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Exploring Spirituality as a Research Agenda

Paul Gleason

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Chicago, Illinois

The subject of spirituality in higher education is a difficult one to address. Highly diffuse, the term spirituality is attributed to a wide range of activities, beliefs and general dispositions such as humility or a strong sense of purpose (Winterowd, Harrist, Thomason, Worth, & Carlozzi, 2005). As a dependent variable, spirituality is difficult to measure effectively. Recent research has attempted to more carefully measure aspects of spirituality as a distinct construct separate from religiousness or religious activity (Astin, Astin, & Lindholm, 2011). Decades of research indicate that college affects a religious decline and disaffiliation with traditional religious practices. More nuanced investigations indicate that students enter college with significant spiritual interest (Lindholm, 2007), and the college experience allows for active exploration and redefinition of spirituality though this process can be a turbulent one (Cherry, DeBerg, & Porterfield, 2001; Winterowd, et al., 2005). However, before reviewing the approaches to date, it is helpful to understand why researchers have a growing interest in understanding the effect of college on students' spirituality.

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Historically speaking, the founding of higher education in the United States was a spiritual-civic movement. Beginning with the Puritan founding of Harvard College in 1636, the Congregationalist founding of Yale in 1701, and the Presbyterian establishment of the institution which would become Princeton in 1746, the mission of the country's institutions of higher education was unapologetically religious (Rudolph, 1991). In fact, it would be inconsistent with an eighteenth and nineteenth century epistemology to separate religious precepts from the education process. Harvard's founding Precepts and Rules stated,

> Let every Student be plainly instructed, and earnestly pressed to consider well, the maine end of his life and studies is, to know God and Jesus Christ which is eternal life (John 17:3) and therefore to lay Christ in the bottome, as the only foundation of all sound knowledge and Learning. (Harvard University, 2011, para 2)

Religious principles and biblical knowledge together formed the foundation to all aspects of learning (Hartley, 2004).

While the twentieth century saw a significant shift away from religious-based curricula, two additional characteristics of American higher education extended a more general spiritual emphasis beyond sectarian founding well into the modern era. First, the traditional role of institutions acting *in loco parentis* established broad authority for the university to provide care and control of students beyond purely academic instruction. The role of student body caretaker extended to moral and often spiritual activity, even in state-sponsored institutions, until the landmark case of Dixon v. Alabama in 1961. Second, the traditional liberal arts core—a vestige from the classical curriculum—is contemplative and spiritual in regards to its immaterial definitions of knowledge and purpose. It is on this liberal arts tradition that present day spiritual advocates at secular institutions focus their attention (Astin, 2004; Zajonc, 2003). Critiquing the artifical seperation of the purely academic and spiritual as a disconnect from what it means to be human, these authors see little justification for such a limited exploration and explanation within the context of the university experience (Tolliver & Tisdell, 2006). Recent postmodernist critiques have also questioned the singularly authoritative voice of the scientific method, ironically opening the field for a renewal of interest in spiritual and even religious explorations in higher education (Hartley, 2004).

Defining Religousness and Spirtuality

As expressed in Amherst College's motto, Let Them Give Light to the World, non-religious colleges and universities often describe their mission in lofty, almost religious language. To the degree that the institutions describe the college experience in transformational terms, researchers ask from what and into what are students being transformed (Capeheart-Meningall, 2005).

Mission statements typically describe student development as holistic, including intellectual, moral and civic dimensions of maturity. Given such goals, research has sought to measure the effect of the college experience on these dimensions, including the

impact of college on pre-existing religious convictions and the spiritual beliefs of students (Bowman & Small, 2010) as well as how spirituality is the unifying experience of student development (Tisdell, 2003).

In order to measure the effect of college on such dimensions as religiousness and spirituality, researchers defined and operationalized these concepts. The following review indicates that various attempts were made with mixed results. A review of the literature reveals that the terms religiousness and spirituality were often used interchangeably. However, this conflation obscures important distinctions for research. Careful analysis indicates that religiousness, in the context of higher education research, is a subset of a more general concept of spirituality. Spirituality is viewed as a personal quest—a process of seeking authenticity, connectedness to self and community, developing meaning, and a relationship with transcendence (Love & Talbot, 1999; Tisdell, 2003). Religion, on the other hand, refers specifically to organized communities of faith with defined practices or rituals and shared systems of beliefs or doctrines concerning the world, its creation, and destiny (Astin et al., 2011; Tisdell, 2003). While these concepts are distinct, it is important to understand the general compatibility of the constructs and avoid pronouncing simplistic generalizations, namely, that religion is a closed system, dogmatic and negative while spirituality is personal, open and positive. Religion is spiritual, but the practice of spirituality can stand apart from religion in students who construct themselves as spiritual but not religious (Bryant, Yasuno, & Choi, 2003).

