

Article

“Too Smart to be Religious?” Discreet Seeking Amidst Religious Stigma at an Elite College

Kateri Boucher and Jaime Kucinkas *

Department of Sociology, Hamilton College, New York, NY 13323, USA; E-Mails: kboucher@hamilton.edu (K.B.), jkucinsk@hamilton.edu (J.K.)

* Corresponding author

Submitted: 29 October 2015 | Accepted: 7 December 2015 | Published: 19 April 2016

Abstract

To advance understandings of how religion manifests in subtle, nuanced ways in secular institutions, we examine student religiosity and spirituality at an elite liberal arts school marked by a strong intellectual collective identity. Using mixed research methods, we examine how the college’s structures and dominant culture influence students’ religiosity and spirituality. Despite an institutional commitment to promoting students’ self-exploration and inclusion of social “diversity,” we found both campus structures and mainstream culture deterred open spiritual and religious exploration and identification. The structure of the college and its dominant secular, intellectual culture reinforced: (1) a widespread stigma against religious and spiritual expression, (2) a lack of dialogue about the sacred, (3) discreetness in exploring and adhering to sacred beliefs and practices, and (4) a large degree of religious and spiritual pluralism. Our findings additionally illustrate that early exposure to the campus culture’s critical regard for religion had a long-lasting impact on students’ religiosity. A majority of students kept their religious and spiritual expressions hidden and private; only a marginalized minority of students embraced their expressions publically. To increase students’ comfort with religious and spiritual exploration, we propose that colleges foster intentional peer dialogues early in the college experience. Furthermore, we recommend that campus communities prioritize religious and spiritual literacy and respect.

Keywords

college; diversity; higher education; lived religion; religiosity; spirituality

Issue

This article is part of the issue “Religious Diversity and Social Inclusion”, edited by Gary Bouma (Monash University, Australia).

© 2016 by the authors; licensee Cogitatio (Lisbon, Portugal). This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY).

1. Introduction

Members of elite academic institutions are more likely to express discomfort with religion than people at other schools (Jacobsen & Jacobsen, 2012). This is due in part to the historical secularization of higher education and science, and the perception among many at elite secular colleges and universities that science and religion are conflicting perspectives (Evans & Evans, 2008; Reuben, 1996; Smith, 2003). To better understand how people bring their religious lives into secular institutions in nuanced and often hidden ways, and to make

“invisible religion” more visible in secular institutions (Cadge & Konieczny, 2014), we examine student religiosity and spirituality at an elite, secular liberal arts campus.¹ College is an important site to examine because, upon arrival at college, students must choose whether to embrace or leave behind religious identities learned from their families (Peek, 2005). College is also

¹ In keeping with Jacobsen and Jacobsen (2012), we characterize an “elite” school as one that is historically selective in its admissions, academically rigorous, and relatively well-known on a national level.

a time when many students become aware of how their religious and spiritual identities are regarded by wider society.

Our study contributes to a growing body of scholarship on college students' religiosity and spirituality (Jacobsen & Jacobsen, 2012; Pew Research Center, 2015; Smith & Snell, 2009). We expand upon extant scholarship by interviewing various constituencies on campus, including administrators, faculty, and students to best understand the multiple cultural and structural levels which influence college students' religious and spiritual exploration on a secular campus.

We find that, despite institutional aims to promote tolerance for diversity and inclusion of students with diverse identities, the College's structures and dominant culture stigmatizes and deters religiosity. As sociologists Elizabeth Armstrong and Laura Hamilton discuss in their (2014) book *Paying for the party*, colleges and universities have institutional pathways which shape student experiences. At the liberal arts college we examined, the most common pathway for students to take was a secular one, as reinforced by academic life and the party scene. In and out of the classroom, most students, faculty, and administrators united around a mission of intellectual rigor. In this context, religion was viewed as highly suspect and implicitly contradictory to the mainstream campus culture which valued being a rational intellectual and a critical thinker. Due to the stigmatization of religion and its marginalized place on campus, few students engaged in public religious and spiritual exploration and dialogue. Most students instead hid their religious and spiritual pursuits, and explored them privately in individualistic ways.

2. Student Religiosity at Secular Colleges and Universities

Student religiosity typically declines somewhat in college (Astin et al., 2004). Although students may disaffiliate from formal religious institutions during their college years, they tend to grow spiritually and may adopt spiritual identities (Astin, Astin, & Lindholm, 2011; Lane et al., 2013; Lindholm, 2006). However, there is a great deal of variation in student religiosity and spirituality based on the kind of college or university that students attend (Cherry, DeBerg, & Porterfield, 2001; Freitas, 2010). Students at faith-based colleges are immersed in a more pervasive religious culture, and they tend to engage in spiritual and religious practices more than those at secular institutions (Kuh & Gonyea, 2015). In contrast, many students at secular public universities are disengaged from religion (Freitas, 2010). Other scholarship identifies how liberal arts colleges can be pervaded by a "narrative of religious intolerance" (Lane et al., 2013).

