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Difference of Faith: Why Conservatively Religious Students Can Thrive in a Liberal Arts
University

When one hears the phrase “religious diversity,” one normally thinks in terms of religious minorities such as Muslims, Jews, Buddhists, or atheists. One does not usually think, however, in terms of liberal and conservative. At Stetson University, for example, Christians are the majority (Flint-Hamilton 7). However, if upon further investigation, one would find that, because Stetson is a liberal arts university, the vast majority of them are liberal Christians. Consequently, conservative Christian students are a hidden minority since they share a name that claims the majority when in fact their ideology sets them distinctly apart from the mainstream Christians at Stetson. Because liberal and conservative ideologies are so different, many wonder if conservatively religious students can or should even attend liberal arts universities at all. After all, many – though certainly not all – of the things that conservative students believe go contrary to what liberal arts institutions teach and encourage in their students. Does that mean conservative students should not attend liberal colleges? Do conservative students have to give up their ideology in order to have a successful college experience? These questions are important because, firstly, for a conservatively religious student deciding which college to attend, maintenance of faith is often a prime deciding factor. In addition, it is important for liberal colleges such as Stetson University, which highly values diversity, to know whether or not conservative students can contribute to diversity and benefit their community. Can conservative

students thrive in and profit an environment in which they do not fit in, or is a concession in ideological values necessary and inevitable?

According to authors such as Gary Madsen, Gary Railsback, and Jack Balswick, a sizeable amount of religious students hold fast to their beliefs during their stay at college. Railsback reports that, among born-again college students, 77% at public universities and 55% at private universities claimed to keep their faith through graduation (Railsback 50). In the same way, Balswick contends that most conservative students hold onto their religious beliefs, though they often change in their moral or political views (Balswick 66). He suggests that this is because the relationship between religion and politics is a very complex one and a change in one does not necessarily imply a change in the other. In addition, Madsen asserts that though many do change in their religiously conservative beliefs, a sizeable amount claim no change or even an increase in their orthodoxy (Madsen and Vernon 131).

On the other hand, authors such as Alyssa Bryant et al, Donald Edmondson, Crystal Park, and Joseph Zelan claim that losing conservative faith is practically inevitable in a liberal college. According to Edmondson, most religious students cannot get through college with their faith intact and undergo a significant belief change (Edmondson and Park 298). In addition, Bryant and her associates report that college students tend to decrease in religiosity and increase in a postmodern spirituality (Bryant et al 736). Joseph Zelan goes so far as to claim that elite, liberal colleges are the prime places for conservatively religious students to lose their faith because these schools encourage a questioning mentality in students, causing them to seriously doubt their religious beliefs (Zelan 376). In colleges where liberal, postmodern thought and ideology are taught and strongly recommended, it seems almost impossible for conservatives to hold fast to their beliefs without refusing to think critically. However, just because it is probable does not

make it inevitable. I assert that religiously conservative students *can* not only hold on to their faith, but also flourish in it, because they can prepare beforehand with evidences supporting their faith; because opposition in the classroom provides opportunities for students to be challenged and sink their roots deeper; because conservative students can add to and benefit from the diversity on liberal campuses, giving them an opportunity to share and grow in what they believe; and, most importantly, because religious faith is based upon personal, spiritual experience and not just data, giving the students a sure confidence to rely upon.

A dilemma in the scholarly debate above, however, lies in the apparent contradictions between findings. As can be seen, some authors assert that most conservatively religious students hold on to their faith, whereas other authors claim that most do not. Obviously, both claims cannot be true. However, it could be that the students' or authors' definitions of "religion" are different. Authors such as Railsback, who claim 77% and 55% of students remained in their faith during college, are likely operating under a vaguer understanding of religious faith than are authors such as Bryant and Edmondson. In fact, Bryant draws attention to this dilemma when she separates the ideas of religiosity and spirituality, showing that while students increase in the latter during college, they decrease in the former. Bryant, borrowing from Love (2001), defines religion as "a shared system of beliefs, principles or doctrines related to a belief in and worship of a supernatural power or powers regarded as creator(s) and governor(s) of the universe" (Bryant 723). In contrast, spirituality is defined as "seeking personal authenticity, genuineness, and wholeness; transcending one's locus of centrality...; connectedness to self and others through relationships and community; developing a sense of meaning, purpose and direction; and openness to fostering a relationship with a higher power or center of value that transcends human existence and rational ways of knowing" (Bryant 724). Therefore, even though students are

growing in spirituality and wandering away from religious doctrines, they may not necessarily see this process as compromise in religious beliefs, which explains the discrepancy in the authors' findings and claims.

