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CONCEPTUALIZATIONS OF SPIRITUALITY, RELIGION, AND FAITH: COMPARING BIBLICAL NOTIONS WITH THE PERSPECTIVES OF PROTESTANT CHRISTIAN STUDENTS AT A LUTHERAN COLLEGE

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As part of a larger investigation into the spiritual climate at one Lutheran college, we interviewed Protestant Christian students in order to compare their conceptualizations of spirituality, religion, and faith with biblical notions of those concepts. We found that the students’ understandings of those concepts only loosely reflected general understanding within the higher education literature, and a significant disconnect existed between their conceptualizations of the relevant terms and those found in the Bible. In an effort to make meaning of our findings, we discuss existing literature about religious illiteracy as it relates to inherited faith and to the impact of institutional religious affiliation.

Spirituality and religion not only influence the lives of many Americans in general (Subbiondo, 2006) but also play a salient role among college and university students in particular. Dalton and Crosby (2007) suggested that because the college years are “a time of great personal reflection and transition in beliefs, values, and commitments” (p. 2), many students are drawn to spirituality and religion. Given this interest among students, it is not surprising that a number of scholars in higher education have become interested in the role of spirituality and religion in higher education. One of the primary challenges faced by both scholars and practitioners, however, relates to that of adequately conceptualizing spirituality, religion, and related constructs such as faith.

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Within the literature in the academic discipline of higher education, various scholars have proposed conceptualizations of spirituality, religion, and/or faith. Many have done so with a primarily philosophical focus in mind. Others, however, have engaged in dialogue about these concepts in hopes of providing insight to college and university personnel so that they will better know how to relate to the spiritual, religious, and/or faith-related beliefs and practices of many college students. Conceptualizations of spirituality, religion, and faith that are expressed in the higher education literature are presented in the following sections.

**Spirituality**

Within the last 10 years, many scholars in higher education have shared their perspectives about the essence of spirituality. Most of the current literature focuses upon descriptions of spirituality that are primarily theoretical in nature. For instance, one group of scholars (Adams, Bezner, Drabbs, Zambarano, & Steinhardt, 2000) described spirituality as including the following dimensions: a sense of meaning and purpose; connectedness to self, the environment, or a higher power; and a belief in a unifying life force. Estanek (2006) provided a more thorough summary after analyzing the meaning given to spirituality in the higher education literature. Five themes emerged from her analysis: understanding spirituality as a new discourse; spirituality defined as spiritual development (see Love & Talbot, 1999); spirituality used as critique to be distinguished from mainstream traditions; spirituality as an empty container for individual meaning; spirituality as a common ground or field that “connects all religions” (p. 277); and spirituality as quasi-religion. Additionally, Parks’ (2000) conceptualization of spirituality as a personal search for meaning, transcendence, wholeness, purpose, and “apprehension of spirit (or Spirit) as the animating essence at the core of life” (p. 16) is often cited in the higher education literature.

Recently, a phenomenological study involving students representing eight different worldviews was conducted by Mayhew (2004) to unveil the essence of spirituality. The 10 themes that emerged from his study mirrored the dimensions discussed in
the theoretical literature. Unlike the others, though, Mayhew discussed the concepts of continuity and pervasiveness as well as the idea that spirituality is meaningful during specific episodes in an individual’s life. He concluded that spirituality consists of two overarching categories: connectedness (e.g., emotional, spiritual) and explication (e.g., making sense, knowing why we exist).

Religion

Much of the higher education literature about religion focuses on distinguishing religion from spirituality rather than elaborating upon the concept of religion itself. However, several scholars have proposed theoretical conceptualizations of religion that warrant consideration. For instance, Koenig, Parkerson, and Meador (1997) described three dimensions of religiosity: organizational, nonorganizational, and intrinsic. Organizational refers to the frequency with which one attends religious services, whereas nonorganizational is conceptualized as the amount of time spent in private religious activities such as prayer or meditation. The degree to which people integrate their religion into their lives describes the intrinsic dimension. Additionally, Corsini (1999) defined religion as an organized system of values and beliefs that serve as moral and spiritual guides. In elaborating upon that conceptualization, Corsini suggested that religious faith involves a belief in a supreme being that sets standards of conduct, responds to prayer, and often assures the ultimate triumph of good over evil. Ultimately, Corsini, along with various others (e.g., Clark, 2001; Love, 2002; Teadale, 1999), believe that religion can best be conceptualized as an organized set of doctrines and rituals.