Although much research has been conducted on student religiosity at religious schools (Bouman,

DeGraaf, Mulder, & Marion, 2005; Ma, 2010; Richter, 2001), we know less about how students on secular campuses, and in particular at elite colleges and universities, explore religiosity and spirituality. Consequently, in this study we focus on how student religiosity and spirituality manifest at an elite secular liberal arts school, which we expect will have low religious tolerance (Lane et al., 2013; Jacobsen & Jacobsen, 2012).

Because studies of student religiosity in higher education fail to examine the complex, multi-level, cultural, and structural contexts that students are embedded in (Maryl & Oeur, 2009), we intentionally explore these factors. First, we examine how various constituencies, ranging from top administrators to students, view religion on campus. Second, we explore the extent to which religiosity is supported by the school and present in popular convening spaces. Lastly, we examine how students become aware of the overarching normative campus orientation toward religion, and the ways in which they consequently explore the sacred.

Based on the few studies that exist (e.g. Lane et al, 2013; Jacobsen & Jacobsen, 2012), we expect that a general sense of religious intolerance among the students will affect the degree to which they felt comfortable sharing their religious backgrounds, beliefs, and practices. We also expect students to experience difficulty in reconciling their public, intellectual identities with religious identities (Smith, 2003; Speers, 2008).

3. Data Collection and Research Methods

This project began in a Sociology of Religion course taught by one of the authors. The class raised questions about student religiosity on elite secular campuses which had not been addressed in the extant literature. As a result, the author teaching the course trained the class in interviewing methods and helped them collect twenty-eight interviews with students on a small, elite, liberal arts campus in the fall of 2014. Participants were randomly chosen from a telephone list of the school's population. Interviews took place on campus in person, with the average interview lasting approximately thirty minutes. Participants were asked about their spiritual and religious histories, practices, and about campus culture regarding religion and spirituality.²

In the spring of 2015, we continued collecting data on campus religiosity. Interviewees were chosen based on purposive sampling. The authors invited student leaders from nine religious and spiritual organizations on campus to participate in the study. Faculty and administrators were invited based their leadership role in the campus community. Faculty participants were tenured and recommended by various members of the

² Descriptive statistics of these students' religious and spiritual profiles are shown in the Appendix.

community. During the second wave of data collection, we conducted nineteen interviews in total; we interviewed nine student religious leaders and eleven members of the faculty and administration. Student leaders were asked the same questions as students in the first wave, as well as questions about their experiences leading student groups. Professors and administrators were asked open-ended questions about how they perceived religious life on campus and their involvement with it.

All interviews were transcribed. Actual names and identifying information were replaced with pseudonyms and other descriptors. We then open-coded for: campus religious culture, student spiritual, religious, and secular identities, stigmas toward religion and spirituality, and respondent sociodemographics.³ After identifying our initial primary categories, we completed a focused coding of all interviews. This additional coding included categories relating religion and spirituality to: the College administration and mission, initial experiences on campus, social interactions, academic experiences, social life, preconceived assumptions among students, dialogue on campus, pluralism and diversity, and religious and spiritual visibility/invisibility.

In addition to the interviews, we conducted a content analysis of the College's website. Through the website, the authors specifically explored the College's mission statement, as well as pages on student life, religious life, and social diversity on campus. We also analyzed the College's Senior Surveys (Higher Education Research Institute, 2013, 2014), which were administered to graduating seniors by the Higher Education Research Institute.

4. Hidden Religious and Spiritual Identities and a Lack of Dialogue

Our research exposed a stark discrepancy between students' public and private expressions of religiosity and spirituality. Most community members believed that the campus atmosphere was not particularly religious or spiritual. However, nearly three fifths of our randomly selected respondents identified as spiritual, religious, or both. In addition, 75% of the 2013 graduating seniors reported a specific religious affiliation.⁴ This contradiction can be explained by our finding that many students' spiritual and religious practices were kept relatively private from their peers.

When students first arrived at the College, many of them quickly became aware of how religion was generally viewed negatively on campus. For example, senior Ali Roland, a leader of a student spirituality group, explained:

³ Descriptive statistics of respondents from Wave 2 are available upon request.

⁴ College Senior Survey 2013.

"At the beginning of freshman year, even before the ideas [of religion and spirituality] were breached...there would be discussions within the friend groups, and if you did believe something, you would feel so uncomfortable. Because people would automatically be like 'Oh, you believe in God? Like, what are you, stupid?'"

In addition, Grace Crowley, a senior leader of the Hillel group and former new member recruitment chair commented on how, "in the first week, and the first month, so many people want to get involved. But then they figure out the whole scene and figure out that maybe [Hillel] isn't that "cool" of a thing to do..." Roland and Crowley suggest that the subtle and explicit criticism of religious students' beliefs early in their college experience leads many students to hide their religious and spiritual backgrounds, beliefs, and practices for the rest of their time at the college.

Many students who arrived on campus identifying as religious or spiritual said that they began to avoid public displays of religiosity, and did not talk with their peers about their religious or spiritual backgrounds. One student explained, "In a very secular community such as [the College], I think people would be wary to describe themselves as religious or spiritual, whether or not they actually feel that way inside." Administrator Susan Nichols added:

"I think that you could walk on this campus and think of yourself as a deeply religious person, and very quickly, just by observing conversations, decide—I'm going to be quiet about that. I'm not going to tell people that's an important part of who I am."

