

**Through the Looking Glass:
The Social Behaviors of Christian Students at St. Olaf College**

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The Setting

- The sample population consisted of members and leaders of Christian student organizations at St. Olaf College, participant observation being carried out primarily in two groups: meetings of the Fellowship of Christian Athletes and meetings of the Progressive Christian Fellowship, groups chosen because they fall on different ends of the sociopolitical religious spectrum.

The Problem

- This research investigates how St. Olaf students who identify themselves as Christians perceive their religious values in relationship to a variety of social behaviors, and focuses on the universality of Christian symbols and the effect of their various interpretations on the imagined community of Christianity.

Methodology

- This research uses in depth interviews with individual students and participant observation to understand the differences in discourse amongst individuals and groups within the broader Christian community.

Findings

- Despite acknowledged differences in interpreting Christian values, most Christians operate with the presupposition of unity within the Christian community.
- This presupposed community holds certain symbols as being of central value: the Bible, the idea of sacrifice. Sacrifice as a symbol broke down into the ideas of service, financial giving, and love.
- Love functioned as a multifaceted symbol, and was talked about predominantly as Love for God or as love for others. While there are elements of both displayed in all groups and interviews, those who value love for God tend to have a spiritual life that is focused on personal actions like prayer, while those who talk more about love for others often value acts of service or the cause of social justice to be central to their spiritual life.

Summary and Conclusions

- Because Christians from various backgrounds and approaches to their spiritual lives displayed many of the same central values, this research finds that the differences displayed between groups of Christian students is more an example of a looking glass self phenomenon than a fundamental difference of beliefs, and that love is a central and universal symbol in discussing Christian values for Christian St. Olaf Students.

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Abstract

This paper presents findings from research done at St. Olaf College to assess how

St. Olaf students who identify themselves as Christians perceive their religious values in relationship to a variety of social behaviors, and it focuses on primarily on two Christian student organizations which fall on different ends of what might be called the sociopolitical religious spectrum at the college: the Fellowship of Christian Athletes and the Progressive Christian Fellowship. Within a universal symbol set, belonging to the presupposed community of Christianity, various interpretations were made of its primary symbols, most notably love, which is often discussed in terms of love between God and the believer and also between believers and others in the world. While certain individuals often stressed one aspect of this two-pronged value in their discussion and behavior, and while those with similar expressions tended to belong to one group or another, our research has found that this difference seems to result more from a looking glass self behavior in selecting the groups of which Christians are a part, instead of a genuinely different or contradictory interpretation of the universal symbols and values of Christianity.

The Setting

The subjects of our study are members of the Christian community of St. Olaf College, which is similar demographically to the college as a whole. A large percentage of students at the college are Christians. The pervading

demographic characteristics which would be easily recognized by any outsider include a large majority of Caucasians, and an overwhelming majority of middle and upper-middle class students. These characteristics generally fit the Christian community as well, though there are variances within subgroups of Christians.

There are many ways to identify Christian students on campus. One could attend chapel services, meetings of Christian affiliated student organizations (of which there are a wide variety), or, presumably, ask individual students about their religious identities. Christian student organizations include the Catholic Students Association (CSA), L'abri Lectures, Christian Activities Network (CAN), Intervarsity (which leads Thursday night Bible studies), Fellowship of Christian Athletes (FCA), Selah, T-shirt Chapel (a community youth outreach program), Christian Outreach, Progressive Christian Fellowship (PCF), and Campus Crusade for Christ (CRU). The primary settings for this research centered around two different Christian Student Organizations: the Fellowship of Christian Athletes, and the Progressive Christian Fellowship.

Each author of this study attended a few meetings of either FCA or PCF as a participant observer. FCA has weekly meetings on Tuesday nights (and various other meetings for the organization's leadership at other times), with an average attendance of 200 students. The meetings follow a fairly regular structure which begins with a few contemporary worship songs, which are led by a band, and are followed by announcements in the form of a funny skit. Afterwards, the primary speaker for the week is introduced and gives a lesson or sermon about fifteen minutes in length. Later, more songs are sung, and people disperse slowly. There is a request for offering made every week to pay for a Compassion International child that the organization sponsors. The St. Olaf FCA website describes the group:

FCA is a place for meeting and sharing with others as well as developing a deeper Christian faith. FCA meets once a week for singing, special speakers, skits and fellowship. FCA also provides opportunities in outreach, small group Bible studies, prayer, mission trips and special events. You need not be an athlete (in the physical sense) to attend meetings. Everyone is welcome as FCA seeks to train the spirit and increase the strength of relationships with God.