Faith

Relative to spirituality and religion, less has been written in the field of higher education about the phenomenon of faith. The most common conceptualization, however, is that used by Fowler (1981) and Parks (2000) in their theories of faith development. In the context of those theories, faith is defined as a process of trying to find a meaning and purpose in one’s life. Parks stated that a person of faith may not believe in a supernatural being but may still have a center of value and loyalty to which that person
holds. She stated that faith is different than belief in that beliefs are more static than faith. Finally, in their study at 10 church-related colleges, Braskamp, Trautvetter, and Ward (2005) found that faculty conceptualized faith as making meaning out of life but in a way that includes matters of spirituality and religion. Regardless of different thoughts about how to conceptualize these terms, spirituality, religion, and faith are topics of interest at most religiously affiliated colleges. Information about such colleges is presented next.

**Religiously Affiliated Colleges**

Out of approximately 1,600 private, nonprofit institutions of higher education in the United States, about 900 of these institutions are classified as religiously affiliated (Council for Christian Colleges & Universities, 2006). Religiously affiliated colleges incorporate spirituality, religion, and faith in various ways into the fiber of their institutions in order to facilitate the holistic development of the students therein (Braskamp, Trautvetter, & Ward, 2005). According to Hartley (2004), religiously affiliated colleges are typically affiliated with mainline Protestant or Catholic denominations, yet do not place restrictions on student enrollment based on students’ religious identities. Interestingly, many Protestant denominational colleges have recently experienced a shift in their environments such that they are becoming more pluralistic where religious diversity is concerned (Cherry, DeBerg, & Porterfield, 2001).

Conceptualizations of spirituality, religion, and faith held by students at religiously affiliated institutions are missing from the literature in the field of higher education. One might expect that such conceptualizations would be congruent with the religious tradition with which the institution is affiliated. However, given the religious pluralism on many of these college campuses, students’ conceptualizations of those phenomena may not reflect the central tenets of the religious affiliation of the college. This study, which is part of a larger investigation, addressed the following research question: To what extent are the conceptualizations of spirituality, religion, and faith held by Protestant Christian students at one Lutheran college congruent with the conceptualizations of
those concepts found within the primary sacred document, the Bible, associated with the denomination of the college?

Method

A case study design was used to guide the planning and implementation of this study. In instrumental case studies such as this one, the case serves as a source of insight to generate and to deepen an understanding of a defined issue around which the study is organized (Stake, 2005). The case for this study is described below.

Description of the Case

Comprised of almost 1,800 students, Lutheran College (a pseudonym) is a small institution affiliated with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA). Lutheran College is comprised of 53% female, 7% ethnic minority, and 5% international students. Although 41% of the student body is Lutheran, 25% are Catholic, and the others are a combination of other Christian denominations, non-Christian faiths, and nonreligious individuals. Located in a small town with a population of about 10,000 people in the Midwest, the institution is devoted to providing students with a residential, liberal arts undergraduate experience, supportive connections to faculty and peers, spiritual enrichment, and opportunities to explore one’s calling. A primary challenge facing Lutheran College is that of determining how to best serve the diverse religious perspectives represented on campus while also maintaining its Lutheran denominational identity.

In 2003, Lutheran College instituted a holistic and multidimensional approach to fostering purpose, leadership, and service in the vocational and spiritual lives of students, faculty, and staff by promoting a campus-wide emphasis on calling. In the face of some upcoming changes in personnel (e.g., retirement), several administrators on campus have turned their thoughts to how to best facilitate the spiritual direction, practice, and overall wellness of all members of the campus community. This overarching case study assessed the spiritual atmosphere and the campus ministry programming at the college. This particular portion of the research, however, highlights the conceptualizations of spirituality, religion, and faith held by the Protestant Christian students on the campus
and the extent to which the students’ conceptualizations reflect those found in the Holy Bible (1999).

