
Religion and Spirituality: History, Discourse, Measurement

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The recent spate of attention that funders, administrators and researchers have given to undergraduates' religious and spiritual lives has led to new questions and ideas about the ways that religious identities and understandings influence campus life. It is likely, given this attention, that these studies will prompt new initiatives on numerous campuses that acknowledge and address students' religious engagements in novel ways. Before moving too far into conversations about how students' identities and proclivities impact campus life, and how college programs and curricula might be sensitive to these aspects of students' lives, it is important to take a close look at what these terms mean, and more specifically, how recent social scientific surveys of religion on campus define and shape our perceptions of religious and spiritual engagements.

As all scholars studying religion are deeply aware, definitions of religion and spirituality are porous, historically variable, marked by varieties of evident and implicit theological understandings, and always remain open to the charge that they are either too general or too specific. For numerous generations, scholars have started their studies with warnings about the impossibility of the enterprise, throwing up their hands in the face of so many divergent definitions and measures, before providing their own (see Smith 1998). It is not surprising to see these academic rituals continued in many of the published studies of college students' religious lives, nor is it surprising to note the speed and assurance with which these studies proceed to define and measure religion and spirituality. More surprising, perhaps, is the degree of convergence and agreement in these studies that spirituality is private, emergent, emotional, and individual, and religion is corporate, public, and stable. The survey instruments that follow from such definitions typically measure spirituality by asking questions about psychological well-being, experience and self-identification, and in contrast measure religion through questions about activities, participation and adherence to doctrine or community.

The results of these studies yield many interesting questions about how college students understand their own spiritual lives and development. Yet their findings and their authors' continued appeals to the difficulties and problems of measuring spirituality nonetheless also raise questions about their limits and their usefulness. Where do these definitions come from, what do they leave out, and what are the alternatives? Answers to these questions become even more

important once we evaluate current survey measures in light of the burgeoning research in history, religious studies, and sociology that presents numerous challenges to commonplace definitions of spirituality and religion, including the very definitions that most quantitative studies adopt.

As I note below, historical investigations of American spiritual traditions challenge quantitative studies' definitions and measures in several ways. To begin, they identify spirituality as it is shaped by various robust theological traditions. Views that understand spirituality as actions and traditions draw our attention to the ways that being spiritual develop within communities and through practices and activities, aspects that are separated from the spiritual in many quantitative studies. In addition, historians are attentive to the ways that American spirituality became strongly linked to psychology and mental states throughout the twentieth century. In this way, historical studies allow us to see psychological definitions of spirituality as participating in another tradition of spirituality and call into question its objective, scientific definition. Sociological studies of religious and spiritual identities in contrast call attention to the varieties of meanings that spirituality and religion take on within social interactions. Rather than viewing spirituality as a condition that is expressed similarly across social settings, this perspective calls attention to the varieties of contrasting, overlapping meanings that spirituality takes on in context, and seeks to determine the ways that these meanings impact social interactions and relations between groups.

In brief, these studies call attention to the numerous spiritual traditions and discourses that shape American college students' religious engagements. These studies make it clear that survey analyses at best capture only a narrow range of students' religious and spiritual practices, narratives, identities, and meaningful affiliations. These studies also raise the pressing question of how these rather circumscribed understandings of religion and spirituality have represented religion, and in so doing shaped public conversations and understandings about the religious (see Igo 2007). With these issues in mind, my primary goal in this short report is not to refine recent scholarly definitions and measures of religion and spirituality but to call attention to discursive, genealogical and historical methods that college administrators and social scientific researchers might also draw upon to understand the changing position and importance of college undergraduates' religious engagements. Drawing on this wide range of definitions, strategies and perspectives will ultimately contribute both to our understandings of college students' religious engagements, and why (and how) their engagements have come to matter to us at this point in time.

American Spiritual Traditions

“Spirituality” now generally connotes something different from “religion,” but historians are quick to remind us that until very recently the terms have been more or less interchangeable. Likewise, these studies remind us that spirituality encompasses not only emotions but practice, action, community and discipline (Fuller 2001). What scholars at the turn of the twenty-first century thus sometimes apprehend as commonplace and naturally observable distinctions between the private and public, personal and communal, internal and external “aspects” of religion are rather products of changing theological, cultural, and academic understandings of religious institutions, human consciousness, and the self (Hoopes 1989; Taves 1999; White 2006).

