

## Religion and the Individual at CWRU by Jared Ballance, Eric Buggy, and Arvind Krishnan

*Part of our research for this portion of the discussion included attending some religious group meetings to observe the ways in which individuals interact with religion in the group setting. What follows is an anecdotal account of one of these meetings offered to introduce some of the main ideas we are seeking to address in this portion of the study.*

We're meeting tonight to talk about "Just War Doctrine" as articulated in the Roman Catholic tradition. A rather quiet but extremely alert priest is sitting to my right, and to my left extends a circle of about ten curious students eagerly awaiting the discussion. They have come tonight for answers to the question, "Should the United States go to war with Iraq according to the religious beliefs we hold most dear?" There is a little bit of small talk going on as we wait for the priest to call this meeting to order. However, before he starts, the meeting is quite somber in keeping with the mood of most student gatherings during this time of war. Most of the students don't really seem to know who to believe, and thus, don't seem very confident about their opinions regarding the war. A few students have some nagging ideas about the moral implications of war, but few feel that these are well formed enough to be blurted out with any semblance of confidence or conviction. Thus, as the meeting starts, most of us just sit quietly attentive to the priest as he begins to talk about the origins of just war theory.

Even the priest seems a bit timid – perhaps weighed down by the general mood of the assembly. He is no stranger to voicing his opinion in times of war. He tells us that he was arrested for acts of civil disobedience during the Vietnam War, and that he has regularly participated in other acts of protest against actions of the U.S. government. He smiles sheepishly and laughs a bit nervously after he admits this as if he wonders how he is being judged, but the other students remain relatively poker-faced simply waiting for the facts. There are a few reassuring smiles directed at the priest, but most are still waiting to be inspired enough by the priest to trust what he has to say. One student, whom I know to be quite politically and theologically conservative is sitting across from me and is giving the priest a rather skeptical look. He is armed with a stack of papers, and seems to have done a bit of homework on the subject.

The priest begins to go through the doctrine talking without any notes. He states the first condition of just war, and then asks for comments or questions. There is quite a bit of silence

before one or two students begin to comment on the condition's application to the current war. Students are reserved as they voice their opinion, and the priest is also rather timid in his answers especially when they disagree with what one of the students just said. The students are also hesitant to level criticism at the priest. Finally, after about the third condition is articulated, the student sitting across from me pipes up saying, "Do you mind if I read the exact wording of the condition just so that we have a bit of catechism." The priest is a bit surprised by quietly invites the student to do so. The student reads it confidently and then pauses looking around the room for comments. The priest also tries to stoke the discussion. The student across from me continued to read the doctrine from the literature he had brought with him for the rest of the meeting seeming to suggest that he did not trust the priest to accurately convey the stipulations of the doctrine accurately.

As the meeting is winding down, the priest is making a few final comments conveying his attitude towards this war. He is very clearly suggesting that this war is unjust according to the Catholic doctrine of just war. The student across from me is obviously very anxious to get his opinion into the conversation and challenge the priest. The priest stops and asks for final comments. The student immediately pipes up saying that he has the Bishops' statement on the war. He reads a few excerpts from the statement, which seem to be saying the Catholic Church's position against the war and why the church does not feel that this war is just. He then struggles to interpret the Bishops' statement as possibly supporting the war. He cites a few other statements in the document that seem to suggest that war would be just if human life would be preserved through such an act even though, the majority of the document condemns war in this particular case. The student then asks the priest, respectfully, what he thinks of the interpretation he has just given. The priest disagrees timidly, and they spar back and forth for about a minute and then quietly call a truce, and the meeting adjourns.

This little vignette is just one example of a student struggling with his religious ideals. It seems that this student's quite challenging of the priest in question is a manifestation of the inner struggles that the students is experiencing with religion. First, he is very protective about his faith and the accuracy with which it is portrayed as displayed in his desire to read the doctrines verbatim. Furthermore, the student seems to be struggling with the fact that two institutions in which he finds a lot of identity are in disagreement – the U.S. government and the Roman

Catholic Church. He seems to be trying very hard to get the two on the same page, but their differences on this matter seem to be irreconcilable.

Now, this little story may seem to be only an isolated case, and certainly many parts of it are. First, as we will see, as this discussion continues, not many students at Case Western Reserve University are quite as well informed about their religious tradition as this student seems to be. Secondly, there are also few students who are as fervently concerned about what “the institution” says. However, one part of this story is true for most of the students at CWRU: Religion is something that they must confront and struggle with as one influence on their search for inner meaning. The purpose of this portion of our study is to determine how exactly this confrontation happens, and what kinds of effects religion has on the inner life of students at CWRU as opposed to the effects it may have on the academic life or social life of students.

