Spiritual but Not Religious Student Development Model at Religiously Affiliated Institutions

Camber Sollberger

This paper will focus on the development of students who enter religiously-affiliated universities with a personal religion but then transition to being spiritual but not religious. To do this, a theory is created that closes the gap of developmental theory for spiritual but not religious students at religiously-affiliated institutions. Religiously-affiliated institutions have the resources to support all students but often focus mainly on those who identify with the dominant religion. The decline in religious affiliation while attending college is not holistically represented in current student developmental theory. The Spiritual but Not Religious Identity Development Model is constructed from Smith’s (2011) Model of Atheist Identity Development and Bryant and Astin’s (2008) concept of spiritual struggle to create a model for students who do not reject theism, but organized religion.

A religiously-affiliated institution (RAI) is a college or university founded on a religion that is incorporated into their culture (Tiwari, 2019). An RAI’s mission and vision highlights the importance of spiritual development for students and establishes the campus culture around spiritual exploration (Feldner, 2006). Such an institution is structured around the spirituality and religion of its foundational religion and the students who belong to that religion (Feldner, 2006). Often, RAI’s lack external formulas for students to explore spirituality outside the dominant religion.

Spiritual but not religious people are those with spiritual beliefs, but do not practice a religion. Spiritual but not religious students are losing out on necessary developmental support because they lack a community and support. The lack of research and support for non-religious students at RAIs is detrimental to their development. This gap in support calls for future studies in the field. Creating a theory that applies to spiritual but not religious students and applying it to student affairs practices in RAIs provides the support and community needed for spiritual development. This paper will focus on the development of students who enter a religiously-affiliated university with a personal religion, but then transition to being spiritual but not religious by creating a theory that closes the gap of developmental theory for spiritual but not religious students in religiously affiliated institutions.

Definition of Terms

Religion consists of the beliefs and practices of a group of people (Fowler, 1981). It is often filled with traditions, rituals, and symbols that are supposed to connect its followers to a higher being or truth (Fowler, 1981). Christian privilege is the concept of those belonging to the Christian religion having an advantage of systematic power – this can be seen in the United States through holidays, school breaks, popular media, paid time off, and other integrated parts of a person’s life in the U.S (Bowman & Smedley, 2013). “Students from marginalized religions and those who do not identify with any organized religion can face significant challenges on university campuses and throughout society” (Bowman & Smedley, 2013 p. 745). This paper will focus on religious minorities within the U.S.
majority, therefore, schools mentioned in this paper will mostly be Christian (Protestant or Catholic) affiliated. While people of different religions may have differing traditions and rituals, they may share similar beliefs.

Spirituality is a sense of who a person is and where they come from, as well as beliefs about why humans are here on earth (Fowler, 1981). An institution’s mission statement drives its educational learning (Kuh, 2013). An RAI’s mission is designed to develop students spiritually from a learning perspective (Feldner, 2006). In the U.S., religiously affiliated universities often have religious centers or ministries that are a part of the student affairs system and are an integral part of student development (Stafford, 2017). Individuals who identify with a religion are part of a religious group, while a spiritual identity is a personal identity that is unique rather than shared (Fowler, 1981). All students develop spiritually, not just those who practice a religion. Further, if a person is not religious, it does not mean they cannot be spiritual or have beliefs.

Beliefs are defined as a “conscious intellectual agreement with particular Doctrines or ideologies” (Fowler, 1981, as cited in Patton, 2014 p. 196). Beliefs can change and morph based on current or past circumstances and major life-changing incidents. While not all people go through this development in college, it is a common starting point because of the numerous opportunities to explore different ways of thinking and living that can often cause a spiritual struggle (Bryant & Astin, 2008). It can be easy to focus on those who practice religion, but it must also be applied to those who do not consider themselves religious.

Faith can be found in religion, but also within secular worldviews. This is because faith is universal where each person’s faith expressions are unique (Fowler, 1981). Faith gives people a way to find meaning in the forces that make up our lives: God, the universe, chance, etc. (Fowler, 1981). ‘Nones,’ expanded upon below, may be non-religious, but that does not mean a ‘none’ must reject spirituality or faith (Ho & Ho, 2007).