However, it is also important to understand *why* college students are becoming more spiritual yet less religious. The most common worldview among academic communities and many intellectuals is postmodernism. According to David Noebel, postmodernism is a worldview that denies the existence of a metanarrative (an overarching story about history and the world, such as the Bible's) and upholds deconstructionism (the idea that "words do not represent reality, and that concepts expressed in sentences in any language are arbitrary") (Noebel 26-27). Accepting this worldview allows for a wide range of "little truths," and rejects notions of Absolute Truth. Colleges exemplify postmodernism in what they teach their students. For example, the results from a survey I gave to several Stetson professors from a wide range of subjects show that many professors teach their classes from the viewpoint that truth is relative. Though professors often make an effort to convey to their students that they can choose to believe whatever they wish, they still teach from a liberal perspective, which greatly affects students in what they choose to believe. For example, one professor teaches his Human Rights class on the basis that truth is culturally relative (Participant E). Students learn to use this concept as the foundation for appreciating different cultures. In the same way, a science professor hopes that all the "discussions of scientific experiments, data, and ideas impresses upon the students that truth is always changing" (Participant B). This obviously presents a problem for conservatively religious students, who believe in one Absolute Truth: Jesus Christ. They grow up believing a very different worldview than the one presented to them in college, the place they affiliate, and often equate, with knowledge. Therefore, because of the increasing

postmodernism in the very classroom that students respect, conservative students are more apt to adopt postmodern principles and try to apply them to their faith. This accounts, then, for why most students claim the same religious affiliation while still undergoing a liberalizing process.

Though almost all students, regardless of worldview, change in many different directions in college, research shows that the average trend is that graduating seniors are more liberal than they were as freshmen. Also, studies have shown that students usually become less religiously orthodox, becoming more cynical about God and the Church (Feldman 123). A survey done by Tara Stoppa indicates that among those who were raised Protestant or Catholic, less claimed to be such in college, whereas more students claimed to be agnostic, atheist, or unaffiliated than had been raised so (Stoppa 27). This shows that college students lean more towards a liberal change, which could be due to stress and acclimation to college life, the academic encouragement to think critically, or the separation from religious family and friends from home. Or, most predominantly, it could be due to the liberal ideologies taught in the classrooms and supported among college peers.

However, in spite of the pervasive Postmodernism in secular institutions, I assert that conservative students can still attend a liberal college and think critically and intellectually without compromising their beliefs or liberalizing their ideas. This is because, firstly, a strong opposition to conservative values usually sets up resistance in a student's mentality. Findings have shown that a significant amount of evangelical and other conservatively religious students that attend liberal colleges stay strong in their faith. Authors such as Feldman, Stoppa, Hammond, and Hunter suggest that this could be because these students are first confronted with strongly liberal views and, in an attempt to hold onto what they believe, set up psychological

defenses against such teachings. Hammond and Hunter call it a “fortress mentality” (Hammond and Hunter 233).

This is in part because conservative students who choose to go to a liberal college do so knowing what will await them; they realize that they will not receive the same kind of ideological support as they would in a Christian college. On the one hand, conservative students who choose to attend Conservative Christian schools normally do so with the idea that it will strengthen their faith, not wanting their faith to be undermined nor discredited. However, in many cases, conservatively religious students in Conservative Christian colleges tend to relax in their evangelical worldview whereas those in secular colleges grow stronger in it (Hammond and Hunter 231). It seems that the Conservative Christian schools prove to be a spiritually numbing environment for students *because* their values are not being questioned. The lack of opposition decreases the pressure students feel to defend their views. On the other hand, in secular colleges, conservative students are faced with opposing views – such as evolution or atheism – every day, whether by the curriculum, professors, or fellow classmates and friends. Most conservative students with a strong conservative worldview realize this and choose to attend these liberal colleges anyway, indicating that they feel they are capable of facing the pressure that awaits them (Hammond and Hunter 231).

