



Journal of Student Affairs

Journal of Student Affairs at New York University

Volume V 2009

Volume V 2009

Journal of Student Affairs

at New York University

Volume V 2009

Visit the *Journal* online at <http://steinhardt.nyu.edu/josa/>

Intellectual and Educational Paradigm Shifts: Catalysts in Changing Student Religiosity A Review of Literature

Jennifer Goodwin

College student religiosity has undergone several changes during the last half of the twentieth century. The majority of American college students today prefer to describe themselves as 'spiritual' rather than 'religious.' This change in preference occurred simultaneously with a change in student population, resulting in a challenge to the reigning philosophical paradigm of positivism. After examining student surveys about religiosity during the time period as well as secondary sources to understand the philosophical paradigm shift, it was determined that new populations on campus allowed for philosophical paradigm shifts and contributed to the change in student views of religiosity and spirituality.

In 1932, New York University (NYU) celebrated their centennial with a conference entitled "The Obligation of Universities to the Social Order," which revealed the tangled relationship that had developed between religion and higher education ideology. The conference emphasized the need for progressive commitment to research and the further discovery of scientific knowledge, while also consistently emphasizing the need to develop students' morality and spirituality. Walter E. Spahr, an NYU economist at the time, was one of the speakers at the conference and suggested that the ideal graduate should resemble Francis Bacon: "discursive, discerning, searching, patient, experimental, skeptical, and independent" (Hollinger, 1988, p. 253). However, another speaker at the event, poet Alfred Noyes, "was introduced as one who had wisely recognized the limitations of 'scientific philosophy' and who saw to 'those deeper things which we call religion'" (Hollinger, p. 253). The conference was one example of the tensions within higher education about the nature and role of science and religion. During the 1930s and 1940s, higher education in America had reached the full extent of the conflict between religious ideals and dedication to

Jennifer Goodwin (jennifer.goodwin@nyu.edu) is an Academic Advisor at New York University. She will complete her Master's of Arts in Higher Education Administration in May 2009.

scientific discovery (Beckwith, 1957). This conflict has had deep implications for student religiosity and higher education's philosophical paradigm throughout the twentieth century. Student displays of religiosity and spirituality have changed over the past century just as the relationship between higher education and religion has shifted. A review of the literature will aid student affairs practitioners in understanding how student religiosity and philosophical paradigm have been altered by the deep conflict between science and religion.

Higher education began in what would become the United States with the opening of Harvard College in 1636 (Marsden, 1994; Thelin, 2004). The earliest mission of the college was to educate a new population of clergy and civil leaders, both of which were occupations deemed necessary for the survival of the colony (Marsden). The fact that one institution developed to serve both these needs did not trouble seventeenth century colonial Americans. Harvard's earliest motto was *Veritas* (Truth), although it was changed shortly thereafter to *In Christi Gloriam* (Glory in Christ) (Reuben, 1996). These two mottos were highly interchangeable in colonial America, as the Puritan's definition of truth was entirely conceived through their glorification of Christ (Reuben). Higher education in colonial America, "identified those men who were called by their spiritual and intellectual qualifications to be the interpreters of the Scripture and thus those who would maintain the fundamental principles on which the community would run" (Marsden, p. 41). To be an intellectual individual necessarily suggested that one was religious and that one should use these capabilities to serve the public good. In fact, the majority of the instructors in the early colonial colleges were members of the clergy (Marsden).

As the model for higher education in America, Harvard set a precedent which influenced the earliest mission statements of American colleges (Thelin, 2004). Higher education from the start was not simply a method of shaping the young intellect, it was a means of creating and enforcing moral development (Reuben, 1996). This moral development was a strict adherence to Protestant values, which emphasized the necessity of doing good works to glorify God and serve one's community. The most basic method of moral development was through rigorous education and the pursuit of the Divine (Reuben). Thus, education and religiosity were nearly synonymous in colonial America, and combined created the reigning moral philosophy of education.

The advent of the Enlightenment in the late seventeenth century brought new ideas into the American university and began to call into question many of the ideas behind the reigning moral philosophy of education (Reuben, 1996).

