Religion and Undergraduates:

The Effects of Religious Involvement on Students During the College Years

An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)

by

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Abstract

This examination of the role of religion in the lives of undergraduates is divided into three main components: a research paper, interviews conducted with on-campus religious leaders, and conclusions based on observations of these two elements combined. The research paper's purpose is threefold: to articulate the difference between religion and spirituality, to define religious involvement, and to examine the effects of religious involvement on undergraduates in four areas of the Wellness Model: physical, emotional, social, and intellectual. The research paper is then followed by a journal of the interviews. The purpose of conducting and then journaling the interviews with four on-campus religious leaders was to combine the research with the personal accounts and observations of the interviewees to formulate well-rounded conclusions. The last section is a discussion of the conclusions reached as a result of the research and interviews combined. The three sections work together to attempt to determine what religion means to undergraduates and to articulate the effects of religious involvement on college students.

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Introduction

"I don’t know what I believe. I used to be Catholic, but now... well, I don’t know." These words sent me on a journey. I had heard them often from friends and classmates. I began to wonder, Is anyone in college religious? Does anybody go to church (or synagogue or mosque)?

I sensed from my conversations with other college students that religion was on the decline. I felt that, as I moved closer to graduation, my own religiosity was declining. Was I really a Catholic? But what if I believe in reincarnation? Does that mean I have to stop being Catholic? I had so many questions.

In the process of searching for answers, I began this thesis. I wondered what kind of impact having a high level of religiosity or being religiously involved would have on a college student. First, though, I wanted to discuss what religion really means. How does it differ from spirituality? Why are some religious people bigots in the name of their religion? Is religion simply the social coming together of like-minded individuals? Was there something more to it?

With these motives in mind, I began this project with definitive goals: first, to find out what religion and spirituality mean to undergraduates; second, to prove that the effects of such involvement are overwhelmingly positive; and third, to seek out my own religious beliefs. Well, as one can imagine, nothing about this thesis has been so cut and dry. I have spent many hours combing academic studies and books written by religious experts in order to get a handle on the facts. In addition, I interviewed religious leaders at Ball State University and then reflected on those interviews by journaling about them. I believed these interviews would lend a personal aspect to my search – how did these
leaders come up with religious answers for themselves? By combining these elements, I have come up with a few conclusions, all of which were quite different from what I had expected. First, there are no definitive answers when it comes to matters of religion and spirituality because they are intensely personal. Second, one should never set out to “prove” something in a project like this — there was no way I could prove that the effects of religious involvement on undergraduates are overwhelmingly positive. It seemed that whether the studies indicated positive or negative effects, there was usually a flip side, either within the same study or within other resources I examined. I could and did reach some overall observations based upon my research, but this thesis is in no way an exhaustive study of the effects of religiosity on college students. Last, I ended up more confused about my religious path at the end of this project than I was at the beginning.

Thus, in contrast to my original expectations and goals, this thesis is an attempt to define and analyze some of the elements of religion and some of the researched effects of religiosity in college students’ lives. It has been a challenge to pull this information into a cohesive framework because, first, as I mentioned, many of the studies I looked at examined the two sides (positive and negative) of every effect, and second, even experts in the field seem to bring an element of personal experience into their religious studies. Put simply, religion will never be an easy topic to study because everyone’s definition is slightly tainted by his or her framework.

That being said, I feel that I have captured elements of what religion and spirituality mean to undergraduates. I also feel I have made some connections between how experts and college students define each of these terms. In addition, I have gleaned some loose conclusions about the effects of religiosity on college students’ physical,
emotional, social, and intellectual health. To this extent, I feel I have been successful.

The majority of my research is current and the work of leading experts in the field. I feel confident that I have produced a springboard for much discussion, as my presentation on this topic at the 2003 Butler Undergraduate Research Conference confirmed. There my work met with praise, questions, and problems to work out. I left the conference with a better sense of my own analysis of the research, and with a renewed vigor to make those conclusions (no matter how loose) clear in my finished product.

So, this is where I am. I started with a clear sense of purpose and ended with a somewhat muddled collage of loosely based conclusions, researched observations, and an even muddier sense of where I stand in all of this. That said, I feel that the pieces of the collage -- the research, the interviews, the journaling -- have left me with a mission: to continue my own search for spiritual and religious truth. Within these pages, I attempt to make sense of this collage and for what it's worth, to make some sense of the intricate relationship between religion and young adults.
The Research

According to a 1988 Gallup poll, 89% of college students report that they believe in God or a universal spirit. However, only 34% of students report weekly attendance at a religious ceremony, while 18% report monthly attendance, 25% attend a few times a year, and 23% almost never attend (Gallup, 1992, p. 42). These statistics indicate a missing link between beliefs and action for college students. If so many students believe in a higher power, why don’t they attend religious services regularly? Is it because they are spiritual, but not religious? If so, what does that mean? And is subscribing to a particular religion in college even a worthwhile endeavor? Are religious students healthier than their non-religious counterparts? I approached my research with these questions in mind.

Religion vs. Spirituality

How do experts define religion as opposed to spirituality?

The first question to answer is where do experts draw a line between religion and spirituality? What components constitute each? And how do the experts’ definitions and distinctions compare with those of college students? I thought answering these questions would allow me to make an assertion about whether college students were spiritual, but not religious, and why. I suspected that the answers might lie in how experts and students defined each of the terms.

In their book Religion on Campus, authors Conrad Cherry, Betty A. Deberg, and Amanda Porterfield (2001) examine the religious attitudes of students attending four very different educational institutions. Although some exceptions exist, the authors found a
nationwide consensus among college students concerning the definition of religion. In their conclusion, the authors state, “The undergraduates we interviewed, as well as many of the campus professionals who helped us interpret the religion of the undergraduates, preferred to use the words ‘spirituality’ and ‘spiritual’ instead of ‘religion’ and ‘religious’ when describing undergraduate attitudes and practices” (p. 275). This emphasis upon diction suggests that, among college students, the term “religion” may suggest formal, prescriptive institutions. Spirituality, on the other hand, may suggest subjective, personal attitudes and ideals based on a broader system of beliefs.

Were these students “right”? That is, do the experts in the field make such distinctions between religion and spirituality? Put simply, yes, they do. Although the terms each expert uses to distinguish between the two often vary, overall, their definitions match the “religion” and “spirituality” definitions of the students in Religion On Campus, respectively.

For example, in his essay “Religion and Prejudice,” Gordon Allport (1959) makes an important distinction between what he calls the two types of religion. First, an individual may possess extrinsic religiosity. Allport defines this type of religion as “a self-serving, utilitarian, self-protective form of religious outlook, which provides the believer with comfort and salvation at the expense of out-groups” (p. 257). On the other hand, intrinsic religion “marks the life that has interiorized the total creed of his faith without reservation, including the commandment to love one’s neighbor. A person of this sort is more intent on serving his religion than on making it serve him” (p. 257). Thus, it appears as if undergraduates, who embrace the idea of a spiritual being, but
choose not to attend religious ceremonies, may in fact associate the term “religion” with Allport’s definition of extrinsic religion.

In The Implications of Student Spirituality for Student Affairs Practice, the author, Margaret Jablonski (2001), once again points to the two sides of religion. What she defines as religion and spirituality are somewhat analogous to Allport’s extrinsic and intrinsic religiosity, respectively. She states:

Religion is a shared system of beliefs, principles, or doctrines related to a belief in and worship of a supernatural power or powers regarded as creator(s) and governor(s) of the universe…. Spirituality [is] a search for meaning, transcendence, wholeness, purpose, and apprehension of spirit (or Spirit) as the animating essence at the core of life. [It is] a search more personal than public.

Ideally, religion and spirituality overlap. However, there are religious people tied so closely to dogma and doctrine as to be disconnected from issues of the spirit and people who disavow any notion or connection with religion yet are deeply involved in a search for meaning, wholeness, and purpose. (p. 8)

Here Jablonski’s definition of religion – dogma and doctrine – are closely related to Allport’s definition of extrinsic religiosity. Similarly, spirituality is associated with a holistic sense of purpose, much like intrinsic religiosity. However, Jablonski’s spirituality differs from Allport’s intrinsic religiosity in that it can exist without religion, whereas Allport’s intrinsic religiosity can not – intrinsic religiosity, as the term suggests, must include both the elements of religion and spirituality, as Jablonski defines them.

