

Faculty Views of the Climate for Religion at Grinnell College, Spring 2002

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Interviews were held in April 2002 with 28 members of the faculty. The stratified random sample included 8 from humanities, 10 from social studies, and 10 from science. The 8 assistant professors, 10 associates, and 10 full professors represented 15 departments. There were 17 males and 10 females interviewed.

About half of the faculty members interviewed identified themselves as practicing members of some religion. These included Catholics, Episcopalians, members of several Protestant denominations, and Jews. Some of the others who did not identify themselves in this way mentioned considering joining a church in town.

Different Student Approaches to Religion and Spirituality

Several types of students were described:

- (1) Students to whom their religion is very important, and who are willing to be open about this.
- (2) Students who have no religious affiliation but claim to be very spiritual, and/or secular humanists, for whom religion/spirituality = social conscience.
- (3) Students with no religious background but who seem to want to explore religion and/or spirituality.
- (4) Students who have no interest in religion.

Students to whom their religion is very important, and who are willing to be open about this

For some, religion is a big issue and very important to their lives. The students who are more religious see it as part of their lives and are willing to talk about it. Students in the more evangelical religions are pretty open and refer to it in regular conversation. One said that a "surprising number" have very strong faith.

Many thought Jewish students' involvement is particularly visible, for several reasons: they have to inform professors of absences from class on holy days, they are more likely to talk openly about their participation in religious activities, they are more likely to mention their own religious upbringing, and the college rabbi gives them more sense of identity than they had before she came.

Several are aware of practicing Catholic students. Faculty who belong to the Catholic church noted the presence of many Grinnell students there, and one said the students often become connected with families in the parish, and some become involved in the liturgy as acolytes or lay readers. Catholics, like Jews, are more likely to mention their own religious upbringing.

Protestants seem less visible, appearing less likely to mention their own involvement or past religious upbringing. One person said town ministers have said that more students have been coming to local churches in recent years than before. There are some students for whom religion matters a lot. On Ash Wednesday, several students in class had ashes on their foreheads. People are somewhat aware of there being students who go to local churches or are involved in religious groups on campus.

Ethnic differences in openness about religion were also mentioned. One said that students of color are much more likely than white students to identify themselves as Christians, that religion appears to be higher on their list of personal identity features. Others mentioned that many international students here are very religious. One person commented that the institutional attitude is that Christianity is wrong for whites, but that black gospel stuff is good, authentic, etc., and argued that this is inconsistent, patronizing, and hypocritical.

Some faculty members (including at least one atheist and at least one committed practicing member of a major religion) mentioned making the general assumption in class that everyone here is secular. Several noted that not everyone is. One said that in some classes, or with athletes, it's clear that they're not. Another had expected on arriving here that because Grinnell is so liberal, students would think that religion should

be kept very separate from their studies. This person has decided that it is better not to assume that students are agnostic. One very religious student almost dropped a class because they were reading about homosexual behavior in another culture; the student said he had to consult his parents.

Some students, but very few, want religious vocations. Others see cultural value in religious participation for themselves and their children.

Students who have no religious affiliation but claim to be very spiritual, and/or secular humanists, for whom religion/spirituality = social conscience

Many students seem to make a distinction between religion and spirituality, which is also made in the wider society. There seem to be many who consider themselves spiritual but not with a formal organized religion, seeing these two as separate. Religion is generally defined as organized institutions with rules and hierarchies, and as a community of like-minded people. The general sense is that spirituality is personal and individual rather than institutional and/or communal, and as permissive rather than having rules. Spirituality, being not well-defined, is much broader, lets one be much more vague, and is not necessarily supernatural. It could, people thought, encompass secular humanist beliefs, environmentalism, how people feel about nature, being a good caring person, and a general moral compass. It might be New Age turning within. One person commented that people who define themselves as spiritual hold many values that are common in organized religions, but that they don't want an institutional affiliation.

Students appear interested in spiritual questions, but not in religious affiliation, and may be anti-church. Several individuals were skeptical of the religion/spirituality distinction, the idea that one could have a rich spiritual life without some kind of structure that helps one live it. One person didn't know what spirituality could mean without some kind of spiritual practice, and thought that once you have a practice, then it's organized religion.

Students with no religious background but who seem to want to explore religion and/or spirituality

It appears to some that many students did not have any religious upbringing, and probably haven't thought much about religion. Some noted that a fair number of students want to take a religious studies course, and that they seem to want to explore. One said that many students with no prior knowledge have some spiritual interest awakened while they're here, and posited that an academic interest in religion helps to spark and foster that. Another thought that the active chaplains may be contributing to an increased fostering of interest in religion on campus.

