

Youthful seekers try to find

Studies: Religion becoming more individualized

By G. Jeffrey MacDonald
Special to USA TODAY

When Amanda Zimmerman goes to synagogue at Duke University, she's the only woman there in a yarmulke, the skullcap traditionally worn by Jewish men but increasingly adopted by equality-minded women.

That's just fine with her — it's part of finding where she's comfortable in her religion. "It's not about new ways of expressing yourself, but finding new meaning in tradition and bringing back traditions that were forgotten," she says.

As a spiritual journeyer on an American college campus, Zimmerman has plenty of company. Two studies released this week document the extent to which teens and young adults are teeming with spiritual curiosity, tolerance for religious differences and willingness to tap multiple sources for wisdom and guidance.

One study, released Wednesday, is the most comprehensive ever done on the subject. Researchers from the Higher Education Research Institute at UCLA base their conclusions on survey responses from 112,232 freshmen at 236 diverse colleges and universities.

A complex picture emerges. On the one hand, students show a hearty interest in spiritual matters: 79% say they believe in God, 69% say they pray, and 76% say they are searching for purpose or meaning.

On the other hand, respondents confided some uncertainty and discomfort. Fewer than half reported feeling "secure" in their current views on spiritual and religious matters. And students strongly committed to doing acts of charity and living by an ethic of caring showed higher levels of psychological distress than their less socially concerned peers.

Researchers hope they've hit upon potentially useful insights for anyone who works with college students.

"They are searching for answers to



By C.J. Gunther for USA TODAY

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— College student
Katrina Hobbs-Hawkins

big questions: What is the meaning of life? What is my purpose in life? What will happen to me? Will I leave my mark in this world?" says Helen Astin, co-principal investigator of the study with her husband, Alexander Astin. "No one, including ourselves, ever thought of that as being an important aspect of student life. I hope we'll get to know the students better and look at them in a more holistic way."

A second study used a survey of 1,385 respondents to discover that those ages 18 to 25 are the most diverse generation in U.S. history. They're also drawn to informal, personalized spiritual practices. Example: 64% say they pray before meals. In both studies, young adults seem accustomed to customizing how they live, and spiritual life falls within the same rubric.

"Many say they're 'spiritual but not religious,' or 'religious' but don't know what denomination they belong to, because it's more about the individual than it ever has been before," says Roger Bennett, co-founder of Reboot, a national Jewish network that commissioned the study from Greenberg Quinlan Rosner Research.

On campus, individuals are finding others to probe the depths with them. At Marquette University, for instance, about 2,000 of the 7,500 Catholics on campus go to Mass regularly on Sunday, and many more are involved in Catholic activism, says the Rev. William Prospero, director of campus ministry.

At the University of Oregon, 300 students attend Friday night Bible study at Onyx House, a ministry of the International Church of the Four-square Gospel; five years ago, 100 did.

"I've never met an atheist on the campus of the University of Oregon," said pastor A.J. Swoboda. "I've only met people believing in some form of a higher power, and they might not know what that higher power is."

College is often a place to test old beliefs and try out new ones.

At Northern Essex Community College in Haverhill, Mass., Katrina Hobbs-Hawkins, 23, continues to attend and tithe at the Pentecostal church where her father is pastor, but she drinks socially. She also has lesbian friends and a pierced bellybutton.

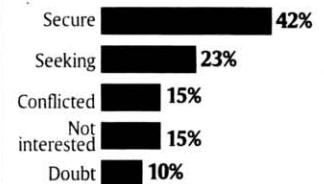
"You can be in church every single Sunday and still not be spiritually in tune with God," she says. "It's more about your relationship with God, talking with God on a daily basis, reading your Bible, trying to get to know God and have a one-on-one relationship with him, instead of just showing up to church on time and never drinking."

For some students, the individualized approach hasn't led to greater religious or spiritual involvement. Adam Kemp, a 22-year-old senior at Texas A&M, co-leads the Agnostic and Atheist Student Group and describes himself as "not spiritual at all." Still, the topics discussed at the group's weekly meetings sound a lot like those considered by spiritual groups elsewhere: morality, death, sex, love and euthanasia, to name a few.

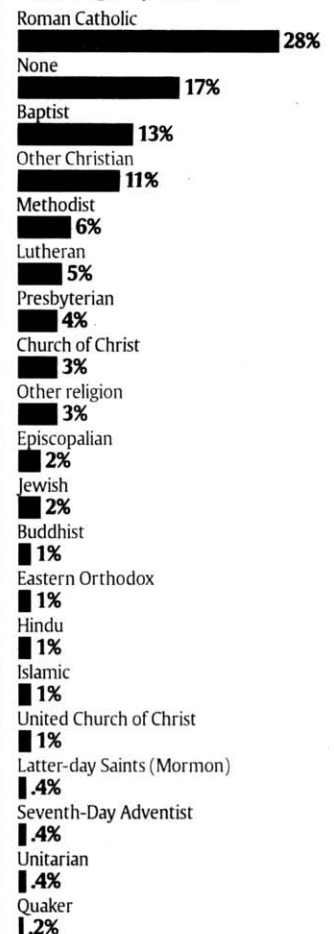
"There really isn't a purpose in life, but it's more that we define our purpose," Kemp says. "Because we're alive and we enjoy being alive, that's our purpose — to live as long as we can and as happily as we can, and hopefully make other people feel the same way."

Students' spiritual views

How college freshmen describe their current views about spiritual/religious matters



... and religious preferences:



Note: Percentages greater than 1 rounded
Source: UCLA Higher Education Research Institute, 2005 Based on surveys of 112,232 freshmen at 236 U.S. colleges and universities

By Alejandro Gonzalez, USA TODAY