**Study Design**

Ethnographic techniques were employed to gather the data for the overarching case study. Individual interviews and focus groups were conducted, and observations were made, to generate an in-depth description of Lutheran College. Additionally, a significant amount of biblical text was analyzed after the data collection process ended at the college. Because ethnographic studies typically involve prolonged periods of fieldwork and grounding in anthropological perspectives (Creswell, 1998), the best descriptor of this study is that of a case study with ethnographic features.

**Sampling of Participants**

Prior to our arrival at Lutheran College, we sent an e-mail message to the entire campus community requesting their participation in the study. The invitation for students included a statement about the $20 gift certificate to the Lutheran College bookstore that they would receive in exchange for their participation. Those who were willing to participate completed a demographic survey, the data from which assisted us in assuring maximum variation within the sample (Merriam, 2002). Because, for the entire case study, we sought to reflect the diversity of religious perspectives represented among the students on campus, we included participants from a variety of religious and nonreligious identities. Only students who self-identified as Protestant Christians (e.g., Lutheran, Protestant/Non-Lutheran), however, were included in this portion of the study.

Following the initial request for participants, specific underrepresented students (e.g., racial/ethnic minorities, international students, men) were again contacted via e-mail and invited to participate. Of the 51 students who comprised the final sample of student participants, slightly more than half were females (54.9%). Additionally, a slight majority of the student participants were those who were active participants in campus ministry activities at data collection. Twenty-seven students were included in this particular aspect of the study, 16 of whom self-identified as Lutheran
and 11 as Protestant/Non-Lutheran. All students represented in the sample for this portion of the study were Caucasian.

Data Collection During Site Visits on Campus

Prior to our arrival on campus, we constructed the protocols for the individual interviews and the two focus groups in conjunction with some of the administrators of Lutheran College. Data collection began with an eight-day site visit and ended with a four-day visit approximately four weeks later. Though six of the student participants were unable to meet face to face, they responded to the interview questions via e-mail. All of the face-to-face individual interviews and focus groups were held in a quiet study room in the library on campus. The individual interviews each lasted approximately 30 minutes to 1 hour, while the focus groups each lasted 1 to 1.5 hours. The collection of interview and focus data ended upon the point of reaching saturation (Patton, 2002), when no new themes were coming forth. In addition to the focus groups and interviews, observations of two weekday and two Sunday chapel services provided other sources of data for the overarching case study. To ensure confidentiality, pseudonyms were used for all participants and the college.

Analysis of Data Collected During Site Visits

To be attentive and responsive to emerging themes, theories, and gaps in the data, we chose to follow Maxwell’s (1996) suggestion that the data analysis process begin while collecting data. Transcriptions of all interviews as well as observation field notes were used to develop a list of codes that would, subsequently, be used to systematically break down the data into meaningful units. These units of meaning were then reconstructed into themes and patterns that were essential to understanding the critical issues of focus in the study. Essentially, the process was one of tearing down and rebuilding into an organized and meaningful interpretation of the case (Creswell, 1998).
**Document Analysis of Biblical Text**

Strong’s (1990) concordance was utilized to identify every instance in which the words *spirituality*, *religion*, and *faith* were found within the biblical text. Because the word *spirituality* was not found in the text, a search for the words *spiritual* and *spiritually* was conducted. Additionally, in light of the limited references to the word *religion*, textual units in which the word *religious* was used were also analyzed. A total of 283 units of text, containing at least one of the aforementioned terms, were included in this portion of the data. Each unit of text was identified in the New King James Version of the Holy Bible (1999) and was typed onto one of three documents based on the focus of the textual unit: spirituality, religion, and faith. These units of meaning were then analyzed in the same way as that gleaned from interviews, focus groups, and observations (Creswell, 1998).

**Trustworthiness**

Qualitative research involves the acknowledgment of the perspectives of the researchers to lend transparency to the ways in which the data may have been affected. We are both middle-class, Caucasian women, affiliated with non-Lutheran Christian traditions. Additionally, as external researchers-consultants, we brought outsider perspectives to this study along with in-depth knowledge of issues related to spirituality and religion in higher education.