After all, defending one’s viewpoints in the classroom requires preparation. Preparation entails knowing *what* one believes and *why*. A conservative student who does not have a strong foundation for their religious convictions before college will not be able to defend their position well in the classroom. For instance, it is important for conservative students to know that there is scientific evidence supporting Creation, such as the Third Law of Thermodynamics or the Cambrian Explosion (an archeological discovery of a diverse array of complex organisms in a

stratum that was supposed to contain only very simple organisms). Likewise, it is important to know that Jesus was a historical figure and that many historians – Christian and secular – wrote about His life, death, and resurrection as well as the miracles and wonders that accompanied these events. Without a basic understanding of these topics, conservative students will have nothing to stand on when they defend their views except for a personal experience. Conservative students who attend secular colleges, I believe, understand this and are usually, to some degree, prepared for the opposition they are to face. They anticipate it.

In addition to beforehand preparation, conservative students are also willing to continue to think critically, look deeper into the material taught in the classroom, and even look beyond it into other sources. In essence, it forces students to study harder, research more, and learn more about their beliefs, further strengthening their convictions. For example, for a conservative student taking a biology class taught from an evolutionary standpoint, it is necessary to research evidence for and against both evolution and creationism. If the student chooses not to put forth this effort, he or she is left with only two other options: accept the opposing view of evolution as true or try to push it out of the mind, labeling it unimportant. Both these options are contrary to the aim of higher education, which is to learn to think both critically and analytically in order to prepare yourself for your future and discover truth.

Even in the cases of apparent failure when students speak out in class and are shut down or do not know how to respond to objections, they can later reflect on what they said and how they could have presented it better. They can hone their skills in public speaking, debating, and research, all of which are qualities that are highly valuable in a college education. For example, when I stepped into a debate concerning evolution versus creationism in my English class my freshman year, I thought I knew exactly what I was going to say. However, when asked what

scientific evidence supported creationism, my mind went completely blank and my memory all but shut down. I vaguely remember mumbling something about the cosmos and perhaps a tidbit about the geological column. Whatever I said, it was certainly not convincing. However, even though I left the class feeling defeated, it gave me the opportunity to later ask myself how I should have responded to such a question. I researched more evidences for creationism and prepared in my mind what I would say if the topic ever came up again. Opposition to conservative values, though uncomfortable, is the perfect opportunity for conservatively religious students to improve their logical and oral intelligence.

In addition to opposition, the diversity found in secular colleges also allows conservative students to remain in their faith by giving them more opportunities to share it. I believe this is important to liberal colleges because the presence of this greatly different worldview adds to their diversity by offering fresh perspective and an opportunity for them to respect a very different belief. Stetson University's Vice President for Campus Life, Rina Tovar, states that "[Stetson University] is a liberal arts institution which values diversity of thought. It is important for our students to think about what they have been taught in regards to religion, and then determine for themselves what they believe." In talking with several professors on Stetson's campus, I have come to find that hearing different perspectives is considered a highly valuable trait in learning; the more one hears, the better. However, how can students determine what they believe by considering others' points of view if they do not hear all sides? Because the conservative Christian worldview is so vastly different than any liberal worldview on campus, it adds a special aspect to the diversity as well as offers fresh perspective to those who are questioning what they believe. It also provides the liberal students and faculty the opportunity to learn to appreciate and respect opinions that are very different from their own. This is another of

the values of diversity on campus, as voiced by one of the top administrators of Stetson University, adding to the significance of conservative students on liberal campuses. After all, how can one learn to respect people of all religions and backgrounds if they never come into contact with them, interact with them, or converse with them? Therefore, the conservative Christian worldview is not only beneficial to the diversity on liberal campuses, but essential.

By sharing what they believe, conservatively religious students not only benefit the college, but themselves as well. This is important for conservatively religious students because sharing with others about what they believe enhances their faith and confidence. Sharing their faith with friends who do not know or understand it forces religious students to focus more on the core essentials in their faith such as Creation, Christ's death and resurrection, salvation and forgiveness, and Christ's Return. Students reinforce what they believe by speaking out loud about these foundational pillars to the Christian faith and keeping them in the forefront of their minds. Speaking them out loud also serves to build up students' confidence in their ability to speak about controversial matters with people of differing opinions. Whereas some students may be predisposed to boldly sharing what they believe, some, like me, are not. I have found that sharing my faith with those who either disagree with me or do not know about Christianity has helped me become more confident in what I am sharing as well as my ability to present it. After the conversations, I am able to look back and see what I could have said differently that would make clearer what I was trying to convey.