Measuring Religiousness and Spirituality

From a research perspective, operationalizing the terms of religiousness and spirituality appropriately is difficult. The research conducted to date tends to operationalize religiousness as the extent to which an individual engages in external religious activity. Bryant, Yasuno, and Choi (2003) measured changes in religiousness using a longitudinal sample of first-year college students who completed the Cooperative Institutional Research Program. Religiousness was quantified by counting attendance at religious services or clubs, discussing religion, and praying/meditating. Certainly, these are important activities in many religious traditions. However, religious activities are a limited proxy for religious conviction. Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) established that participation in a residential college can significantly attenuate observable or reported religious activity. There may be environmental factors at work in this process that are not often considered. Students migrate to their college campuses from across the country and around the world. Access to a familiar denominational community or to non-Christian religious groups may be difficult, especially in the rural setting of many college campuses. In addition, personal religious practices often require a level of privacy that is lacking in residence hall settings. These environmental factors tend to naturally attenuate religious behavior, particularly among the less mobile freshman living on campus.

However, research has also found that religious attitudes change during the college experience. Attitudes tend to become less dogmatic, are viewed more as a personal conviction, and gain in relative respect for other faith systems. In particular, these attitudinal changes are distinct from those experienced by young adults not attending college (Funk & Willits, 1987). One aspect of Pascarella and Terenzini's (1991) review of student development research examines the evidence that different kinds of institutions

exert a differential influence on various measures of the impact of college on students, that is, they are "between-college effects" (p. 9). Their summary of the literature finds college students' religious beliefs were less negatively affected in students who lived at home during college and/or attended religiously-affiliated schools (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). The same effect has been seen among students who attended colleges at which the faculty and other students were more religious (Astin, 1977).

Pascarella and Terenzini's (2005) updated review of research in this area found mixed results in measuring the impact of college on religiousness. They found that studies with nationally representative samples actually saw small increases or refinements in the value students attribute to religion (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Two key studies were summarized. The first was conducted by Lee (2002) and involved 4,000 students in 76 four-year colleges participating in a repeated measures study during freshman and senior years. While half of the students reported no change in the value they placed in religion, 38% reported increases (Lee, 2002). Studies which sought to establish the net effect of college on student religiousness did not control for previous religious conviction but rather relied on students to self-report both their growth and the colleges' contributions to the development of religious values (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). As such, these studies have limited explanatory value.

Studies designed to measure an increase or decrease in student religious inclination may be fundamentally misconstrued as they construct religious beliefs on a telelogical continuum rather than a recursive process. Evidence indicates that religious values may not be developed as much as they are examined, refined, and reincorporated into an expanded self-definition as students progress through college (Cherry, DeBerg, & Porterfield, 2001).

Is Spirituality a University's Concern?

While changes in spiritual beliefs during the college experience are interesting, one must ask whether these notions are substantive enough to warrant serious research outside of sectarian institutions. Are spiritual beliefs among college students any more compelling for higher education research than, say, the effect of the college experience on students' interest in professional sports? This paper has indicated that spiritual matters were intricately connected to early models of higher education, but what on-going value should be placed on spiritual development? The following summarizes themes found in the literature supporting further exploration.