A few characteristics of the FCA group are indicated by the physical set-up of their meeting space:

We met in Stav Hall, with the band and speakers by the large window looking towards the Science Center. There is room on the floor in front where about fifty people sit in small groups, and behind them, the tables fill with other groups and individuals. The farther back people sit, the more likely they are to be sitting alone or not talking to the people closest to them. Everyone is dressed fairly nicely, with a fair smattering of St. Olaf sweatshirts in the room. This is a group that typifies what I see as the image of the St. Olaf student, though there is a man with dreadlocks sitting one table in front of me [Author's field notes].

The leaders seemed to stand on the sides of the room, as if they were supposed to be mingling with the whole group, but couldn't quite manage it, and it seemed that the people there mostly talked to the circle of friends that they came with, because the only people who talked to me were the ones I approached, aside from a faculty member who seemed to be involved with leading the group.

The atmosphere of PCF presents a fairly stark contrast for various reasons. It meets in a dorm lounge, and consists of eight to twelve attendees each week. They sit in a sort of circle of couches, and someone makes the whole group hot chocolate or tea. The appearance of the members of this group is somewhat different from FCA:

A few group members are in business-casual dress, while others are in patched overalls or homemade skirts. There is a disproportionate number of "hippie" types here for St. Olaf. But then again, this group uses the term "progressive" to describe itself, which often fits the Birkenstock and baja-wearing crowd. I know a few people, who greet me, and others make some small talk. Even the people who don't know my name treat me like I'm a friend. You can't get lost in the crowd here [Author's field notes].

Additionally, out of the regular attendees, four are non-students (three are St. Olaf staff members and one is a member of the Northfield community).

The friendlier tone of the experience of PCF may very well be largely a result of more superficial similarities among the attendees, which led people to open up more quickly, as well as the small size of the group, which would generally encourage people to talk to everyone—ignoring someone in such setting would take concerted effort. The feeling of relaxation, though, is very clear, and the unstructured format of the meetings makes each person equally a “leader,” in contrast to the structure of FCA, which is large enough to require a more organized leadership network.

Conversation referenced the Bible occasionally, but was more likely to relate to current events, both on campus and in the world. One night the group was discussing a speaker that the Christian Activities Network had recently brought to campus to speak on “Sexuality and Divine Love.” The speaker had turned out to be affiliated with and had referred to an organization supporting “ex-gay” individuals who had been reformed to a “Christian” lifestyle. It seemed to be understood among the attendees that members of this organization supported GLBT rights and almost certainly opposed any idea that homosexuality was condemned by Christianity. No one in the group challenged statements that criticized this idea, and as the meeting progressed, several members spoke of identifying themselves as GLBT people. While it was never explicitly addressed at FCA, it is fairly certain there would not have been such unanimity on such a divisive social issue in that setting.

These two organizations were chosen because they included Christians from a variety of backgrounds with a variety of ideas regarding their faith, and provided a relatively diverse context in which to explore the varying ideas and values within the Christian community at St. Olaf.

The Problem

The purpose of this research was to investigate how St. Olaf students who identify themselves as Christians and belong to Christian organizations perceive their religious values in relationship to a variety of social behaviors. While the initial goal was to get a cross-section of the Christian population with regards to both a range of ideologies and involvement levels, the research soon became more focused on leaders and very active members of the Christian community, as they were the most responsive and willing to be interviewed. As interview data was accumulated, research became increasingly focused on the symbolic discourse of Christians and the role of the imagined community of Christianity, or the “Body of Christ.”

Symbolic interactionism provided a vocabulary for this discussion, and theologians of the “experiential-expressive” school gave voice to a language of religion useful in assessing the various manifestations of spiritual understanding and the array of expressions of religious truths in this study. Liberation theology provided a theological grounding for the symbol of service and sacrifice, while Weber’s discussion in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* gave historical and theoretical explanation for language of individualistic spirituality. The studies of Robert Bellah provided a groundwork for looking at individualism and communalism within religious discourse.