We utilized several techniques to increase the trustworthiness of the larger study of which this datum was a part (Patton, 2002). First, triangulation was used to ensure consistency of the findings across multiple sources of data (e.g., faculty, students, and staff) and data collection methods (e.g., interviews, focus groups, observations). Also, the strategy of analyst triangulation was utilized to increase the trustworthiness of the results; this form of triangulation involves the use of two or more people who independently analyze the same qualitative data and compare their findings (Patton). Member checking, another strategy used in this study, involves taking the data and interpretations back to the participants in the study so that they can confirm the credibility of the information (Creswell & Miller, 2000). We solicited feedback
on initial findings from the Lutheran College community during a follow-up visit; from that visit, we were able to refine the description and analysis of the college’s spiritual context. Finally, an audit trail was established. An audit trail is the maintenance of “precise records of who said what, when, where, and under what conditions” (Whitt, 1991, p. 45). To this end, we documented all research decisions and activities throughout the course of the project and maintained files of all interview transcripts, observation documents, and data charts.

Limitations

Unfortunately, we lack important demographic information that would have added value to this study. First of all, the academic classification (e.g., freshman, sophomore) of the participants is likely related to the length of time they have been attending Lutheran College, unless they transferred from a different institution. Also, it stands to reason that the longer students are at a particular institution, the more likely they will be influenced by that institution. Because we did not have the academic classifications of the students, we were not able to determine if their responses differed as a result of how long they had been in attendance at Lutheran College.

A second limitation of the study is that which concerns the self-identification of the participants. Clearly, all identified themselves as Protestant Christians either directly or indirectly. However, knowing the degree to which the students themselves understood those labels is unclear. Furthermore, the degree to which their religious identity was salient in their lives at the time is indeterminable by the data that we collected. It is possible that students who utilized certain labels to describe their religious identity really do not view their religion as salient in their lives. So, knowing the degree to which the students in this study were devout in their religion (e.g., actively practicing it) would have been insightful as we attempted to make meaning of our results. It is likely that those who are less devout might be less knowledgeable about their religion. In spite of the limitations, however, useful information can be gleaned from this research.
Results

Students’ Perspectives

Though a number of the students attempted to convey distinctions among spirituality, religion, and faith, most were unable to meaningfully distinguish those concepts. Common among most of the conceptualizations provided by the participants, however, was the underlying assumption that spirituality, religion, and faith each involve a belief system with related practices. According to the participants, though all three concepts are interrelated, the source and related practices of the belief systems relevant to each differ among the concepts.

**Spirituality**

Most of the student participants articulated the idea that spirituality involves various belief systems that are internally constructed and/or defined. For instance, Heather stated, “Spirituality is more of your inner … what you believe without outside influences.” Similarly, Cooper stated the following:

> Spirituality is more of a personal thing. It’s more of how you look at the universe and how you experience it, how you look at life … your own feelings and your own ideas and your own beliefs.

Not surprisingly given the perspective that spirituality is an internally constructed and/or defined belief system, many students in this study suggested that spirituality is often practiced in a more private, individual manner. Dustin best described this sentiment: “Spirituality is not wanting to be associated with any particular group or denomination. It’s just kind of their own little personal religion.”

**Religion**

Unlike their conceptualization of spirituality, students in this study expressed that religion is grounded upon beliefs externally defined and often imposed. “Religion is following a certain … whether it be Christianity, Judaism, Muslim, Buddhist …
following the beliefs of that particular religion,” stated Louise. Furthermore, religion, unlike spirituality, is frequently practiced publicly and corporately. Anne stated the following in this regard:

Religion is more structured than any of the other two [spirituality and faith]. Religion has a name to it, has a place where you can worship or be with other people who share your same religion by that same name.

Interestingly, most participants stated that religion has a negative connotation due to the perceived external regulation inherent in it. For this reason, few participants were willing to identify themselves as explicitly “religious.” Dylan best described this perception:

When I think of religion, red flags go up. I don’t really like the term religion. The traditional attitude and atmosphere of the church [where I was raised] was basically, “You do this, this, and this, and you belong to this committee and you do this thing and then you’ll be good with God.” I would go to church on Sunday and then forget about it for the rest of the week, because the guilt that came with remembering was a lot.

Faith

Faith was described by many of the participants as a belief in things that “cannot be proven.” Marcia, for example, stated, “Faith is a belief you have that you really have no basis for but the fact that you believe it is true.” Similarly, Gayla described faith in the following way: “Faith is definitely somebody believing in something greater than yourself, something that you can’t necessarily see or actually have contact with, but you believe in it.”