Even among their friends, students did not talk about their religious or spiritual lives. In fact, at the end of the interviews, a few of our respondents admitted that this was the first time they had discussed their religion or spirituality while at the College. Because students believed that the majority of the College students were not spiritual or religious, they assumed their friends and peers were secular.

Students and faculty members alike expressed surprise upon finding out that a student was religious. Meryl Parker, a faculty member, explained:

"Whenever anybody 'announces' a religious identification in any way, my level of surprise makes me think that I just assume that everybody here is not religious, or not in any significant way. And then when somebody [explicitly] identifies as religious...I'm always kind of taken aback. And I definitely look at that student a little bit differently when I think about their self-identification with a religious group."

Parker's reflection shows that even some faculty members assume that most students on campus are not religious. Furthermore, when students deviate from the secular norm by making a religious identification obvious, they can be perceived differently and receive differential treatment from both faculty members and peers.

Respondents thought that the lack of religious dialogue on campus reflected the campus community's difficulty with approaching challenging dialogues in general. Yunus Farjad, a junior leader of the Muslim Students Association, explained, "If one has an opinion that goes against the majority of [the College's] students, they might feel pressured to not express it." Farjad, among many other respondents, found that the College community is not open to the expression of opinions or beliefs that might "rock the boat," as another respondent described.

5. Religious Discomfort and Stigmatization on Campus

The vast majority of the students, faculty members and administrators reported that the campus culture was not friendly to theism or organized religion. Various respondents described religious students on campus as being viewed as "weird," "backwards," or "off-putting." Students and faculty members alike shared experiences which suggested that the culture of religious discomfort is conveyed in both subtle, prejudicial and explicit, discriminatory ways.

5.1. Subtle Intolerance

Although many respondents reported a negative stigma towards religion on campus, it was often difficult for them to articulate their experiences with it. An anti-religious orientation often manifested implicitly in interactions between members of the community. Grace Crowley, senior leader of Hillel, the Jewish student group on campus, said students' discomfort with religion is, "not an outward thing...but it's like 'Oh, you're going to *Hillel*? It's a look, or a glance, or a tone."⁵ Similarly, senior Reuben Gamely described, "You know, it's like 'oh that person's *religious*' and that's like, '*oh*.' People don't identify as religious because it has a negative connotation...When you hear that someone is religious it has an off-putting effect." Crowley and Gamely reveal some of the subtle ways through which students at the College criticize their peers' religiosity and participation in student religious groups.

Administrators and faculty members also noticed that interactions between students conveyed undertones of intolerance. Dean Susan Nichols explained, "It's the subtle ways that we convey to one another—that's a goofy thing you're thinking. It's usually not

words." Similarly, Christian faculty member Jamie Kim recalled that, when talking about religious identification, "Sometimes it's like 'Well, that's cool,' but sometimes it's like 'Oh...you're *that*.'"

These examples from students, faculty, and administrators indicate that religious students on campus sense a disapproval of their religious and spiritual identities through subtle gestures or cues. Students' perceptions of others' discomfort with religion led many students to not publicly affiliate with religion or engage in religious practices for fear of being judged.

5.2. Stereotyping and Overt Discrimination

In addition to subtle stigmatization of religion, some students and faculty described explicit stereotyping and discrimination on campus. For example, many respondents referenced an opinion article published in the spring of 2015 by a conservative publication on campus. The article argued that Islam as a religion is inherently violent, and that there is a high prevalence of extremism and violence among Muslims. In response, Fatima Choudhary, a junior leader of the Muslim Students Association, said she, "wasn't so much upset because of what they said, because [she] knew it wasn't true," but what bothered her most was that "this was such a widely available publication that is put everywhere on campus so any student can pick it up. A student who doesn't know much about Islam can pick it up and think, 'Oh, this is an official publication of [the College]. It must be legitimate.' And then when they read it, they'll believe it." Although Choudhary and the other Muslim students were used to being stereotyped in the mainstream conservative media, it concerned them to hear such direct stereotyping from a group of their peers on campus. Choudhary said that, in the wake of the article's publication, she became much more aware of her identity as a Muslim on campus, and more cognizant of how few other Muslim students there were at the College.

Jewish students also spoke of anti-Semitism from their peers at the College. In one incident, someone cut a hole out of the campus *sukkah* tent, a holy space for Jewish students during the *Sukkot* holiday. The same year, a friend of senior Hillel leader Zoe Holtzman found the message "Eradicate the Jews" written on a whiteboard on her door. Holtzman explained that Campus Safety investigated both of these incidents, but "nothing happened" and the perpetrators were never caught. Holtzman reflected on the sense of fear and insecurity the events incited, "Anybody who calls for things like that against people like yourself...It's going to kind of rattle you, and make you say, 'Wow, someone is really out there to get us,' right?" This experience suggests that Jewish students have felt uncomfortable and even unsafe on campus as a result of threats by their peers. Furthermore, because the perpetrators were never

⁵ Bold type signifies emphasis by the respondent.

caught, Jewish students had to walk around campus every day not knowing which of their peers had committed these explicitly anti-Semitic acts.