A ‘none’ is an umbrella term for atheist, agnostic, spiritual but not religious, or some other identity that is without a particular religion (Lipka, 2015). The number of ‘nones’ are on the rise in the U.S., making up 23 percent of the U.S. population which is a sharp increase from the 17 percent found in 2007 (Lipka, 2015). There is an even greater difference found by generation; 35 percent of Millennials and only 17 percent of Baby Boomers identify within the definition of ‘none’ (Lipka, 2015). Since the percentage of ‘nones’ increase with each new generation, colleges should be prepared to support incoming classes where ‘nones’ inch closer to becoming the majority. Forty-seven percent of millennials have a college degree, more than any other generation (The Council of Economic Advisers, 2014). Since more students are attending college and becoming ‘nones,’ more focus is needed for that population (The Council of Economic Advisers, 2014). ‘None’ development is not studied because most ‘none’ students attend secular institutions that do not focus on the development of their religious students (Stafford, 2017). The Spiritual but Not Religious Development Model provides a foundation for student affairs professionals to build an understanding of spiritual but not religious students that is missing from current literature.

Literature Review

The foundation of the Spiritual but Not Religious Student Development Model is based on the Atheist Development Model
(Smith, 2011) and Astin and Bryant’s spiritual struggle structures (2008). In order to build a model describing the differences found in the development of student who are spiritual but not religious, the Atheist Development Model (Smith, 2011), the spiritual struggle (Bryant & Astin, 2008), statistics on the decline in religious affiliation (Downey, 2017), and Christian privilege (Bowman & Smedley, 2013) will be used as foundational research. Finally, the formation of programs to use within RAIs to best support this population of students will be discussed as a starting point in support for the growing spiritual but not religious student population.

**Atheist Development Model**

Jesse Smith (2011) proposed an identity development model for atheists that describes a fluid process of self-identifying as an atheist in the modern U.S. The first stage is the starting point: the ubiquity of theism. Most individuals start their lives with a religion that is taught from their family, and they are certain in their theism. Theism is the belief in the existence of a God or gods. At this stage, there is little room for exploration or individuality in faith (Smith, 2011).

The second component is questioning theism. This occurs after interacting with new settings and contexts as well as new people with differing viewpoints and backgrounds. This questioning leads to a gradual unlearning of religious instruction by educating oneself on different ways of living and believing. Most start having these doubts about God’s existence after leaving for college and coming out from their parent’s shadow (Smith, 2011).

The third component is Rejecting theism: “Not theist”, or atheism as a rejection identity. The transition from exploration and questioning leads to straight rejection of God and religion. People in this stage admit there is no evidence for God, but also no true certainty that one does not exist (Smith, 2001).

The fourth component of the development theory is “coming out” atheist. This is the full acceptance of one’s atheist identity and the ability to internally and externally express what that identity means. All four stages are fluid and dynamic and can cause stress to those who go through them, but eventually individuals come to resolve feelings of stress and instead feel affirmed and liberated (Smith, 2011).

The Atheist Identity Model is important to include because of the similarities in the experiences of atheist and spiritual but not religious students. Both types of students go through similar steps, but with slightly different belief aspects that conclude in completely different ways of thinking. This original model lacks the option for students to reject religion, but not God or another higher being.

**Spiritual Struggle**

The spiritual struggle depicts the main difference found between the Atheist Development Model and the Spiritual but Not Religious Student Development Model. Bryant and Astin (2008) wrote about a spiritual struggle of college students brought about by concern of faith, purpose, and meaning of life. There can be problems of spiritual and religious nature when it comes to questioning faith, spiritual, religious values. The causes of these struggles are most often connected to difficult life circumstances, including “confusion about beliefs and values, loss of a relationship, sexual assault, homesickness, and suicidal thoughts and feelings” (Bryant & Astin, 2008, p. 2). This causes growing concern regarding individuals suffering psychologically from religious or spiritual problems. The spiritual struggle scale is
made up of five items: questioning one’s religious/spiritual beliefs; feeling unsettled about spiritual and religious matters; struggling to understand evil, suffering, and death; feeling angry at God; and feeling disillusioned with one’s religious upbringing (Bryant & Astin, 2008). Struggle is often found when a myriad of correlates come together in one person’s life; however, if the right group of correlates occur, spiritual struggle can also decrease (Bryant & Astin, 2008).