Institutional Fit

As a part of a national study titled "Spirituality in Higher Education" a collaborative group headquartered at the University of California, Los Angeles conducted a multi-year study across 236 campuses of more than 100,000 first year college students (Lindholm, 2007). The study also included faculty members at more than 500 institutions nationwide. The results of the first full survey in 2004 indicate that spiritual issues are important to incoming students as well as to many faculty (Lindholm, 2007). Two-thirds of student respondents indicated that their spiritual development was "essential" or "very important" while four of five faculty participating considered themselves a "spiritual person" (Lindholm, 2007, p. 6). Lindholm and her colleagues found that both public and private institutions' "spirituality shapes the perspectives brought into educational

settings and the values placed at the center of academic pursuits" (p. 11). These findings suggest that spirituality remains a significant aspect of the college experience and is central to how participants construct knowledge (Tisdell, 2003). Given this, students can experience a disruption of expectations if the institution does not effectively provide a nurturing environment for spiritual growth. If students face limited opportunities to engage in spiritual activities because of the lack of access or privacy, or students sense that institution's environment is hostile to the open exploration of spiritual matters, students could experience a diminished connection or commitment to the institution. Access to such opportunities would encourage a sense of congruence between the students' beliefs and the college environment (Bryant, et al., 2003).

Certainly, students attending faith-based colleges would have high expectations of what Morris, Smith, and Cejda (2003) term "spiritual fit" (p. 343). Building on previous findings which indicated that attending religiously affiliated schools enhanced students' religious participation in college (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991), Morris, et al. (2003) extended Tinto's student persistence model to include a Spiritual Integration scale. They found that student persistence was significantly related to measures of positive student perceptions of the following items:

1. Being at this school is contributing to my spiritual growth.

2. My understanding of God is being strengthened by classroom and/or campus experiences.

3. Faculty, administrators, and/or staff are helpful to me in processing issues related to my faith.

4. This school provides adequate opportunities for involvement in ministry.

5. Given where I am spiritually right now, this school is a good fit for me.

Student Development

In addition to making students feel at home, one of the roles of higher education, especially within the liberal arts tradition, is to develop the inner person, including students' ability to reframe knowledge and integrate complex and diverse perspectives (Zajonc, 2003). Such a perspective connects spirituality with the search for truth, contemplative awareness, and personal integration. Eschewing the dichotomy between faith and reason, science and faith, Zajonic (2003) argues for what might be called a "cognitive spirituality" (p. 56).

Cognitive spirituality is similar to Kegan's (1994) construct of self-authorship. Guided by Piaget's constructive-developmental system, self-authorship is an ability to develop complex belief systems which allow for both interconnectivity and distinguishing how individuals understand themselves, their world, and their relationships (Baxter-Magolda, 2008). These principles are aligned with Friedman's (2007) concept of self-differentiation.

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It is a transformative shift to internal meaning-making (Baxter-Magolda, 2001). Chickering, Dalton, and Stamm (2006) contend that personal authenticity can only be realized by returning to the traditional role of the university in promoting spiritual growth among its students and faculty.

Community Dynamics

In any community dominated by adolescents and young adults, issues related to the level of mature interaction are a concern. Winterowd, et al. (2005) took an initial step in the nascent research on the connection between spirituality and coping responses in a single institution study conducted at a southern four year college. Counterintuitively, Winterowd, et al. found a positive relationship between spirituality and stress and anger. Students who were more contemplative and meditative were also more prone to stress and anger. In exploring this finding, Winterowd, et al. speculate that spiritual students may experience greater levels of discord, both with their college environment as well as a sense of internal angst as they question long-held beliefs or traditions from their family structure. This turmoil may be most acute in students from highly authoritative religious families. The study found that the stronger the sense of purpose in students, the more likely students are angry and stressed when their expectations or goals are not realized. For practitioners, these findings point to the importance of creating a positive and supportive environment for students to process the reexamination of their core beliefs.

Conclusion

Research on spirituality in higher education is resurging. Early findings indicated that religiousness declined as students progressed through college. More recently nuanced approaches, carefully distinguishing religious activity from a larger concept of spirituality, found that students' spirituality does not decline, but is recast into a more integrated sense of self.

The concept of spirituality in higher education provides an interesting crossroads for researchers and practitioners in higher education. Spirituality is a highly personal and private matter for students, one that secular institutions may choose to respect but not openly address. Advocates for restoring an overt focus on spirituality within the higher education experience have three general agenda: (a) to support the transition of students with religious or spiritual beliefs to life on campus, (b) to create a rigorous and well-rounded curriculum and student development process in the liberal arts tradition, and to create a highly integrated campus community. These additions to the well-established emphases in student development will ensure a holistic approach in keeping with the aspirations and traditions of American higher education. (g)

Dr. Paul Gleason holds a Doctor of Education from Vanderbilt University.

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