Most importantly, the diversity at liberal universities teaches conservative students to interact with and share their faith with their friends out of sincere love. Building relationships with people from diverse backgrounds allows conservative students to build a valuable friendship and trust with people. If the words and message are the backbone to discussions about

faith, then sincere love and friendship are the flesh and blood. Recently, according to C. L. Lopez, even Christian outreaches on college campuses are now focusing more on social and relational interaction. In the same way, Christians in a religiously diverse environment tend to learn that evangelism must be done with love and understanding (Wuthnow 49). The great number of opportunities to talk about faith, religion, and God in the diverse community of a liberal college campus allows for students to hone their faith, build their confidence, and learn how to share what they believe in a loving, understanding way. Therefore, conservative students can thrive because, through sharing what they believe, they not only benefit the campus, but also build up their own faith.

The final reason conservative students can stand strong in their faith throughout their stay at a liberal college is that religious faith goes beyond academic reasoning. Faith is spiritual. Because of its spiritual nature, students do not have to be afraid of failing to find the answer to their questions through academic study. They can still stand in their faith without doubting it. Faith must still have intellectual evidences, of course. However, in spite of the evidence supporting the conservatively religious student's faith, he or she must realize that academics can only go so far. Science is not completely trustworthy. Every so often, a new scientific hypothesis or theory is disproven and others are formed. A common – and perhaps overused – example would be the old “scientific law” that the earth was flat. The scientific data at that time period pointed to this suggestion – or so they thought. When this notion was disproved and it became evident that the earth is indeed a spherical shape, science proved itself wrong in that earlier observations and theories were either thrown aside or reinterpreted. In the same way, when I was a child, Pluto was considered a planet. Now, however, scientists call it a moon, showing yet again that our understanding of science is not always as trustworthy as we would like to think.

If we only believed what we could see, then we would know very little about the world at all. Not even academic scholars entirely behave in such a way. In addition to observations, they rely on trusted sources, their findings, their opinions. Religious faith works almost the same way. Faith is founded not only upon hard evidence, but also others' testimonies and personal experience. For a believer, faith is born from a personal experience with God. This is what many Christians call their "testimony." For instance, though I believe in Jesus because of the evidences supporting Christianity, the ultimate reason I put my faith in Him is because He revealed Himself to my heart. When I was twelve years old, I decided that, if God was real, I wanted to know Him for myself and not just believe in Him because my parents did. I told Him that if He truly was real and wanted to save me, He needed to show me who He was. And He did. He set me free from addictions I could not seem to escape. He fulfilled prophecies spoken over me. When I worship, I feel His Presence. When I pray, He answers me. For me, these spiritual aspects are different than a vague, postmodern spirituality because of their indestructible link to the Bible and Jesus Christ. Of course, I would not use these examples in the classroom because spiritual experiences are not considered classroom material. But they *are* solidifiers for my *personal* faith. Other people could explain these instances away as mere emotion, but as the one who experienced these things, I cannot because I could tell it was different than mere emotion. Because I am the one who had these experiences, I am convinced in my faith and never have to be afraid of when my studying and my knowledge fail me. In the same way, conservative students can remain in their faith at liberal colleges because of their own personal, spiritual experiences with God. The spiritual nature of faith allows students to remain convinced even when the academic evidence fails.

Joseph Zelan may object to my claim that conservative students can thrive in a liberal college atmosphere because the saturation of a liberal atmosphere and its alternative lifestyle are too often major contributors to religious apostasy and liberalization (Zelan 378). In other words, he asserts that being constantly surrounded by liberal curriculum, professors, and students would eventually wear down a conservative student's resistance. In addition, he points out that liberal colleges offer an alternative lifestyle to the conservative student, including a political ideology, a moral outlook, and a career. This means that students can leave their orthodox views and lifestyle without fear that they will have nothing to exchange it with. Zelan's claims are certainly worth heeding. This certainly has been partly the cause of many conservative students leaving their religious orthodoxy for a more liberal, postmodern, spiritual belief. The very things Zelan mentions are the things that pulled many of my conservative friends away from their religious faith. However, while I believe conservative students should not take the persuasiveness of liberal colleges lightly, I still maintain that it is something they do not have to succumb to, provided that they stay well-connected to a church and religious friends.

