

How College Students Evaluate Their Professors' Spirituality

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The lifetime journey of faith winds through new and significant terrain during the college years. At this time, young adults must critically evaluate the beliefs they were taught and determine for themselves the shape of their adult faith.

One of the simplest descriptions of this transition is that young adults enter a time of searching faith.¹ A more nuanced explanation is provided by Marcia,² who, building on Erikson,³ creates a scheme of four possible categories to describe how young adults process the "crisis" of establishing their ego identity in terms of religion. He says they may (1) be in a state of non-interest (identity diffusion), (2) have decided to accept their parents' faith without critical evaluation (identity foreclosure), (3) be engaged in open-minded searching (identity moratorium), or (4) have gone through the crisis of searching and made a commitment (identity achievement).

Park's theoretical model⁴ is even broader and more complex. She attempts to show that young adults journey through a distinctive stage of faith development, often lingering there for years. She defines this stage in terms of forms of knowing (cognition), forms of dependence (feeling and affect), and forms of community (social belonging).

But no matter which theory is used to describe this faith journey, theorists agree that mature mentors and models play a crucial role in the young adult's successfully achieving a vibrant Christian faith. Obviously, then, faculty on a Christian campus—intentionally or not—serve as spiritual models and mentors for their students. From a student perspective, what makes a faculty member a

good spiritual model or mentor?

On many college and university campuses, at the end of every course, students are asked to evaluate both the course and the teacher. On Christian college and university campuses, such evaluations often include questions about faculty members' personal values and spiritual commitments, as well as how they demonstrate "Christian attitudes, values, or behaviors." Such questionnaires indicate a serious interest in faculty spirituality on the part of administrators.

Interest in student perceptions of faculty spirituality can come from other sources, as well.

- First, most governing boards of Christian colleges and universities expect faculty members to serve as role models for the students. Such role modeling contributes to the making of long-term commitments to Christian beliefs and behaviors by graduates of Christian colleges and universities.⁵

- Second, faculty members want to know what criteria students use to evaluate them on spirituality-related items. Teachers sometimes speculate privately that students use simplistic methods of assessment, based on whether the teacher presents a devotional thought or prays at the beginning of class. Faculty wonder whether students can distinguish genuine spirituality from perfunctory religious behaviors.

In order to find out what criteria college students use to evaluate faculty spirituality, the authors of this article created an instrument to interview 21 students from Andrews University in Berrien Springs, Michigan, during the spring quarter of their senior year. We used statements the students made in interviews to arrive at a working definition: Spirituality is the lived relationship with God as expressed through attitudes and behaviors.

BY JANE THAYER, CHRISTINE D. BOTHNE, AND ROBERT D. BATES

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Frederick Kosinski, professor of educational and counseling psychology at Andrews University in Berrien Springs, Michigan, enjoys interacting with his students.

Research Methodology

The interviews included 12 males and 9 females. Their mean age was 23.3 years, and the mean length of time they had attended Andrews University was 4.3 years. Survey participants included students with the following majors or double majors: elementary education (3), language for international trade (2), and one each in architecture, art, art education, biology, economics, English, English/German, graphic imaging technology, history and education, horticulture, marketing, math and chemistry, math/secondary education, medical technology and biology, physical therapy, and social work.

All the interviews were conducted by a graduate assistant who was a Master's student in education and employed by the University Assessment Office. The interviews ranged in length from five to 20 minutes.

Without offering a definition of spirituality, the researcher asked each interviewee, "While you have been a student here at Andrews University, have you had any teachers that you would consider 'spiritual'?" All of the students responded positively. However, a few students objected to the question because they considered spirituality hard to define or describe, and they were hesitant about—or objected to—the "judging" involved. One stated that a teacher he considered "spiritual" might just be polite or a nice person. A male biology student pointed out that "teachers are not necessarily non-spiritual because they don't bring spirituality into the classrooms." Two other students concurred, saying that the reason some teachers don't bring spirituality into the classroom is because they are not as open or overt about their faith.

Prayer

When students were asked what characteristics caused them to classify a teacher as "spiritual," 14 of the 21 mentioned prayer.

More than half of the 14 considered prayer a positive indicator of spirituality, while the others viewed it only as a qualified indicator or even a non-indicator of spirituality.

Six student responses supported faculty speculation about the role of class prayer by identifying "having prayer before class" as a positive indicator of faculty spirituality. Interestingly, none of the students mentioned the *content* of such prayers. What seemed to impress the students was the fact that the teacher devoted *time* to prayer. With class time at a premium, consistently setting aside time for an activity indicates that the teacher values that activity. Repeatedly, students talked of teachers "taking time" or "setting aside time" for prayer or devotions.