Religion and peoples’ approaches to it can often be interpreted on the micro level from a symbolic interactionist perspective. W. I. and Dorothy S. Thomas used the term “definition of the situation” to describe the concept an individual has in her mind of a particular situation; this concept or definition—the symbol—has a much greater impact on the situation—and thus, on the way a person interacts with the situation—than does the reality of the situation, due to the definition’s ability to produce consequences (Ritzer, 2000: 60). Cooley theorized that each individual forms a sense of self by watching himself or herself in the looking glass of others’ perceptions—that is, each individual pays close attention to how she is being perceived by others, and forms a sense of self that is based on the self that others seem to see in her. She uses others’ perceptions to determine whether her actions are having the effect that she wishes them to have, and to adjust the ways in which she behaves if she finds that her actions are being misunderstood. She also uses others’ perceptions of her to determine whether she is portraying herself as the person she wishes to be (2000: 60-61). Goffman’s concept of dramaturgy is based on the idea that people define themselves through dramatic performances in which they produce a concept of self through interaction with their audiences. The difference between what a person ideally should be (the virtual social identity),

and what a person actually is (the actual social identity), is called stigma, and may also be useful in the analysis of religion from a symbolic interactionist perspective (2000: 147-154).

Each of these theories describes the ways in which people relate to the world by defining what is appropriate or desirable according to societal influences. Within the context of religion, this could imply that the ways in which Christianity and Christian values manifest themselves within individuals are affected by how they perceive religion, what they want their position within the social context of religion to be, and how they want to define themselves with regards to religion. The many different forms Christianity adopts, therefore, and the many different ways in which subjects described and justified their values and behaviors could be argued to have roots not in different opinions regarding the “true” message of God, for example, but in the differences in perceptions of religion, different social positions with regards to religion, and desirable ways in which to define themselves religiously.

One school of theological thought offers an interesting perspective on manifestations of religious belief that may help to ground the discussion of how varied the interpretations of seemingly universal symbols in Christian discourse are. The “‘experiential-expressive’ notion of religion...‘locates the ultimately significant contact with whatever is finally important to religion in the prereflective depths of the soul and regards the public and outer features of religion as expressive and evocative objectifications (i.e., nondiscursive symbols) of internal experience’” (Budde, 1997: 57). Michael Budde cites the work of theologian George Lindbeck in the context of his own analysis of “Christianity and global culture industries.” This concept proved both an explanation of various understandings of the Christian ideology and experience, but also poses a problem that all experiential religious philosophies do, which is to raise the question: Is there any standard of what is good or true if manifestations of religious understanding all emerge from the “prereflective depths of the soul” and are thus immune from the questions of the reasoning mind or even of human emotion? In any case, the idea that religious understandings may, in fact, emerge from somewhere beyond reason allows for one point of view on what can be seen as different and conflicting preconceptions of religion.

Other theological schools have offered other explanations and priorities for contemporary Christianity, one of which is the school of liberation theology. The defining of "liberation theology" in recent years as a theoretical approach to religion has put an emphasis on Christianity as a religion of action

over spirituality and belief. Liberation theology posits Christianity as a religion that intends to help the less-fortunate and which focuses its energy on serving others in a way that promotes social justice and peace; indeed, many would argue that this is exactly how Jesus lived and what he preached, and that American Christianity's frequent emphasis on personal matters such as one's relationship with God as well as salvation, sometimes at the exclusion of an emphasis on serving others, is not what Jesus taught.

In *Unexpected News: Reading the Bible with Third World Eyes*, Robert McAfee Brown explains that "the basic viewpoint of the biblical writers is that of victims, those who have been cruelly used by society, the poor and oppressed." Today's poor and oppressed, he says, are the "contemporary counterparts of those biblical victims," and thus, "when they hear the Bible offering hope and liberation to the oppressed of the ancient world, they hear hope and liberation being offered to them" as well (1983: 14). However, he notes that this message is often brushed aside by those in the developed world in favor of the passages which speak more about matters of personal spirituality.