Spiritual Styles: Spirituality as a Part of Religious Traditions

Historian Catherine Albanese tells us that spirituality might be best approached as ways of “knowing” the divine. Each way of knowing is to some degree grounded in and expressed within religious traditions, institutions, and organizations (Albanese 2001). Albanese embraces the notion that spirituality is “the personal, experiential element in religion” and with this in mind then traces four ways that this is taught by and expressed within religious institutions. Albanese highlights four dominant American strains of spirituality: “knowing through the body,” which includes corporate and individual rituals and practices; “knowing through the heart” makes emotion and experience central; “knowing through the will,” which emphasizes social justice and a prophetic stance; and “knowing through the mind” urges adherents to pursue metaphysical connection to the divine.

Albanese's historical approach highlights several important things. First, it suggests that while spirituality might relate to individuals and their worldviews, it is primarily expressed in actions, that is, in *ways* of knowing, such as saying the rosary, pursuing perfection through meditation, speaking for racial justice, or encountering religious others. In short, spirituality involves types of action, devotion, and theology. Second, it suggests that spiritual styles are distributed differently across religious traditions, so that some religious traditions are more likely to emphasize “knowing through the heart” rather than “knowing through the mind” and that religious organizations and traditions produce and teach these styles. As Albanese and others have pointed out, all religious traditions and communities are likely to have figures who exemplify a variety of styles, for example within Roman Catholicism, we can point to spiritual movements as diverse as the Catholic Worker movement and the Charismatic Renewal. Third, Albanese's approach foregrounds how Americans continue to pursue spirituality individually and in groups.

Religious teachers, exemplars, and rites are important catalysts, models, and sustainers of spiritual practices and identities. Americans' understandings of what it means to be spiritual continue to be shaped primarily through their participation in various specific religious traditions, in numerous informal and formal contexts. As leaders in churches and synagogues revive their commitments to developing members' spiritual expression, they continue to play an important role in also shaping mindsets, attitudes, and practices (Ammerman 2005; Chaves 2004; Stanczak and Miller 2004; Wuthnow 2003). In short, this work calls our attention to the rich variations in American spiritual traditions that are largely embedded within religious organizations and collectives. For many Americans, especially for American college students, understandings of spirituality are directly connected to the teachings and practices of the religious traditions and communities in which they participate, or in which they spent their formative years.

The American Traditions of “Seeker Spirituality” and Experience

As Albanese rightly notes, spirituality continues to be practiced and taught primarily within religious groups: most Americans learn how to be spiritual, and what that means, within religious communities. With this in mind, the limits and distinctions between being religious and being spiritual are far from clear. Nonetheless, numerous Americans claim that they are “spiritual but

not religious,” and in addition do not participate in a regular religious group. These individuals appear to exhibit the kind of spiritual orientation or outlook that is individually generated and mediated through the free marketplace of the “spiritual bazaar” rather than through the authority of a religious tradition. Scholars sometimes point to spiritual seekers as evidence for the existence of self-generated spirituality and for a more distinct separation between organized religion and individual spirituality.

Historians have also challenged this storyline by demonstrating that American seeker spirituality is a robust and longstanding religious tradition and not the consequence of the spiritual marketplace. This “tradition” has particular lineage, developing in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries among liberal Protestant groups, Transcendentalists, New Thought groups such as Unity, and the harmonial and “mind cure” religious movements such as Christian Science. Historians argue that while spiritual seekers do not always (or often) participate within religious communities, they nevertheless participate in a theological lineage and institutions that shape their religious experiences. In this view, seeking is a longstanding and valued religious tradition in the United States which places the highest value on individual self-reliance and perfection, and on the ability to seek wisdom from diverse religious sources (Griffith 2004; Satter 1999; Taylor 1999).

In a very engaging recent volume historian Leigh Schmidt (Schmidt 2005) situates early twenty-first century seekers in a religious lineage that begins with the American transcendentalists Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau, and numerous other liberal Protestants. Running from “Emerson to Oprah,” Schmidt argues that this lineage constitutes a “community of memory” populated “by people of diverse faiths who share in the piebald tradition of America's spiritual democracy” (p. 283). As Schmidt and others point out, a key (yet ironic) aspect of this “community of memory” is its strong commitment to defending individual religious authority. A tradition of mystical inspiration and perennialism has little rhetorical need for traditional and historical religious authorities, lineages, or pasts. Nonetheless, this religious tradition has a history, as well as institutions, prophets, theological principles, and practices that continue to influence and shape it (Albanese 2006; Bender Forthcoming).

