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# How Christianity is Experienced on a College Campus

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Catherine Lee

## ABSTRACT

*This is a qualitative study of the experiences of traditional college students who choose to attend a Christian organization on the University of New Hampshire campus. Information was gathered through both ethnographic research and two in-depth interviews. The results of this study showed that college had a significant impact on how religion was experienced, whether it increased religious inclinations or decreased them. The social expectations of the Christian organization represented a specific way of life, with specific rules to follow. Most students expressed dedication to these rules and adopted them into their own life. A few members chose to only include some aspects of the religion, and the group, into their lives. Results show that involvement in this organization and religion had affect on daily life. The larger implications of this research show the importance of the unique experience being Christian in a college setting.*

This paper will involve inspection of religion on college campuses. The topic of religion on college campuses has been studied before, but mostly quantitatively, whereas this paper focuses on a qualitative view. It is an important topic to study because the change in religion after entering college is often not studied, and many people go through great changes in their life and beliefs while attending a university (Small and Bowman 2011). Unfortunately, because of the time allotted, it proved to be difficult to include any data regarding minorities and religion in this study.

The study included five, forty-five minute observations in a religious organization on the University of New Hampshire campus, and two in-depth interviews. There are studies that focus on the relationship between religion and the experience of college, but most are specific to a certain activity. Past studies have also looked at the relationship between religion and sex, religion and alcohol consumption, and many other situations that are often encountered in college. This paper looks at all aspects of a college student's life and how religion plays a role in the college experience. This study focuses on a broad range of experiences and the in-depth interviews have a range of questions about daily life. The ethnographic research sessions were generally focused on a topic of the day, and therefore allowed more detailed research on certain topics introduced by the organization.

The goal of this study was to answer the research question 'how do people of the Christian faith experience college?' The original topic centered on a variety of religions, but because the study lasted only about three months, time only allowed for a focus on one religion. The largest organization on the University of New Hampshire's campus happens to be a Christian organization, so the research question had to be revised.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

College is a time when new things are discovered and life changes, all of this often including religion. In a study done by Kneipp et al. (2011) it was found that students who attend a private, religious university were more religious than those who attended a public, non-religious university. Though this may seem like an obvious conclusion, one must take into consideration a student's motivation for attending a school. If the school is a student's choice, then there is clearly a desire to attend that university, but many students are pressured by parents, teachers, or friends to attend a university. This decision to attend where they are encouraged may change future experiences. This is also an interesting observation because past studies have indicated that the longer a student's academic career is, the less likely they are to be a part of

an organized religion. Engaging in a religious community increased the commitment to the religion and decreased skepticism, and is heightened when peers have the same beliefs (Small and Bowman 2011).

It has also been shown that as religiosity is heightened, so too are overall subject well-being, and perceived social support. Most importantly those who are more religious are less stressed than those who are not as religious (Diener et al. 2011). This finding has been seen predominantly in the United States, but has also been seen around the world in many other organized religions (Diener et al. 2011). Although students who are more engaged in religion have more religious struggles, especially at private, religious universities (Small and Bowman 2011) this does not seem to discredit the findings of Diener et al (2011). This may be in part because some are involved in religion for personal gain and some are involved because of real motive for the religion (Kniepp et al. 2011).

It was also found that religious tendencies decline in college for a variety of reasons (Hill 2009). At first it was thought that religious knowledge and academic knowledge were in conflict with one another and that forced students to choose, but that was later found to be false (Hill 2009). Most students idealize that religion and science as hand in hand and not at all in conflict with one another (Scheitle 2011). Scheitle found that some students who were perceived as more religious, and often were, felt more threatened by science and are more likely to adopt resistive views that aligned more with their faith (Scheitle 2011). It was found that the real reason for this separation is caused by the act of relocating, the perceived isolation of being on a campus that is not a part of the rest of the world, and substitute activities for religious devotion (Hill 2009).

Religion can also have a large influence on study habits and academic achievements. It was found by Schubmehl et al. that religion is not positively correlated with a higher GPA (Schubmehl et al. 2009). One major correlation found was that family background had both direct and indirect correlations with academic achievements (Schubmehl et al. 2009). It has also been found that although religion alone does not positively correlate with grades, attending religious services does positively correlate with a higher GPA (Mooney 2010). It was found that this affect does not change when controlled for race, gender, family success, or class (Mooney 2010). Both attending religious services and actively observing religious customs were found to positively correlate with a higher GPA (Mooney 2010). Mooney (2010) found that,

“Previous work on religion and high school achievement...argues that regularly attending a church, synagogue, or other religious services in high school provides students with structure and guidance which then improves their academic dedication and performance during their college careers” (p.210).