This frequent discrepancy between what is understood to be the message of the Bible by those in the developing world and those in the developed world is evident in the variety of approaches we found subjects took towards behaving in the way they believed God intended. Many placed a greater emphasis upon matters of personal spirituality, such as their relationship with God. Others placed a greater emphasis upon servitude to others, but often this was not manifested as a concern for the extreme poor and oppressed of the world, as liberation theologians would argue is necessary of Christians, but rather as a concern for people in general—anyone in need, or for friends, or perhaps for the slightly less-oppressed of the world, such as the GLBT community, which was the focus of one subject's servitude. Though these concerns would not necessarily fall into the category of liberation theology (liberation theology is not always defined as including things such as GLBT rights, but is instead focused on the liberation of the developing world), they are within the spirit of liberation theology. Additionally, one respondent did express concerns about such matters as those with which liberation theology concerns itself. Using liberation theology as a theoretical framework within this context is useful not to argue how Christian belief can and should be used as a tool through which to liberate the oppressed, but rather to compare, explain, and place in context the different approaches Christians take to servitude.

Weber also provides a useful framework in which to analyze religion. His explorations of the social aspects of religion resulted in, among others, the observation that Christianity (Protestantism in particular, according to his book, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*) is, or at least has become, a particularly individualistic religion in which members are encouraged to strive for personal success. In the aforementioned book, he demonstrates how capitalism (one of the facets of developed Christian society which Brown criticizes as being at least partially responsible for the poverty and oppression of much of the developing world) and Protestantism complement each other well. Protestantism teaches that God shows his approval by blessing people with success, which gives people the motivation to work towards being personally successful. This mentality doubtlessly plays into the United States's culture of materialism and abundance, of which we observed proof in the responses of subjects. The often-individualistic nature of Christianity combined with the emphasis on personal achievement is another possible explanation for the individual and internal nature of the beliefs and behavior of many respondents, which is, liberation theologians would argue, not at all within the spirit of the Christianity taught by Jesus when practiced and preached at the exclusion of an emphasis on liberation as well.

Bellah ties religious individualism to the historical event of “religious bodies [needing] to compete in a consumers’ market” where they “grew or declined in terms of changing patterns of individual religious taste” (Bellah, 1985: 233). His view on the individualization of religion is that it coincided with increased intellectual and financial freedom, where people wanted religion to reinforce their sense of entitlement to those freedoms. He distinguishes between “radically individualistic religion” and “conservative or fundamentalist religion,” but goes on to describe how their God-concepts, while conceptually different, both “value personal religious experience as the basis of belief” (Bellah, 1985: 235), and “both value freedom and individuality” (Bellah, 1985: 236).

A central point in Bellah’s book, *Habits of the Heart*, is that there is a “conflict between withdrawal into purely private spirituality and the biblical impetus to see religion as involved with the whole of life” (Bellah, 1985: 248). He cites a solution proposed by Parker Palmer, a theologian at the Fetzer Institute, instructing Christians “to deepen and direct and discipline that inwardness in the light of faith until God leads us back to a vision of the public and faithful action on the public’s behalf” (Bellah, 1985: 248). This merging of the separate expressions of Christian values as either internal and personal or external and communal that often emerged in this study can be seen in

relationship to each other through Bellah's language and analysis of individualism in religious life.

Synthesizing the vocabularies of these various theoretical frameworks, we set out to determine how Christian students at St. Olaf related their faith and behavior to the society around them, and how this could be explained sociologically, within the context of several sociological theories about religion and how it is manifested in the social world.

Methodology

Our study was concerned with students who self-identify as Christian. As St. Olaf is a Lutheran-affiliated institution, there are obviously many students who do nominally identify themselves as Christian. In order to find self-identifying Christians, we focused on students who were members of Christian student organizations on campus. We interviewed a few students who were leaders of some of these Christian organizations, as well as students who did not have leadership roles but who attended meetings of one or more organization(s) regularly.

We sent emails to the student leaders of all of the Christian organizations that provided the name of a leader on the St. Olaf website, and made contact with the non-leaders by asking the leaders for names of potential subjects as well as asking students present at these organizations' meetings if they would be willing to let us interview them. We each conducted ten interviews (separately from one another); each of us interviewed three men and seven women, which was a result of the unequal gender ratio among those who volunteered or said they were willing to be interviewed. All respondents seemed from both outward appearance and responses to interview questions to be from average middle or upper-middle class families, but no class status questions were asked during the interview so this is simply educated

speculation on the part of the researchers. Most of the arranging of interviews was done via email, according to when both the subject and the interviewer had time. The interviews took place in many public spaces on campus, such as the Fireside lounge, the Student Organization Resource Center office, and dormitory lounges.