Similar to Jablonski’s religious binaries are those set forth by James Fowler (1981) in his book Stages of Faith. In it, Fowler cites the ideas of comparative religionist
Wilfred Cantwell Smith to once again define two types of religiosity. In Smith’s account, the two terms are *religion* and *faith*. Religion, he says, is a “cumulative tradition...constituted by texts of scripture or law, including narratives, myths, prophecies, accounts of revelations, and so forth; it may also include visual and other kinds of symbols, oral traditions, music, dance, ethical teachings, etc.” (p. 9). On the other hand, he states, “Faith, at once deeper and more personal than religion, is the person’s or group’s way of responding to transcendent value and power as perceived and grasped through forms of the cumulative tradition” (p. 9). He then goes on to point out, as Jablonski does, that the two terms he defines should, ideally, be interconnected. “Faith and religion, in this view,” he says, “are reciprocal. Each is dynamic; each grows or is renewed through its interaction with the other” (p. 9). Thus, Fowler’s binaries – religion and faith – are almost identical to Jablonski’s religion and spirituality, respectively. He, too, sees one as able to exist without the other but points out that, ideally, religion and faith co-exist. In that case, his definition of the coexistence of the two is nearly identical to Allport’s definition of intrinsic religiosity.

Because Allport is one of the most respected scholars in the field, many of the studies I examined used characteristics of intrinsic and extrinsic religiosity to categorize or measure students’ level of religiosity. For the purposes of making a distinction between religion and spirituality, these two terms are probably the most recognized among scholars today. Thus, much of my research and discussion of effects of religiosity depend upon an understanding of their definitions.
What does religion mean to students?

As mentioned earlier, in many respects, students seem to agree with experts when it comes to answering the question, *What is the difference between religion and spirituality?* Both agree that the term “religion” usually refers to formal, prescriptive institutions, as well as the teachings and traditions that go along with them. In other words, “religion” seems to denote the public or social sphere of one’s beliefs, while “spirituality” appears to refer to the private sphere of those beliefs – the intensely personal journey that shapes what one believes about the creation of the world, the meaning of life, etc. However, research suggests that the opinions of college students and experts may diverge on whether establishing one’s self as “religious” is as worthy a goal as a strong sense of spirituality.

For instance, in *Religion on Campus*, authors found much evidence through their anthropological study of unnamed East, West, North, and South Universities that students agree with the tenets of their definitions of spirituality, and so they feel comfortable calling themselves “spiritual.” However, components of their definitions of “religion,” such as traditions, institutions, dogma, etc., may cause them to shy away from dubbing themselves “religious.” For example, in their conclusion, the authors cite one student’s response to a question about the religiosity of students as evidence of this situation:

James Brand, student government president at South University, summed up a typical student attitude when he replied in answer to a question concerning whether students on his campus were very religious: “No, but most of them are very spiritual.” Like numerous other students we encountered, Brand understood “religion” to mean institutions or organizations, whereas he took “spirituality” to
mean a personal experience of God or ultimate values. Furthermore, more often than not, “spiritual” and “spirituality” connoted a quest, a journey, something not yet completed, whereas “religion” and “religious” signified something completed, fixed, handed down. (pp. 275-76)

So, according to the authors of Religion on Campus, it seems that on today’s college campuses, students identify with the term “spirituality” because it is more comfortable for them, being young and in an intense stage of growth, to associate themselves with something changeable and intensely personal.

But are students really rejecting religion? While it seems as though the statistics and the students in Religion On Campus reject the connotations of the word “religion,” other evidence suggests that the majority of college students are still tied to a religion, at least in name. For example, in the 1988 Gallup poll, 67% of surveyed students considered themselves church or synagogue members (p. 57). Furthermore, in his book The Individual and His Religion, Gordon Allport (1950) points out a study in which the vast majority of students responded affirmatively to the question, “Do you feel that you require some form of religious orientation or belief in order to achieve a fully mature philosophy of life?” He also makes the following conclusions, based on the study’s outcome:

1) Most students feel the need of including a religious sentiment somewhere within their maturing personalities.

2) For the most part they believe in God, though their view is not usually of the traditional theistic variety.

3) A bare quarter are in essential matters orthodox and historically faithful to
theological dogma.

4) The majority maintains some of the forms of the traditional religious practices including prayer.

5) But the majority is clearly dissatisfied with institutional religion as it exists, so much so that 40% of those who feel a religious need repudiate the church in which they were reared. (p. 49)

Although this study is outdated (it was conducted in 1946), the fact that 67% of college students today affiliate themselves with a religion or religious denomination suggests that they are not ready to let go of religion entirely.

Thus, the fact that 89% of students believe in God or a universal spirit and 67% identify themselves as church or synagogue members suggests that students are holding on to some form of religion in their lives, although they often reject the connotations of the term. Couple these statistics with the fact that only a minority actually attend weekly services (34%), and it seems that one could conclude that students would like religion to remain in their lives, but they are dissatisfied with religious services. Or perhaps the larger issue is that they are dissatisfied with religion as an institution, but are not ready to completely disconnect themselves from it. In this case, the solution may be to combine this loose tie to tradition or doctrine (or whatever it is that prompts the majority of students to continue to categorize themselves with one religion or another even though they disagree with many of the term’s connotations) with the tenets of spirituality. But how? I believe the answer lies in religious involvement.
What is religious involvement?

Although statistics and anthropological studies such as Religion on Campus have established that, overall, students possess fairly high levels of spirituality, experts agree that, ideally, a person would integrate both spirituality and religion into his/her life. And what better place to find one’s spiritual self than college? In fact, as the authors of Religion on Campus point out, “The ethos of decentered, diverse, religiously tolerant institutions of higher education is a breeding ground for vital religious practice and teaching” (p. 295). Thus, it seems only logical that college is an ideal time for experimentation with various religious services and organizations. Perhaps the experimentation will lead to a definitive religious orientation, one that is completely organic. Ideally, this orientation would then lead to identification and socialization with a group of peers, which is an important part of the college experience. As Jablonski (2001) notes, “A spiritual quest that focuses primarily on self-definition and understanding fails to consider equally serious concerns about relationships with others and the search for transcendence that is central to that quest” (p. 23).

To decide whether religion is in fact a worthy endeavor for college students (as experts suggest), it is necessary to define some measure to do so. I have opted to use the observation of religious involvement as that measure. But in order to identify the effects of religious involvement on college students, I must first define religious involvement.

Each study cited here that examines the effects of religiosity on college students has its own measures or guidelines for “religious involvement.” Most of the studies administered surveys in which students self-reported levels of religiosity and intrinsic vs. extrinsic religiosity. However, researchers also administered many scales, which through
indirect questions assess the students’ religiosity levels. For the most part, a student who self-identifies as “highly religious” probably attends a weekly religious service and may be involved in an on-campus religious organization. Thus, as many of the studies make no mention of religious involvement (e.g., attending weekly services or participating in an on-campus religious organization) in relation to reported levels of religiosity, one must make related assumptions about students who rated themselves at a variety of levels: highly religious, fairly religious, somewhat religious, not very religious, not at all religious, etc. For example, if a student identified him- or herself as not very religious at all, one should assume that the student does not attend religious services and is not involved with an on-campus religious group. Although the level of involvement for students who rated themselves as “somewhat religious” might be murky, it is not extremely relevant because the majority of the studies reported the effects on either highly religious or not religiously involved students.

**Effects of Religious Involvement**

**Measure of Effects**

A tool for assessing the effects of religious involvement must be identified in order to reach any conclusions about whether religion is as worthy an endeavor as spirituality for students. For that tool, I chose four components (physical, emotional, social, and intellectual) of the seven-dimension Wellness Model (Robbins, Powers, & Burgess, 2002, p. 7). The Wellness Model is a widely agreed upon reference for measuring students’ overall health. In fact, Jablonski points out that “many...student life programs use a wellness model for program design ...” (p. 3).
Physical

The physical effects of religiosity are probably the easiest to pinpoint because they are visible behaviors, behaviors that can be observed, counted, or measured. For instance, one could easily determine how often a religious versus non-religious student drinks alcohol either by observing the student(s) for a period of time or by administering a self-measurement tool to the student(s). In fact, much of the research in this area has focused on self-reports, in the form of surveys, from undergraduates. The most consistent finding is that students with high levels of religiosity drink less and have fewer drinking problems than do students who report a lower level of religiosity. That said, factors such as whether or not the student possesses intrinsically or extrinsically religious characteristics, the religious denomination to which a student belongs, and the gender of the student all play a role in the student’s drinking habits.