Enlightenment thought valued those qualities embodied by Francis Bacon, mentioned at the conference at New York University: “discursive, discerning, searching, patient, experimental, skeptical, and independent” (Hollinger, 1988, p. 253). The sciences that arose during the Enlightenment were regarded by educators as an approach rather than a field of study themselves. For something to be scientific “meant that it was disciplined, ordered, and systematic” (Thelin, 2004, p. 114). It did not necessarily indicate a body of research or an even a particular ideology during this period. The scientific method began to replace religious doctrine as the new standard of the intellectual thought process. New Englanders at the time believed that there was only one possible version of truth and any pursuit of that truth was a positive religious experience; in fact it was an obligation they owed to their religion (Reuben). With only one possible version of the truth, science could not offer too great a threat: “since the creator of heaven and earth was also the author of Scripture, truths learned through the methods of philosophy and those learned from biblical authority would supplement each other and harmonize in one curriculum” (Marsden, 1994, p. 50). Thus, throughout the early Enlightenment in America, science was not regarded as a threat to religious organization in any way. These two ideas were compatible and seemed only able to enhance each other. The ideas of the Enlightenment had not taken hold completely enough to change the way American Protestants thought about the nature of knowledge. As philosophical principles, such as logic and empiricism, made greater strides into the academic thought of the eighteenth century, it would become more and more difficult for American Protestants to retain this mode of uncomplicated thinking.

By the mid-nineteenth century, “reverence for scientific authority was the major intellectual manifestation” of America (Marsden, 1994, p. 99). At this time, educators in America began to sense that tension might arise between the scientific rationality of Enlightenment thought and the Protestant religion. A group of reformers had declared that evangelical religion was no longer applicable in their modern, scientific world. Among these reformers were most notably Andrew Dickson White and Ezra Cornell, who founded Cornell University in New York as a non-sectarian institution (Reuben, 1996). The tension between evangelical and scientific educators had become a palpable reality in America. To accommodate for some of this tension between the new scientific outlook and dogmatic religion, a new form of modern, liberal Protestantism emerged which embraced empirical education and the notion of academic freedom (Marsden; Hart, 1999; Reuben). According to this view, people should be free to pursue knowledge because it could only serve to glorify God. The Modern Protestant thus championed academic freedom and plurality of ideas (Marsden;

Hart; Reuben). Ultimately all knowledge must converge into one Truth, one which supported the Protestant notion of God, thus the Modern Protestant was willing to compromise on dogmatic or theological ideas in order to pursue knowledge in other ways (Reuben). However, the rise of evolutionary science and a complete reliance on empirical investigation would make it difficult for the Modern Protestant to retain this belief system for much longer.

As a result of the Modern Protestant's ideological compromise, many mandatory theology courses were removed from the American collegiate curriculum, although universities maintained a desire to educate the whole student (Hart, 1999). This meant that there was a need to influence not only the intellectual well-being but also the spiritual and moral well-being of each college student. The study of religion rose during this time period as one way to keep theology as a part of the intellectual life of the students. In this model, religion itself was asked to adhere to the scientific method of observation and analysis. D.G. Hart explained that this inclusion of religion was effectively a bargain Protestants had to make if they wanted religious instruction to be included in the university curriculum: "Protestant educators naturally could claim to be specialists in the Bible, theology, ethics, and religious history, but in other areas religious perspectives would have to take a backseat to the rules of the specific academic discipline." (Hart, p. 193). Science had gained enough ground in academia to eliminate many of the mandatory theological courses from the curriculum. From its earliest days when higher education's curriculum had been determined almost entirely by the religion of each school, it was now faced with a complete lack of mandatory religious participation. Religion could still be experienced on campus through student activities, but it was no longer an integral piece of the American higher education curriculum.

As the ideas of science took hold in most areas of American academia, a new philosophical paradigm also took hold: logical positivism. The father of logical positivism is often cited as Auguste Comte, who believed that "humans were rising from a religious stage in which questions were decided by authority, through a metaphysical stage in which philosophy ruled, to a positive stage in which empirical investigation would be accepted as the only reliable road to truth" (Marsden, 1994, p. 130). Logical positivists from the start then set themselves in direct contrast to those who adhered to organized religion. In 1957, Beckwith defined the beliefs of logical positivists by saying, "logical positivists believe that science contains all truth, that religion and philosophy include only false and nonsensical theories, aside from the few scientific facts and theories they duplicate. They assert that truth (true statements) can be created only by using

scientific methods” (Beckwith, p. 2). The scientific method, with positivism as the driving force behind it, quickly became the standard by which academic research was judged. Scientific reasoning and rationality were thus the core traits of any respected field of academic study. Throughout the 30s, 40s and 50s it became more and more apparent that religion and scientific study were not only incompatible, but in direct opposition to each other. The Modern Protestant faction had aligned themselves with academic freedom and pursuit of knowledge, so it was difficult for them to suddenly renounce the new scientific knowledge, which flourished during this period.