Bryant and Astin (2008) found through their survey that those who had no religious preference, attended a religiously-affiliated institution, demonstrated high levels of spiritual practice, and had faculty who provided encouragement to discuss religious and spiritual matters had minimal spiritual struggle. In the absence of meaningful connections to spirituality and religion, students would likely experience religious and spiritual decline as a result of their struggling (Bryant & Astin, 2008).

Students often go through this struggle and then can move away from religion, but not always entirely away from a higher being. The struggles mentioned above are very difficult to go through, especially if one is without the support of the community that is often found in organized religion. RAIs can provide that support if they are more aware of this populations struggles and growth through the Spiritual but Not Religious Student Development Model.

**Decline of Religion Affiliation**

Attending a college or university brings about an opportunity for students to explore their faith, beliefs, spirituality and religion. During the last thirty years, the religious beliefs of college students have changed drastically. Catholicism “dropped from 32 percent to 23 percent, and mainstream Protestant denominations including Baptists (17 percent to 7 percent), and Methodists (9 percent to 3 percent) lowered as well” (Downey, 2017, p. 4).

The number of students with no religious affiliation has increased dramatically over the last 30 years, but less so in colleges, which are much more likely to be religiously affiliated, than universities (Downey, 2017). A student can receive a bachelor’s degree at both a college and university, but a university also offers graduate degrees and are often larger (Study USA, 2016). This difference in affiliation and size affects a students’ experience and shows that students who attend religious colleges are often more religious, both when they enter and when they leave (Downey, 2017). However, there is a lack of spiritual development at secular universities (Stafford, 2017). Those who go through any religious or spiritual journey are often left to find their own resources or go about their journey all on their own (Stafford, 2017). Private colleges have more resources to develop students spiritually but often do not. Public schools serve over 6 million students yearly, much more than colleges, but do not have the resources nor ability to support students through their spiritual journey (Stafford, 2017).

For those who enter college without an affiliated religion, they can be stigmatized and marginalized because they do not share traditional values of faith (Goodman and Mueller, 2009). The 21 percent of entering college students who do not believe in God and identify as atheist are often described by other students as “bitter,” “mean-spirited,” “Satanic,” “immoral,” “empty,” or “ignorant” (Nash, 2013, p. 6). The Spiritual but Not Religious Student Development Model well help prepare staff to work with ‘none’ students and educate their peers on the concepts that are often judged.
Christian Privilege

In the U.S., there is Christian privilege. Non-majority religions are often considered a “forgotten minority” because they experience discrimination, marginalization and are often overlooked (Bowman & Smedley, 2013, p. 745). There is a large amount of support in all institution types for those of the majority religion, but it is missing for those who do not identity with the religion affiliated with the university (Bowman & Smedley, 2013). Students who do not identify with any religious group have the lowest satisfaction, while Protestant students have the highest (Bowman & Smedley, 2013).

Similar to the growing population of ‘nones’ in the U.S., those who are part of the subcategory called ‘spiritual but not religious’ has grown from 9 to 14 percent as of 2013 (Ammerman, 2013). As defined in the introduction, spirituality and religiousness are not one and the same, but instead independent aspects of a person’s life. Ammerman (2013) defines spiritual but not religious as a separate moral category of those who think of organized religion as hypocritical, empty, and implausible. Those who do not want to practice an organized religion but still need a spiritual connection to a higher power are not offered the same support as those who are religiously affiliated, even though support is needed in order to grow and develop (Ammerman, 2013).

Religion is often considered an invisible minority. Invisible minorities are generally able to hide their identity, thereby avoiding marginalization, discrimination, and negativity; however, the act of concealing their identity can have adverse consequences where the more salient the identity, the more harm is caused. This is because the more important an identity is to a student, the more it hurts to shut that aspect of themselves away based on fear of marginalization (Goodman & Mueller, 2009).

These statistics are important to consider when using the Spiritual but Not Religious Student Development Model because these students become a religious minority because of their lack of religious affiliation. If they attend an RAI, they become even more of a minority because of the focus on religion in the school’s educational mission. Storytelling and formation programs can be used by schools to give a support system to this population.

Storytelling

The Interfaith Youth Core was found by Eboo Patel - a man who believes that religion should be a “bridge of cooperation rather than a barrier of division” (Interfaith Youth Core, 2018, p. 1). The foundation is based on bringing about interfaith discussion. Interfaith means all faiths and non-faiths, so that includes all religions but also secular or spiritual ways of living (Interfaith Youth Core, 2018).