One unlikely prophet of this religious tradition was William James, the Harvard psychologist and philosopher whose *Varieties of Religious Experience* articulated a definition of religious experience that remains a central reference point in many contemporary studies of spirituality. James draws upon a wide array of religious and scientific sources and surveys to define religious experience as individual, private moments, and beyond this, as the originating point of living religion. This understanding, developed by several generations of scholars, established spirituality as the experiences of men “in their solitude,” emphasizing individual and pre-cultural experiences that can be cross-culturally compared. While James's developing pragmatist philosophy arguably tempered some of his statements in *Varieties*, his ideas nonetheless mark an important contribution to the scientific study of spiritual experience as psychological states. As Christopher White's forthcoming investigation of the development of psychology, religion and measurement demonstrates, James essays speeded the transformation of specific (primarily liberal mainline Protestant) theologies of religious experience and spiritual development into “objective” criteria and categories of spiritual experience that were applied (although not without controversy and

problems) across a wider range of contexts (see also Schmidt 2003). This research demonstrates likewise that social scientific measures of experience, religion and spirituality are far from neutral, insofar as they remain deeply intertwined with “seeker” theologies and traditions.

Changing American Institutions: Locating Spirituality with Sociology

Where historical work on spirituality illuminates the close links between spiritual and religious traditions and the development of psychological measure of spirituality, sociological work illuminates other changes influencing the development of contemporary spirituality. Sociologists have called our attention to major changes in postwar institutional and cultural in America that contribute to weakening commitments to religious institutions (Roof 1999; Wuthnow 1998). These studies trace the “rise” in spiritual discourse, practices, and interests to declining powers of various religious structures and organizations in the post-war period, but also note that Americans have never been particularly orthodox in their religious commitments to various religious practices and beliefs (Butler 1990; Hall 1989). This research suggests that what appears from some vantages to be a growing interest in spiritual practice appears from others to be a more complex combination of Americans' weakening institutional identifications and our continuing interests in exploring a variety of heterodox spiritual ideas.

Historical and sociological investigations like these call attention to the dynamic and changing meanings of both spirituality and religion in American popular culture and academic use. Taken as a whole, this research leads us to the observation that “spirituality” and “religion” are not neutral or objective terms, and that measurements and ideas about what defines them are both shifting and at the same time linked to particular normative projects, interests, and even desires. With this in mind, it is important also to see the ways that the language of spirituality and its varied relations to religion work in the contemporary world. Given the fact that definitions and understandings of religion and spirituality are not neutral or objective either in their development or use, we might wish to observe how students and others use religious and spiritual identities and discourses to shape and position various speakers and interests on American college campuses.

Spirituality and Religion: Varying Relations

In order to do so, we turn from thinking about spirituality and religion as entities or properties that students hold constant in their lives and turn instead to think about the ways that “spirituality” and “religion” are identities that mark out relationships and distinctions. As an example, we might consider a (hypothetical) conservative evangelical college freshman who talks about her “spiritual walk with Jesus” in her church Bible study, and who signs up for the group's upcoming “spiritual development retreat.” She then returns to the dorm room that she shares with a roommate who practices Buddhist meditation and who considers herself to be “spiritual, not religious.” In talking with her roommate, this young conservative Christian refers to herself as “religious” rather than “spiritual.” Her decision to identify as “religious” or “spiritual” is largely dependent on the social context that she is in: no one would claim that this young woman is not fully invested in various religious commitments, but this example suggests that “spirituality” and “religion” are not defined or experienced as absolute properties.

Rather, in daily use these terms establish relational identities. College students use various spiritual and religious discourses to distinguish themselves from others. The same students can, and likely do, use different understandings of “spirituality” and “religion” in the various settings where they interact. In this section, I note three common discursive constructions of “religion” and “spirituality.” Americans use these to express different relations to each other and to the divine, and they likely also play important roles on America's college campuses.