Thus, in this section of our discussion, we will first look at the personal religious activities of students at CWRU. This will include an attempt to gauge how often students participate in devotional activities such as personal prayer and reflection. We will also look at how religion serves to help the student in constructing a moral code, and how this code shapes the student’s decision-making process. Then we will attempt to describe how students reported that their religiosity changed since coming to CWRU. In the next section, we will also look at how much of a role religion plays as a source of comfort for students. In this section we will explore how students compare the religious environment of their hometown with the religious environment at CWRU. In this, we will be looking at whether religion seems to be a comforting presence in a student’s life or a disruptive presence. We will also try to compare the level of students’ religiosity to studies that have attempted to characterize this generation of students by establishing general behavioral and ideological trends among this age group which researchers have labeled “millennial.” Finally, the last section of this discussion will report student responses assessing the religious and spiritual facilities and services available to them at CWRU.

As many students seem to report that religion is “personal thing,” this section seems to be of particular interest to our study. Is religion really a personal thing or does it seem to be a more social or academic thing? We have already discussed the curricular and extracurricular aspects of religion at CWRU, and now we dive into a discussion of the more personal inner experience of this seemingly inescapable human phenomenon. So, we ask the reader to keep this question in

mind as we discuss the finding of our research into this inner experience of religion: Is religion a “personal thing” or is it more a social or academic thing?

### **Personal Religious Activities**

In this portion of our discussion, we would like to investigate the personal religious activities of students at CWRU including how often they engage in these activities and why they feel these activities are important. In our survey of 565 undergraduates we found that 33.9% of students engage in personal religious activities like prayer or meditation quite often. A similar percentage of students (32.7%) reported that they were part of a specific religious group on campus. Most of these groups were churches, but a number of the students also reported being part of student run groups like Fellowship of Christian Athletes and the Muslim Student Association. It seems likely that these percentages are so similar because most of the students who attend regular religious group meetings also engage in personal prayer. In interviewing students, we found that the majority of students who participated in religious groups also engaged in personal religious devotion. Also, those students who claimed that they did not participate in any groups also reported little to no personal religious activity.

Some students indicated that the community in which they participated helped to support their personal prayer life by encouraging more accountability. One student said, “I need to be reminded sometimes how good God is, so I can spend time with him on my own time. I depend on the accountability I receive from my Christian friends.” Another student said that prayer was more a part of her faith in high school when she was involved with a youth group, and wished it were still a part of her faith. This community support of one’s personal religious activities was a common thread among respondents to our survey, and thus, it seems that there is a correlation between one’s involvement in religious organizations and their level of personal religious activity.

In interviewing students we found that there are a number of reasons why they engage in personal religious activities. For some, it is a meaning making activity. In talking about his personal prayer, one student said, “Ultimately, I believe that everything in this world is meaningless, and the only way to give my life meaning is to delight myself in the Lord.” Another student also said that these activities “teach me discipline and show me how to focus on something.” Many of the students also saw prayer to be effectual on more than a personal level.

One student said, “Rosary for Life is a chance to be the voice of the voiceless, the unborn, and a chance to save lives and help pregnant women.” Thus, this student seemed to suggest that his prayer was actually an action on behalf of others that served to actively help those in need.

The most common reasons for personal religious activity seems to focus around the student’s desire to “stay on track” in his or her spiritual life, and the “relaxation response” that one felt after prayer. In our survey, 53% of respondents said that their personal religious activities positively affected their state of mind. One student said, “Praying the rosary has a calming effect, especially on very busy days.” Another said that her personal religious activities “provide me with a soothing sense and one of happiness when I need that.” The desire for happiness is one that seems to bring a lot of students to prayer as many of them claimed that they prayed most in times of stress or sadness. In our survey, 43.5% of respondents said that their religious ideals affected how they dealt with positive and negative life experiences. Based on our interview data, it seems that religious practices are most fervently observed in the face of negative life experiences.

Interestingly, about 8% of respondents said that personal religious activities negatively affected their state of mind. This would be an interesting population to study more closely, but a discussion with Mike Zaccarello of University Counseling Services may prove informative on this point. Zaccarello said that most of the clients that he sees who present themselves as having religious concerns have what he called a “negative affect” toward God. That is, the student believes in God, but is angry with Him for some perceived wrong that God has committed against the student or a perceived potential to commit wrong. Zaccarello said that this usually comes with a view of God that is punitive. Thus, those students that go into their personal religious activities with a fear of being harshly judged by God may emerge with a negative state of mind.