Storytelling is part of the foundation for Patel’s interfaith discussion model (Interfaith Youth Core, 2018). Interfaith dialogue is about identity, both individual and communal. Identity constructs itself through stories and storytelling. Three reasons a group would use storytelling are to create space to voice religious or nonreligious values, experiences, and identities; to strengthen the sense of community among membership; and to practice your stories in a safe space (Patel, Kunze, & Silverman, 2008). RAIs and the field of higher education can use this practice as a means to provide external formulas for students going through the steps of the Spiritual but Not Religious Model.

Formation Programs
Melanie-Prejean Sullivan was on an international committee with the goal of shifting a new member education program for the Alpha Delta Pi sorority. This program was created to abridge the old educational time-table, and create a “Total Member Education” (TME) program. It was designed to eliminate the “second-class citizenship” that pledging had created and aimed to eliminate hazing. This committee created a formation program for the “social integration of new members - their education in the history and traditions... as well as academic enhancement programs to build college-level study habits, research and writing skills, and knowledge of resources on campus.”

Prejean-Sullivan was also the Director of the Campus Ministry of an Independent Catholic University for 19 years. She emphasizes that “the task of chaplains towards unaffiliated students is as important as towards affiliated ones, when it comes to building spiritually resilient students.” The model that Greek organizations use may have originated within a Christian privileged perspective, but they are all looking toward inclusion. “This spiritual resilience in the face of tragedies is a critical concern of both student affairs professionals and campus ministers.”

Formation programs are used in religious communities in order to give new members a time for inquiry and decision making before committing to a church for life. This is commonly used for adults wanting to join the Catholic Church as well as a more strenuous process for those wanting to become a monk, nun, priest, or other position of lifelong commitment.

A similar model is used in student affairs through sororities and fraternities. The candidacy period is the formation program used by Greek life. It is a time for new members to get to know the chapter, ask questions, bond with members, and decide on whether they want to be a member for life. These students also receive similar benefits to those going into the church: a strong, supportive community for life.” A similar program format can be used by RAIs to create community and structure for student who lose their community and structure they once found in organized religion.

**Spiritual but Not Religious Student Development Model**

Operating on the belief that ‘nones’ are often spiritual and may identify as ‘spiritual but not religious,’ it becomes clear that when such students enter an RAI they may need spiritual support. Additionally, this model assumes that support could be lost due to social marginalization and personal spiritual struggle. Smith’s (2011) Model of Atheist Identity Development and Bryant and Astin’s (2008) concept of spiritual struggle are used as a framework to create a Spiritual but Not Religious Identity Development Model for students who do not reject theism but do reject organized religion. A visual representation of the model is below.

1. **The Starting Point: The Ubiquity of Religion**
   - Certain in their affiliated religion

2. **Questioning Religion**
   - Enters the Spiritual Struggle (Bryant and Astin, 2008)

3. **Rejecting Religion**
   - Leaves their affiliated religion; continues relationship with God

4. **Coming out Spiritual but Not Religious**
   - Comfortably open about their non-religious affiliation
Figure 1. Spiritual but not religious identity development model

The first stage of the Spiritual but Not Religious Identity Development Model is similar to the beginning of Smith’s (2008) Model of Atheist Identity Development, The starting point: the ubiquity of religion. For students who are spiritual but not religious, they come from a religious background and grew up with certainty in God’s existence and their affiliated religion. They have been raised in this religion and feel as though these ideas have been imposed on them.

This leads to the second stage, questioning religion. After having interactions with different people and new ways of life, students enter a spiritual struggle. This includes the five elements from Bryant and Astin (2008): questioning one’s religious/spiritual beliefs; feeling unsettled about spiritual and religious matters; struggling to understand evil, suffering, and death; feeling angry at God; and feeling disillusioned with one’s religious upbringing. The spiritual struggle during the college years is intensified for those who come into a religiously-affiliated institution with their personal religion who then want a spiritual relationship without the organized religion (Bryant and Astin, 2008).

The third stage is rejecting religion. After questioning and not receiving adequate answers, students leave the church and religion. These students realize they have a connection with God, but not with religion. Still believing in a God, but not the one that their church has depicted, this is where students need support spirituality and may lack a community. A community that was originally found in a church now needs to be found in like-minded peers.