Although one student gave what many faculty would probably consider a classic answer when he said, ". . . taking the time to pray before every class demonstrates their spiritual commitment," other students offered serious qualifications about the value of such prayer in determining spirituality. "Prayer before class doesn't really count when judging spirituality," a male student said. "Some just tack it on at the beginning and forget about it for the rest of the class."

Devotionals

Respondents also considered worship at the beginning of class as an indicator of a teacher's spirituality. But as with prayer, the students qualified their answers. The words "just having prayer" or "just having worship" were used by several students to indicate that these by themselves were inconclusive as a criterion of spirituality. Students offered contrasting evaluations of class worship and devotions. A female student said: "The first teacher that comes to mind had devotions in class every day—though they were almost offensive in their spirituality." A male student reported that "one teacher did devotions that were very deep and in-

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sightful, though just for five minutes, talking about their [sic] own experience, and I think it really made some of us ask ourselves questions.” So how can the same activity be rated so differently? One male student said: “Some teachers who had worship didn’t seem as spiritual as those who didn’t have worship. I guess it was mainly the way they treated the students that made the difference.”

Integration of Faith and Learning

One other indicator of spirituality, “integrating faith and learning,” was mentioned by a third of the students, with no qualifiers attached. Although only one student, a male math/secondary education major, used the term *integrate* in his response, saying, “a spiritual teacher will integrate faith and bring it into the class almost unconsciously [unself-consciously],” other students clearly had the integration of faith and learning in mind. One student explained: “If it’s OK with the material, [the teacher] brings spirituality up in class.” Others explained the concept as follows: “They

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April Summitt, assistant professor of history at Andrews University, begins each class period with a personal prayer.

incorporate spirituality into their teaching”; “they introduce God somewhere in their day-to-day lectures”; they “put some aspect of spirituality into an assignment”; “one English teacher relates stories to the Bible.” Students did not detect, or at least did not report, any insincerity when their professors brought God or spirituality into their discussions or lectures because not one student had anything negative to say about this activity.

Caring and Concern for Students

Clearly, the respondents perceived the most important indicator of faculty spirituality as showing concern for, or caring about, students. Two-thirds of the students used the words “concern for” or “cares about” or “how they treat students” in their description of the spiritual teacher. This caring had to exceed mere academic interest and be genuine concern.

The students who listed “caring or concern” as an indicator of

spirituality often shared a specific example or characteristic of caring. Spiritual teachers “display patience and care in the classroom”; they are “approachable—they treat you like, not necessarily their peer, but as a friend, with respect, and they value your thoughts and opinions”; “they see students as a person with [his or her] own conflicts”; they accept a student’s “ethnicity—unconditionally accepting [people] as who they are and working with them from that basis.”

Observable Classroom Behaviors

Besides the four most frequently mentioned indicators of spirituality—prayer, devotions, integration of faith and learning, and caring and concern for students—interviewees named a variety of observable classroom behaviors relating to spirituality. These can be grouped into two categories: the teacher’s relationship with students and classroom management. Spiritual teachers “interact with students,” and they do so in a “Christ-like way.” They “respect” student opinion. One student offered this example: “When [spiritual teachers] are faced with confrontation, they say: ‘This is how it is, but you can have some options.’”

In commenting on classroom management, students saw “flexibility” (as opposed to “stiffness” or “formality”) as allowing teachers to devote time to spiritual discussion if it serendipitously became appropriate. Non-spiritual teachers were seen as “more task-oriented,” although one student observed: “Some easy, laid-back teachers are not spiritual, and some tough teachers are.” While one student listed as an indicator of teacher spirituality that the instructor was “understanding if a student needs to hand in late assignments,” another said that spirituality “doesn’t have anything to do with how they grade or [what their] late homework policy [is], but how they treat the student as a person.” With such contrasting interpretations, students’ perceptions about classroom management probably do not offer much definitive insight into faculty spirituality.

Outside-of-Classroom Behaviors

A few teacher behaviors outside the classroom were seen as indicators of spirituality: arranging to have vespers in their home; being involved in church activities; encouraging students; and praying with and for students. Even these co-curricular activities were not judged at face value. One student explained how she could recognize spiritual teachers: It’s “just in how . . . they interact with me. They could just be checking with me to see my spiritual goals. [Or asking] how church was on Sabbath. It doesn’t have to be anything major.” A male student drew the line between spiritual and non-spiritual faculty members based on whether they prayed for him personally: “‘Non-spiritual’ faculty . . . , when dealing with some really important issues of my life, never really prayed with me—just told me what they would do if it were their son, or what they would do.” A female student said that a spiritual teacher is one that you “know [is] praying for you and doing things for you.” But she recognized the complexity of such evaluations by stating that “non-spiritual [teachers] can do some of the

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same things as the spiritual ones, but without Christ in them.”