First, whether a student is intrinsically or extrinsically religious plays a large role in how religious beliefs affect his or her alcohol use. It seems reasonable to suggest that if a student is extrinsically religious only, life decisions, such as whether or not to drink alcohol and how much, would not be affected by his or her religious beliefs. On the other hand, if one is intrinsically religious, one’s decisions would be influenced by one’s religious beliefs, since intrinsic religiosity is a holistic brand of religiosity, affecting all areas of one’s life. One example of the different ways that extrinsic and intrinsic religiosity affects students’ decisions regarding alcohol is in the findings of the study “The Relationship Between Religious Orientation, Gender, and Drinking Patterns Among Catholic College Students” (Templin and Martin, 1999). Researchers found a strong
correlation between intrinsic religiosity and infrequent alcohol use, while they observed no correlation between extrinsic motivation toward religion and alcohol consumption.

Researchers explored another example of the differences between intrinsic and extrinsic religiosity effects upon students' alcohol use in the study “Effect of Religion and Religiosity on Alcohol Use in a College Student Sample” (Patock-Peckham, Hutchinson, Cheong, and Nagoshi, 1998). In this case, researchers found that for Catholics, intrinsic religiosity is associated with a range of negative effects, such as drinking problems, expectations of depression, and pathological and celebratory reasons for drinking alcohol. In contrast, intrinsic religiosity for Protestants is associated with positive effects, such as a negative correlation to drinking quantity, frequency of inebriation, and a positive correlation to drinking control. As a possible explanation for the findings, the authors of the study cite that “particular cultural norms fostered by different religions may have unique effects on drinking-related behaviors and cognitions” (p. 87). In other words, Catholics may have a stronger link to alcohol consumption because of their heritage and traditions.

This study raises the second major finding in the research – that religious orientation or denomination plays a role in the effects of religiosity on alcohol consumption for college students. Besides the results of the aforementioned study, in a similar study conducted by H. Wesley Perkins (1987), research suggests that traditionally Jewish students are even less likely than Protestant students to engage in alcohol consumption (or over-consumption). In this study, students who identified themselves as possessing a “strong” faith in a particular religion once again were less likely than students with no religious tradition to be heavy social drinkers and to be frequently
intoxicated. However, a “hierarchy” of alcohol use was observed, correlating to religious association. In this case, as stated, Jewish students were the least likely to have alcohol problems, Protestants next, and finally Catholics. It is also interesting to note that the strength of religiosity with both Jewish and Protestant students was an important indication of the degree of alcohol consumption. However, for Catholics, strength of religion was not correlated to fewer alcohol problems. For example, weak Protestants and Jews were more likely than their strong Protestant and Jewish counterparts to engage in risky alcohol behavior, while it seemed that strength of religiosity was unrelated to such behavior for Catholic students.

It is difficult to pinpoint why the differences in drinking attitudes and habits exist among different denominations. My supposition is that, as mentioned earlier, it has much to do with the traditions of each religion. Beyond that, I feel unqualified to make any other contentions since, in all honesty, the findings surprised me. Why would they be different? I do not know.

Another demographic factor that influences the effects of religiosity on alcohol decisions for college students, besides denomination, is gender. In all of the relevant studies that explore gender, researchers have found that the effects of religiosity are almost always more pronounced for women. For example, in the study “The Impact of Gender and Religion on College Students’ Spring Break Behavior,” Matilla, Apostolopoulos, Sonmez, Yu, and Sasidharan (2001) studied how gender and religion affected the behavior of college students on spring break. Spring break has often been characterized by college students as “an atmosphere that provides opportunities to indulge in ‘unusual’ activities, in which personal rules and codes ‘do not apply’ or are
'temporarily suspended'" (p. 193). Thus, even more so than the experimental nature of the college experience in general, spring break is a time that tests students' values and morals. This particular study found that, once again, religion and gender both played a large role in students' behavior on spring break, especially regarding alcohol consumption, drug use, and casual sex. In this case, female college students drank and participated in drug use and casual sex less than males, because their behavior was more likely to be influenced by their level of religiosity than male students' behavior.

A study previously mentioned, "The Relationship Between Religious Orientation, Gender, and Drinking Patterns Among Catholic College Students" (1999), along with focusing on denominational differences, also pointed out that Catholic females behaved more like Protestants in their drinking behaviors, in that their level of intrinsic religiosity affected their decisions regarding alcohol consumption. On the other hand, Catholic males exhibited the same degree of drinking patterns as students with no religion.

So, it seems that alcohol use among undergraduates is influenced by a student's level of religiosity, especially for Protestant females. This is not to suggest that their level of intrinsic religiosity does not influence Catholic students' decisions regarding alcohol. But in the studies I looked at, it seemed that, overall, Catholic males' decisions regarding alcohol were the least influenced by religion of any of the other denominations mentioned. The overwhelming and most significant finding, however, is that students who identify themselves as highly religious or intrinsically religious have fewer alcohol-related problems than their non-religious or extrinsically religious counterparts. The reason for this is hard to pinpoint, but I am inclined to believe that students who are intrinsically religious are less likely to drink because they have, as Allport defines it,
"interiorized the total creed of [their] faith." Thus, since abstaining from excessive drinking is a tenet of many religions, and one that religious leaders probably target when speaking to college students, highly religious students drink less than those students who do not subscribe to a religion. Of course, it would also be logical to conclude that religious students may abstain from drinking out of guilt, because they are supposed to live within certain parameters, as prescribed by their religion.

**Emotional**

Although alcohol abuse is a physical activity, it is closely related to the state of a student's emotional health. Thus, the emotional life of a student is arguably the most important part of the Wellness Model for undergraduates because this area can affect all other areas of the Model.

The research that relates to the emotional effects of high religiosity and/or religious involvement on college students can be divided into two categories: one, studies that relate higher levels of positive emotional characteristics to highly religious students (versus their non-religious counterparts), and two, research that relates higher levels of negative emotional characteristics to highly religious students (versus their non-religious counterparts). This balance between positive and negative suggests that the emotional effects of religiosity or religious involvement are quite controversial among researchers.

First, as several studies indicate, the effects of high religiosity and/or religious involvement on college students are often related to positive emotional characteristics, such as adaptive perfectionism (a type of perfectionism that influences a person positively, not negatively) and a strong desire for high-principled values, like honor and
family. In fact, students who self-identified as “highly religious” were actually shown to possess a higher level of such characteristics than their non-religious counterparts. For example, in one study (Ashby & Huff, 1999), researchers found that highly religious students had higher levels of adaptive perfectionism (an example of an adaptive characteristic of perfectionism would be determination) than less religious students, but they did not possess higher levels of maladaptive perfectionism (an example of a maladaptive characteristic of perfectionism would be anxiety). Thus, the study found that “religious persons may be more likely to be perfectionist in ways that contribute to greater self-esteem and self-efficacy” (p. 187). Another study, which examined why students turn to religion (Reiss, 2000), found that religiosity was associated with a high desire for honor and family (as opposed to non-religious people, who rated their desire for these entities lower) and a low desire for vengeance and independence (as opposed to non-religious people, who rated their desire for these higher).

This study was especially interesting in that it brought up the issue of the negative emotional effects of high religiosity, and it also raised the issue of whether or not the effects were actually negative. In this case, the desire for dependence can be seen as either positive or negative, depending upon one’s perspective. As Reiss points out, “Generally, American society views dependence negatively and values instead self-reliance and independence” (p.47). Even historically, dependence on a higher being has been criticized as a sign of weakness. For example, Nietzsche touted the belief that humans are capable of achieving a god-like status, which he called the superman. In his theory, humans have the ability to become higher beings, thus eliminating the need to depend on anything or anyone else, because nothing is higher than a god.
However, in Eastern cultures, dependence is valued. For example, Reiss states, "Buddhism teaches the value of becoming one with the nirvana. In religious mysticism, people seek to lose the independence of the ego in order to merge with The One" (p. 48). It is also important to point out that in this study, although religiosity was associated with a low desire for independence, it was not related to a low desire for power. Nor was the desire for dependence associated with a desire for psychological weakness. Furthermore, religiosity and the level of desire for dependence were "dose-related." In other words, the more religious a person is, the more his or her desire for dependence, and vice versa.