These experiences demonstrated that the campus culture was not just apathetic or disinterested in religion. At times, members of the campus community were explicitly discriminatory and hostile towards organized religion. Although these incidents occurred intermittently, they directly threatened religious minorities on campus, made their identities more salient, and made them feel like outsiders. Such episodes not only made religious minorities feel misunderstood and more marginalized on campus, but among some, it instilled a fear of future interactions with their peers.

6. The Marginalization of Religion in Mainstream College Life

Respondents discussed how religion is stigmatized in the two main places that students regularly convene on campus: in the classroom and at parties. Because involvement in academics and the party culture were viewed as necessary parts of the student college experience by most students—and religion and theism were often viewed as incompatible with intellectual life and partying—religious students were marginalized and judged as deviant.

6.1. Academic Life

At elite liberal arts colleges, academics are a central part of college life. Like other liberal arts colleges, the College we examined generally promoted tolerance of social diversity in academic life. The College website (2013) stated that, “Woven throughout [the College]’s curriculum is the study of the world’s races, cultures, religions and ideologies.” However, students portrayed their classroom experiences as lacking conversation about religion, and at times even discouraging it. Students and faculty repeatedly stated how the intense intellectual atmosphere deterred religious exploration and acceptance.

Some respondents thought that faculty members ignored or demeaned religion in the classroom. Students and faculty members who identified as religious were particularly aware of critical attitudes toward religion in the classroom. Ji-Yun Lee, a leader of the College Christian Fellowship, said, “I’ve been in classes where the default mode was definitely ‘religion is stupid.’” Jamie Kim, a faculty member and the advisor to the College Christian Fellowship, related that on campus, “You’ll even hear faculty members with Ph.D.s who have biases against religion...” Although he hoped that faculty members would be open and accepting of religious beliefs, Kim suggested this was not always the case.

Many students perceived an implicit conflict be-

tween religious faith and scientific rationality. Students believed that you could not be both religious and intellectual, so students with religious identities were marginalized and viewed as unable to fully participate in academic life. A senior who did not identify as religious or spiritual, described, “The majority of kids I know here aren’t religious. And even if they are practicing a religion, they’re still...intellectual enough not to live by it.” Ali Roland, a senior, similarly described how many students held the view that religion and intellect were implicitly opposed:

“There’s also this idea that...as students at [the College], we’re too smart to be religious. Like we’re too smart to put our faith into a higher power. Like I said, especially with an elite college like [College name], there’s just this belief that being religious implies a lower intelligence level. I don’t know if it’s really spoken about that much.”

In this context, there was considerable normative pressure to first be an engaged member of the prestigious college. To be a part of the College’s elite privileged membership, one had to have a salient secular intellectual identity. To do otherwise would undermine one’s perceived intelligence, which was one of the most valued traits at the College. These findings support our hypothesis that many students at this elite liberal arts school would have trouble reconciling their religious and intellectual identities. Because intellectual identities were central to being a part of the collective college identity, and religious identification was seen as oppositional to intellect, religious identities were marginalized and made suspect.

6.2. The Party Scene

At the College, partying was viewed by students as a central part of the mainstream social scene. Ninety percent of the graduating seniors in 2014 spent at least an hour partying in a typical week. In contrast, only ten percent of seniors prayed or meditated for at least an hour a week.⁶ Unfortunately for religious students, most students we spoke with thought the party scene was not only incompatible with religiosity, but that the party crowd was particularly critical and dismissive of religion. It was a part of student social life in which religious students felt most marginalized, alienated, and judged.

Non-religious respondents assumed that religious students maintained strict religious commitments which did not allow for partying. Senior Henry Silber said that being at college involved the temptation to do “things that religions don’t usually condone.” Blake Rosenberg, a senior, explained, “People separate

⁶ College Senior Survey 2014.

themselves from religion because it stops them from having a good time.” Silber and Rosenberg’s responses are indicative of a campus culture that perceives student religious identification as deviant and suspect, because it is viewed as a voluntary choice to not participate in the “fun” aspects of mainstream college life.

Religious students thought that the stigmatization of their religious traditions was particularly likely to happen at parties. Religious stigma was often expressed in the form of discriminatory jokes. Ji-Yun Lee, a self-identified Christian student, said that people in “party crowds” were more likely to make fun of Christians, or make Jesus jokes. Most of the religious students we spoke with said that they were not comfortable at campus parties.

Faculty also mentioned that the students who partied frequently were particularly likely to judge religious students. Faculty member Zach Sandler noted that religious students are generally regarded as “weird” by their peers, and that the stigma against religious students is related to the stigma against students who refrain from drinking alcohol. Similarly, administrator Harshad Bhat described that, “The minute a student says, ‘I can’t drink because of my culture, my faith,’ now they’re in that extreme crazy group, because it’s proving this point that religion is backwards.” Bhat’s explanation further suggests that religious expression and practice were already assumed to be strange or deviant, and they were viewed as especially so when they interfered with students’ ability to party.

7. The Perceived Lack of Structural Support for Religious Practice and Spiritual Exploration

7.1. Falling Short on the Institutional Mission

The College espoused an explicit commitment to support holistic student development and self-exploration, like many liberal arts institutions. It also sought to promote inclusion and tolerance of diverse social identities. These missions are clearly stated on the College’s website and in its other publications. The College is guided by the motto “Know Thyself,” which intimates a commitment to students’ personal development and an intentional fostering of unique, individual identities. Religious and spiritual respondents thought that the motto could serve as a personal motivation for spiritual exploration. One student, when asked what religion means to him, shared: “It means knowing myself better. One of the big reasons I came to [the College] was because of Know Thyself.” A senior administrator also believed that the motto could serve as a “perfect vehicle to give students permission to explore their religion and spirituality while they are here.”