Zaccarello did say that he did not see very many students with religious concerns. He said that he felt this was because people who had religious concerns would be more likely to a clergy member for guidance than a psychologist. He said that this trend has been observed in most studies of clients who have spiritual concerns. However, in our study, 61.2% of respondents said that they almost never sought any kind of spiritual guidance. Thus, it seems that very few students would seek any kind of counseling from a spiritual leader if they had

religious concerns. It seems then that the majority of religious concerns might be worked out amongst one's peers as opposed to seeking any sort of professional advice or guidance.

Concerning the importance of having a private religious space in which to practice one's religion, 63.2% of respondents said that this type of sacred space is not very important. This was confirmed in our interview data, as most of the respondents did not mention any kind of personal sacred space when describing their personal religious activities. However, it does seem that sacred space is important to the religious practice of students in a more communal setting. One student said that she felt most "spiritually alive" at a church camp where she worked as a counselor in the summers. She said that it was not because of the people that were there with her, but it was because for her camp was a sacred space where religion "just happened." She also commented that she felt CWRU did not have any such sacred space. She said that she felt that if there were such a space, she would be more motivated to engage in personal religious activities.

Another student once said to me that she "did not feel God at the Hallinan Center." The Hallinan Center is the home of Newman Catholic Campus ministries at CWRU and holds services on Sunday evenings. This particular student said that she did not feel God there because the center did not have a tabernacle that housed the Eucharistic presence of Christ. It was for this reason that this student decided to attend Holy Rosary Parish in Little Italy. For this student, it seems that the quality of her sacred space was very important to the quality of her prayer life. Thus, it seems that sacred space does play some role in the religious practices of students at CWRU.

Finally, 50.2% of respondents to our survey indicated that they feel very well informed about their own religious tradition. This statistic was also observed in our interview data as nearly every student who indicated that they read some religious text as part of their personal religious activity. Thus, many students who are involved in religious devotion seem to try to direct this devotion with the religious text they associate with their religious tradition. Most students indicated that they read a religious book like the Bible or the Quran before going to bed, and began their prayers with a verse from a religious text like these. Thus, it seems that the students who are involved in personal religious activity are also involved in some sort of scriptural study that is considered part of their devotional life.

In contrast, only 16.7% of respondents said that they felt well informed about other religious traditions. Thus, it seems that most students focus only on learning about the tradition with which they identify most. This may have something to do with a student's level of comfort within his or her tradition. A student may feel more drawn to studying his or her own tradition because he or she feels more comfortable moving around in the familiar framework of the belief system with which he or she identifies. Similarly, it may be relatively less comfortable to venture out into the uncharted waters of another faith tradition.

Overall, concerning personal religious activity, it seems that religion may be an "all or nothing" endeavor. Most students who indicated they engaged in personal religious activity quite often also were more likely to engage in religious study and attend social religious activities. These students often mentioned that they drew a great deal of support for their personal religious life from their participation in these groups. Study of religious texts also seemed to fuel personal religious devotion. One final correlation that would be interesting to study would be the amount of overlap between the 32.7% of students involved in religious groups and the 30% of students at CWRU involved in Greek life. If there wasn't much overlap that may suggest that these groups are serving a similar social and personal function. If there was extensive overlap, it may suggest something about religious students being drawn to the communal life of a fraternity. This is just one suggestion for future study.

### **Religion and Personal Moral Decision Making**

Religion and spirituality are very personal matters that have a large influence in the way people live their lives. Religion is an important factor in developing a set of moral and ethical standards. Religion and spirituality, often through moral and ethical values, shape and guide many people's decisions. Religion and spirituality often deal with divine beings and principles of right and wrong. It seems that most students do identify religion as one among many factors that help to shape their moral and ethical values. This section seeks to show that this is in fact the case. In this research project we tried to find out how students' religion and spirituality affected the way they made decisions and how it affects their personal morals and ethical standards.

Most students who describe themselves as religious or spiritual say that their religious beliefs are very important in their decision making process. "My religious perspectives impact

my personal decision making processes on a daily basis... It's my religious perspectives that first and foremost guide my personal decision-making process," said one person we interviewed. Another student said, "Being a Christian gives me a strong moral basis on which to base all my decisions."