Many of the characteristics or behaviors students listed as indicators of spirituality might also describe teachers who are “good” but not necessarily spiritual. Indeed, some students saw a correlation between a good teacher and a spiritual teacher. One student said: “Most of my ‘spiritual’ teachers have been good at what they do—academically, following the Christian motto, ‘whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might.’”

Personal Characteristics of Teachers

One final category of spiritual indicators might be labeled as personal characteristics of the teacher. The large number of items listed by our interviewees can be grouped into five areas: the “look” of the teacher, his or her character traits, sincerity, vulnerability, and relationship with God. Students seem to use these personal characteristics to determine the genuineness of the faculty member’s spirituality.

The search for genuineness is reflected in students’ comments that spirituality is “nothing [teachers] really say, but their witness and actions.” Or, as one student said: “They do what they tell us to do.” Another student, recognizing the pressure that working in a Christian school might have on teachers’ actions, described spiritual professors by saying: “They just seem to be really in touch with God and believe strongly, and it seems to be a part of their life, not something they have to do because they are part of a [Christian] school.”

When teachers are vulnerable and open with students about their own spiritual lives, students perceive them as genuine and spiritual. When such teachers make a mistake, they say “I’m sorry.” One student explained that spiritual teachers may show their vulnerability by saying, “I’m growing, and the Lord is teaching me,” and talking about where God has brought them from.” Another student considered teachers’ openness about their relationship with God as an indicator of spirituality: “Some teachers are spiritual people because they are looking for a closer relationship with God and sharing about their experience.”

Summary and Implications

The students in our study identified actions and behaviors that might indicate a spiritual teacher, but they were quick to explain—very emphatically—that something else is required to separate the real from the apparent. The religious behaviors they mentioned most frequently are ones that are open to interpretation—prayer and worship at the start of class. Faculty members who think that students will consider them spiritual simply because they have prayer or a devotion at the beginning of class are, in most cases, mistaken.

Integrating faith and learning was mentioned as frequently as prayer and devotions as an indicator of faculty spirituality, and no

students qualified this criterion. Students take at face value the teacher’s spiritual commitment when he or she relates the topic of the lecture or discussion to Christian theology and values. By integrating faith and learning, faculty members help students construct a Christian worldview, which is essential if students are to maintain their spiritual commitments in the years following college.⁶

On the Andrews University teacher evaluation form, this item appears: “Christian concepts were integrated into the course when appropriate.” Those who are interested in and responsible for a college’s impact on student spirituality would be wise to pay careful attention to how students evaluate faculty on this item and to provide discipline-specific training to help faculty members integrate faith and learning.

The most important criterion used by the students we inter-

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Sharon Prest, assistant professor of technology education at Andrews University, enjoys getting involved with students outside formal class periods.

viewed to evaluate faculty spirituality is how teachers treat students. (Students also use this criterion to judge the sincerity of other, more overtly religious activities.) Of all the teacher behaviors students listed as indicators of spirituality, this “caring and concern” ties in most closely with the literature on Student Evaluations of Teacher Effectiveness (SETE). Studies have found that concern and respect for students, availability, openness to others’ opinions,⁷ perceived warmth and supportiveness,⁸ the teacher’s personal empathy,⁹ and student perception of the professor as caring¹⁰ were the best predictors of most ratings of teaching effectiveness. Therefore, the criterion of “caring and concern for students” appears to tie faculty spirituality to general teacher effectiveness.

Archer¹¹ found that a teacher’s care and concern for students predicts a trust relationship. With that trust, he says, comes re-

sponsibility. For Christian teachers, this presents opportunities for role modeling and mentoring. It is encouraging to note Archer's suggestion that since caring and concern are not personality characteristics, it may be possible to train teachers in these behaviors.

Thayer-Bacon,¹² who approaches the study of caring professors from a philosophical perspective, recommends that teacher-evaluation questionnaires include questions that measure caring. She says that although teachers may perceive themselves as caring, students may not concur. In his study of more than 400 teachers who had not previously collected SETE data, Centra¹³ found that teacher self-ratings on specific items and on a global item correlated

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Andrews University professor Woodrow Whidden conducts worship at the beginning of class.

poorly (only .20 level) with student evaluations. Since the most frequently mentioned indicator of faculty spirituality was caring for students, teachers need to know how students perceive their "caring" in order to understand how they are being evaluated on spirituality issues.

In this study, students listed a few classroom and out-of-classroom teacher behaviors as indicators of spirituality, but added qualifiers relating to genuineness. Students also listed various personal characteristics of teachers as indicators of spirituality. These can be classified into five categories: the "look" of the teacher, his or her character traits, sincerity, vulnerability, and relationship with God.

From this study, we can reasonably conclude that teachers' care and concern for students and their ability to integrate faith with the discipline taught are the two criteria that most heavily and unambiguously influence students' perception of their teachers' spirituality. ☞

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Students offered contrasting evaluations of class worships and devotions.

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