

Teachers, students see religious inquiry fading

Patricia Coll Freeman | Nov. 11, 2009



Students walk to class Sept. 27 at the University of Alaska in Anchorage. (CNS/Catholic Anchor/Patricia Coll Freeman)

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ANCHORAGE, ALASKA -- Many college students are wandering around campus -- spiritually, that is.

Historically, many students have found college a place to explore life's spiritual issues. But more and more young adults are arriving on campus without any experience or language of faith, and they appear to express little interest in finding the ultimate truth.

A study on religious affiliation by researchers at Trinity College in Hartford, Conn., found that the number of American adults who do not identify with any particular religious group has almost doubled -- to 34 million -- since 1990.

The study found about 22 percent of young adults -- those 30 and younger -- identify themselves as "nones," a group that includes the irreligious, unreligious, antireligious and anticlerical. Increasingly, people in that category report having had no formal religion as a child.

This modern phenomenon is evident in the student bodies of Alaska Pacific University, a private liberal arts institution in Anchorage, and the University of Alaska Anchorage.

"A lot of families, at least that I have noticed, kind of wait on [introducing their children to religion]," the Rev. Doug Lindsay, chaplain at Alaska Pacific University, told the *Catholic Anchor*, newspaper of the Anchorage archdiocese. "They don't necessarily discourage their children to go that route, but they don't necessarily encourage them either."

Kristin Helweg Hanson, adjunct professor of religion and philosophy at the University of Alaska Anchorage, regularly teaches students whose parents have taken such a hands-off approach. In introductory essays for Hanson's class, students "often reveal a relative absence of exposure to any religion," she said.

Hanson's students often write about how they appreciate their parents' laissez-faire stance because it allows

them to choose their own religious path. But in most cases Hanson believes such an attitude means students haven't done any choosing and don't have the tools to even explore.

Lindsay hears few of the age-old questions about God or the presence of evil in the world. Increasingly, however, he hears concerns about the environment and diversity, though such concerns are rarely expressed as plainly and purely as they might be asked in a theology or philosophy class.

Hanson said she also has found students initially do not ask questions outright, but only at her suggestion. In addition, she explained, students often arrive in class with very truncated impressions of religions. She has found that opinions of entire religious traditions -- especially Christianity -- can be outright negative.

Students see their lives a bit differently.

Ben Carpenter, a junior at the University of Alaska Anchorage, does not see college necessarily helping students explore the deepest questions of life.

Very few teachers have really provoked me to think about a lot of things, or in the order they should be considered, he said, adding that he has seen few of his fellow students delving into life's big questions.

Carpenter, a Catholic who was mainly schooled at home by his mother, was quick to say that he thinks students have the potential to ask these questions or to think about these things, but that secular universities don't generally center on philosophical pursuits.

It's just very career-oriented, he said. Students don't have any deep desires, or their desires might be to jump through the hoops of work or of college and getting a degree, Carpenter explained. So it's kind of hard to extract deeper questions they may have. Not that they don't have them, I just think it doesn't come up.

But Carpenter believes the lack of religion in childhood handicaps students before they arrive on campus.

They don't have any framework from which to build their pursuit for knowledge, he said. Without that framework, he explained, they stall at pursuing the deeper questions, especially philosophical questions about God and about religion or about being.

Natalia Balaban and Sheila Sine of the University of Alaska Anchorage's Cardinal Newman Club, which hosts Masses on campus and sponsors charitable projects, agree that most students are not focused on issues of faith.

For most nonreligious people, they're not really too interested in talking about it, said Balaban, a junior.

Even for churchgoing students, college can be a distraction from faith, added Sine.

They're away from home, so I think they kind of forget about attending church regularly. It kind of takes a back seat to studies and club activities and athletics, said Sine, who joined the Newman Club to become more involved in her faith.

As to whether she engages in many deep, philosophical conversations with others still searching for truth, she said, No, not really.

In fact, most religious students are quiet as well, explained Windy Thomas, a junior at the University of Alaska Anchorage who is president of the Students for Life group on campus.

I don't always find myself usually opening up about my faith, said Thomas, who considers herself a nondenominational Christian. You have to kind of monitor what you're saying to people. You don't go, I am

so blessed today! or something like that.?

Typically, Thomas doesn't feel excluded from classroom discourse because of her faith. But 'it's not easy by any means,' she said. 'It really depends on the classroom and who the teacher is.'

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