Staying committed to relationships with fellow conservative Christians both encourages students in their faith as well as keeps them accountable. When a student is feeling depressed, weak, or overwhelmed, friends and family that are committed to their shared faith can encourage them with the words they need to hear. Oftentimes, they can offer helpful advice to the student. Other times, students can bring difficult questions or dilemmas they came across at school with them and talk about possible answers to their problems. Kenneth Feldman reports that students are religiously influenced by their college friends (Feldman 120). If their friends are more liberal, conservative students will tend to become more liberal. If, however, their friends are fellow members of their faith, the opposite will occur. Studies have shown that religious students that

frequently attended religious services and had close friends who shared their beliefs were more likely to remain in their faith than those who did not (Madsen and Vernon 131). For example, 65% of born-again students at secular public universities attended religious services frequently, 30% occasionally, and only 5% not at all (Railsback 55). Likewise, in private universities, 56% attended frequently, 38% occasionally, and 6% not at all (Railsback 55). In contrast, those who became so heavily involved in collegiate activities (i.e. Greeks) so that they did not have time for religious activities decreased, unsurprisingly, in their religiosity (Feldman 119). Therefore, though the liberal atmosphere at secular colleges does indeed play a powerful part in decreasing religious ardor in students, if students remain well-connected to a church and close religious friends, they are more likely to resist the liberal atmosphere and its offer for an alternative lifestyle.

Therefore, even though secular colleges tend to have a liberalizing effect on students, religious conservatives *can* attend liberal colleges and not only hold on to their faith, but actually thrive in it. This requires beforehand preparation, where the student studies his or her faith and the evidences that support it. Without this preparation, it can often be overwhelming for conservative students to hear opposing viewpoints in the classroom. In addition, if conservative students do not make it their ambition to grow stronger in their faith, they will find themselves going backwards. Matt Bennet, founder of the Christian Union, speaks of religious students in elite, secular colleges, saying, “Faith is either hot or cold in these places. If it’s casual, you’ll get swept up. If you’re for Christ, you’re known for it” (Hansen 66). If conservatively religious students are truly convinced of what they believe and want to stand firm in it during college, they must choose to work hard and dig deeper in the face of ideological opposition. The opposition liberal schools provide will not only enhance their college education, but also their faith in their

religious views. Likewise, the diverse environment in liberal schools provides opportunities for conservative students to share their faith, benefiting the college and strengthening their own convictions. Finally, conservative students can thrive in their faith in spite of liberal ideologies because religious faith is founded not only on objective, academic evidence, but also on spiritual experiences and a relationship with God. If students only rely on academic data to support their faith, then their sense of purpose is at the mercy of what science has revealed thus far and is subject to constantly sway back and forth according to whichever argument seems stronger at the moment.

Being a conservative student on a liberal arts college campus is certainly a minority position. Liberal colleges often look down on the conservatively religious position, whether they intend to or not. Because of this, it is important for liberal colleges to be careful not to shut down the conservative student voice on their campuses. If they do, they may find that they are falling prey to hypocrisy by voicing a desire to give all an equal voice and then doing the opposite. Therefore, faculty at liberal colleges must not be afraid of having conservatively religious students on their campus or of the influence they may have. Instead, they can learn to appreciate the different perspective that conservatives offer and use it to enhance the diversity they value so highly. I am pleased to say that there are many professors at Stetson University that work very hard to do these things. However, I cannot ignore the instances in which conservative students have been insulted or ridiculed for their position by both professors and liberal classmates. It is imperative that Stetson professors *all* work to give their conservative students an equal voice in the classroom and on campus.

It is true that with an equal conservative voice on campus that there will be potential for heated arguments and disputes. After all, many conservative students will not adopt the idea of

tolerance from the standpoint of religious pluralism. But, if we endeavor to accompany respect and kindness with our boldness and conviction, then we can better approach any uncomfortable situation that may lie ahead. If Stetson truly does value religious diversity, it must respect students who adhere to opposite viewpoints. Since we are in an environment that challenges its students to always be open to others' perspectives, let us not ignore the perspective most different from our own. We must not be afraid of challenge. And we must not be afraid of Truth.

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