This certainly leaves unanswered the question as to whether or not dependence is a positive or negative emotional characteristic. In this particular study, I think Reiss's intentions were to suggest that dependence is not negative in general, but that over-dependence (the kind often associated with extreme or overzealous religiosity) is. This seems a logical conclusion, since many emotional characteristics are positive in moderation, but become negative when excessive.

As some of the findings of this study suggest, the emotional effects of religiosity are not always overwhelmingly positive. In fact, some researchers argue that once a strong sense of religiosity is established in the student's life, he or she could struggle with another sort of religion-related emotional effect: religious strain. In the study "Guilt, Discord, and Alienation: The Role of Religious Strain in Depression and Suicidality," Exline, Yali, and Sanderson (2000) examined the role that religion plays in depression and suicidal tendencies among college students. First, researchers found that participants reported "more comfort than strain associated with religion" (p. 1481). They also noted that "religion may serve as a buffer against depression and suicide" (p. 1482). However,
if the student did experience religious strain, it was associated with depression and
suicidality, regardless of religiosity levels or the degree of comfort that religion afforded
one. In the case where strain was reported, religious fear and guilt, as well as
interpersonal religious rifts and conflicts with church dogma, seemed to be the causes.
As the authors note, in these cases, although religion is many times a source of solace, it
can often be seen as fearfully, as for those who believe in a punishing God. It is
interesting to note, however, that people with no religious affiliation reported higher
levels of strain than did religiously affiliated people. Thus, researchers concluded that
"certain perceptions – often those involving feelings of guilt or alienation – may serve as
a locus of religious strain" (p. 1493).

A good example of the fine line between the positive and negative emotional
effects of high religiosity on college students is illustrated in the study "Religious
Devoutness in College Students: Relations with Emotional Adjustment and Psychological
Separation from Parents" (Richards, 1991). The purpose of this study was to test the
hypothesis that "devoutly religious persons tend to be more emotionally disturbed than
less religious or non-religious persons" (p. 189). Furthermore, the study attempted to
make connections between religiosity, personality, and mental health in a sample of
college students.

The findings of this study, however, provide evidence to disprove the
aforementioned hypothesis. First, the authors found that devout, intrinsically religious
students were not more depressed than less devout, extrinsically religious or
nontraditionally religious students. This group of highly religious students was also no
more prone to shame than their less religious peers nor did they report lower levels of
existential well-being. However, students with high levels of religiosity were more likely to be guilt prone than the less religious and also reported less functional, attitudinal, and emotional separation from parents. The author did point out, however, that both characteristics could be positive or negative. For instance, a student who is guilt prone may “engage in moral and altruistic behavior,” but such guilt proneness could also “contribute to depression and other emotional problems” (p. 194). Similarly, the highly religious students’ close relationships with their parents could be “a powerful source of physical and emotional support, which could ease the transition of leaving home” (p. 194) or, on the other hand, could create unhealthy issues of dependency.

So it is difficult to pinpoint whether high religiosity contributes more positively or negatively to a student’s emotional state. In cases where high religiosity was related to negative emotional traits, it seemed that the negative characteristic could often be seen as positive as well. For example, in two of the studies, researchers point out that dependence, although often associated with weakness, could also be associated with personal freedom (e.g., leaving life “in God’s hands” or letting go of what one can not control). In fact, several of the studies even suggested that non-religious students actually faced negative emotional consequences because of their lack of religiosity, such as the study that related fewer adaptive and more maladaptive characteristics of perfectionism to non-religious students (versus their religious counterparts). Looking at the research from a comprehensive point of view, I believe that, in general, high religiosity was linked to a greater number of healthy emotional characteristics than unhealthy emotional characteristics.
Social

Part of the definition of religion as it has been discussed previously is the gathering with a group of individuals with similar beliefs. In fact, I have suggested that many students overlook this aspect of religion, or that they simply question its value. As research indicates, the social aspect of religion is significant and deserves recognition. Everything from the social influences that motivate college students to become religious to whether or not highly religious students are more or less lonely than their non-religious peers has been studied. Along with this interpersonal look into social relationships, much research has focused on the way that highly religious college students interact with society as a whole, which touches on issues of prejudice, acceptance, etc.

When it comes to direct interpersonal contact with others, it seems that students’ religious beliefs are most affected by their social contact with peers—namely, their friends. For example, in one study entitled “Religious Reference Groups and the Persistence of Normative Behavior: An Empirical Test,” Roberts, Koch, and Johnson (2001) found a clear correlation between the strength of an individual’s religiosity and the frequency of church attendance by his or her friends. For instance, if “all” of an individual’s friends attended church, 92% of surveyed students reported they were church members. If “some” of their friends attended, 76% identified themselves as church members, and if “no” friends attended church, then only 39% of individuals identified themselves as church members. Thus, the study concluded that “individuals’ religiosity is affected not only by their socialization experiences in their growing up years with their families but also by the reinforcing influence of people in their current social environment” (p. 90). This phenomenon may be good or bad. On one hand, the fact that
students’ peers play such a strong role in their religious beliefs is positive in that they have a strong support system when it comes to religious issues and this probably carries over into every aspect of the friendship. On the other hand, this reliance upon social support could also be negative in that college students may still be susceptible to peer pressure and not arrive at their own conclusions about their religious beliefs. Then the personal element of spirituality could be missing, and the student may simply possess extrinsically religious characteristics.

In contrast to students who are too influenced by their peers are those students whose attachment to God destroys relationships with others. In one study entitled “God as a Substitute Attachment Figure: A Longitudinal Study of Adult Attachment Style and Religious Change in College Students,” Lee A. Kirkpatrick (1998) explored the way that students’ attachment styles related to their relationships with God. In some cases, the attachment to God was unhealthy, based on the attachment style of the individual. For example, the insecurely attached person may attach to God, who may play the role of a “silent partner,” out of the fear of attaching to someone who has his or her own desires, beliefs, and agendas. Kirkpatrick goes on to conclude the following:

The degree to which attachments to God prove psychologically adaptive in the long run is an empirical question. On the one hand, belief in God as an attachment figure might provide a secure base from which an individual draws strength and confidence to actively and successfully negotiate stressful situations, as well as a safe haven for retreat from threatening events. Research indicates, for example, that such a collaborative religious coping style is related positively to adaptive coping and positive psychological outcomes, whereas a deferring
religious coping style in which one simply turns one's problems over to God may inhibit adaptive problem solving and thus lead to negative outcomes. (p. 970)

So, the author concludes that one's beliefs about God reflect the dynamics of the attachment style of the individual. It is important then that the individual maintain social relationships with others.

As far as the social effect of high religiosity on college students, one study found that feelings of loneliness are often fewer among highly religious or religiously involved students. This probably springs from the notion that, at least in Christianity, there is a sense of "someone right next to you," even when physically, there may not be. For example, in the study, "Loneliness, Social Support, and Perceived Relationships with God," Kirkpatrick, Shillito, and Kellas (1999) found that religious beliefs were correlated to lower levels of loneliness in college students independent of other sources of social support. However, the relationship existed only for women, not men. As a reason for the finding that religiosity was related to lower levels of loneliness, the authors proposed that people with strong relationships with God may believe in such things as a God who is "always by one's side" or "holding one's hand." Thus, individuals who perceive God (or the equivalent) this way may never really feel alone.

Overall, the sense of peer support (or community of faith) and the idea that even without human support, spiritual support exists, seems to suggest that highly religious college students experience more positive one-on-one social effects than their non-religious peers.

