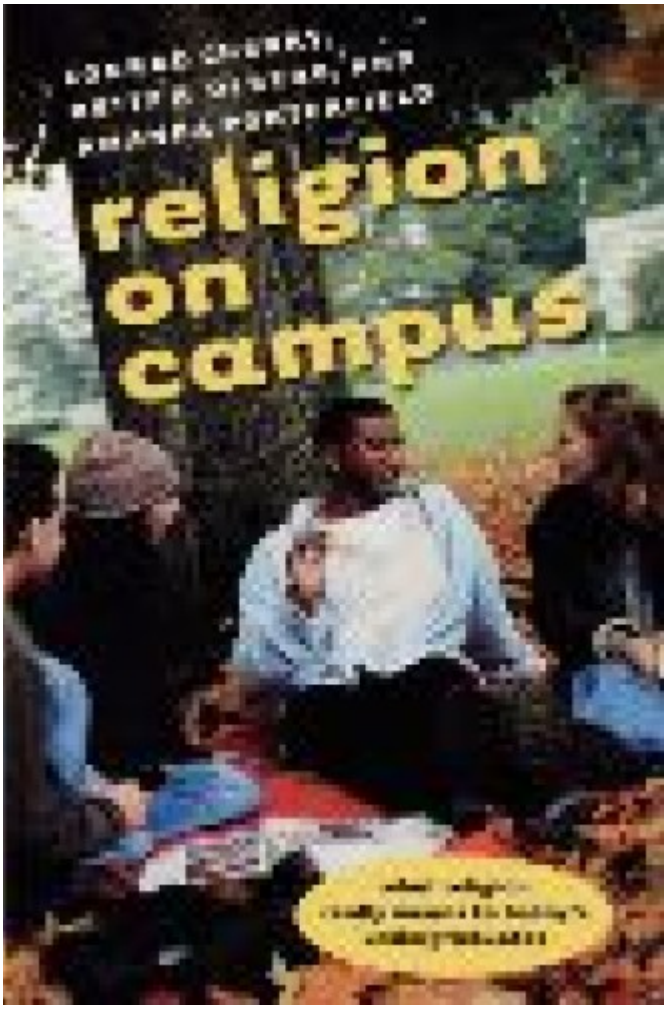
What students crave

By Jennifer E. Copeland in the February 13, 2002 issue

In Review



Religion on Campus

Conrad Cherry, Betty A. DeBerg and Amanda Porterfield
University of North Carolina Press

College is a crucible in which opinions are formed, challenged and reformed; beliefs are redefined or perhaps defined for the first time, and attitudes become more

resolute. That this is so life-shaping a time has something to do with the age of most college students—late adolescence to early adulthood—but also much to do with the campus milieu. Even on fairly homogenous campuses one finds a lively and diverse exchange of ideas, more diverse than that of most of the neighborhoods where students grew up and most of the workplaces to which they will graduate. The college campus introduces different cultures, allows exploration of new limits and offers tools for defining life. Conrad Cherry, Betty A. DeBerg and Amanda Porterfield provide snapshots of four different campuses in four different regions, ultimately concluding that in these places religion is alive and well.

Between them, the three authors have taught religion full-time in eight different academic institutions, including state universities and denominationally connected schools. Additionally, Cherry founded the Center for the Study of Religion and American Culture. A prime impetus for this book was their experiences with students, experiences that did not conform to the oft-recited mantra that college campuses have become increasingly secular.

The writers saw themselves as ethnographers, in James P. Spradley's definition of the term: "The purpose of ethnography is to grasp the native's point of view, his relation to life, to realize his vision of his world" (*The Ethnographic Interview*).

Each writer spent one academic year studying an assigned campus, striving to grasp the "native's point of view" by immersing him or herself in campus life. During the fall semester, DeBerg actually lived on the campus of the large western state university. Besides looking in the usual places for religious expression (worship services, religious group meetings and religion classes), the three perused bulletin boards and student newspapers, paid attention to other events occurring on campus, and sought to hear the voices of dissension hovering at the fringes.