The students who describe themselves as having an active, personal relationship with God believe that God helps them and guides them as they make decisions. This guidance is often received through prayer and meditation. Many such students report that they ask for guidance through prayer, and believe that guidance comes directly from God through their conscience, or through events in their lives, other people, or sacred texts. "I pray for guidance, patience, trust, wisdom," said one student, "[and] I strive to make decisions that will be in accordance with God's Will. That is my main criteria when making decisions."

Many of these students also report that they occasionally choose to make decisions on their own, although they usually state that these decisions are often not the right ones. They also say that God intervenes in their life to change a bad decision they have made.

Other students, who do not mention a personal relationship with a divine being, report that their religious perspectives are also very important in the way they make decisions. They cite the moral codes and ideals of their religion as significantly influencing their decisions and how they relate to other people. One person said, "In my personal decision making process I consider whether or not the chosen answer is appropriate according to my religion." A Catholic student reported, "I try to allow the values of the Catholic Church influence my decisions." Many students strive to live their entire lives in accordance with the principles set out by their religion and in compliance with God's will.

There is another group of students who do not identify themselves as being religious or spiritual, but still credit religion as influencing their lives in a significant way. These students believe that they have a strong set of moral values that were shaped either by a religion that they were once associated with, or by their parents, whose values systems were shaped by a religion. One student, who is no longer active in a religious organization, said, "I believe that my moral foundation is the result of the morals my parents have instilled in me (which are Christian based) and also from the ideals that I learned through the church that I attended." These students, while recognizing that religion itself does not currently play an important role in their lives, realize that

many of their decisions and actions are based upon a set of morals that was originally created by a religion.

Some adults who work with college students through religious organizations also see that religion and spirituality affect the way students live their lives. They do not see religion as affecting the choices students make to determine their major or career, which is a position supported by students' own comments and the data from our survey. They do believe that a student's religion directly affects his/her integrity and truthfulness both while in school and later, after a student has moved into the professional world.

About 60.5% of respondents on our survey said that their religious perspectives had absolutely no influence on their choice of major or career. The largest group of respondents (31%) stated the their religious perspectives had no influence on their academic ethical standards and the next largest group (27.3%) stated that it was only one of many influences. This directly contradicts what some leaders of religious organizations believe. Students, however, do indicate quite strongly that their religious perspectives do influence their personal morals and ethical standards. 47.1% of the respondents on our survey said that their religious perspectives were a significant influence in the decisions they make regarding personal ethical and moral issues. This data seems to suggest that students perceive a big difference between personal ethics and ethics in the classroom. This perception of two sets of moral standards is interesting, especially when one wonders whether the academic or personal ethics and morals become the professional ethics and morals after leaving school.

Our research shows that many students, not just actively religious students, find that religious perspectives do influence their decisions. Religious students perceive their religion as playing an active, fundamental role in the decisions they make. Many non-religious students also see religion as influencing their morals and ethical values, but in a more passive way.

### **Changes in Personal Religion/Spirituality**

In this section, we will discuss the changes that students have seen in their own spirituality and religious beliefs. Three questions on the survey administered to the undergraduate population gauged how an individuals' spirituality or religious beliefs have changed since coming to CWRU. Subjects were specifically asked:

- How would you describe your personal religion/spirituality prior to coming to CWRU?

- How would you describe your personal religion/spirituality now?
- How has your practice of religion changed since attending CWRU

The data gathered through these questions provide interesting results. Prior to coming to CWRU 54.3% of the subjects considered themselves either somewhat active or actively religious or spiritual (3 or 4). After coming to CWRU, a similar percentage of subjects (51.5%) stayed consistent with this finding and reported feeling the same about their religion/spirituality. Thus, the subjects involved in our study believe that they have maintained their level of personal religion/spirituality at a 3 or 4 even after coming to college. This fact becomes interesting however after considering the responses to the last question. When asked how one's practice of religion has changed since attending CWRU 17.9% consider themselves less involved, 18.1% believe they are somewhat less involved and 15.2% believe they are similarly involved (total percentage of respondents between 1 and 3 is 51.2%). With these results it can be stated that subjects feel that they have maintained their personal level of religion but at the same time are less involved in the practice of their religion. This analysis leads to a number of interesting theories about our subject pool. First, the discrepancy in these numbers may reflect the fact that this generation is not as concerned with formal religious practices. People believe they are able to maintain their level of personal religion even though they do not practice their religion as much. If this is true, it would be interesting to see whether college lifestyle has had anything to do with altering their perception of religion.