Additionally, many students in this study discussed the relationship between faith, spirituality, and religion. Several of the participants stated that faith forms the basis of both spirituality and religion and vice versa: “Faith is the foundation of what your spirituality and religion is. My faith is what keeps me grounded, and I consider that a part of my religion and my spirituality” (Bonnie). Other students stated just the opposite; they believe that faith is derived from spirituality and/or religion. For instance, Heather stated, “Faith is your personal beliefs based on your spirituality and your religion.”
Biblical Notions

The biblical notions of spirituality, faith, and religion were analyzed to compare them to the students’ conceptualizations. As mentioned earlier, each reference to one of the aforementioned, or related, terms is from the New King James Version of the Holy Bible (1999). The following sections describe the biblical notions of the concepts of interest in this study.

Spirituality

Interestingly, though *spiritual* and *spiritually* are used 30 times throughout the Holy Bible (1999), the term *spirituality* is not used at all. One of the most prevalent ways in which the term *spiritual* is used is to describe people who are united and mature. In a letter that Paul wrote to the Christians in Corinth, he said:

> But the natural man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; nor can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned. But, he who is spiritual judges all things, yet he himself is rightly judged by no one. For “who has known the mind of the Lord that he may instruct Him?” But we have the mind of Christ.

And I, brethren, could not speak to you as spiritual people but as to carnal, as to babes in Christ. I fed you with milk and not with solid food; for until now you were not able to receive it, and even now you are still not able; for you are still carnal. For where there are envy, strife, and divisions among you, are you not carnal and behaving like mere men? For when one says, “I am of Paul.” And another, “I am of Apollos,” are you not carnal?

(1 Corinthians 2:14–3:4)

In the context above, the term *spiritual* is defined as “supernatural and regenerate” (Strong, 1990).

Additionally, both *spiritual* and *spiritually* are also commonly used in the Bible to describe a form of discernment, judgment, understanding, and wisdom. For instance, Paul and Timothy wrote to the Christians in Colossae and said, “For this reason we also, since the day we heard it, do not cease to pray for you, and to ask that you may be filled with the knowledge of His will in all wisdom and spiritual understanding” (Colossians 1:9). He also wrote to the Christians in Rome and said, “For to be carnally minded is death, but to be spiritually minded is life and peace” (Romans 8:6).
The descriptors “spiritual” or “spiritually” are also used to describe a type of gift or blessing imparted to someone by another person (e.g., Romans 1:11, Romans 15:27) or by God (e.g., 1 Corinthians 12:1, 7; Ephesians 1:3), a type of song to be spoken or sung to others (e.g., Colossians 3:16), and the “law” or commands of God (Romans 7:14). It is intriguing to note that “spiritual” might connote something negative; that term is also used to describe “hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places” (Ephesians 6:12).

Religion

The terms religion and religious are only used seven times throughout the Bible. In several of those instances, the term religion is used to make reference to Judaism (Acts 13:43; Acts 26:5; Galatians 1:13–14) with which the writers of those passages, Luke and Paul respectively, were affiliated. The other instances in which either religion or religious appear are all embedded within two verses of the Bible, written by James:

If anyone among you thinks he is religious, and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his own heart, this one’s religion is useless. Pure and undefiled religion before God and the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their trouble and to keep oneself unspotted from the world. (James 1:26–27)

Implied in the above passages is the idea that the descriptor “religious” should have a positive connotation to it. According to James, people who are careful about what they say, who visit those who are in need (e.g., orphans and widows), and who remain free from being negatively influenced by others in the world are those who have the right to self-identify as good “religious” people.

Faith

Unlike the relatively rare occurrences of terms such as spiritual, spiritually, religion, and religious, the word faith appears 246 times within the Bible. The majority of those occurrences can be found in the first four books of the New Testament, as they are used to describe a whole-hearted trust in Jesus Christ for the provision of
needs (e.g., Matthew 6:30) and safety (e.g., Mark 4:40). Additionally, Jesus often told people that their faith had resulted in their healing (e.g., Matthew 9:22).