This methodology presented the problem of creating a possibly strong bias in the type of self-identifying Christian interviewed. It was pointed out to us by a friend, who was a self-identifying Christian yet did not belong to any Christian organizations on campus, that many Christians may choose to not belong to Christian organizations for specific reasons. This friend told of feeling alienated and unfulfilled by the few meetings she attended at the beginning of her freshman year, and was dissatisfied with what she found to be the general tone of the Christian community at St. Olaf. She is strong in her Christian beliefs, but has chosen to express them in ways that do not involve religious organizations on campus. It is possible that we have therefore failed to take into account the stories of what could be a large number of self-identifying Christians who feel that the Christian community at St. Olaf does not represent them well. Because of this, any conclusions we draw must be understood as being applicable to students who participate in Christian organizations at St. Olaf and not to all self-identifying Christian students.

Each of our interviews took roughly an hour and included questions about past and current denominational affiliations; what were considered important Christian values and how the subjects manifested these values; common student behaviors from which the subjects abstained due to their religious beliefs; and other questions regarding the subjects' beliefs and behaviors with reference to their religious values. [See Appendix A for interview questions.]

As mentioned previously, we also observed meetings of two campus organizations, the Fellowship of Christian Athletes and the Progressive Christian Fellowship. We chose these two groups in an effort to gain an understanding of a wide spectrum of participation in Christian organizations on campus. FCA tends to hold more traditional Christian values and meetings are shaped accordingly, whereas the PCF, as its name would indicate, is attended by a group of more "progressive" students with less traditional approaches to their faith. We observed and, where appropriate, participated in these meetings in an attempt to understand more about the significance of belonging to a Christian organization on campus.

It is important to note that a few of our subjects were acquaintances or friends of ours before we conducted the interviews, which could have led to inhibition on the part of the subject during the interview (or, to be fair, the same on the part of the interviewer). We asked our subjects not to let this get in the way of their answering the questions honestly, but it is never certain whether this actually happened or not.

It is also important to note that our twenty subjects were by no means a representative sample of self-identifying Christians or even self-identifying Christians who belong to Christian organizations on campus. Similarly, the FCA and PCF meetings that we attended and observed were by no means representative of either the organizations and their meetings in general, or of Christian organizations and their meetings community-wide.

It is also, as always, possible that bias was encountered in our own personal approaches to our subject matter and subjects. We tried extremely hard to be neutral but each of us has a history and set of experiences with regards to our feelings about religion, Christianity, and the Christian community at St. Olaf, and this could have caused bias in our recording or interpretation of our data.

Findings

Christian students at St. Olaf College, though they express a broad variety of behaviors and opinions based on their own ideas of Christianity, also demonstrate the centrality of the imagined community of Christianity in identity formation and the significance of the symbolic discourse of the religion and its predominant symbols. The “Body of Christ” is imagined as both diverse and unified, and the significance of love is both universally acknowledged and divergently interpreted. The symbol of sacrifice permeates discussions of friendship, finances, and politics. The Bible is both a source for symbols and behavioral codes, as well a central symbol in and of itself. The discourse of United States Christianity is colored heavily by its culture of consumerism and individualism, though it is used both to legitimate and criticize these primary cultural characteristics.

The imagined unity of the Christian community contrasts with the many interpretations of its symbols by individual believers, an ambiguity that is highlighted by the use of in-group language and vague symbols in speech that even the speakers occasionally do not define concretely for themselves. Using abstract and amorphous symbols makes the Christian community at St. Olaf College diverse, with shared symbols carrying various meanings within subgroups of the community and individuals within those subgroups. Within the Christian community, there is frequently a distinct and unresolved tension between language of communalism and cultural values of individualism, which is resolved (or sometimes not resolved) by individual Christians through the use of their own symbolic discourse.

One general circumstance of note in the process of interviewing Christian students is that, while differences of opinion within the Christian community were acknowledged and discussed, never did any Christian claim a definition of Christianity that excluded anyone else who would consider themselves Christian by a different definition. In fact, efforts were made on many occasions to recognize that people holding varying views should not be judged or excluded because of them.

