

Is God silenced on college campuses? Or is the conversation simply changing?

By Tom Krattenmaker, USA Today, March 31, 2008

The moment had, on the surface, a Nixon-goes-to-China quality.

Filmmaker Dan Merchant stood before an auditorium of students assembled for the first campus screening of his forthcoming movie, *Lord Save Us From Your Followers*. Merchant, a Christian, was at Lewis & Clark College, a school in Portland, Ore., deemed by the *Princeton Review* college guide to be one of the least religious in the USA. Yet one conspicuous reality defied a key premise of the event from the moment the college chaplain brought Merchant to the stage: Students packed the good-sized hall, overflowing into the aisles and entry ways, for a chance to see what most knew was a Christian-themed movie with a Gospel message.

And by the time they had finished watching the film — a humorous and heartfelt examination of the culture wars featuring a Michael Moore-meets-Monty Python style — those students could not wait to talk to Merchant about his movie and his faith.

"What struck me," Merchant said later, "was their openness to this conversation."

Students open to a conversation about Christianity, even on a campus with an ultrasecular reputation? Such is the state of affairs at the nation's colleges and universities, where religion is experiencing something of a renaissance, although not necessarily in the shapes and forms older generations are used to seeing.

Apart from the relatively small number of officially Christian colleges, America's campuses are viewed by many as bastions of liberal secularism, the places where religious faith goes to die.

"Young people entering college often encounter overwhelming temptations while being forced with godless philosophies — and the results can be spiritually catastrophic," warns pastor and radio show host John MacArthur. Former attorney general Edwin Meese III, now a Heritage Foundation fellow, says, "For years, our colleges and universities have shown themselves to be hostile to the rights and dignities of religious students."

A string of incidents do lend some credence to these exaggerated critiques. One of the more recent: action by the since-departed president of William & Mary to remove from permanent display a cross adorning the Virginia college's 274-year-old chapel (done, according to then-president Gene Nichol, to make the space more hospitable to religious minorities).

Also contributing to higher education's ultrasecular image are rules at many colleges that prohibit student organizations from excluding other students — a sure source of conflict when it

comes to conservative religious groups that do not abide homosexuality. And then there is the academic habit of mind that encourages the questioning of, well, everything.

From the Ivy League to the brainiac liberal arts colleges to the major public universities, God has been silenced — or so conventional wisdom tells us.

The conventional wisdom, as it turns out, is not quite right.

From the pollsters come recent data showing that religion and spirituality are alive and well at colleges and universities. A recent study by the Higher Education Research Institute at UCLA finds that more than half of college juniors say "integrating spirituality" into their lives is very important. Today's juniors also tend to pray (67%, according to the UCLA study) and 41% believe it's important, even essential, to "follow religious teachings" in everyday life.

In these and similar measures, the college population tends to lag behind the population at large, but not by much. Other new research suggests that one's experience in higher education is not the cause of any falling away from faith. Survey results from University of Texas researchers find that students are less likely to be secularized than others ages 18-25. In other words, navigating the working world takes a larger toll on a young person's faith than braving the nation's supposedly godless college campuses.

It's not just trendy Eastern or New Age religions to which students are gravitating. Christianity is holding its own, too, in part because many campus Christians are showing a different side of their religion than the one that has lent irresistible fodder to comedians and given it a bad reputation in some quarters.

Young Christians, college students or otherwise, tend to emphasize different public concerns than the old-guard Christian Right. Like the older Christian generation, they do consider abortion an important issue, according to a survey by *Relevant* magazine, but the same survey finds that they tend to care less than their elders about asserting Christian prerogatives in the public square and resisting the advance of gay rights.

Typical of the emerging new model of campus Christians is David Norse, a Lewis & Clark senior and climate-change activist. As Norse said in an article on the college website, "As a Christian, I feel that I have an obligation to speak truth to power on issues that affect the poor, the disenfranchised and the silenced."

To many in the coming-of-age generation, this is a form of faith worthy of a hearing, whether one buys its doctrinal premises or not. As demonstrated by the *Lord Save Us* screening at Lewis & Clark, and by so much else I see on campus as an administrator at the school, I'm convinced it's not Christianity that provokes hard feelings among students so much as a too-common public face of it that appears hostile toward those with different beliefs.

The Lewis & Clark students erupted in applause after viewing Merchant's film, many of them moved by its fresh, idealistic vision for how Jesus' followers might interact with the rest of the world. (Maybe I'm biased about the movie, having become Merchant's friend in the course of his interviewing me for it, yet it's hard to imagine anyone nursing a grudge against all Christians after seeing this film.)

For some older, more traditional believers, it could be jarring to see their treasured faith finding its expression in shaggy students toting courier bags, wearing ragged jeans and invoking Jesus as a friend to the marginalized. Perhaps they will feel some relief if they consider the alternative. If faith weren't changing on college campuses, it might well be dying.

Janet Cooper Nelson is the chaplain at Rhode Island's Brown University, where religion is faring just fine. Even so, as Nelson said in a PBS report last fall, she believes that the more open-ended "spirituality" category will claim ever-more students if established churches do not respond to the urgent issues of the new century. Young people's decisions to ditch such churches, she said, would be understandable if the church doesn't take on the urgent concerns of the up-and-coming generation.

Doesn't all the above add up to a heretical proposition — the notion that God is changing? Not at all. Think of it this way: As any songwriter or musician knows, when you hold a note but change the underlying chord, the note takes on a different quality or meaning. The note hasn't changed, but the music sure sounds different.

And so it is with religion in the hands, hearts and minds of those populating the nation's campuses and classrooms. God isn't gone, but the music is changing. You might be surprised who's listening.

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