Beyond those instances, the term faith is most often used to describe trusting in Jesus Christ to restore peace between self and God. In many instances, this trust is characterized as being “saved through faith” as in Ephesians 2:8: “For by grace you have been saved through faith and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God.” Jesus demonstrated this idea when he healed a paralyzed man who had been carried to him for healing: “When Jesus saw their faith, He said to the paralytic, ‘Your faith has saved you. Go in peace’” (Luke 7:50). Furthermore, Paul stated that people are “justified by faith apart from the deeds of the law” (Romans 3:28) and that by being justified, “we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ” (Romans 5:1).

The other most common references to faith describe the importance of remaining “steadfast” (1 Peter 2:9) in it. Implied in these passages is the notion of faith being something one possesses, specifically a trusting belief in Jesus Christ. For instance, one biblical reference states the following: “As you therefore have received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in Him, rooted and built up in Him and established in the faith, as you have been taught, abounding in it with thanksgiving” (Colossians 2:7). Throughout the New Testament, people are told to “continue in the faith” (e.g., Acts 14:21–22) even when “testing” of the faith is involved as a result of hardship or suffering (e.g., James 1:3). To be sure, the idea that people may be drawn away or can turn away from the faith is stated in various portions of the biblical text (e.g., Acts 13:8); in one instance, people for whom that has happened are described as having “suffered shipwreck” (1 Timothy 1:19).

**Discussion**

Interestingly, the Protestant Christian students’ conceptualizations of the terms spirituality, religion, and faith were unclear and indistinct. Furthermore, upon comparing the students’ conceptualizations of those terms with the biblical references to those or their related concepts, it is clear that there is a significant disconnect between the two. These findings are fascinating when placed in the context of current scholarship about spirituality,
religion, and faith in society at large as well as within higher education.

**Calling into Question the Idea of a Common Language**

Some scholars (e.g., Estanek, 2006; Love, 2002; Parks 2000) have proposed definitions of spirituality, religion, and faith in an attempt to create a common language that will facilitate greater understanding on college and university campuses. However, given the findings of this study, a common language may not exist where spirituality, religion, and faith are concerned. Not only did the students in this study have difficulty defining the concepts of spirituality, religion, and faith, but also their ability to effectively differentiate them from each other was lacking. The basic distinction between spirituality and religion presented by the students in this study, for example, concerned the source of the belief system and related practices for each. They had even less to say about faith, simply communicating the idea that faith is somehow related to religion and spirituality.

These results are not unlike those of Love, Bock, Jannarone, and Richardson (2005) who attempted to differentiate spirituality from religion in a study of the spiritual identity development of lesbian and gay college students. In their study, most of the students discussed those concepts interchangeably. The reality is that most students in American culture instinctively think of religion during discussions of spirituality and faith unless specifically asked to differentiate them. Even in the study by Love and his colleagues, nearly all of the students' comments focused on facets of religion even after the researchers had differentiated spirituality from religion. To be sure, the primary form of congruence, albeit a weak one, between the definitions found in the literature and those provided by the students concerned the phenomenon of faith. Nash (2001) defined faith as “an attitude of trusting belief in something that goes beyond the available evidence” (p. 27), and that is similar to how it was described by several students in this study. Perhaps what is most fascinating is that even though the students had the least amount to say about faith, the biblical text is replete with references to that concept.

Given the fact that all of the students in this study self-identified as Protestant Christians and all were attending
Lutheran College, their inability to define and to differentiate between spirituality, religion, and faith is intriguing. We would have anticipated that, though their definitions of those concepts may have differed from those presented in the higher education literature, they would have been similar to those presented in the biblical text. This lack of understanding of these terms leads one to question the degree to which the participants are knowledgeable about key concepts within their own Christian religion.

Religious Illiteracy

Recently, the religious illiteracy that seemingly pervades American society has been a topic of discussion. Perhaps the most recent publication that has sparked much interest within educational sectors is that by Prothero (2007). Prothero found that, in relation to the Christian religion, the majority of Americans cannot name even one of the four Gospels, only one-third know that it was Jesus who delivered the Sermon on the Mount, and 10% think that Joan of Arc was Noah’s wife. Astoundingly, and most relevant to this particular research study, is Prothero’s claim that devout Christians are, on average, at least as ignorant about the facts of Christianity as are other Americans. Where the findings of this research study are concerned, the question remains: Is this religious illiteracy a result of the inherited faith (Parks, 2000) of the college students, or does it reflect a diluted religious influence of the Lutheran college itself?