Overall, the literature points to the positive affect of religion on academic success as represented by GPA. Being religious does not directly affect GPA, but many activities and principles that come with being religious positively correlates with higher GPAs. These principles may be the driving factor behind the heightened GPAs of those students than students who do participate in religious activities.

Along this path, men and women both experience religion differently in life and especially in college. It has been found that both the involvement in charities and participating in discussions about religion both help foster a spiritual personality in both men and women in college (Bryant 2007). Although this has been found true, it has also been shown to create more of a religious identity among men than women (Bryant 2007). It is hypothesized that this is the case because women tend to be more spiritual even when not necessarily being involved in an organized religion (Bryant 2007). This may be so because some women feel that there are negative attitudes towards women in texts and practice, so they choose to adapt religion to their own lives (Bryant 2007).

Some literature indicates that women, especially religious women, expect to find the person they intend to marry while attending college. Women who come from a two-parent background are more

inclined to put marriage higher up on their priority list, especially in college (Ellison et al. 2011). Ellison et al. (2011) found,

“These results suggest that the family values and norms instilled through religion may strengthen commitment to marriage as a personal goal especially among those who have direct experience growing up within a two-parent family—that is, those for whom personal experience and religious values are broadly consistent.” (p.924)

This can be very problematic in a time when “hooking up” is the new norm (Brimeyer and Smith 2012). It was found that, “Religious students who succumb to the hook up culture often find themselves experiencing cognitive dissonance and ‘simply avoid religion and thereby resolve the conflict’” (Brimeyer and Smith 2012:464). Along with premarital sexual intercourse, often referred to as “hooking up”, the term is more generally more specific to informal relationships. This can prove to be a large problem among students in college, because they find themselves battling with the culture they see around them and the specific standards they used to, or still do, hold themselves to. Women tend to judge their sexual acts mostly on their sexual attitudes, which may be influenced by religion, but men judge their sexual acts on sexual attitudes, social norms, and religion (Luqois et al. 2012).

Alcohol consumption also has an impact on religion. Poulson et al. (1998) found that men and women both perform more risky sexual behavior when there is an increased level of alcohol consumption, and that religion has no significant change on the statistics (Poulson et al. 1998). In a more recent study, it was found that actually attending religious services does inversely correlate with alcohol use and risky sexual activity (Horton et al. 2010). Being a member of an organized religion does not show any statistically significant differences, but attending religious services does, possibly because of the increased social pressures and expectations (Poulson et al. 1998, Horton et al. 2010).

It has even been shown that women who identify as part of an organized religion but do not attend any kind of regular religious service hook up more in college than those women who have no religious affiliation of any kind (Burdette et al. 2009). Some parents choose to have their children attend more religious universities so that they will be forced to attend religious services. The perceived hope of these parents is to squash any possibility of risky dating or sexual behavior their child might otherwise engage in at a secular university (Burdette et al. 2009). Many religiously affiliated universities have policies that prohibit sexual activities on campus, and this has shown to lower rates of sexual activity, possibly because of differing social norms and expectations (Helm Jr. et al. 2009).

The majority of the articles cited herein used quantitative research methods, mostly through anonymous surveys on college campuses, to gather their results.

## **DATA AND METHODS**

As previously stated the research question at hand is: How do people of the Christian faith experience college? Past literature has looked at religion as a whole, with different focuses on certain religions. Due to time constraints, more than one religion could not be explored, as previously stipulated the largest organization on the University of New Hampshire campus happens to be Christian so that religion became the focus of the paper.

For the purposes of this paper, being religious is defined as making a commitment to the organization, religious activities, and weekly worship. For this study, those who say they are a part of the organized religion but do not attend any kind of service will not be included in the above definition. Attendance at the weekly meetings completes this concept, as well as any mention of attending church on a regular basis.

Qualitative methods, like ethnographic research and in-depth interviews, are relevant and appropriate for this research because most past research conducted has been purely quantitative research. By looking more closely at individuals and exclusive groups broader topics could be studied. Using qualitative methods allowed the asking of more specific questions during the interview process, allowing a deeper insight into the personal and social factors that fostered the Christian religion in the individuals. Although this research may be less generalizable, it allows further understanding into the inductive processes. It also allows the question why to be asked, which would not be possible with a quantitative study. As research continued, the research question gained further meaning and the capture of this valuable information could not have been possible through the use of quantitative methods.

