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College students exploring faith through debate

Study finds many skip services, but talk about religion

By Christopher Steiner
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Meghan McCreary no longer wakes up Sunday mornings feeling obligated to go to church. That doesn't mean, however, that the 19-year-old has lost her religion.

"I'm more into my religion than I've ever been," said the Illinois Wesleyan University sophomore.

McCreary counts herself among the majority of college students—according to a recent UCLA study—who explore religion and spirituality during late-night dorm debates rather than in the traditional setting of a church, synagogue or mosque.

"You'll find a lot of college-aged students who say, 'I'm very spiritual but I'm not religious, per se,'" said Dwight Hopkins, a theology professor at the University of Chicago Divinity School. "And what they mean by that is that they feel constrained by the traditional sense of religion."

In a poll of 3,680 college students from 46 colleges and universities, the Higher Education

Research Institute at UCLA found that almost 80 percent of these students say they discuss religion and spirituality with friends on a regular basis.

But whereas 52 percent attended religious services regularly before they entered college, only 29 percent did so by their junior year, according to the study.

Though the results are new, they don't surprise people such as Hopkins, who said he has observed a nationwide disconnect between college students and institutionalized religion.

"And that is manifesting itself in the churches, temples and mosques," he said.

But many don't view the phenomenon as necessarily a bad thing. College life is a learning experience that runs the gamut from physics to God, said Rev. James Halstead, chair of the religious studies department at DePaul University.

When college students question their faith and explore what else is out there, "it's a good thing," Halstead said.

Many students will meet compelling people from all sorts of faiths, and that triggers some of the exploration, he explained. Skipping out on church or other formal religious services is typical.

"You have to grow into rituals, just like a language," he said.

Alexander Astin, one of the principal investigators for the UCLA project, said most professors don't broach the topic of religion or spirituality in their classes—but perhaps they should.

"The central message of the great thinkers of the world is 'know thyself,'" he said. But most schools' curriculums, he said, offer few or no classes that tackle the heavy issues of spirituality.

"We should be encouraging students to explore these things," he said.

Some students say they find the college experience has reinforced their religious convictions.

Tara Gregg, 20, a sophomore at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, never misses the 9 p.m. Sunday mass geared toward students in St. John's Catholic Chapel near the main quad.

"My understanding of religion has matured" since college started, she said. "You have more of an opportunity at college to talk about this stuff."

Gregg, who is from Winthrop Harbor, regularly attends meetings of an interdenominational group called Campus Crusade for Christ. The weekly meetings of "Cru" usually draw more than 100 students.

And even though some of the core beliefs of the group are too conservative for her, Gregg said she gains insight from discussing religion in any form.

Scott Berkey, campus director of Cru, acknowledged that some students may not agree with everything he says, but he's happy to provide a forum for discussion.

"Students do way more talking and thinking about spiritual things than the public probably thinks they do," Berkey said.

Exploring more forms of spirituality can make people appreciate their own faith even more, said Michael Sternfield, senior rabbi at the Chicago Sinai Congregation on the Near North Side.

"Theoretically, one's religion should be able to withstand the test with comparisons to other faiths," Sternfield said. "I'm always excited when young people are able to explore religion."

Rachel Burger, 20, a sophomore at Marquette University in Milwaukee, doesn't attend synagogue while at college, even though she did up through high school.

Still, she feels she has expanded her spirituality through discussions with friends.

"We definitely tackle spirituality a lot," she said. There's a whole new willingness of students to want to talk about religion now that they're out on their own, added Burger, of Oak Park.

Indeed, "it would be a major misreading of young adults to say they are not spiritual because they don't go to church," said Rev. Jeremiah Boland, pastor of Holy Family Church, which sits near the campus of the University of Illinois at Chicago.

Recently at DePaul, Jewish students scheduled a meeting after an information booth for a Jewish student organization was found destroyed, Halstead said.

The meeting was packed—not only with Jews, but also with Catholics, Muslims and other students who showed up out of concern. The feeling at the gathering was unmistakable, Halstead said. It was a feeling of solidarity.

"And that," he said, "gives me hope."