However, other respondents found that this motto was not an accurate reflection of students’ experiences on campus. Rick O’Connor, a faculty member, noted

that a more apt description of the College motto would be, “‘Know Thyself, except don’t talk about the religious part of yourself.’” Similarly, Sarah Wilder, a Protestant senior, shared: “Honestly, I think that a more accurate version of what the College actually achieves, or seeks to achieve, is...‘Know Your Resume.’” Faculty and students alike believed that the College did not sufficiently endorse and support religious and spiritual life on campus.

Although the College’s mission advocated a commitment to diversity and self-exploration, the College lacked an explicit commitment to the inclusion of religious and spiritual identities. For example, a page on the College’s website on diversity,” stated, “At [the College] you can be yourself—and be respected for who you are”. A diversity fact sheet on the same page includes sections on racial and ethnic diversity, geographic diversity, and socioeconomic diversity.⁷ Although the webpage explicitly encouraged multiple forms of diversity, it made no mention of religion or spirituality.

Despite a nominal promotion of diversity in its mission, students felt that the College and the campus community did not always support diversity in practice, especially when it came to religious diversity. Student leaders of religious and spiritual groups believed that members of the College saw religious diversity as potentially “dangerous” or “risky” to explicitly encourage.

7.2. Administrative Support and Limitations

Many religious students reported a lack of support from the administration for fostering religious exploration and inclusion. While these respondents generally thought the administration was tolerant and accepting of religious groups, they did not believe that the administration considered it important to actively engage with religion or spirituality.

Religious student leaders perceived a subtle lack of support from the administration. Ji-Yun Lee, a leader of a student Christian group, said, “I get the feeling that the administration is not too hot on us.” Zoe Holtzman, senior leader of the Hillel group, commented, “I don’t want to say that the administration is anti-religion...but they’re not for religion.” Holtzman and Lee’s perspectives were echoed by other religious students, particularly those identifying as Christian or Jewish. Students in both groups thought that they had to take their own initiative to help their religious groups thrive on campus.

Religious students additionally believed that the College had insufficient space and limited resources for the religious groups on campus. In particular, the majority of the Jewish student respondents expressed disappointment due to limited space available to them for

⁷ Accessed May 15, 2015.

worship and practice. They were primarily concerned about the lack of a Kosher-friendly kitchen. Zoe Holtzman kept a Kosher diet at the College for her first three years. “That was really hard,” she admitted. “Because of my limited options, I was getting really sick.” Although no other respondents had tried keeping Kosher while on campus, many of them expressed concern that the College does not support Jewish students in this practice.

The challenges of limited space and resources are faced by all colleges and universities. However, these challenges are made especially difficult at a small school like the institution we studied, where there may only be a few students belonging to a particular religious group. Furthermore, religious groups were often comprised of students from a wide range of traditions and practices. Administrator Susan Nichols addressed the structural challenges to supporting religious students’ needs:

“There are challenges...for example, it can be hard to find mentors who have that background, availability, and interest. We’ve had different people over the years who have worked with our Jewish community or Muslim students. And when it’s just a handful of students, you can’t really justify hiring a full-time person. So piecing it together in a way that works and feels meaningful for students can be a challenge.”

While Nichols and other administrators have put thought into how best to support the College’s diverse religious population, they are aware that, given the structural limitations characteristic of a small college, not all students will be satisfied with the support for their identities and interests.

Our research demonstrated that some administrators are thoughtfully considering the needs of religious and spiritual groups on campus and attempting to uphold the college’s mission of diversity. However, there was a disconnect between their efforts and students’ perceptions of results, which led religious students to think that the administration did not prioritize their needs.

8. Religion and Spirituality on Campus

8.1. *Spiritual Pluralism*

Although cultural and structural factors combined to discourage public, shared discussions and experiences of the sacred, transcendent experiences were still part of students’ lives on campus. Such experiences, however, often manifested in private, personal, and non-traditional forms. Regardless of specific religious or spiritual identification, students crafted their own unique sets of sacred beliefs and practices. One student, for example, identified as Catholic and believed in God, but did not specifically identify as “religious.” Another stu-

dent considered herself agnostic and was not tied to any particular religion. Yet, she admitted to finding herself praying sometimes. A third student described herself as both agnostic and “culturally Catholic.” The latter term, she explained, she had created as a category to describe her own particular approach to Catholicism.

Although about two fifths of randomly selected student respondents did not explicitly identify as spiritual or religious, most engaged with spirituality in some way. In fact, three-fourths of the same respondents reported having had recent spiritual experiences. Many students spoke of experiencing spirituality through non-traditional avenues. Freshman and self-identified atheist Nikki Wilson said that for her, “Spirituality has a lot to do with nature....I remember one of the first days I got here, me and my roommate went to the [wooded area on campus]. It was probably the closest I’ve gotten to spiritual because we just sat there for a really long time, and it was really quiet...” Despite Wilson’s tranquil moments in nature, she does not identify as “spiritual.” Rather, she is drawn to nature and associates it with spirituality.