Institutions can help students create these communities by using formation programs similar to the ones used in sororities, fraternities, and with religious groups like nuns, monks, etc.

RAIs have the resources to create and support such communities. Christians receive the greatest spiritual gains at any institution type, while non-religious students received no spiritual gains at all (Patton et al., 2014). Student affairs professionals can use foundational theories in tandem with the Spiritual but Not Religious Identity Development Model to provide a space for exploration. “To be a global citizen, one has to understand the values and views of other people” and if RAIs are not supporting spiritual growth and exploration, those students are being deprived of an opportunity to become a global citizen (Stafford, 2017, p. 8).

The final stage is termed, coming out spiritual but not religious. Because of the Christian privilege and religious background of the U.S and the families these students come from, students need support in order to come out comfortably. Similar to atheists and the Atheist Identity Development Model, students need to be able to enter conversations and deal with the negative societal stigma that comes with not being religiously affiliated. If schools provide structure and support for those going through this process, then it will be easier for students to come out to friends and loved ones (Bryant & Astin, 2008). It will be similar to the atheist process, difficult and uncomfortable, but affirming and liberating after the process is over (Smith, 2011). The amount students who are spiritual but not religious is growing rapidly, and schools and the student affairs profession need to keep up with the students in order to provide the best college experience.

Similar to the fact that the Atheist Identity Model is for those who are raised believing in a god, this model is specific for those who are raised in an organized religion. It is a linear process, starting in stage one and progressing through the stages one-by-one. Each student needs to fully
process through the latter stage in order to move on to the next, but does not have to go all the way through, especially not all during college. People can continue to progress after college, while some may never get to the final stage. Those who are raised without religion do not go through this process but still face discriminatory actions. They are in need of similar support from higher education, but they do not go through this process.

**Recommendations for Practitioners**

Because of the increasing number of students who identity as ‘nones’ and the hardship found in the spiritual struggle offered by Bryant and Astin (2008), further research should investigate the stories of students who have already gone through this process in order to best provide for future students. Using Interfaith Youth Core (IFYC) storytelling, surveys, and formation programs, higher education practitioners can construct a process for students using resources already available at RAIs to create a field of understanding and support for this growing population of spiritual but not religious students.

**Storytelling through Surveys**

Surveys could be created for all college types to create storytelling. The survey would be qualitative and ask questions about the process of moving from religious to spiritual but not religious. The point of the survey would be to create a life story for each student. Questions would include: When did you start asking questions about your religion? What kind of questions did you ask? What kind of answers did you receive? Is there a specific life event that cause this questioning? When did you come out to religious friends and family as spiritual but not religious? How did they react/how did it affect your relationship? What support have you had through the process of becoming spiritual but not religious? The end of the survey would include demographic questions.

**Formation Programs**

Formation programs for students who are spiritual but not religious could also be created within Campus Ministry Offices within RAIs using resources that are already available. Learning about a community before becoming a member and then providing support, like a fraternity or sorority, is also ready used throughout student affairs. Formation programs could be extended to religious group as the population continues to grow and would allow for the inclusion and resilience found in students who partake in similar programs.

**Further Research and Concluding Thoughts**

Researchers in the field of student affairs could investigate many of these topics, as well as assess the validity of the Spiritual but Not Religious Identity Development Model by performing qualitative analysis using the proposed survey. Through the emphasis and exploration of the differences in development of atheist students and spiritual but not religious students, institutions can provide better support for the different populations. As the number of students in these populations continue to grow, universities will see more and more of them walking through the doors (Downey, 2017). By blending the spiritual struggle (Bryant & Astin, 2008) and the Atheist Identity Development Model (Smith, 2011), schools can offer learning conditions that support students while staying true to their religiously affiliated mission. Learning outcomes and student experience would improve by taking steps toward their mission through providing spiritual
development (Kuh, 2013). It is a university’s duty to provide necessary support for all of its students, and the spiritual but not religious students cannot be forgotten.

Camber Sollberger is an Indiana University Higher Education and Student Affairs student from Jeffersonville, Indiana. She graduated from Bellarmine University in Louisville, Kentucky with a bachelor’s degree in communication. She is interested in the spiritual development of students as a part of holistic development practices in higher education institutions.

References