This research was conducted at the largest religious organization on the University of New Hampshire campus. It was held in a large, empty classroom during one weeknight a week at night. This site was perfect to answer the research question because every week the group had a new topic to discuss pertaining to how God and religion were a part of their lives. Different people would lead the group to avoid repetitiveness and bias, and they specified in different areas of religion. Emails were sent to many other religious organizations on campus, and not only was this one the first that replied, but it was also the largest. The size of the group allowed for a more diverse range of opinions. The goal was not to study this religion, but it was the most convenient.

The two in-depth interviews add detail to answer my research question that could not be attained from just participant observation. These questions were specific to the topic that being researched and this information could not be attainable through a simple survey because it would not have been possible to place social context or other life variables in the respondent's answers.

Two people were interviewed from the organization, and used purposive sampling in the selection of both interviewees. They were chosen based on their attendance at meetings. Both interviews were recorded after gaining consent from both participants, though the interviews were done separately. Each interview had twelve questions and amounted to about forty-five minutes for the full interview. Both women were asked, now referred to as Natasha and Amelia, how faith affected their daily lives, what they thought of the religious community, and how they viewed the various actions, like sex and drinking, differently because of their religion. Natasha and Amelia were both told that twelve questions would be asked and when that was over they could add any comments they felt they needed or wanted to say. Natasha and Amelia were both told that they had the right to not answer any question they felt uncomfortable with.

## **FINDINGS**

Through ethnographic research at this site, differences and similarities were found between how people who identify as Christian experience college and those who are not Christian.

First and foremost, in this organization if one joins they are presented with the possibility of making a huge time commitment to the organization and the religion. Besides two-hour weekly meetings, there are also a number of Bible study groups throughout the week very early in the morning, Friday night activities, and suggested church attendance on Sunday mornings. One must be dedicated and willing to be a part of the organization, and failure to complete these activities results in a distance between themselves and other members, which may affect social support. Diener et al (2011) and the finding that social support is stronger when commitment to religious activities is higher, lends support to this finding in the current study.

Even so, the organization is very welcoming to new members, and my entrance at each of these meetings was met with welcoming introductions and questions about myself, though I did not know anyone there. The organization is always looking to capture new members on campus because they believe they are fighting a war for God, so the entrance of a possible new member was a very exciting thing.

During each meeting, for about half an hour, projects and initiatives were brought up and suggested for members to participate in. These projects cost a significant amount of money, and were generally supported by fundraising. Each project was focused on “spreading the word of Jesus Christ”. This could be done through what they called “outreach”. Examples of this outreach were events such as holding signs saying “I will listen” outside of public areas to prompt discussions with strangers about Christianity. Members also chose to walk the streets of campus on the weekends where fraternities and sororities were located handing out flyers. This was greatly encouraged during every meeting and was often met with great applause and desired commitment. This connected well with the findings of Diener et al. (2011) that connection exists between a higher level of social support and community with regular attendance to voluntary religious meetings and a desire for their organization to grow.

Sex was not brought up directly, but it was often referenced with discussion of sin, more specifically referred to as “the sin of the flesh”. It was said to be avoided at all costs and that we are all in a spiritual war against this sin and temptation. This is supported by Helm Jr. et al (2009), which found that pressure by social groups and activities may result in decreased sexual activity. The man leading this particular discussion, Robert, states, “if we live according to the flesh we will die”. Robert also states that everything humans say is trickery and that the only truth can come from God.

During the fourth visit, the meeting was a women-only session and it was focused on relationships and dating. A woman, Sheila, took to the front of the room and began to tell us that we need to trust God to confirm our beauty, not men. She repeatedly stated that the relationship men have with women, and that this was the only acceptable relationship, had to be about God completely. This was consistent within all meetings and talks; that God had to be the center of a Christian’s life or they were not considered a real Christian. Sheila stated that,

“Women were designed to be important, but that Satan wanted to the most important so Satan tries to take women from men. Women were designed to reflect the beauty of God, and men were not. Women should be men’s lifesavers and helpers. We were designed to help mended souls.”

There was no question of this amongst the group; women were accepted as helpers to men. This indicates a possible reason why some women tend to separate themselves from organized religion, as indicated by Bryant (2007).