In the survey, a blank space was provided for students to enter an explanation about this change in their religious practice. The primary reasons for being less involved are: "Not enough time", "too busy", "my friends do not want to go", "do not like church or organization", "At home my parents would make me go", and finally "I cannot find a church/temple (any other religious facility) that I like in the area." These explanations indicate an interesting conclusion. The majority of subjects that answered the questions in this manner seem to have allowed their practice of religion to take a less important role in their lives. After making the transition to college life, the value of religious practices has been questioned as subjects and more time have been devoted to "personal time" with God.

Personal interviews with individuals provided our group with many views on this situation that could not be expressed through the subjects' responses to the survey question.

After conducting personal interviews with students, we realized there are three main themes that individuals categorize themselves when describing their personal religion/spirituality:

- Personal experiences in college (such as discovering and learning about other religions, stress, personal struggles) have solidified their values in their own religion.
- Have become more tolerant towards other religions; more open-minded
- No Change and have not tried to change.

In the first category of responses, subjects described their college experiences as reasons to solidify their belief in their religion. While many of these subjects were still actively involved in their religion after coming to CWRU, there was a significant number of subjects that chose to become less involved and questioned their religion after coming CWRU. Then, during their time at college, subjects had life altering experiences to take them back to being an active believer in their religion. These subjects described this experience in many ways. For some it was actually witnessing God or an action of God that was meant to provide guidance, and for others it was through difficult times that they chose to reacquaint themselves with their religion.

For the second category people subjects indicated that their experiences in college have lead them to become more tolerant and understanding other religions. College has allowed these subjects to learn about others and become friends with people that are much more diverse then an individuals' community in their hometown. These experiences have promoted a greater respect for each individuals unique system of beliefs.

The third category did not represent as much of the subjects we interviewed as the first and second category did. There was a small group of respondents that have not experienced any change at all in their religion. It must be noted that these individuals are also ones that are considerably less active in their practice of religion. This category represents the sample of our subjects that have never given importance to religion. Considering this fact places into context and makes this answer much more understandable.

Overall, these common trends within subjects' responses indicate the varying levels that an individuals' personal religion/spirituality has changed. It must be remembered however, that in this entire survey subjects were given the freedom to define religion/spirituality in their own manner. We speculate that this "free interpretation" rather than a universal definition may have had a strong affect on the way respondents answered these questions in particular. In further studies, it would be beneficial to determine how individuals are defining religion/spirituality

prior to answering this question. Also, exploring of the interesting correlation mentioned in the survey data would be helpful in determining whether in fact people have changed their view on religious practices.

## **Religion and Comfort**

For many students in our survey it seemed that religion provided a sense of community and belonging that translated into a feeling of comfort for these students especially in times of stress. We have already cited numerous instances where students suggested that their personal religious activities helped to give them a greater sense of overall well-being. Furthermore, we have suggested that studying one's own religious tradition can often be more comfortable than studying another because one's own tradition seems to suggest an encounter with the familiar. This seems to ring true in survey data collected regarding religion's effects on one's relationships. In the survey, 48.8% of respondents indicated that religion had an effect on dating relationships, and 37.7% indicated that it had an effect on friendships. When asked to explain this effect, the majority of students said that they simply felt more comfortable with someone who shared their religious faith. They often seemed to suggest that there was a greater bond and a greater feeling of trust when the other in the relationship was from a similar faith background.

These numbers may even be a bit deflated, as many students don't seem to realize how much religion may come to affect their relationships. One student said, "I don't think it [religion] will impact who I marry, but most definitely it will impact the ceremony, how we raise our children, and family issues." It seems that the second part of this student's statement contradicts her initial position that religion would not affect whom she would marry. Thus, one fears that she may end up like this student who said, "As for whom I marry, I had been dating a girl for two years and we were talking about marriage, but our religious beliefs really started to create a rift between us."

Thus, it seems that there is often a conflict about religion in the minds of students as they try to struggle with the impact it may or may not have on their life. Zaccarello also affirmed this struggle stating that many clients do not realize the impact of religion on their lives until they are confronted with religious conflicts at major times of transition like marriage or the birth of children. He said that such events often bring people back around to the religion with which they grew up.