As mentioned, another aspect of social interaction as it relates to religion is the individual's interaction with society as a whole. I found that, in this area, much depends
on the strength of fundamentalism within the students’ belief system. Within Christianity 
alone, there are widely differing opinions among religious leaders about interpretations of 
the Bible’s teachings on tolerance as it relates to homosexuals, women’s roles, and other 
social issues. Couple this confusion with the experiences of the individual, which may be 
tainted by negative encounters with the group in question, and it makes for a confusing 
mess of prejudices, all somehow related in the individual’s mind to his or her religious 
beliefs.

Many studies have explored the relationship of the highly religious to society as a 
whole. In one such study, “Religious Orientation, Anti-homosexual Sentiment, and 
Fundamentalism Among Christians,” Fulton, Maynard, and Gorsuch (1999) administered 
scales to 257 students from a conservative Christian college affiliated with the Seventh 
Day Adventist Church. As the researchers predicted, people who scored higher on the 
fundamentalism scale tended to reject homosexuality to a greater degree than did those 
that reported lower levels of fundamentalism. However, the authors also found that 
antipathy of intrinsically religious people toward homosexuals does not seem to influence 
their decisions about social contact. Furthermore, fundamentalists’ antipathy appears to 
be in excess of that for which their religious ideology calls. Thus, “the results of this 
study suggest that the relationship of tolerance to religious orientation is not a simple 
function of commitment to one’s religion. Rather, the nature of the religious 
commitment must also be considered” (p. 21). In other words, although religious 
fundamentalism was correlated with homosexual antipathy, this antipathy did not 
influence social decisions pertaining to interaction with homosexuals if the student 
reported high levels of intrinsic religiosity.
Another study that explores religion’s role in social intolerance is Robert H. Freymeyer’s (1997) “Rape Myths and Religiosity.” First and foremost, the results of the study found that “without controls for sex, no religiosity measure has a significant relationship with rape myth acceptance” (p. 482). However, when controls for sex were taken into account, religious importance had a significant relationship to rape myth acceptance for men. Specifically, college-aged males in this particular study who reported a high level of religiosity were more accepting of the rape myth concerning provocative dress than were their less religious male counterparts. Greater religiosity for women, however, suggested less acceptance of rape myths.

Thus, the socially related motives and effects of high religiosity on college students are as mixed as those related to the emotional health of college students. Once again, although much of the research related high religiosity to positive social effects, some of the research suggested that such characteristics as extreme fundamentalism or personality disorders (like destructive attachment disorder) may actually hinder interpersonal and global social relationships. These studies all point to the idea that religion as a non-oppressive institution may enrich the social dealings of college students, both in their personal lives and with members of society as a whole.

Intellectual

One of the biggest debates about religion today is its intellectual feasibility, and this debate is of special concern to college students, who are in a setting where intellectual growth is imminent. In accordance with findings from several studies, there
seems to be some division between intellectual thought (especially the sciences) and religious faith.

Evidence of this division can be found in the results of the study “Interaction of Religion and Science: Development of a Questionnaire and the Results of Its Administration to Undergraduates” (Brazelton, Frandsen, McKown, and Brown, 1999). In it, researchers explore the influence of the individual’s religious beliefs on his or her attitudes toward scientific theories. Researchers found that undergraduates with a high level of religiosity held more unscientific beliefs than did students with low religiosity. Highly religious students also selected more unscientific explanations of natural phenomena than did their less religious peers. I suggest that in some cases, highly religious students may reject scientific theory in favor of religious beliefs because they fear the guilt associated with rejecting a religious tenet by which they may have been leading their lives. They may also reject scientific theory out of fear that their religious beliefs may be “wrong,” and thus, their whole perception of life flawed.

Another interesting component of religion as it relates to intellectualism is the divergence among college students according to their respective fields of study. For instance, in a study entitled “Religion and Esotericism Among Students: A Cross-Cultural Comparative Study,” Hollinger & Smith (2002) found that, cross-culturally (both American and European students were surveyed), students in the natural sciences, economics, law, health disciplines, and languages were more religious than those students in the arts or social sciences. The authors suggest that this may be because the arts and social sciences are areas that analyze social institutions and values. Thus, these students’ worldviews may be less optimistic because they are in direct contact with many hopeless
and unfair situations. Furthermore, researchers also found that students in the hard sciences (like math) were more skeptical about New Age activities than were those students in the arts, health sciences, languages, and social sciences. So it seems logical to conclude that a number of students in the arts and social sciences may not be as religious in the traditional sense of the word, but their affinity to the New Age movement suggests they be open to more liberal notions of spirituality.

Second, the authors examined cross-cultural differences concerning religion and science and found that students in the U.S. and Latin America believe in "traditional Christian cosmos" and the New Age movement more than do European students. The authors suggest that the explanation for the American students' "strong affinity to religion and ... to esoteric beliefs ... is the instability and insecurity of life conditions in this country" (p. 245). They go on to suggest that social factors such as geographic and occupational mobility, loose family ties, and more violence are some of the reasons U.S. students would be likely to give more weight to religious beliefs than to scientific beliefs, since most of these factors are uncontrollable (for the student). Thus, the authors concluded: "We found that students, being persons who are trained to think according to the laws of modern science, have more or less the same level of religiousness as the rest of the society they live in" (p. 245).

So it appears as if the consensus of these studies suggests that the division between scientific and religious thought is, in many cases, inconsequential for undergraduates. It seems that the majority of students are unaffected by scientific theories, inasmuch that they choose to continue to accept the fundamental issue of religion, which is the existence of God or a god-like being.
Conclusions

My overarching conclusion concerning the research is that, in general, the effects of religiosity on undergraduates are positive, at least in four areas of the Wellness Model. However, within two of the four areas examined (emotional and social), a balance between positive and negative effects exists, which suggests that religion in undergraduates’ lives is an area in which conclusions are hard to pinpoint.

I have attempted to make a few definitive observations. However, I have reached conclusions by combining the research findings with the information I gained from the interviews conducted with on-campus religious leaders. The journaling of those interviews comprises section two. I felt that by combining these two sources -- one objective research, the other subjective observation -- I would have a better chance of making meanings out of what I found. The conclusions I have made based on examining both parts, research and interviews, can be found in the third section.
The Interviews

I conducted interviews with a variety of on-campus religious leaders because I believed they would lend a personal aspect to all of the hard research I had been doing. I wanted to talk to some very religious people and see what helped them discover their spiritual and religious paths and also to find out what they thought about the relationship (or lack thereof) between religion and undergraduates. The following pages reflect the content of the interviews, as well as what I took away from each of them – how each helped me discover something about my spiritual or religious self. The tone is quite different from that of the research portion – these journal entries are a reflection of my thoughts, feelings, and observations based on the interviews, and so they are written rather informally.

I interviewed the following people: a graduate student involved in the Muslim Student Association, the faculty advisor for the Campus Religious Liberals, the campus minister for the Newman Center, and the faculty advisor for the Hillel Jewish Organization. The asterisk (*) next to the names indicates that all names have been changed to protect the identity of my interviewees.
Interview with Mohammed*, Muslim Student Association

My interview with Mohammed was completely by chance. I was supposed to meet with the president of the Muslim Student Association at the mosque in Muncie. However, when I arrived, my interviewee was nowhere to be found. It just so happened that a young Muslim man was saying his afternoon prayers at the time I was to meet my interviewee. Mohammed knew the man I was supposed to interview, and called him, but there was no answer. So, being extremely nice, Mohammed offered to do the interview with me. I was happy because I soon found out that Mohammed was a member of the Muslim Student Association. So I felt that this interview was sort of meant to be.

I first questioned Mohammed about how he thought students on Ball State’s campus defined religion. “My personal perception is that students in general define religion as spiritual practices that they do outside the classroom,” he said. “I’ve encountered very few students who actually tie religion to their daily life.” He seemed to think that perhaps in Christianity, it was okay not to tie religion to daily life. I mentioned that this was not the way it was supposed to be, according to Christian doctrine. I could understand how he might see the majority of Ball State students, most of who would identify themselves as Christian, as somewhat distanced from their religion, and I would be inclined to agree with him.