Blake Rosenberg, a senior and self-identified “agnostic/discordian,” spoke of many aspects of his life that he considers sacred and divine. He referenced working at the community farm on campus, which he describes as a “holistic connection” that he cannot find anywhere else. When he writes, he says: “It is similar to a prayer, but instead of choosing God as my audience, I choose someone I know.” Additionally, washing dishes offered him a similar spiritual experience. Rosenberg described his experiences as transcendent moments, without necessarily connecting them to a belief in God or a “spiritual” self-identification.

Another student, Henry Silber, was raised Jewish but considered himself neither spiritual nor religious. He “usually” doesn’t believe in a higher power. However, Silber discussed the ways that reading and listening to music were spiritual experiences: “If there’s a passage that’s really incredible, or a piece of music that’s jaw-dropping, I think that’s a form of experiencing the divine. Like something pure, and beautiful....It makes me want to find something deeper.” Even though Henry was not intentionally engaging in religious or spiritual practices, he experienced the spiritual through non-traditional avenues.

These three respondents did not label themselves as “spiritual” or theistic, yet they each cited spiritual or divine experiences in their lives on campus. All of these experiences were unique, personally meaningful, and deviated from conventional forms of organized religion.

8.2. *Embracing Religiosity in Marginal Safe Spaces: Student Religious Groups*

Although the general campus culture which stigma-

tized religion led the majority of students to keep their religious identities and expressions hidden, a small minority of students embraced their religious expressions publically. The College's head chaplain estimated that about ten percent of the College's students participated in a religious or spiritual group on campus. Perhaps because these students were a marginalized minority on campus, they were very grateful for the support they received from each other and from the chaplaincy.

Leaders of religious groups spoke of the difficulty in arriving at the College without sufficient community support. Counterintuitively, this lack of initial support actually contributed to some students' religious involvement. Ji-Yun Kim, a senior and leader of the College Christian Fellowship, spoke of her challenging arrival to the College:

"I would have to say that I kind of struggled for a while, because there are so few Christians here. And there wasn't a lot of leadership....Normally there's a staff worker who leads the fellowship, but we don't have that here. And so that was hard."

Kim's struggles caused her to feel isolated, and she began to reconsider her identity as a Christian. However, she explained that as a direct result of the adversity she faced, "[her] faith skyrocketed" because she "had to take it into [her] own hands."

Zoe Holtzman shared a similar story: "It was really hard at first. I was pretty unhappy for about the first year." She wasn't satisfied with the availability of *Shabbat* services, and did not feel supported by her peers in her Jewish faith. But by her senior year, she had gained a different perspective: "What I've noticed here is that when you don't have people like you around you, you have to fight more for what you believe in and you have to identify more with that." For Holtzman, the anti-Semitic incidents on campus actually motivated her membership in the Hillel group. The discrimination the Jewish community faced "made us want to push Jewish life on campus more, and show that we're still a strong Jewish community that doesn't get derailed by those kinds of threats." Overt forms of discrimination from peers served as catalysts for the Hillel students to re-claim their place on campus.

Although the stigma towards religious groups on campus caused most students to veil or reject their own religious identities, the social climate on campus caused a contingency of students to become even more active and invested in their religious identities. Both Holtzman and Kim's experiences suggest that being in the midst of a campus culture that is not primarily religious caused them to further embrace their own religious identities.

Student religious groups became havens for many of their members by the end of their college experiences. Holtzman explained that by her senior year at

the College, she thought of the Hillel group as her family. Similarly, Sarah Wilder, a Protestant senior, shared that a Protestant discussion group "is a place where I've opened up many times about things where I wouldn't elsewhere." The chaplaincy was another important source of support for religious students. Caitlin O'Connor, an agnostic Catholic, shared that she may not have stayed at the College if it had not been for the head chaplain's constant support and guidance. Overall, religious students' experiences showed how valuable student religious groups and mentors can be in providing support; such support was seen as especially important in the face of a campus culture critical of religion.

9. Discussion

This study examined a secular elite liberal arts college in order to make "invisible religion" more visible (Cadge & Konieczny, 2014) and to trace the cultural and structural facets of campus life which support or impede student religiosity. Although our findings are from a single small liberal arts college, based on past research, we suspect the subtle and explicit ways through which religious and spiritual life are repressed in public spaces on campus are likely to occur at other liberal arts colleges and elite secular universities (Freitas 2010; Jacobsen & Jacobsen, 2012; Lane et al. 2013).

Despite how the College's mission officially promoted the inclusion of people with diverse social identities, many students perceived a lack of peer, faculty, and administrative support for religious and spiritual exploration. The College additionally lacked a pathway for the majority of the student body to meaningfully explore religion or spirituality in a supportive environment. In mainstream social pathways on campus—such as in academic life and in the party scene—religion and spirituality were not only absent, but were viewed with suspicion. Students repeatedly spoke of how important being smart was to maintaining an identity as part of the prestigious College. They viewed religiosity as based on "belief" or "faith" rather than reason, and perceived an inherent conflict between religion and being an intellectual. Partying, a valued part of the student college experience for most non-religious students, was also viewed as incompatible with religious practice; religiosity was seen by non-religious students as an irrational, deviant impediment to having fun and getting the full college experience. Our findings correspond with Donna Freitas' (2010) study, which found that students often fail to reconcile religiosity with college party culture.