In asking students to assess the religious environment at CWRU as compared with that of their hometown, we found that for the most part students are enjoying the ability to explore a more diverse environment. However, students don't seem to stray too far from the religious perspectives they were exposed to in the home. Most students described the personal faith practices as home as being within the tradition that they practice here at CWRU, but they did suggest that while at CWRU they had been introduced to a number of other faiths and practices that they attempt to incorporate into their daily routines. However, one student suggested that this diversity could more easily be taken for granted in an environment where the variety of religions is so ever-present. Whereas in a small town diversity may actually be better appreciated. She said, "In my hometown there is primarily one religion. As a result, if you are in the minority, it makes more people want to know about the religion since it is unfamiliar to them." Thus, it seems that the novelty of diversity may wear off in settings where new religions come and go every day.

A common advantage to religion at CWRU that many students cited over their religious environment at home is the "continual environment of peer accountability." As mentioned before this accountability seems to encourage personal religious development, and many students seem to welcome the presence of such a support system. CWRU also seems to encourage a more intellectual approach to religion than many students found at home. One student said, "[At CWRU] people are more willing to explore deep topics like religion...college students probably have a little deeper philosophy." In this exploration, it seems that more diverse conceptions of religion are formed in the college setting. Yet, people do seem to cling to rather dogmatic positions in this intellectual university setting as easily as they do in many student's home settings. One student commented, "Students are more opposed to God simply because it's associated with organized religion, and that's 'conforming'."

A common disadvantage to spiritual life at CWRU as compared with religion at home was the comment that communities can be more fragmented at CWRU. One student reported spending a lot of time alone even though she was very involved in a Christian fellowship group. She said, "It's spiritually challenging here because of how distant everyone's lives are from each other. At my home, I felt like I was much more involved with friends, etc." Many students suggested that religion at CWRU was much more individualistic in comparison to their hometown. One student said, "[In my hometown] people are more willing to go to services as a

group. At CWRU, people tend to follow their own beliefs and attend services when they choose.” Thus, it seems that communal worship may very easily turn into personal worship at CWRU. Instead of going to church with one’s family, the student just slips into the back row sitting by him or herself – alone in the crowd.

For the most part, it seems that students who describe the environment at CWRU as more like the religious environment in their hometown are more comfortable with religion at CWRU. Students who indicated that the environment at CWRU was much different than the environment they were used to at home seemed to be less satisfied with the environment at CWRU. They often seemed to indicate that there were more disadvantages to the environment that was less familiar. However, we would like to suggest that it is possible that as students spend more time at CWRU and adjust to the new environment, they may come to identify more with this environment. Thus, the religious environment of their hometown may become less desirable as they acclimate themselves to the CWRU environment. It would be very interesting to more closely study the relationship between student’s satisfaction with the religious climate at CWRU and their satisfaction with the university as a whole. Also, it would be interesting to see whether the students who try to construct a religious environment at CWRU that is closest to their home environment are any less well adjusted overall to college life.

In general it seems like the religious environment at CWRU as compared with the environment around which many students grew up, may be more diverse but not necessarily more tolerant or open. Most students said that they enjoyed the diversity of the campus, but felt that religious groups on the whole liked to keep to themselves. Students suggested that the general public discourse tried to stay away from matters of religion, and real dialogue did not happen. Thus, it seems that students still remain most comfortable with their own religious groups. It seems that to venture out of these groups would be to venture out of one’s comfort zone. Very few students said that they took time to dialogue with other religious groups as supported by the very low percentage that said they felt well informed about religious traditions other than their own. Thus, while students say they appreciate the diversity of CWRU, they seem to still long for and try to create the comfortable religious environment of home by surrounding themselves with friends of similar religious views.

## **The Millennial Generation**

The students interviewed and surveyed in this study are all from the Millennial Generation, or Generation Y. This generation was born approximately between 1980 and 2003. This places our focus group in the early part of that generation. This generation is still quite young and just beginning to come of age. Social researchers are searching to determine what characteristics will define this generation. In this section we will compare our research to that of another research group. The two sets of research contain some interesting parallels that are worth exploring. We found that the students on the CWRU campus share many similarities in their approach toward religion with the students surveyed nationwide.

Our respondents who were religious indicated in general that their religious beliefs were a very important part of their personal lives. They see their relationship with a divine being as influencing many areas of their lives. One student said, “All I do is meant to glorify God...[and] should be undertaken in view of God’s love for me and my love for Him.” As a result, their personal prayers, devotions, and meditations, which connect them with a divine being, seem to be the most important parts of their spiritual lives. Another student said that her devotions were “essential for me to stay grounded and keep a positive attitude.” What emerges from student comments is a religious attitude based on a personal relationship with a divine being. Many students find that this relationship helps them throughout their daily lives and as they encounter stressful circumstances.