They quote students, ministers and professors or summarize the settings they investigated. Nevertheless, the authors admit that studying only four campuses allows only limited generalization. They do agree from the outset to observe the same kinds of events, interview the same kinds of people, and divide their chapters into the same subsections. This gives readers the opportunity to compare the four institutions more accurately—apples to apples, so to speak.

In the large state university in the west they found a plethora of religious choices, though little student participation—less than 10 percent of undergraduates were

involved in campus religious activities, weekly worship services or religion classes. At the historically African-American college in the south they discovered higher religious participation but lower diversity, with only a nod to the concept of pluralism. Similarly, little pluralism existed at the Catholic university in the east or the Lutheran college in the north, though, again, overall student involvement in religious activities was higher. Apparently, church-related schools have lagged behind other institutions in the effort to create pluralistic religious environments for their student bodies. At the same time, however, the higher percentage of student participation shows the church's residual influence on these campuses. As long as the dominant religious presence on a campus does not undermine other religious expressions, this situation beats the alternative.

The authors set out to debunk some of the recent dour accounts of religion's place in college life. By focusing on "the religious practices of today's undergraduates, . . . and the extent to which the study and the practice of religion are made available to undergraduate students," they offer a systematic report of each campus's ethos, inherent religious practices and religion courses. They have discovered a significant level of religious vitality on these campuses, responsible scholarship in the classroom and a surge in student volunteerism.

Their assessment appears to be good news for religion. Many students consider religion a viable option and some take it quite seriously. Campuses are much like society in general—there are a few serious faith practitioners sprinkled among people with moderate religious proclivities. It seems that college campuses, often maligned as secularist breeding grounds, are no worse than the culture at large. They may indeed be better, since college students are still in the process of being formed. If they awaken to their need for the transcendent while in the proximity of sound religious practices, they may actually become faithful participants instead of joining the wide ranks of the religiously apathetic. Today's college campuses offer ample opportunity for such an awakening and a plethora of faith communities from which to begin the journey.

In order to reach such an optimistic conclusion, the authors sometimes use the least common denominator to define religion, enabling them to detect religious overtones in settings as diverse as a "Jello wrestling" contest between the dean of students and the college chaplain and the crowning of a homecoming queen. That a chaplain will wrestle in Jello to raise money for charity while students cheer says more about benevolence than religion. The crowning of a homecoming queen who gives her

rendition of a popular piece of gospel music does not make the homecoming dance a religious occasion, any more than prayer after a football game makes a sporting event a worship service.

To point out that a homecoming queen or a football player is an individual with religious convictions says no more or less about the religious climate on campus than would the claim that because four ordained United Methodist clergy live in my neighborhood, we are a Christian homeowners association. Students interviewed during the course of this study further obscure the issue by describing themselves as “spiritual” and defining their general spirituality as a personal religious experience. This kind of self-labeling fails to strengthen the case that religion is an essential part of campus life. It only confirms that there are religious, or “spiritual,” people present on the campuses.

The founder of Duke University, where I am a campus pastor, placed a colossal church at the center of the grounds. “I want the central building to be a church, a great towering church which will dominate all of the surrounding buildings, because such an edifice would be bound to have a profound influence on the spiritual life of the young men and women who come here,” he explained. In spite of this claim, I would hesitate to describe the campus as religious, though a great deal of religious activity does take place here. More than 100 different student gatherings occur weekly under the auspices of more than 20 diverse religious groups (Hindu, Jewish, Muslim and Unitarian, to name a few). Yet while eavesdropping on a campus tour for prospective students, I heard the guide explain that Duke is not affiliated with any particular church (it is affiliated with the United Methodist Church), that the statues at the entrance to Duke Chapel are of “important people from Duke’s past” (the figures, which include Robert E. Lee, Girolamo Savonarola and, of course, John Wesley, have no direct ties to Duke) and that “anybody can come to worship that wants to, but nobody has to” (true enough).