Despite the taken-for-granted, secular, mainstream campus culture, many students were involved in a discreet, individualized seeking of the sacred. While students were often hesitant to publicly self-identify as religious or engage in religious dialogue, behind closed doors they were more willing to share personal stories

and experiences regarding their spiritual and religious backgrounds, beliefs, and practices when given the opportunity.

A minority of students embraced a public religious identity and maintained small marginalized communities in which they could embrace and discuss their religious and spiritual lives. In the face of discrimination and prejudice from the larger campus community, some religious students deepened their commitments to their faith tradition and their small student religious communities. This finding suggesting that some students will embrace, strengthen, and assert their religious identities when confronted with adversity mirrors sociologist Lori Peek's (2005) scholarship on the *declared religious identities* of Muslim students after the September 11 terrorist attacks. In the face of religious stereotyping and criticism, some Muslim students developed a stronger commitment to their faith and expressed their religiosity in more public ways.

At the liberal arts college we investigated, dominant secular norms and structural institutional pathways combined to discourage religious practice and spiritual exploration among the students. Because the structural opportunities for religious practice and dialogue were limited and socially marginalized, students were more likely to develop discreet, private religious and spiritual beliefs and practices. With the largely invisible nature of student religiosity and spirituality on campus, few students explicitly requested greater administrative support of religious and spiritual initiatives. Consequently, the administration did not prioritize these measures. Thus, students' religious and spiritual lives remained largely concealed and private, and the cycle of invisible religion perpetuated.

Like many other liberal arts colleges, the College aimed to foster a community with dialogue and openness regarding various forms of diversity. In order to better fulfill this mission regarding religion and spirituality specifically, we suggest that student leaders and administrators at secular colleges and universities focus on creating safe spaces for "deliberative dialogues" early on in students' college experiences (Lane et al., 2013, pp. 348). Intentional open dialogue would help foster a greater openness among students in exploring religion and spirituality, and aid in preventing and addressing religious intolerance. We recommend that these dialogues begin as early as freshmen orientation. After undergoing an identity-sensitivity training that includes a component on religiosity and spirituality, orientation leaders should be given the space to facilitate safe, inter-faith dialogues among new students. We believe that early support in sharing one's story will have a lasting effect on students' comfort in publicly sharing their religious and spiritual identities and expressions during the rest of their time on campus.

Our study also reveals surprisingly high amounts of discriminatory attitudes and actions against students

from all of the three major religious traditions represented at the College—Christianity, Judaism, and Islam. Safe spaces for practice and dialogue allowed these religious groups to form their own supportive communities, even in the midst of a culture of discrimination. These findings underscore the importance of prioritizing the creation of safe spaces for religious and spiritual groups to convene and practice in colleges and universities. We recommend that faculty and administrative members work with religious student groups to ensure that each group has a designated space on campus in which they can gather and maintain their religious practices.

In addition, our study has illustrated the importance of having religiously diverse faculty and staff members. Students cited the valuable role that faculty and staff mentors can play in increasing students' comfort levels on campus and providing support. Finding a full-time staff member can be a challenge, especially at a small college. If full-time staffing is not possible, we recommend that administrative members work with student leaders to consider alternative options, such as hiring a part-time staff member, or forming connections with religious leaders in the area.

Initiatives fostering religious dialogue and literacy are being intentionally developed on other college campuses across the nation. President Obama launched "The President's Interfaith and Community Service Campus Challenge," in 2011, which encouraged many colleges and universities to commit to fostering religious and spiritual respect and education (U.S. Department of Education, 2011). Prestigious Ivy League schools, such as Yale and Princeton, have become national leaders in developing programs of religious pluralism and spiritual exploration. Such programs are promising but, as we suspect based on our results and other research (e.g. Freitas, 2010; Lane et al., 2013), still relatively rare or marginal at most secular colleges and universities. Because college is a critical time of identity formation for many students, such programs are very important not only for supporting religious and spiritual students, but also for promoting inclusion of people of all religions into campus social life. While at college, students may also be exposed to a greater diversity of identities in their peers than ever before. Colleges should take advantage of this opportunity to help students develop relationships with people from other faith traditions.