Spiritual, but not Religious

Perhaps the most familiar relationship between spirituality and religion comes in the oft-repeated phrase, “spiritual but not religious.” In this construction, spirituality is the preferred state: spirituality connotes a pure relation to the divine or the sacred that is unsullied by human institutions and authorities (the “religious”). “Spiritual, but not religious” denotes the speaker's rejection of mainstream, organized religions. This discourse remains a frequent rallying cry for alternative spiritual movements. For example, the 1970's feminist spirituality movement criticized religious organizations as patriarchal and exclusive; by claiming to be spiritual but not religious, social actors found resources to develop alternative communities and structures (Eller 1993). Similarly, some parts of the environmental movement and alternative health movement claimed a “spirituality” that was counter to organized religion's non-organic, non-holistic, materialist foundations, and urged an alternative, countercultural spirituality (Albanese 1990; Gould 2005). Others have noted that this emphasis on spiritual but not religious provided ways for individuals who were dissatisfied with religion to follow their “own little voice” (Bellah 1985).

“Spiritual, but not religious” remains an important discourse for Americans, but at the same time a range of recent studies have noted that more Americans are likely to claim that they are “spiritual *and* religious” than that they are exclusively religious or spiritual. “Spiritual and religious” calls attention to the ways that both continue to be strongly connected, and perhaps have become more so as many American religious groups renew their attention to cultivating congregants’ “spiritual development” (Albanese 2001; Davie 1995; Wuthnow 2003). In addition, we can also see that numerous mainstream and alternative domains are also moving toward rapprochement. For example, alternative medicine, once the province of “countercultural” holistic and “mind-body-spirit” healing (and in many cases made illegal by state regulations) is now much more widely accepted as “integrative” or “complementary” medicine, in part due to stronger legal footing (McGuire and Kantor 1988; Ruggie 2004).

Spirituality as the “Individual” Part of Religion

Keeping in mind the growing number of Americans who call themselves “spiritual and religious,” we can point to a second, much less oppositional discourse that distinguishes spirituality as the individual and personal part of religion. In this discourse religion designates the group, community, and tradition in which the individual's *personal* spirituality develop; this discourse is consistent with Albanese's argument about “spiritual styles” especially as it allows that spirituality can be developed within specific religious traditions. This discourse is, likewise, often used within religious groups themselves to distinguish emphasis on personal growth and development from

corporate or institutional matters.

A discourse that defines spirituality as the “personal” part of religion provides strategies that allow individuals to talk about their religious practices in religiously heterogeneous or even secular settings. In my fieldwork at a non-religious AIDS organization, for example, volunteers (even those with strong religious commitments) often said that their work was motivated by their own “spirituality.” While religious volunteers told me that their religious communities encouraged individuals to volunteer, and often spoke about their theological commitments to virtues of caring and giving, these volunteers often emphasized that their voluntary work was “spiritual” when they were with other volunteers. In so doing, they represented themselves as individuals rather than as representatives of their churches and synagogues. In this case, volunteers used the language of spirituality to signal individual commitments and downplay (or mute) communal ones, and in so doing used “spiritual” language as an entry point from which they could then further explore the differences and similarities in their religious traditions’ theologies in further conversations (Bender 2003).

Spirituality as “More Than” Religion

A third discourse suggests that religious traditions, authorities, and institutions are all second-order expressions of first-order primary spiritual experiences. This discourse privileges the spiritual over the religious, and likewise often suggests that spirituality is universal, denoting the common experience that lies at the root of every religious tradition. This discourse is often very generous in its view of (most) religion traditions. Unlike the “spiritual but not religious” discourse that rejects religion, this discourse views religious institutions, teachings, leaders, groups, laws, and scriptures as repositories of human endeavors to develop spiritual propensities. While this discourse is broadly humanistic and often resonates in liberal appeals for interfaith or ecumenical projects (Wuthnow 2005), others criticize it for being overly critical of faith traditions that do not share its perennialist outlook, and for its tendencies to gloss over differences among traditions and theologies as cultural or historical artifacts that can be overcome (Jantzen 1995; Sharf 1995).

These discourses position Americans in various relations to the religious and the spiritual, and in daily life can be used to express and explain various understandings of religion. As such, each discourse presents important and distinctive cultural resources for navigating a changing American religious terrain. Viewed with historical and qualitative lenses, spirituality and religion emerge as changing, flexible terms that allow people to articulate relations to the sacred and to others, and that link them to particular theologies of the self. In contrast to claims and ritualized academic stories that call religion and spirituality ill defined and inchoate, we see that spirituality and religion are actually rather well defined. Indeed, they are defined in numerous ways, and people recognize their different uses in the multiple contexts in which they interact. These context-specific variations raise the question of whether more generalizable and non-specific definitions of spirituality are capable of picking up on the relational and contextualized meanings that shape the American spiritual and religious landscape, and around which coalitions form and differences come to matter.