In the in depth interviews these questions were studied more specifically to see if Natasha and Amelia believed everything that I heard during the meetings. First the focus is on the interview with Natasha. Natasha absolutely incorporated religion into her everyday life and regretted any day that she ignored it. She believed it gave her perspective on every aspect and her day was healthier when she took time to communicate with God, which ties nicely with Bryant’s (2007) finding that well-being may be higher in those with strong religious affiliations. Natasha had grown up in a Christian household and loved the organization on campus. She felt that her religion blossomed when she came to college and that she enjoyed the challenge of attending a university that was not solely her religion. She felt that God was calling her to “save the other people on this campus” which would not be possible on a campus already dedicated to God.

Natasha felt that God gave her certain gifts to use in the world and that He chose her academic career for her. She believes that although she was given these gifts, God also wants her to find peace outside of academics and this latter notion causes her to feel less dedicated than would like to be. Although it often motivates her to work, when she cannot find the motivation in herself she often prays to God and she feels that he allows it to all work out. When I asked her if she relied on God to get her homework done, she admitted that she does partially do that.

Natasha felt that “hooking up” was a terrible sin that was rampant on this campus. She defines hooking up as “making out or more with someone you don’t really know very well, or sleeping in the same bed” (Natasha, Interview Two). Natasha believed that this lifestyle could not be satisfying and participates in neither alcohol consumption nor any kind of sexual activity. She felt it was a way for people to fill the hole in them that should be filled with Jesus Christ.

The first interview was with a young woman who will be referred to as Amelia. Amelia was also raised in a Christian household, though she felt she lost her religious tendencies in high school and early college. Last summer she experienced something traumatic and turned back to God for hope and support. Since then she has become a more active member of the organization and she now incorporates it into every aspect of her life, including academics and study habits. Though this may result in a higher GPA, it could be influenced by both family background and religious affiliation (Mooney 2010). Amelia feels that her faith motivates her to be a good person and a good student. In contrast to Natasha, Amelia feels that she must do her homework in order to glorify God and does not pray to Him in order to finish her homework. Amelia feels that God also gave her certain strengths and made her to help save lives.

Amelia does believe that sex is a sin in most circumstances but that if it is between two people in a loving committed relationship, preferably the one the person believes they will be in for the rest of their life, then sex is okay. She does feel some guilt about it because Amelia believes the Bible does say sex is wrong before marriage, but for one reason or another she continues to do it. This correlates directly with what Brimeyer and Smith (2012) stated about possible conflict within oneself when questioning beliefs versus actual practice. Outside of those circumstances, Amelia believes that premarital sex is wrong and that hooking up is “disgusting”. She feels that most hooking up is fueled by alcohol consumption, and although a glass of wine is not sinful, the “amount that college students drink is disgusting”.

Overall both women felt negatively toward premarital sex, although Amelia was debating with herself on the issue, and that heavy drinking was sinful and wrong. Through these observations and interviews, I conclude that being an active member of this specific religious organization on the University of New Hampshire campus does decrease “hooking up” and alcohol consumption, while encouraging social relationships with others in the same faith. Family background definitely contributed to both women’s faith, but one was stronger because of family pressure while the other was more independently found.

The well-being of both individuals, and the entire organization, originally appeared to be more stable than others, but after the in-depth interviews I found that both women experienced the same amount of troubles that those not connected with Christianity do, and that overall well being is probably closer to equal to that of others on campus that make similar moral decisions without necessarily being religious.

## **CONCLUSION**

The majority of my findings align fairly well with what other researchers have found in this field. It can be somewhat difficult to say if they are actually similar because this study employed qualitative methods while most other literature used quantitative research. The literature indicates that there are lower levels of sexual behavior among religious college students. I found this to be true as it is the general view in this group that all sexual activities before marriage are sinful and should be avoided. This conclusion comes at the exception of certain members who believe that long-term relationships can include elements of sexuality.

Alcohol consumption was also found to be less prevalent in the Christian organization on campus, but it was also not mentioned enough for one to come to any conclusive finding. It could go either way, but the interviews suggest decreased levels of consumption.

The limitations to this study were the lack of time and money. Had I had more time I could have performed more interviews and more participant observation. With funding, I could have studied similar organizations around the country and compared their views. My only other desire would be to incorporate

quantitative methods and findings along with these qualitative findings I found. Although the literature generally supports these findings, indicating that the qualitative and quantitative data match up, it would be more efficient to have both kinds of data from the same sample group. Through purposive sampling I could have found similarities, or differences, between members of the group via both methods. It also would have allowed me access to more members of the organization.

The topic of religious influence on college campuses is one that will continue to be studied over time because both college and religion change over time. Both methods of research, qualitative and quantitative, are important and necessary for understanding the interaction between the college experience and religion.

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