We then talked about what it meant to be religiously involved, and I think this discussion created somewhat of a divide between us. He emphasized that praying five times a day and attending mosque on Friday was part of what he “had to do,” and that it could not constitute religious involvement. He went on to say that he defined a religiously involved person as someone who preached or was a scholar in the field. I

* Name has been changed to protect the identity of the interviewee.
think here was where I disagreed, because although I respected his opinions immensely, I thought that Mohammed was certainly religiously involved. He said his prayers every day and attended mosque (both extrinsic behaviors), but it was also very apparent from our discussion that he also tied religion into his daily life (an intrinsic behavior). For him, his religion was so much a part of his life that he had a hard time calling it religious involvement – it was just life. I began to wonder whether this was a characteristic of Muslims, or if it was simply a characteristic of any highly religious person.

As far as the effects of religious involvement, I think Mohammed was pretty much in line with the rest of my interviewees. It seemed that in all the areas I mentioned, he felt that the effects of being religious (not religiously involved in his opinion) were overwhelmingly positive. First, he talked about the physical aspect of religiosity by noting, “If you are involved in religion you will also do some exercises to strengthen the body.” It seemed that many of his thoughts on the effects of religiosity had a lot to do with balance. For example, when he talked about the intellectual effects of religiosity, he talked about how religion inspires (or should inspire) the search for knowledge in one’s life. “Development is the key to life,” he said. “We should strive to do better.” This idea also tied into the emotional and social effects he described. For example, he said that emotionally he is very strong, and that this strength leads to objectivity when it comes to the beliefs of others.

The social effects of religiosity seemed to be the most pronounced area of effects with Mohammed. I believe this is due to the fact that there is such a small Muslim population at Ball State. He even said that the mosque “is the shortest and easiest way to socialize with [other Muslims].” He also emphasized that the social dimension of
religion was different for him here at Ball State than it would be at home in the Middle East. Here, I think he feels more of a need to socialize with other Muslims, because of the judgment from many Christian students that he said he faces. At home, the social aspect of religion may not be as important.

Along those same lines, we talked a little bit about the religious climate at Ball State and he said what I thought he’d say (and what all the other religious leaders said) – that we are “obviously a Christian campus.” He said that even with students who don’t appear to be religious, the Christian aura, if you will, is “implicitly there.” I could definitely see this. Although public universities more than private emphasize the importance of diversity, it seems that it will always be a challenge to incorporate diversity on a campus that is in the middle of Indiana and predominantly white and Christian. We then went on to talk about how Muslim students fit into the religious climate at Ball State. Mohammed talked about how, in his department (he’s a graduate student in the English department), students are quite tolerant. However, I was sad to hear that Mohammed’s overall experience has not been as positive as his departmental experience. “When I look at things collectively, from the other side,” he said, “I see less tolerance of us being Muslims.”

We then touched on whether or not religious beliefs conflict with the intellectual spirit of the university. This is an issue I am interested in since I am exposed to both those who feel no need to question their religious beliefs and those who can not fathom something as “illogical” as religion. Mohammed said he was confused by my question, although his answer to it seemed like he truly understood what I was asking. He said he “totally disagreed” with the notion that intellectualism and religiosity could not coexist.
He then pointed out that “we as Muslims are encouraged very highly to seek knowledge from birth to death.” I thought that he expressed what all of my interviewees hinted at—that intellectualism and religious beliefs can not only coexist, but they can in fact complement each other. If you think intellectually about your religious beliefs, then you can come to conclusions about what you believe or don’t believe religiously.

I ended the interview by asking Mohammed what advice he could give to those students on a spiritual journey. I honestly looked up to him because he seemed so sure about his own beliefs, so alive with his religious ideology. The main point he stressed to me was to ask sincere questions and research for the answers. I thought this made perfect sense and it was pretty much in accordance with what all the other religious leaders told me. Overall, I felt that Mohammed’s strong religiosity was an inspiration for me, because it seemed as if he lived his faith every day. And no matter what religious path I am on, I want to feel strongly enough about it that its tenets guide my everyday life.
Interview with Sarah*, Campus Religious Liberals

Sarah is the director of youth programming for Campus Religious Liberals, an organization affiliated with the Unitarian Universalists (U.U.). When asked why she chose a leadership position in this organization, she suggested that it is a two-part question. First, she explained why she chose a leadership position and then she talked about why she chose Unitarian Universalism (U.U.) as a religion. As for why she became a leader, she says she has always had a desire to work with young people, and she has a master’s degree in Christian education (as well as in religious history). So, in a sense, she has been preparing for this position her entire life. Sarah talked about being very religiously involved in high school and college. At the time, she devoted herself to Christian groups. However, in 1997, things changed. Sarah found the Christian church less welcoming than it had been. She is a lesbian, and although that wasn’t a huge issue (she attended a Christian church that was known for its gay, lesbian, and transgendered members), her partner is an atheist. So certainly this created some problems. First, Sarah’s partner felt understandably uncomfortable in a Christian church, and Sarah was beginning to feel “ghettoized” because her church’s membership was overwhelmingly homosexual. So she started to attend U.U. services and has been involved in the liberal religion ever since.

After discussing some of the history of the U.U. church, I asked her how she thought students defined religion. Since she is an instructor in the Religious Studies department, she had a pretty good idea of how they did. Her religious students, she said, think of religion as “teachings and general practice. They also think of it in terms of right and wrong – my religion right, your religion wrong. As well as doing right and wrong

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* Name has been changed to protect the identity of the interviewee.
things within it.” She thought that overall, students’ definitions are rather narrow and often vague. She also made a distinction between spirituality and religion. “There is a difference between spirituality and religious life,” she said. I think that certainly Sarah’s definition is wider and more inclusive than the majority of students’ because Unitarian Universalists believe in accepting all religions. Sarah suggested that students do more reading and attend various religious services to expand, or at least help specify, their definitions.

We then turned the discussion to what it meant to be religiously involved. This question has turned out to be one of the least agreed-upon among my interviewees. For Sarah, she believes that religious involvement is about “finding practices that best nurture them [the individuals].” So if that means one attends religious services every week, then that’s okay. Or it could mean that a person simply finds a “sacred space” and worships there often. Although she stressed the individualistic nature of religious involvement, Sarah also emphasized the importance of the community connection. She simply wanted to convey that she believes involvement should be open, not pushed. She talked a lot about evangelical groups that she believes demand large time commitments from their members. She seemed pretty disillusioned with such groups and knew a lot about their programs. I started to think she had had a rather negative experience with one (or several) in the past.

When I asked about the effects of religious involvement on students, this disillusionment with Christian groups again showed itself. She discussed at length the way “certain groups expect a lot.” In this sense, if a student feels pressured to make a huge time commitment to the organization, she believes there can be an array of negative
effects in all areas of one's life. I could understand her point, even though I have never been part of such an organization. However, I did wonder at times whether the U.U. commitment to the acceptance of all religions included evangelical Christianity. It seemed that from my discussion with Sarah that if I were a member of such a religion, I would feel somewhat uncomfortable at a U.U. service.

The discussion of religious involvement then progressed to a discussion of the religious climate on campus. As the rest of the interviewees agreed, Sarah felt that Ball State is an overwhelmingly conservative campus. She said that because Unitarian Universalists are traditionally liberal (if not further left), they sometimes feel uncomfortable at Ball State. I can certainly see her point here, although I do feel that in some departments, as Mohammed pointed out, students are much more tolerant of liberal religious ideals. In fact, many students hold such liberal notions themselves.

As for how many and how often students participate in religious activities, Sarah felt somewhat uncomfortable answering the question (as did the rest of the interviewees). I suppose the speculative nature of the question made her (and the others) uncomfortable. However, Sarah did make some observations based on her experiences with students. She believes that a large number of students on campus participate in “popular religion.” That is, they may attend church occasionally, or they might go to a campus activity or religious concert once a month. If asked, these students would probably consider themselves religiously involved. However, Sarah believes that if you asked them about their religious life, it might be quite different from their religious involvement. I think this is a good distinction to make, although there is something to be said for the social aspect of “popular religion.”
I then turned the discussion to the question of whether or not religious beliefs conflict with the intellectual spirit of the university. “It can conflict if you think you’re right,” she stated, “[but] it shouldn’t conflict if you recognize why you’re here at college.” I think this is a great point. I believe many students don’t recognize that because college is a time for intellectual growth, it is also a time for questioning and change. Some students seemed frightened at the prospect of such digging. On the other hand, there are also students who believe that an intellectual person can not hold religious beliefs and remain truly intellectual. To both these ends, I think Sarah’s opinion was right on target.