Several noted that students generally don't seem to know much about religion, denominational differences in Christianity, metaphysical issues like transubstantiation, differences between Christians and Jews, etc. At the same time, they tend to assume they already know about Christianity, so it's hard to get them to take a critical/analytical approach to it. One person noted a tendency to associate certain views that are not necessarily linked, such as assuming that anyone who is anti-abortion must also be anti-gay. Another commented that students tend to assume that all Catholic countries are socially conservative, and may be shocked when they learn that these two do not necessarily go together.

Students who have no interest in religion

For many it appears that religion is not important to them. Some faculty members get the sense that not many students here are curious about religion. Religion is not visible as a major issue on campus the way diversity is. The student body appears to many to have a mainly secular orientation.

Tolerance and Intolerance

Three different perceptions of student tolerance and intolerance regarding religion were described:

- (1) students are/are not tolerant of religion generally
- (2) students are tolerant of certain religions and not others

(3) students expect religions themselves to be tolerant.

(1) A few people said they have a sense that students are tolerant of religion, and that at least in the classroom they are quite respectful of each other's beliefs. One had observed the opposite attitude, having read student journals for a class around 1995, which described new students finding themselves confronted in the dorms with "You don't believe in God, do you? you're not religious?," and reporting that people who said yes were hounded by their peers.

(2) Others noted that if Grinnell has any fundamentalist or otherwise religiously conservative students, they probably feel silenced here. Two noted that during the Inter-Varsity dispute, there was hostility toward conservative Christians. The students who took that group's position paid a major social cost for it, which made other conservative students both angry and anxious. One person noted that Grinnell students are very intolerant: they are all for a politically correct religion, such as social activist Catholicism or mainline liberal Protestantism, and also tend to think that it's okay to be Jewish. However, anyone whose religion is not politically correct is not okay: conservative Christianity, veiled Islamic women, Catholics not allowing women to be priests, or Inter-Varsity's views on homosexuality.

(3) The prevailing attitude here is to let everyone do their own thing: "tolerance to the point of indifference," as one person phrased it. Two people referred to an apparent desire for an "I'm okay you're okay" religion, in which there is a lack of conviction and "anything goes." One person uses his own faith to illustrate to students the difference between obligation and self-interest, which they often don't understand (that is, not doing a prohibited thing simply because it's prohibited, one doesn't do that, even though one might like the thing if it was tried). Grinnell, another said, prefers to be so tolerant that it does not engage in discussion; students prefer not to stick out among their peers. One noted not seeing a lot of interest in religion here, no real negativity, rather a kind of openness without strong convictions or much personal commitment. For most, someone else noted, religion is a form of social conscience. They are for religion as a secular religion, but are totally against people dying for their religious faith. Social passion is okay, but they don't want it tied up with doctrine. They think that since everybody wants to feed the hungry, etc, there shouldn't be any problems between different religions.

Views of the Institutional Treatment of Different Religions

(1) All religions are treated evenly, and all groups would receive college support.

(2) The college makes a genuine effort to be even-handed, and given the demographics of the student body, does well. It's a Protestant environment, not as serious about Muslims, etc, but this is not an outrage. There are churches in town serving many groups. One noted that foreign students expect to be in the minority. American Muslims, and maybe Jews, have some feelings of deprivation. They get fewer resources overall, but probably get more if you think on a per capita basis. Muslim students had to negotiate with Dining Services about Ramadan restrictions, but Dining was accommodating. Also, more serious Christians probably feel they are not taken seriously in this overwhelmingly secular culture. One person commented on the college's heritage – Congregationalist ministers bringing the social gospel to the frontier – and suggested that preserving this does not imply disrespect for other religions.

(3) A Judeo-Christian bias. There are chaplains for Christians and Jews, signifying an institutional commitment to these groups. There are few here outside the Judeo-Christian faiths, so not much understanding of them. People are open but naive. The Religious Studies curriculum, it was said, is slanted toward Christianity.

(4) A Christian Protestant bias. Different Christian religions are seen as equal. More of an effort has been made lately to support Jews. International students have a problem; Muslims are less accommodated, and there has been no support for Hindus. Both these religions have mostly lay leadership, so what they need is help in organizing themselves (for example, Hindus could get together at the shrine on campus for their festivals).

(5) A secular Protestant environment. Being secular means the college is culturally Christian. This is visible in the calendar, and in the structure and tone of nondenominational ceremonies. One religious individual mentioned finding the secularism disconcerting, and thinking the college could do better than being oblivious to people's religious lives. Another noted that the more conservative Christian denominations are probably not as accepted on campus.

(6) An anti-Christian bias. Non-Christian religions are felt to be more okay than Christianity. People can talk openly about being Jewish or Muslim, but when you say Christian, people bristle, as if you mean fundamentalist. Many tend to assume that all Christians are evangelical fundamentalists. "Christian" is almost a pejorative term here. Those who are not Christian get more attention. Some students want to believe, incorrectly, that non-Western religions do not have the formal features of Christianity, such as rules and hierarchies.