During the 1960s, the civil rights movement allowed a new population of students to enter American higher education. It was no longer the case that the vast majority of students would be male, Protestant, and wealthy. With so many new perspectives and religions represented within each institution, the underlying Christian current became more and more unacceptable to those to whom it did not apply. The very ideas of freedom and the pursuit of Truth which Protestantism had embraced allowed the positivist paradigm of one God, one Truth to slowly destruct (Marsden, 1994; Hart, 1999). The emphasis on difference and pluralism led to a new philosophical paradigm: constructivism, which eliminated the idea of one Truth and absolute knowledge from the academic lexicon. Religion in higher education lost even more standing during this period and the Protestant cultural dominance continually subsided.

The influx of new ideas in the university challenged not only Protestant dominance, but also the reigning philosophical paradigm of logical positivism. The alternative was constructivism, a philosophical approach which emphasized a new, individualized type of knowledge, constructed by each individual’s life experiences. Von Glaserfeld (1984) explained constructivism as a radical development, “because it breaks with convention and develops a theory of knowledge in which knowledge does not reflect an ‘objective’ ontological reality, but exclusively an ordering an organization of a world constituted by our experience” (p. 24). The central idea here is a world in which each person constructs their own personalized version of knowledge. The plurality of identities and religious affiliations on campus encouraged a campus-wide shift to a constructivist paradigm. It allowed each member of the campus community to feel that their own religious experience was valid and equitable with any other member’s. This type of peaceful coexistence would have been difficult under a positivist or Protestant-dominated paradigm, as there could only have been one valid experience. Those who did not conform to that experience would have been deemed outsiders or inferior (Caplovitz & Sherrow, 1977). Constructivism, therefore,

allowed the new, more diverse student population to engage with each other's belief system in a more tolerant and interactive way.

The culture revolution of the 1960s was in many ways a reaction against the positivist paradigm, and on campus, this usually indicated a reaction against religion as well. Those who identified outside of the mainstream voiced their disenchantment with their institutions of higher education, government, and religion. The main focus of student protests in the 1960s was American participation in the Vietnam War. Studies have consistently found that students most active in these protests were also most likely to be disassociated from their childhood religion (Conners, Leonard, & Burnham, 1968; Tygart, 1971). The presence of such upheaval on American campuses had significant indications for student religiosity. Political liberalism and religiosity have historically held a negative relationship (Nelson, 1988; Lee, 2002), thus it follows that during this period of liberal uprisings on campus, religiosity would undergo a major challenge. This challenge came in the form of constructivism and the rise of the idea of spirituality as distinct from religiosity.

Student religiosity has been affected by this paradigm shift in several ways. Just as the Modern Protestant rejected dogmatic religion in favor of a more liberal definition, American college students have altered their methods of thinking as well. Cherry, Deberg, and Porterfield (2001) conducted a study of student religiosity on four American college campuses of varying size, denominational-affiliation, and geographical location. There was a general rejection of the word "religion" and a marked preference for the idea of spirituality on all four college campuses, a trend which likely holds true on most American college campuses today (Cherry, Deberg, and Porterfield). Bryant, Choi, and Yasuno (2003) similarly found that students consider religion and spirituality to be two separate notions: "although students became less religiously active in the first year of college with respect to attending religious services, praying/meditating, and discussing religion, they become more committed to integrating spirituality into their lives" (Bryant et al. p. 736). Students struggle to adhere completely to the idea of a dogmatic, institutional religion, but the notion of creating one's own personal and individualized faith system is appealing. Likewise, Lee (2002) found that college students' religious observance decreased, while their spirituality increased, and their tolerance of other religious views increased: "students may engage in less church attendance and observance of the Sabbath but may still hold strong convictions about being 'spiritual' and may develop more tolerance of multiple religious faiths compared to their beliefs when they first entered college" (Lee, 2002, p. 382). These recent studies (Bryant et al.;

Lee) both demonstrated that college students today become less religiously observant, but more spiritual and tolerant while in college. This increase in tolerance supports the paradigm shift to constructivism in the academic community, as it indicates that each member deems each other's beliefs to be valid and equitable with their own.