Last, I asked Sarah what advice she would give to undergraduates who are searching for their religious path. She suggested, like the others, that one read, talk to a lot of people, evaluate one’s self, and recognize one’s biases. I thought that this was a great point and one that no other interviewee brought up. It is important to search yourself for biases and evaluate how those may shape your worldview. In this way, I think you can come to understand a more authentic set of religious beliefs.

Overall, my interview with Sarah went well. She had quite a different worldview than my other interviewees, and that was helpful for my purposes. I did feel at times that she came down pretty hard on evangelical Christianity and that sometimes made me feel defensive, even though I don’t consider myself an evangelical Christian. Although I am inclined to agree with Sarah’s perspectives in many areas, I still recognize that evangelical Christians are also working from a frame of reference much different from Sarah’s, and somewhat different from my own.
Interview with Jessica*, Newman Center

My first impression of Jessica was *Wow, I can’t believe how young she is.* I had spoken to her on the phone, and I was picturing some old, matronly, staunch Catholic. Instead, Jessica was two years older than I am, bubbly and sweet, and extremely inviting. Right away we established a good rapport and I could tell that she would be a great person to interview.

Jessica is the campus minister for the Newman Center, the organization representing Catholic students on-campus. We discussed how and why she became a leader in this organization. She first talked about her upbringing. Although she was raised by a Catholic mother and Jewish father, her parents instilled a strong sense of faith in her. She also noted that her dad was a non-practicing Jew and attended mass with her mother on Sundays. It helped that she received her bachelor’s degree in pastoral leadership. Jessica has attended Catholic schools for sixteen years. As a result, I think her frame of reference is definitely limited, but she is not a narrow-minded person in the least. She simply noted that she has not been challenged about her beliefs very often because she has been surrounded by other Catholics.

So when I asked her how she believed undergraduates, and Ball State students in particular, define religion, she worked from her frame of reference, which is the Catholic Church. She talked about the core group of fifty students active in the Catholic Student Union and their activities and then about all of the other students who attend church every week. She then talked about her thoughts on other religions. “I’m not here to judge anybody,” she said. “If this [one’s religion] is really what you think is the truth and this is what you are supposed to believe in and how you’re supposed to act, then good,

* Name has been changed to protect the identity of the interviewee.
I'm glad you are living your life the way you think you should.” She also mentioned that she tries to understand the differences among religions.

So although her answer was not extremely clear, I certainly got a sense of how she defines religion and that is important to me too. We then discussed what it means to be religiously involved, and she said that, for Catholics, going to church every Sunday is pretty much a given. However, she added, “If a person is coming to church once a month, and that’s where they are right now, then I’m happy they’re coming to church.” Along with regular church attendance, she said that “living the Gospel message” is also important. This is an area where I think all of my interviewees agreed – that to call one’s self religious or religiously involved, one must live his or her religion. I then asked her what she would consider “highly religiously involved,” and she said that in addition to the previously mentioned criteria, the student would also attend church or youth group activities. I tended to agree with her definition of religious involvement, and I think I captured that in my research paper.

I then asked her about the effects of religious involvement on students. Although she did not address each of the wellness areas separately (physical, emotional, and social) as one or two of my other interviewees did, she connected them and made an overall statement that embodied my findings: “All the aspects of your life are going to be good if you know you’re loved [by God].” Although I knew, for her, being loved meant being loved by Jesus, I knew that she intended the statement to encompass anyone religious, regardless of his or her denomination. I took it a step further in my own mind and applied it to anyone with a strong sense of spirituality, who may not affiliate him- or herself with a denomination. Jessica went on to talk about students who drink, sleep
around, or otherwise make poor physical and emotional choices and how the reason for their behavior is simply that they do not feel loved. I thought she conveyed a strong sense of herself and of how loving herself was the most important part of being a religious person. I then asked her if it is religion that these students need or simply a sense of spirit. She explained that of course, if students are making these kinds of decisions and do not yet realize their impact, then they are probably not ready for church yet. In that case, she explained, it would be as though they were coming simply to perform their “duty.” From what she said, I gleaned the following timeline: recognition first, spirituality second, religion third. To explain: first, I think that for students who are making poor decisions, it is important for them to recognize that there is something missing in their lives and that may be contributing to their poor decision-making.

Second, I think they need to work on finding their spiritual core. Last, they may find that to channel that spirituality, it is beneficial to choose a religion or denomination by which to define themselves. I don’t know if this is the path Jessica was outlining, but it was my perception of what she said.

After further discussion about the effects of religious involvement, I asked Jessica what she thought the religious climate was like on campus. She, like the others I interviewed, felt that some groups, mainly evangelical Christian, were very visible on campus. However, she also mentioned a group of religious advisors who get together and plan events here on campus, called the Council of Religious Advisors. She said that this group of leaders was there to support each other and was very tolerant of each other’s religious differences. She pointed out that the majority of the leaders who attend meetings are from Christian organizations, but that every religious organization on
campus is invited. She noted a few instances in which the advisor for the Hillel Jewish group attended a meeting. It seemed that Jessica truly desired a meeting of beliefs, and that she seemed excited by the prospect of such integration.

We then came to the discussion of whether religion conflicts with the intellectual spirit of the university. Jessica felt that it was a hard question for her to answer since she attended Catholic schools all her life. She did note, however, that it is completely natural, when one begins a college education, to question one’s beliefs. She said this sort of intellectual questioning strengthens one’s faith. Her answer was interesting, because I think a lot of people believe that Christians never question their faith and that they lack the intellectual ability to do so. But Jessica proved that myth wrong.

Last, I asked Jessica what advice she had for students who were looking for their religious niche. She said that campus ministers are supposed to help answer religious questions in a non-threatening, non-judgmental way. I am not sure if every campus religious leader succeeds at that, but I know Jessica, for one, would. She also talked about how important it is for students to know what they believe in. “In the Catholic Church,” she said, “people don’t really understand what they’re told to believe…. I don’t think people have been taught very well.” I thought Jessica was right on the mark about this because I am Catholic, and I do feel that a lot of Catholics are clueless as to why they believe in certain things.

Overall, I left my interview with Jessica refreshed. I didn’t tell her until after the interview that I was Catholic and she was pretty surprised. I think she thought that some of my questions were challenging the Catholic faith, and although I didn’t want to make her feel defensive, I did go in with a certain sense of scrutiny because I am Catholic. I
wanted to really question my own beliefs and practices, so I was probably a little more
probing with Jessica than I was with the others. However, I am happy to report that
Jessica is truly a wonderful spokesperson for the religion and it makes me feel happy to
know that she is representing my religious affiliation. Her tolerance and non-judgmental
attitude spoke well for her spiritual state.
Interview with Laura*, Hillel Jewish Organization

Laura is the faculty advisor for Ball State's Hillel group, the Jewish religious organization on campus. She came to Muncie a few years ago from a major metropolis. So settling into the "Bible Belt" has been quite a transition for Laura. Because there is such a small Jewish population in this area, she has had to adjust to inconveniences, like the fact that the temple in Muncie has a rabbi (who has to drive in from Cincinnati) only once or twice a month. However, Laura isn't the least bit bitter. It seemed she has lived much of her life as a minority (religiously speaking) and for her, experiences with the majority have been overwhelmingly positive. For instance, Laura grew up in a Christian neighborhood, attended a Catholic university, and now resides in the decidedly Christian town of Muncie. She feels that these experiences have been positive, and that there are many people (including her friends in college and students here at Ball State) who genuinely respect and want to learn about Judaism.

I began our discussion by inquiring about why she chose a position of leadership in Hillel. She said that, to be honest, she was asked. She normally would not have taken on such a responsibility because of her already tight schedule, but she felt strongly about representing the small population of Jewish students on campus. She also noted that because there is such a small population, there is a strong sense of camaraderie among the Jewish community. This reminded me of my talk with Mohammed, who said something very similar in our interview. However, I would be willing to bet that the Jewish population is much smaller even than the Muslim population here in Muncie.