“Inherited faith”

In Sharon Parks’ (2000) theory of faith development, she describes the first stage as that characterized by absolute/conventional knowing. In this form of knowing, young adults get knowledge from outside of themselves from various types of authorities. During childhood, for instance, many form their faith on the basis of the initial understandings of sacred texts, the teachings of parents, and their religious experiences. College students, then, begin college with this “inherited faith” (p. 55). One explanation for the religious illiteracy found in this study, then, is that the students were never taught the meaning of biblical concepts such as religion, spirituality, and faith during their childhood.
experiences. Perhaps they never read the Bible. Or, it is possible that they were unable to fully understand biblical principles related to the aforementioned concepts. Either way, students in this study who identified as Protestant Christians did not refer to the biblical notions of spirituality, religion, and faith when attempting to communicate their own conceptualizations.

Religious Affiliation of the College

Even if the inherited faith of the students in this study was lacking in biblical content, it is surprising that the students’ presence at a college of the Lutheran church did not equip them with the biblical notions associated with the concepts of interest in this study: religion, spirituality, and faith. The results of this study suggest that the Christian affiliation of the college was not directly reflected in the language used by the students to describe spirituality, religion, and faith; indeed, the biblical conceptualizations of spirituality, religion, and faith were missing from among those presented by the Protestant Christian students in this study. Why might this incongruence exist?

Burtchaell (1998) stated that colleges and universities that have claimed significant connections with Christian denominations have become increasingly more secularized over the years. In fact, most sectarian schools have only a “nominal relationship to a denomination or religious tradition” (Poe, 2005, p. 64) such that they may not be significantly different than their secular counterparts (Mixon, Lyon, & Beaty, 2004). To be sure, once-hegemonic Christian traditions are no longer dominant on religiously affiliated college campuses (Spach, 2007). This may be due, in part, to a significant challenge facing many such colleges of “how to embody their Christian identity meaningfully in a context where Christianity is but one among the diverse religious and non-religious perspectives represented on campus” (Spach, p. 56). Evidence from the larger case study (of which this was a portion) exists to suggest that Lutheran College is, indeed, facing that same challenge (Bryant & Craft, 2010).

Implications and Conclusion

Evidence suggests that many evangelical Christian students at public universities believe that there is a public misperception about
the nature of authentic Christianity (Moran, 2007). Perhaps religious illiteracy on the part of self-identified Protestant Christian students such as those in this study exaggerates this public misperception. Given the findings of this study, we propose the recommendations listed below.

First, during new student orientation, faculty and staff at religiously affiliated institutions could spend time discussing the religious affiliation of the institution. Rather than simply sharing a historical perspective, faculty and staff could discuss the current meaning and implications of the religious affiliation along with a general overview of the doctrine and primary concepts associated with that affiliation. Terms such as spirituality, religion, and faith could be discussed in relation to the institutional affiliation.

Second, the basic doctrine and concepts of the religion with which the institution is affiliated could be revisited on a regular basis within classroom settings as well as in the out-of-class curriculum (e.g., student activities programming, residence hall programming). Required religion courses are the most obvious venue for discussions such as these. In addition, programs can be planned and facilitated in which concepts related to the religious affiliation of the institution are discussed in depth.

Finally, if the institution is attempting to distance itself from its religious affiliation, it is critical that such intentions be communicated to key stakeholders. Having no knowledge of such an intention, we assumed that students at Lutheran College would have an understanding of the concepts associated with Christianity. The communication of such intentions is particularly important in religiously affiliated institutions wherein many students, and their parents, most likely expect religion to infiltrate the atmosphere of those institutions.

In conclusion, the findings of this study suggest that even Protestant Christian students at a Lutheran college may not have an in-depth understanding of their own religious affiliation. Whether this lack of knowledge reflects their inherited faith or a diluted religious influence of the college itself remains a question to be investigated. Either way, if religiously affiliated institutions are striving to incorporate their religion into all facets of their institutional cultures, these findings should highlight the need for intentional mechanisms by which to do so.
References