Future research should follow youth in their transitions from college to the workplace to examine the extent to which hidden religious and spiritual orientations are carried on into the world of work. We predict that the attitudes, beliefs, and practices that students develop with respect to their own spiritual and religious lives, and that of others, during their college years will affect their attitudes in subsequent life experiences in their workplaces and other often secular in-

stitutions. Future research should also examine how religious tolerance developed during one's youth, or the lack thereof, shape one's treatment of members of other faith traditions during adulthood.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

References

- Armstrong, E. A., & Hamilton, L.T. (2013). *Paying for the party*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Astin, A. W., Astin, H. S., & Lindholm, J. A. (2011). *Cultivating the spirit: How college can enhance students' inner lives*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Astin, A. W., Astin, H. S., Bryant, A. N., Calderone, S., Lindholm, J. A., & Szelenyi, K. (2004). *The spiritual life of college students*. Los Angeles: Higher Education Research Institute.
- Bouman, J., DeGraaf, D., Mulder, M., & Marion, J. V. (2005). Connecting the mind, heart, and hands through intentional community at Calvin College. *Journal of College and Character*, 6. doi:10.2202/1940-1639.1463
- Cadge, W., & Konieczny, M. E. (2014). "Hidden in plain sight": The significance of religion and spirituality in secular organizations. *Sociology of Religion*, 75, 551-563.
- Cherry, C., DeBerg, B. A., & Porterfield, A. (2001). *Religion on campus*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.
- Evans, J. H., & Evans, M. S. (2008). Religion and science: Beyond the epistemological conflict narrative. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 34, 87-105.
- Freitas, D. (2010). *Sex and the soul: Juggling sexuality, spirituality, romance, and religion on America's college campuses*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Higher Education Research Institute. (2013). Senior survey.
- Higher Education Research Institute. (2014). Senior survey.
- Jacobsen, D., & Jacobsen, R. H. (2012). *No longer invisible: Religion in university education*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Kuh, G. D., & Gonyea, R. M. (2005, July 11). *Exploring the relationships between spirituality, liberal learning, and college student engagement*. New York: Teagle Foundation. Retrieved from http://www.teaglefoundation.org/teagle/media/library/documents/resources/20050711_k_gonyea.pdf
- Lane, A. M., Allis, S., Allman, N., Pettys, A., Quinlan, M., & Siefert, B. (2013). "Religion is not a monolith": Religious experience at a Midwestern Liberal Arts College. *Journal of College and Character*, 14, 341-350. doi: 10.1515/jcc-2013-0043
- Lindholm, J. A. (2006). The "interior" lives of American college students: Preliminary findings from a national study. In J. Heft (Ed.), *Passing on the faith: Transforming traditions for the next generation of Jews, Christians, and Muslims* (pp. 75-102). New York: Fordham University Press.
- Ma, S. Y. (2010). The Christian college experience and the development of spirituality among students. *Christian Higher Education*, 2, 321-339. doi: 10.1080/15363750390246097
- Maryl, D., & Oeur, F. (2009). Current knowledge and directions for future research. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 48, 260-275. doi: 10.1111/j.1468-5906.2009.01446
- Peek, L. (2005). Becoming Muslim: The development of a religious identity. *Sociology of Religion*, 66, 215-242. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4153097>
- Pew Research Center. (2015). *America's changing religious landscape: Christians decline sharply as share of population; unaffiliated and other faiths continue to grow*. Washington, DC: Gregory Smith.
- Reuben, J. A. (1996). *The making of the modern university: Intellectual transformation and the marginalization of morality*. Chicago: University of Chicago.
- Richter, R.J. (2001). Correlation of psychological well-being and Christian spiritual well-being at a small Christian liberal arts college in the urban Midwest. *Wisconsin Lutheran College*.
- Smith, C. (2003). *The secular revolution: Power, interests, and conflict in the secularization of American public life*. Oakland: University of California Press.
- Smith, C., & Snell, P. (2009). *Souls in transition: The religious and spiritual lives of emerging adults: The religious and spiritual lives of emerging adults*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Speers, S. (2008). The secular thesis revisited: Religious life on the secular college campus today. *Journal of College and Character*, 10. doi:10.2202/1940-1639.1056
- U.S. Department of Education. (2011). *Center for faith-based and neighborhood partnerships*. President's Campus Challenge. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education.

About the Authors



Kateri Boucher

Kateri Boucher is a Sociology student at Hamilton College in the class of 2017. She is currently doing research on civic agriculture in Quito, Ecuador and on urban farms in the United States.



Dr. Jaime Kucinkas

Jaime Kucinkas is Assistant Professor of Sociology at Hamilton College. Her research interests span the sociology of religion, inequality, social movements, and cultural change. In her current research, she examines how people experience the sacred in their everyday lives at work and in other secular institutions. Kucinkas has published in the *American Journal of Sociology*, the *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, and *Sociology of Religion*.

Appendix
Table 1. Religiosity and spirituality of randomly selected respondents (N= 28).

	Total	Percent
<i>Religious Self-Identification</i>		
Religious and Spiritual	8	28.6
Religious	3	10.7
Spiritual but not Religious	5	17.9
None	12	42.9
<i>Denomination</i>		
Protestant	2	7.1
Catholic	7	25.0
Jewish	4	14.3
Episcopalian	1	3.6
None	14	50.0
<i>Belief in a Higher Power</i>		
Yes	16	57.1
No	6	21.4
Not sure	6	21.4
<i>Frequency of Prayer</i>		
Daily	7	25.0
Weekly	1	3.6
Monthly	1	3.6
Yearly	3	10.7
Never	16	57.1
<i>Frequency of Attending Religious Services</i>		
Weekly	10	35.7
Monthly	2	7.1
Never	16	57.1
<i>Spiritual Experiences</i>		
Had at least one kind of spiritual experience		
Meditation	21	75.0
Nature	7	25.0
Running/Sports	5	17.9
Other	2	7.1
None	7	25.0