After discussing how she came to be the faculty advisor for Hillel, I asked her how she thought undergraduates at Ball State defined religion and whether or not she

* Name has been changed to protect the identity of the interviewee.
agreed with that definition. “Living in the Bible Belt, there is a very strong sense of
religion from the Christian sector and I think it’s wonderful,” she said. I thought that this
statement was very generous. I don’t how I would feel if I were in Laura’s shoes, but she
seems very comfortable with her environment.

Next I asked her how she would define religious involvement. Her answer to this
was very different from the answers of my other interviewees, but I thought it was a great
point. Laura focused much on upbringing. She talked about how a child forms an
identity, embraces others, and then attends services. It seemed that from our interview,
tradition was very important to her. She went on to say, “It [religion] reminds each one
of us of our roots and our spiritual core.”

Although we didn’t discuss the effects of religious involvement on
undergraduates, I sensed that Laura would have felt that the effects would be
overwhelmingly positive. She seemed like such a thoroughly positive person and so
connected with her religious tradition that I can’t really imagine her saying anything
negative about it.

I then switched gears a little and asked Laura how she would characterize the
religious climate here on campus. She, like the others, said, “The religious climate here
is Christian and born-again Christian.” I then asked how she thought the Hillel group fit
into this climate, and again, her answers were optimistic and positive. She talked a lot
about how well Ball State has received the Jewish community. She also talked about
how she has attended a few Council of Religious Advisors events and has been greeted
with open arms. Just as Jessica of the Newman Center felt, Laura was excited about this
infiltration.
After discussing the religious climate at Ball State, I asked her what percentage of students she thought took part in religious activities. She seemed uncomfortable with the question (as the other interviewees had), so she spoke from her observations of the Jewish students on campus and her music students. She said that all of the Jewish students she deals with (the Hillel group has a core of about seven students) attend temple at least every holiday. As for her music students, who are all Christian, she guessed that about one third of them attend religious services regularly. This estimate seemed to match the statistics I found. In a 1988 Gallup poll, 34% of college students attended religious services weekly.

After this discussion, I then changed subjects again and asked her whether she believed religious beliefs conflict with the intellectual spirit of the university. Laura responded, “Religion is a product of intellectual thought. Religion is ethics. Ethics is philosophy.” Like the other people I interviewed, she felt that intellectualism and religion go hand in hand because a person should use one’s intellect to arrive at one’s religious beliefs.

As for what advice she would give to students attempting to find their religious niche, she suggested that students read, go to various services, speak with religious leaders, and study. I felt that this was an area where all of my interviewees agreed. They all noted the necessity to seek out knowledge.

Although my interview with Laura was the shortest one I conducted, I felt she was clear, concise, and successful at conveying her point of view. I guess the best word to describe how I felt after my interview with Laura is calm. She seemed very comfortable in her own skin and she had a great attitude about how she fits into the
community. She made me feel optimistic about the future relations among religious
groups in Muncie. Although I am sure she has seen her fair share of discrimination, she
doesn’t let that taint her opinion of Christians in the Bible Belt. I think that Laura
believes that having a strong faith and spiritual life is a wonderful thing, regardless of
religion.
Conclusions

As I mentioned in the introduction, putting together conclusions has been a challenge. I felt that all the information was there, but that making up my mind about something as subjective as religion was difficult. But I tried and I feel confident about two things. First, I feel I have created a fairly thorough springboard for further study on the subject. Second, I am more confused today than I was when I began this project because it seems as though there are many answers for what I thought were my clearly defined research questions. For example, what is religious involvement? My research never definitively answered this question, although different studies made several allusions to what it meant. So by presenting a range of answers or half-answers to my questions, my research further exacerbated my confusion. However, in light of all this uncertainty, I actually feel more confident that I am arriving closer to my own truths. That may sound strange, but I feel that the more questioning I do, the closer I get to my religious beliefs. What I have done, I am convinced, is worthwhile both for me and for anyone interested in a starting point for further study.

The first connections I made were between how experts define spirituality and religion and how students define the terms. My interviews reinforced my conclusions. I feel that students simply are not educated enough in the field of religion to recognize all the implications of religion. A majority of the students cited in my research seemed to think of religion only in terms of what Gordon Allport called extrinsic value, or in negative terms associated with dogma, doctrine, and tradition. When I talked to Sarah, the religious studies instructor, she confirmed this notion. Thus, the first conclusion that I made was students and experts are in agreement about what the terms “spirituality”
and "religion" mean, respectively. Also, students are more likely to associate themselves with spirituality rather than religion because they either disagree or fail to see the value of some of the connotations of religion. However, experts agree that the ideal life would include elements of both spirituality and religion. Furthermore, I think the solution to this problem (because I believe it is a problem) is for students to read more literature concerning religion and spirituality and ask questions of their peers, professors, and in some cases, religious leaders, as all of my interviewees pointed out. Maybe most students do not care enough to take this step. I know many times in my own life, I have neglected my spiritual self because I didn’t have time to ponder life’s meaning between writing papers, working, and paying the bills. However, I think it is the most important aspect of life to develop because, as all of my interviewees pointed out, when one’s spiritual core is good, health in the areas of the Wellness Model follow.

Another conclusion I reached through my research and interviews is that religious involvement is impossible to define (at least for my purposes). Only a few of the researchers explained their reasoning behind calling subjects “highly religious” or “not religious” or “moderately religious” and all of my interviewees had different definitions of what it meant. So I took pieces of everyone’s definition, added a dash of common sense and a little bit of speculation and came up with the following: for someone to be “highly religious,” I assumed it to mean that they attend religious services weekly, attempt to “live” the tenets of their respective religions, and may attend other religious activities anywhere from a few times a year to a few times a week. For someone to be “non-religious,” I assumed they did none of these things, or else practiced religion in strictly extrinsic terms. Overall, defining religious involvement turned out to be a
secondary aspect of my research. I originally believed it was going to be primary, but unfortunately, the hard and fast answers were just not there. I had to depend upon the scales of the individual studies and often the researchers did not spell out their criteria for them.

One of the most significant conclusions I took away from this study was that in general, religiosity affects students positively in at least four areas of the Wellness Model. Although many of the effects seemed to have the potential to be both positive or negative, the overall tone of the research seemed to suggest a positive correlation between highly religious college students and positive health benefits (in terms of four areas of the Wellness Model.) Again, my interviews with on-campus religious leaders seemed to confirm this conclusion. Not only did my interviewees directly confirm this, but they also indirectly did so by the way they interacted with me. I felt that all of them had a strong and optimistic sense of self and they all seemed, for the most part, tolerant of religious differences. This suggested to me that they were all intrinsically religious and thus embodied the notion of the ideal combination of spirituality and religiosity.

Last, as I mentioned, I formally concluded that I am indeed more confused by all of this now then I was when I started. Although through my research I became somewhat convinced that religiosity in college had positive effects on the student, I also wondered if religion was necessarily the essential element. It seemed just as feasible that spirituality alone was the primary factor. Although all of the experts who defined both spirituality and religion suggested that the ideal state would be to possess elements of both, there was really no evidence in my research or theirs (at least that I found) that proved this. All the research I looked at and all of the people I interviewed seemed both highly spiritual and
highly religious. I did not find research that investigated the effects of high spirituality on students, nor did I interview anyone who was not religious as well as spiritual. As a result, my research has, in many ways, opened up a whole different “can of worms,” so to speak. I can not say definitively that religion was the factor that caused positive effects on the students’ well-being. It could be spirituality alone that spawned such effects, or more likely, the interplay of the two. In fact, many of my conclusions within the research portion rest on the assumption that when students identified themselves as “highly religious,” they were in fact students who embraced both spirituality and religiosity in their lives.

Now that this project is finished, I can begin to ponder the unfinished aspects of it, such as the additional questions that my research and interviews have raised. I picture this project now as a bubble diagram, with branches connecting to other bubbles to other bubbles. Still there is a connection – it is simply that I am not sure which connects to what yet. That, I think, will be a lifelong quest.
Appendix

To listen to the interviews in their entirety, please refer to the CDs in the front and back pockets.

CD One: Interview with Mohammed, Muslim Student Association

CD Two: Interview with Sarah, Campus Religious Liberals

CD Three: Interview with Jessica, Newman Center

CD Four: Interview with Laura, Hillel Jewish group
References