Studying and Measuring Spirituality

This brief overview highlights some problematic or troublesome features of contemporary measures of “spirituality” and “religion.” As others have noted, most survey analyses focus on the most general and indistinct religious and spiritual questions rather than asking about specific rituals or practices, or using language that might be more specific rather than universal (Hall, Koenig and Meador 2004). Historical and relational approaches suggest two other difficulties that studies based on similar definitions may encounter.

First, most surveys assay spirituality through questions about experience, outlook, emotion and other feelings, and in contrast assay religion through questions about participation, practice, action and theological orthodoxy (e.g. Idler et al. 2003). This distinction reinforces the view that spirituality is individual and primarily emotional, and that religion is group-oriented and primarily mental or action related. The foregoing exploration of American spiritual traditions suggests strongly that this distinction should be revisited and reconsidered. In the future, we might consider how to address both “religious” outlook and experience *and* “spiritual” community, practice and institutional involvement.

Second, many measures of spirituality employ wording that makes it difficult for respondents to evaluate what kind of “definition” of spirituality the surveys are drawing upon. Future surveys can likely add to the clarity of their findings merely by being more conscientious about the types of relations between religion and spirituality that may be implied in questions. This will require scholars to move away from approaches that suggest that spirituality is a stable property or condition of individual psyches, however.

Beyond this, however, recent historical and sociological analyses of spirituality call attention to the very complex ways that these terms are used in numerous public arenas to make distinctions between various types of religious belief, belonging, action, and authority. These complex uses are not disorganized, rather, various religious and nonreligious organizations, including colleges and universities have played important roles in shaping how they are used, and the kinds of identities and arguments that they map out. It is with this in mind that college leaders and student life administrators interested in college students' religious proclivities thus will do well to do two things. First, they should evaluate how their own institutional cultures, histories and student demographics shape campus-wide understandings of spirituality and religion. “Spiritual” groups and programming might draw liberal and seeking students from various religious traditions on religiously diverse campuses, yet simultaneously warn off students who have more particularistic religious identities and commitments. In contrast, students on religious college campuses or where there is less religious diversity might presume that spirituality programs are aligned with a specific tradition or be directed toward a more homogeneous and traditional notion of spirituality, and thus attract a completely different cohort of students and interests. In order to understand what spirituality means and how it matters to college students, administrators and others will need to pay close attention to their own institutions' cultures and histories, in addition to remaining critically appreciative of the strengths and limits of large-scale surveys' claims to objectively assay religious and spiritual life on American college campuses.

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Though all religions emphasise spiritualism as being part of faith, you can be "spiritual" without being religious or a member of an organised religion. What's the difference between religion and spirituality? There are some pretty clear ways in which religion and spirituality differ. Religion: This is a specific set of organised beliefs and practices, usually shared by a community or group. Spirituality: This is more of an individual practice, and has to do with having a sense of peace and purpose. It also relates to the process of developing beliefs around the meaning of life and connection with others, without any set spiritual values. Organised vs freeform. One way to understand the relationship between spirituality and religion is to imagine a game of football. Telling people you are spiritual but not religious is often greeted with a confused face. People tend to think of spirituality as something very strange and mysterious. They even struggle to differentiate it from religion but this is only because people in modern-day society have a fear of being manipulated and have a lack of knowledge when it comes to non-material subjects. The truth of the matter is that spirituality is perhaps the most natural thing there is: it is simply your own conscious self recognizing that you are more than just a body, that you are a soul with infinite potential. The difference between a spiritual and religious person comes down to how they see God. For a religious person, the concept of God is predetermined, named, and comes with a set method on how to worship that God. This paper provides a concise but comprehensive review of research on religion/spirituality (R/S) and both mental health and physical health. It is based on a systematic review of original data-based quantitative research published in peer-reviewed journals between 1872 and 2010, including a few seminal articles published since 2010. First, I provide a brief historical background to set the stage. Then I review research on R/S and mental health, examining relationships with both positive and negative mental health outcomes, where positive outcomes include well-being, happiness...