In one interview, a student discussed her personal struggles to keep her behavior consistent with her values and went on to describe certain problems she perceives in the world in general:

At first, Sapphira couldn't think of a time when she'd done something she felt was wrong according to her values, until I gave the example of gossiping. Then she said that "passing judgment is a big one" for her. She gave the example of a professor she's heard about who has a lot of ideologies that she doesn't agree with, but she doesn't even know him, and she already doesn't like him because of that...Later on, in discussing her political views and her ideas of what the government should be doing, she said that "Christianity is completely persecuted in Muslim countries" and that there should be freedom of religion because "people need Jesus," and "Jesus can offer them something that no other religion can" [Authors field notes].

Sapphira's comments express her desire to be inclusive and embrace the imagine community of Christianity, and this conflicts with her desire to

evangelize and follow her “calling” to “encourage, lead, and guide people—to make them feel like they are part of the Body.” This sentiment mirrors that of many Christian students who believe in the truth of their religion (which presumably is requisite to being an adherent of it), yet who believe in the unity of the diverse “Body” or Christian community, in which people inevitably adhere to different priority systems, give primacy to different values, and have their own interpretation of religious ideology.

The symbol of Christianity is central to the empowerment of adherents to the many permutations of Christian ideology. Many subjects discussed the need for solidarity, mutual support, and cooperation of Christians, especially close friends, but also the community as a whole. Even personal goals were often framed in the context of a community value or need for cooperative efforts.

In one instance, an interview subject responded to a question about how her own “particular behaviors [were] affected by [her] religious values” by speaking to a mission for all Christians:

An aspect of behaviors that should be guided by religious values is “being an active member of your community.” She mentioned volunteer service in a tone that indicated she felt like this term was overused and under-acted, mentioning that at any moment that you’re needed, you should be willing to go help at a food pantry or anywhere there is need, “both in your church and outside.” She mentioned “relating to society beyond the Christian community,” stressing her belief that “the gospel is a gospel that *goes to* people as opposed to making people *come* to it. If we are trying to reflect Christ, we *go to* people.” “It is important to focus on who Jesus focused on—the marginalized—but all people are needy” [Author’s fieldnotes].

Bathsheba’s use of the word “we” in responding to a question that only addressed her personal behavior demonstrates the significance of the imagined community and its imagined collective action as a means for bearing out a Christian ideal in the world in the minds of individual Christians. Cooperative effort and unity are necessary to fulfill this world view.

The “Body of Christ” and the need for group identity and affirmation is a necessary aspect for maintaining the imagined Christian community. An interesting contrast arose in one FCA meeting where a speaker, addressing a group of approximately two-hundred white upper-middle class students, stressed an understanding of the “Body of Christ” including a diverse global community:

The speaker asked everyone to close their eyes briefly and envision what the phrase “Body of Christ” made them think of. She then shared some photographic images, many from her trip to China, that were her image of the Body of Christ. She shared some statistics about how much of the Christian world is actually from the West (about 30%), to indicate the scope and diversity that is the Body of Christ... She frequently mentioned the Body of Christ and members of the Christian family overseas as people who we often forget in conceiving the Body of Christ. She mentioned how overwhelming and hard to process that is... She spoke about a few key points and Bible passages. One which she constantly returned to was about “bearing one another’s burdens.” It is important to remember that as the Body of Christ, people take on each other’s burdens. She mentioned a quote from a Christian who said, “God let my heart be broken by the things that break your heart” [Author’s field notes].

This discussion is interesting in that it was couched within the context of very personal, specific St. Olaf student experiences. This discursive purpose of envisioning this global Christian community was self-empowering and focused back into the small community as opposed to directing focus outward beyond personal attitudes and actions.

Another broadly defined symbol of the Christian community is its central text, the Bible. This is a multifaceted symbol that functions as the source of almost all other symbols and the vocabulary of symbolic discourse, but is also a symbol itself. Reference to “the Word of God” arises in the context of seeking guidance for behaviors, gaining a better understanding of God, finding personal comfort, worshiping, and loving other people, as well as God. These purposes are generally only implicit in statements about the word of God. It is a nonspecific symbol that is understood as universal, though

subjects simultaneously discuss the different understandings of the text and its purpose and truth.