They often view organized religious activities as helping them to keep their perspectives straight and as helping them maintain their connection with the divine. One student said that weekly church attendance helps “me to maintain a healthy relationship with God and to try to grow spiritually.” Organized religious activities mostly serve to increase their awareness of the divine and encourage them to stick with their beliefs.

Students also indicate that they find attending organized religious events important in social ways. They find it encouraging and helpful to meet with other people who have similar beliefs and values. Meeting with other people who share the same belief system provides a support group for students, many of whom find it difficult to keep their religious perspectives alive at college. One student remarked that the community at her church “helps me especially when I am feeling lonely because I am welcomed and embraced by my fellow brothers and sisters in Christ.” Many students find the social atmosphere at organized religious events

important and it seemed to be an aspect that was crucial to whether students continued attending these events.

On the whole, with some exceptions, attending organized religious events seem to be secondary for most students. Some students say that they do not find attending organized religious events helpful, but still describe themselves as religious or spiritual. One student remarked, “There seem to be a number of strong religious groups here, but I like to approach religion on a very personal basis that includes friends and family. The churches here don't seem that great. I've been to several without much success.”

Even though many students do not participate in an organized religion, they still find their own religiosity or spirituality to be very important and relevant in their daily lives. This can be seen most clearly in the responses to two questions on our survey. 72.2% of respondents described themselves as religious, spiritual, or both religious and spiritual. Only 32.7% of respondents, however, were active in any on-campus or off-campus religious groups. Those who are active in religious organizations are often active in more than one organization. Some students do not find attending any form of organized religious event helpful. They often do, however, indicate that they pray frequently and find that engaging in prayer is very helpful and relevant to their everyday life. One student said that he does not find attending church “fulfilling,” but, he said, “I do pray a lot which I find very helpful all the time instead of just once a week.”

Our research indicates some striking similarities with other research done on the Millennial Generation. The characteristics that we found evident in the students on the CWRU campus have also been found to be evident in the Millennial Generation nationwide. Students on this campus view and practice their religious or spiritual perspectives in much the same way as their peers around the country.

In a telephone survey of teenagers (ages 13-18) in 1999, the Barna Research Group found that 56% of teenagers attended church weekly, but only about one third of respondents thought that they would continue their church participation after they were living on their own<sup>1</sup>. (Most of the teenagers they surveyed in 1999 would be undergraduate college students in 2003.) In our

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<sup>1</sup> “Teenagers Embrace Religion but Are Not Excited About Christianity.” [Barna Research Online](http://www.barna.org/cgi-bin/PagePressRelease.asp?PressReleaseID=45&Reference=C), 10 January 2000. <<http://www.barna.org/cgi-bin/PagePressRelease.asp?PressReleaseID=45&Reference=C>> (May 7, 2003).

survey, 32.7% of respondents indicated that they were involved in religious groups either on or off campus.

The Barna Research Group believes that the Millennial Generation is a generation that describes itself as spiritual or religious, but does not invest itself in religious pursuits or activities. Barna also states that their research indicates that this generation does not find church attendance particularly helpful. Involvement in religious organizations seems to be more motivated by friendships and the social aspects of the organizations than in religious or spiritual pursuits.

Do the students on the CWRU campus exhibit these characteristics of the Millennial Generation? 72.2% of our survey respondents classified themselves as religious or spiritual, but only 32.7% of them are involved with religious organizations. Many students who are involved in religious organizations indicate that they find the sense of community and the friendship with other believers to be very important. Most students who are actively involved in religious organizations on the CWRU campus indicated regular involvement in organized religious events, such as attending church services regularly. Many students who regularly attended organized religious events in the past no longer find them important, but still indicate a personal religiosity or spirituality.

There does seem to be a minority of students, particularly in the Catholic and conservative protestant denominations, who have an increasing dedication to their church and its institutions. They are very conservative in their beliefs and are sticking to the traditional forms of religion. "I am dismayed at the irreverence for the laws of the Church displayed at Mass in the Hallinan building, including gross incomppliance to the General Instruction of the Roman Missal, and the Code of Canon law," said one student. Although this group of students seems to be small, there does seem to be strong fundamentalist tendency among a small, but outspoken group of students. One student, commenting on the phenomenon, said that before coming to college, "I had never seen so much religious conservatism, and fundamental-type religious people... Most people are not very open to new ideas (surprising, for a college), and quick to tell others why their way of life is wrong."

