectual paradigms, emotional prejudices and a pervasive system of financial rewards that work against the academic study of religion, can the field move from side show to center stage in secular research universities? When I posed the question at an American Academy of Religion meeting in 2003, I spoke from my position as a program officer at the Pew Charitable Trusts. Pew invested more than \$30 million in ten centers of excellence to mainstream the study of religion at ten, top-tier research universities.<sup>17</sup> As part of my portfolio I helped select and oversee the centers that the foundation hoped would end the ghettoization of religious studies.

On my own campus, the Pew-supported Center for Religion and Civic Culture (CRCC)<sup>18</sup> has reinvigorated the academic discussion of religion through high-profile programming, funding for interdisciplinary research and leveraging Pew support to garner additional funding. Is religion center stage at USC? That is for others to decide, but CRCC’s research and academic programs combined with extracurricular activities through the Office of Religious Life<sup>19</sup> and faculty and student interest provide a high profile.

That’s not to say that religion holds the same hallowed spot that engineering, business, and the sciences do. These areas attract the most funding, some of the best students and a significant slice of cultural capital. Yet religion has made inroads in each of these fields through programming, research and interdisciplinary projects that remind faculty (as well as students) that some of our most pressing questions—*why do you get up in the morning*—are religious in nature.

For me, these questions exemplify why religion has a central role to play in the academy. All our studies must be leavened by inquiries into the ethical and existential meaning of the knowledge we seek and the responsibilities it bears. But even though I believe these questions are fundamentally religious in nature, I am cautious about framing the discussions that follow lest I—or anyone else—appear to have ultimate answers. I balk when others try to impress their truth claims on me, as when evangelical colleagues claim that all truth is mediated through the Christian revelation. I am glad that many of our great universities are no longer religious institutions and I pray they remain so. I want my students to be free to choose which tee shirts to wear around campus.

“If Jesus came back he would be just as liberal for today as he was for his time,” Sarah told me. “He’d go to the people whom nobody loves just like he went to the prostitutes and those who were unclean and unworthy. That’s his example.”

To drive home her point, Sarah wore another black tee shirt to a Campus Crusade meeting. This one read, “Gay? Fine By Me.”

The leadership immediately pulled her aside.

“They wanted to talk about it and look at the Bible,” she recalled. “I never saw anything in the Bible that said being a homosexual is evil. It says two guys having sex is bad, but not that you’re going to hell if you’re born gay.”

After much discussion, Sarah and the leadership agreed to disagree.

“They gave me the postmodern view that everyone has to come to the truth their own way,” she observed. “But I’m socially liberal and most of them aren’t.”

Me, I’m still coming to terms with a generation that doesn’t automatically tie Biblical truth to social conservatism. If my students are indicative, these young believers may have more in common with nineteenth century evangelicals, crusaders for abolition, suffrage and labor reform—than with the today’s Christian right. Now can somebody say Amen?

## Endnotes

**1** <http://www.rebooters.net/poll.html>

**2** <http://www.spirituality.ucla.edu/reports/index.html>

**3** [http://www.gseis.ucla.edu/heri/PDFs/06CIRPFS\\_Norms\\_Narrative.pdf](http://www.gseis.ucla.edu/heri/PDFs/06CIRPFS_Norms_Narrative.pdf)

**4** [http://www.nytimes.com/2007/05/02/education/02spirituality.html?\\_r=1&adxnnl=1&oref=slogin&adxnnlx=1178215631-NXoc7NYr9cmIJUOlwfLKt](http://www.nytimes.com/2007/05/02/education/02spirituality.html?_r=1&adxnnl=1&oref=slogin&adxnnlx=1178215631-NXoc7NYr9cmIJUOlwfLKt)

Articles about religion on campus also can be found in campus magazines including the University of Iowa (Summer 2002), Indiana University July/August 2002), Santa Clara University (Winter 2005), University of Chicago (February 2006), Middlebury College (Winter 2007)

**5** 5 - 3, 4 - 4, 3 - 3, 2 - 4, 1 - 3

**6** 5 - 6, 4 - 7, 3 - 1, 2 - 2, 1 - 1

**7** 5 - 4, 4 - 2, 3 - 5, 2 - 1, 1 - 4

**8** 5 - 6, 4 - 2, 3 - 4, 2 - 1, 1 - 2

**9** <http://www.uga.edu/bahai/News/011698.html>

**10** USC Class discussion, April 17, 2006

**11** <http://www.stanfordalumni.org/news/magazine/2006/mayjun/features/religion.html>

**12** [http://www.oberlin.edu/alummag/oamcurrent/oam\\_summer\\_00/religion.html](http://www.oberlin.edu/alummag/oamcurrent/oam_summer_00/religion.html)

**13** <http://www.rpi.edu/dept/metasite/news/magazine/spring2006/features/feature1-pg1.html>

**14** USC Class discussion, April 17, 2006

**15** <http://chronicle.com/weekly/v51/i18/18c00101.htm>

**16** <http://chronicle.com/weekly/v53/i18/18a01001.htm> and  
<http://chronicle.com/weekly/v53/i08/08a04901.htm>

**17** [http://www.pewtrusts.org/ideas/index.cfm?issue=17&misc\\_idea=2](http://www.pewtrusts.org/ideas/index.cfm?issue=17&misc_idea=2)

**18** <http://www.usc.edu/schools/college/crcc/>

**19** [http://www.usc.edu/programs/religious\\_life/](http://www.usc.edu/programs/religious_life/)