

Abstract of

WHAT DO COLLEGE STUDENTS THINK ABOUT RELIGIOUS PLURALISM?

A STUDY OF STUDENTS AT AMHERST COLLEGE

by

Paul Vincent Sorrentino

Religious life staffs at colleges and universities struggle with how best to address religious plurality on campus. How can we serve a multifaith community in a way that is respectful and meaningful to the various faith adherents? A key element often missing in seeking to address this concern is what do religiously involved students think about coming together with people of other faiths? This is the research question of the study.

Surveys were sent to 701 Amherst College students. Two-hundred and nineteen of these were returned. From that group, 91 students participated in two-hour focus group interviews. The groups were homogeneous by faith tradition. Sample size was large enough to subdivide the Jewish, Protestant, and Roman Catholic groups into high, moderate, and low involvement groups. All four class years were represented.

Transcripts were analyzed with a computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software program (NVivo).

The results include quotations from the interviews and survey summaries. Psychosocial and theological analysis of the data is provided in the final two chapters. The findings of this study are:

- 1) All religious students have a commitment to a set of beliefs, symbols, regulations, rites and practices and want these particularities to be respected, valued, guarded and understood in multifaith interactions;
- 2) Provided the first condition is met, religious students are eager to learn about and from the faith of others. This is especially true in informal settings and multifaith dialogue, as opposed to multifaith services.
- 3) Multifaith events are valued primarily for their educational benefit, cultural expression, and potential to deepen relationships.

The use of multifaith dialogue was shown to be an especially effective means of educating students about other faiths and providing an attractive forum for an exchange of ideas about beliefs and values. Guidelines are provided for planning a multifaith service as well as suggestions for when it may be appropriate.

The faculty advisors for this project were Professors Kenda Dean and Daniel Migliore.

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A Final Thesis Project Report

Submitted to the Faculty of Princeton Theological Seminary

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Ministry

Princeton, New Jersey

May 2005

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am indebted to many people who assisted me along the way in this project. Tom Gerety, former President of Amherst College, and Greg Call, Dean of Faculty, provided important financial assistance without which the research for this project could not have been accomplished. Matt Schulkind, Associate Professor of Psychology at Amherst, and Patrice Brodeur, currently a Rockefeller Visiting Fellow at Notre Dame's Kroc Institute, each provided valuable support and advice at key times during the project. Hermenia Gardner, formerly the Affirmative Action Officer at Amherst, was a mainstay of my support. Ben Lieber, Dean of Students at Amherst, and the rest of the deans encouraged me and made substantial allowances for me to adjust my workload. My thanks go to InterVarsity Christian Fellowship and John Ratichek for allowing me the flexibility in my schedule to make trips to Princeton and to use time for studies.

The staff in dining services at Valentine Hall was immensely supportive as I conducted my research in a private dining room. The Information Technology staff, particularly Nicholas Dahlman, showed endless patience with my formatting disability. Matt Mascioli uncomplainingly proofread my manuscript. I was competently supported by several research assistants: Corie Wallace did the lion's share of the work along with Jennifer Wertheimer and Melody Ko. They tirelessly did set-up and breakdown, took notes, typed transcripts and created tables.

The religious life staff at Amherst encouraged me throughout the project and often took over responsibilities to free up time for me. My thanks to Eric Getty, Diane

Dix, Dawn Murry, Tom Fisher, Bruce Bromberg Seltzer, Shamshad Sheikh, Leon Burrows, Liz Carr and Bruce Teague.

Student leaders in the Amherst Christian Fellowship were an amazing support and encouragement. Special thanks go to Sarah Bass, Chris Burnor, Rob Godzeno, Jin-Young Kim, Janet Lydecker, Katie Massopust, and Christian Sanchez who led the Fellowship while I was ensconced in the depths of Valentine.

I was privileged to work with a wonderful peer group at Princeton. Meals together, walks, phone calls, visits, and exhortations kept me in the program. My thanks for friendship and support go to Kendell Cameron, Janel Dixon, John Norman, Jim Rawlings, Jeff Carter, Mark Radecke and Lydia and Bruce Rappaport. I was grateful for the opportunity to work with faculty members Don Juel, Jim Kay, and Randy Nichols. My two advisors for the project were of immense help to me. Kenda Dean encouraged me to pursue this direction from the beginning and gave me some invaluable research advice. Dan Migliore helped with long phone calls and extensive comments on my manuscript.

I am grateful to my sister and brother-in-law, Kathy and Bern Lytle, for their hospitality. They provided me a quiet place to work and fed me when I came out of my room. My Mom, Joan Tunnicliff, has always been affirming and encouraged me by her calls and prayers. My stepmother, Rosemary Pierrel Sorrentino, has been my academic inspiration and I regret that she did not get to see me finish. My Dad, Louis Sorrentino, was my Princeton historical advisor and ever interested in what I was doing.

Most of all, I am thankful for my family who has cheered me on and paid the cost for my reduced time at home and minimal availability during these four years. My boys, John and Tim, were understanding of missed special days and events. I look forward to making it up to them. My wife, Karen, is the one who encouraged me to do the program and never wavered in her commitment to my seeing it through. It is to her, most of all, that I owe my undying love and thanks.

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