Most of the students on the CWRU campus seem to fit into Barna's descriptions of the Millennial Generation. Millennials describe themselves as having a personal, relational form of

spirituality, but seem to have turned away, to a large extent, from participation in traditional, organized religious organizations.

### **Student's Assessment of CWRU**

In this section we were interested in learning what students felt of the facilities, and information CWRU provides students regarding their personal religion. In the survey two questions we aimed at addressing this issue. These questions are as follows:

- How do often do you seek religious or spiritual guidance?
- How important is a private religious space to your personal religious activities?

When asked how often students seek religious guidance: 61.2% said they never or very rarely seek guidance. Similarly, when asked how important a private religious space is, 63.2% said not important at all or rarely important. Based on these numbers a strong conclusion can be made. It seems that students on this campus do not care much about religious facilities. This data however strongly contradicts our results in personal interviews. In our interviews subjects' response to this question could be divided into the following responses:

- CWRU offers sufficient facilities
- CWRU does not offer sufficient facilities to meet certain students' needs
- CWRU does not offer enough information about surrounding religious facilities and needs to maintain updating listings.
- CWRU's religious organizations do not advertise or actively attempt to reach students
- Religious facilities on campus do not matter

Reviewing these responses with the other background information provided by respondents of their religious life, these responses display an interesting to pattern. Those individuals that state that CWRU's facilities are sufficient, are either members of the big 3 organizations in the interfaith council, or feel that as CWRU is a secular institution. The fact that CWRU allows many religions to even voice their views and are tolerant of this is sufficient. Therefore, it is understandable that many of the students that are part of religious organizations in the interfaith

council feel that there are sufficient facilities on campus, as they have services and facilities closer than many required classes for some students.

The response that alarms our group the most is that of the students that believe CWRU being a secular institution is providing sufficient facilities simply by allowing people to voice their views. This is a strong misunderstanding of what it means to be a secular institution. CWRU, being similar to other state institutions such as Cleveland State University, is considered secular. This however does not mean that students are not supposed to voice their opinions on religion. It is actually quite different. Students are allowed to voice what they please and no one religion is to be provided dominance over others. Institutions such as CSU are state funded and thus must be secular, however CSU contains an office of religious services, similar to the office of multicultural affairs here at CWRU. The fact that CWRU students do not realize that the university does not have the power to prevent students from voicing their opinions is alarming.

Another conclusion that can be made based on individual's background information is that the individuals that state that CWRU's facilities are not sufficient are those that have strict "religious practice schedules" such as many Muslim and Jewish students. The Muslim students in particular indicate how CWRU does not provide adequate facilities for many of their required practices. For example, many Muslim students choose to pray 5 times a day as required by their religion. These students have been provided a small facility in Yost but this is not always the nearest location to their classes. Consequently, these students must choose between praying or attending class on time. One student interviewed said that due to this issue she has to use random rooms in Thwing center to accommodate her religious duties and class schedule.

On Fridays Muslim men have an even more difficult task of juggling their schedule and their religious obligations. One Muslim student indicated that Friday prayers are mandatory for men and held at between 12:00 and 1:00pm in Mosques in the area. These prayer services last between 30 and 45 minutes and as a result many students encounter class conflicts with these prayers. As skipping class every Friday to attend these prayers is not an option, students are forced to give up their religious duty. This is a major concern for Muslim students.

The other response, in which subjects do not seem to care about the religious facilities on campus are from those students that do not have these formal schedules and are those that pray in their own "sacred space" such as Hindus, Jains, and Buddhists. These students mention that while they would enjoy a religious temple on campus, they also realize how lofty of a desire a

temple on campus is. The funding required for a temple is non-existent and students have made adaptations in their lives to accommodate. These students have created their own “sacred space” in their dorms room and apartments. In this space, students have sacred objects and perform their daily prayers. For many this is a shelf on a bookcase, a closet or cupboard.

Based on these accounts it seems difficult for CWRU to provide a universal solution to a student’s religious needs. It can be seen that each individual’s opinion of CWRU’s facilities varies based on their religious background. While I am an advocate of better religious facilities on campus, I am aware of the difficulty involved in providing adequate facilities for all religions. Our research shows how students’ opinions of the facilities on campus vary with their background and perhaps not providing any religious facility at all is the best way to prevent dominance of any one particular religion. However, seeing as how CWRU has allowed the formation of a religious center for the three members of the interfaith council, they should not ignore the requests of the other students, such as the Muslims, that do have a desire for better facilities.