Ruthnow (1979) explained that the events of the 1960s wreaked havoc on the central tenets of positivism, and therefore on religion in America, not only on college campuses, but within society at large. The changes wrought by the 1960s "[have] resulted in a religious posture characterized more by seeking, nomadic wandering and choosing among diverse options (spirituality) than by the more stable posture of dwelling in or inhabiting safe, sacred places (religion)" (Cherry et al., 2001, p. 276). In this model, positivism and religious institutionalism are identified similarly, as they both posit that there can only be one model of truth and one basis of knowledge. Constructivism, with its emphasis on personalized experience, rejects the ideas of positivism and dogmatic religion. Spirituality, as a personalized and customizable ideology, fits nicely within this construct.

These new forms of student religiosity reinforce the philosophical paradigm shift from positivism to constructivism. Just as the constructivist's knowledge cannot be tied down to one singular experience, American adolescents struggle to adhere to a single religion's value system. The alternative is to pursue spirituality rather than to continue strict adherence to one religious faith. These changes in student religiosity preference have arisen because of the philosophical paradigm shift which occurred in the 1960s as a result of social, political, and religious upheaval on American college campuses. The complex relationship between higher education and religion challenged paradigms and encouraged new modes of knowledge construction. Within its 350 year history, higher education has experienced a complete reversal in its negotiations with religious sectarianism. Initially created to affirm and enforce religion in the American colonies, Harvard set an early precedent, in which intellectual thought and religiosity went hand in hand. Enlightenment thought and culture challenged this assumption and the advent of science as a process and eventually an entire mode of thinking ultimately overturned this notion with the reigning philosophical paradigm of logical positivism. Religion's role on campus further splintered as events of the 1960s introduced new student and faculty populations on campus and wrought a new philosophical paradigm, constructivism. American college students embraced constructivism and turned to a personalized spirituality rather than strict adherence to organized religion. The dominance of constructivism and the preference of spirituality seems likely to continue until another

decade of tumultuous events challenges it.

Student affairs professionals need to take these changes and make them a part of their practice. The college years, especially for traditionally-aged students, are very challenging and turbulent times in regard to religious beliefs, as evidenced by Lee (2002) and Bryant et al. (2003). The constructivist paradigm has become ingrained on many college campuses and this culture encourages students to question their religious beliefs. Student affairs professionals need to be prepared to support their students during this questioning process and resources on campus should be strengthened for those going through this process. Universities should be prepared to offer spirituality counseling at a variety of levels. This means that counselors and therapists on campus need to understand the particular spiritual and religious challenges for undergraduates and peer advisors and resident assistants should be aware of the warning signs of spiritual struggle and should have resources to which they can refer students. These additional measures on campus will ensure that students going through spiritual and religious problems will be cared for appropriately.

References

- Beckwith, B. (1957). *Religion, philosophy, and science: An introduction to logical positivism*. New York City: Philosophical Library, Inc.
- Bryant, A., Choi, J., Yasuno, M. (2003). Understanding the religious and spiritual dimensions of students' lives in the first year of college. *Religious and Spiritual Dimensions* 44: 6.
- Caplovitz, D., Sherrow, F. (1977). *The Religious Drop-Outs: Apostasy Among College Graduates*. Beverly Hills: Sage Publications.
- Cherry, C., Deberg, B., Porterfield, A. (2001). *Religion on campus*. Chapel-Hill: University of North Carolina Press.
- Connors, J., Leonard, R., Burnham, K. (1968). Religion and opposition to war among college students. *Sociological Analysis* 27: 187-209.
- Hart, D. (1999). *The university gets religion: Religious studies in American higher education*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Hollinger, D. (1988). Two NYUs and "The Obligation of Universities to the Social Order" in the Great Depression. In Bender, T. (Ed.) *The university and the city*. New York City: Oxford University Press.
- Lee, J. (2002). Religion and college attendance: Change among students. *The Review of Higher Education* 25:4.

- Marsden, G. (1994). *The soul of the American university: From Protestant establishment to established nonbelief*. New York City: Oxford University Press.
- Nelson, L. (1988). Disaffiliation, desacralization, and political values. In Bromley, D. (Ed), *Falling from the faith: Causes and consequences of religious apostasy*. Beverly Hills: Sage Publications, Inc.
- Reuben, J. (1996). *The making of the modern university*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Ruthnow, R. (1998). *After heaven: Spirituality in America since the 1950s*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Thelin, J. (2004). *A History of American Higher Education*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Tygart, C. (1971). Religiosity and university student anti-Vietnam war attitudes: A negative or curvilinear relationship? *Sociological Analysis* 32: 2.
- Von Glaserfeld, H. (1984). An Introduction to Radical Constructivism. In *The invented reality: How do we know what we believe we know? Contributions to constructivism*. New York City: W.W. Norton and Company.