Perhaps the school is at pains not to present itself as religious, and it may even be uncomfortable with such an overtly Christian symbol in the center of a community that espouses pluralism. While one cannot set foot on the campus without reckoning with the chapel, the religious detractors among us easily dismiss it as a relic of days gone by. At the spring baccalaureate service students sometimes comment that this is only their second trip into Duke Chapel, the first presumably being freshman convocation four years earlier—a required event. In the shadow of such a strong religious symbol, students still manage to remain amazingly irreligious. Of course,

many do worship, pray and sing in Duke Chapel, and while some of them might not bother if the chapel were not so convenient, the majority of them would likely find a place to practice their faith if the chapel were not available.

This said, it should be acknowledged that the religious climate discovered by Cherry, DeBerg and Porterfield is encouraging. On none of the campuses they visited did they find a hostile attitude toward religious activity. Colleges often went to great lengths to support religious groups and, at the very least, always allowed them. Such tolerance, however, does not refute the claims of George Marsden and others that “the presence of religion programs in universities is, on balance, not a countervailing force to the secularization of universities.” Their efforts to refute this declaration may not be the best service rendered by Cherry, DeBerg and Porterfield. Perhaps their greatest contribution is admitting that religion no longer claims center stage in university life and must “compete” for student loyalty with sporting events, musical ensembles and lecture series. Is that necessarily bad news for faith communities?

When blue laws were finally abolished, giving people the choice between going to the movies or attending worship on Sunday evening, the churches quickly discovered they were losing the competition for the attention of teenagers. After fruitless attempts to win youth by plying them with ski trips, bowling parties and lock-ins, some churches reverted to their original charge of proclaiming the gospel. The burden of proof that the church offered a compelling alternative to entertainment and consumerism lay at its own doors. Such is now the case on most college campuses. Few schools require attendance at worship services and those that do only fill their pews with begrudging students. A survey of students fulfilling college requirements for religion classes uncovered a certain amount of frustration about this imposition. Faculty grumbled as well when asked to teach classes that fell outside their area of expertise in order to meet the school’s curriculum requirements.

On the other hand, the presence of religious leaders and the prevalence of religious practices at the colleges allow students to discover or rediscover faith in ways that inspire them to practice it. The most tangible expression of religious practice among college students is the surge in volunteerism. Time is a precious commodity on most campuses, yet large numbers of students volunteer their time to support worthy causes. Faith communities can help facilitate the connections between the campus and the surrounding area, though many students offer volunteer time without the

prompting of a faith community. Many say they want to help other people, but they have no idea why.

Service learning is another tangential element of student religious life. Many colleges and universities now offer, and some require, a version of the project highlighted by Porterfield at a Catholic university in the north. Service learning combines classroom assignments with hands-on experience at a nonprofit agency close to the school. Professors must be willing to incorporate this kind of practical experience into their courses and to structure reading and writing assignments to promote useful discernment for the student participants. With topics ranging from health care to archaeology, such an arrangement may or may not incorporate overtly religious themes, though direct application of classroom subject matter generally induces thoughtful reflections that can trigger a religious quest. The philosophy course detailed by Porterfield regularly evoked such a response.

The book's descriptions of student religious groups are unlikely to surprise anyone familiar with a college campus. Nor will the course content represented in the sections on "Teaching Religion." Perhaps the best audience for this book is not current college personnel but parents, local church members, denominational officials and seminaries. Churches, synagogues, mosques or other faith communities will find more fertile ground on college campuses than in the suburban neighborhoods where they routinely sow mass mailings. Any church leader who questions the validity of a religious presence on college campuses should read this book and reassess that notion.

College students crave purpose and meaning. They are ripe for the chance to embark on a journey that gives validity to their lives. When only mediocre, or even suspect, opportunities are available, they will settle for those. Cherry, DeBerg and Porterfield conclude by stating that on college campuses "religion has become more optional." We owe it to our students and to the future of society to provide faith communities that build sound theological foundations and stimulate authentic faith practices.