Various contrasting perceptions of the Bible and its authority and truth came up throughout the interview process. One subject, Jephthah, referred to the Bible as “the standard [for behavior], because it is “the direct...and inerrant...word from God [and] the way we’re supposed to live life and the way God expects us to live life. He consistently talked about his behavior in relationship to “what the Bible says,” also saying that “the people who live by it are the best people around.” For another subject, Prisca, reading the Bible and prayer constituted “spending time with God” in her life. Another subject, Hazael whose personal views leaned somewhat towards social conservatism, in that he personally perceives marriage as being between a man and woman “from a faith point of view,” also said that he has a “hard time with Christians who take the Bible and say ‘This is absolutely the way people should do things’...because people read the Bible differently.” Another subject, Hadassah, calls the Bible “God’s word given to us so that we can know Him.”

On the other hand, some subjects spoke of the Bible in much less literal terms. One subject, Chloe, who is gay, spoke of the common passages Christians often use to support the claim that homosexuality is wrong in the eyes of God, and of the responses she had to these claims. In Leviticus, for example, it explicitly states that homosexuality is wrong, but it also explicitly states that God does not want people to cut their hair, for example. To Chloe, anything in Leviticus must therefore be taken with a grain of salt. Another subject, Drusilla, asserts that many of the things forbidden by the Bible should be examined carefully because they were "written in a different context." Christians operate on the assumption that the Bible is central to all of them, and they are clearly aware of their various interpretations and uses of the text, making the Bible another symbol that is both universal and unifying, as well as unique for each individual, and occasionally divisive.

An expected central figure in discussions of Christian values is Jesus, and he was discussed by name in almost every interview (though some people only used the title Christ). He is most often cited as the ideal manifestation of Christian values and behavior, a predominant interpretation of his function in guiding religious action and discourse, as the WWJD? (What Would Jesus Do?) merchandising campaign has so prominently displayed for all of the nation to see. WWJD? was also mentioned in interviews, usually in a tone indicating embarrassment at using such a trivialized adage. What was most interesting was how even the person of Jesus Christ as a behavioral model is

understood in a wide range of terms, and is yet another universal symbol that is not universally understood in the same way. Jephthah, in the context of discussing how his “religious values inform political views” said that “it’s very clear that Christ was not involved with politics,” while Ham described Jesus’ life as a “radical one” which indicates to Christians that they are not supposed to “just accept the status quo.”

The other most predominant symbol in interviews was the idea of sacrifice. The beneficiary of sacrifice varied between God and other people. In matters of lifestyle, especially financial choices, this symbol played a primary role, though sometimes only as subtext. Even the most individualistic descriptions of Christian life often included a value of non-materialism or simple living, which speaks to, at the very least, an understanding that one’s own use of materials affects other people, and there is a responsibility on the part of Christians not to use resources in such a way as to cause harm or scarcity for others who need access to the same resources.

Some subjects expressed slightly more extreme views against materialism than others. Bathsheba (who plans to do mission work and who has spent time working at an orphanage in a developing country) explained her views on materialism:

An example of doing something that society supports but her religious values do not is centered on materialism. She sees society as clearly, “definitely,” indicating that she “needs to have a decent looking car...wear new clothing...have the ‘latest’ things...to be successful.” She says that she is “convicted” that these are superficial claims, “stereotypes, and essentially lies.” “She feels she needs to redefine success by a Christian standard that’s different than this.” Regarding future financial decisions, she says that she believes people should set aside everything they don’t need to help others, which she believes is the heart of the Biblical instruction on what to do with one’s money and resources. Setting aside 10% and then a little more (tithing), or what you “can” give isn’t sufficient. She believes that one should live at the minimum standard for the culture one lives in (which is arguably hard to define), but that there is no need to live above that mark. [Author’s field notes]

This position resonates with Ham's, who mentions the idea of "stewardship" and not considering one's possessions as one's own. He said, "It's hard to realize that other people work who don't have as much," and they are equally entitled to resources, in this world view.

Other subjects define "living simply" according to what the necessity of their intended future circumstances would dictate. One subject, Junia, who hopes to enter a seminary and become a leader in the Christian community says that she does not foresee herself ever owning a house, but as one to whom many will turn for help, she hopes to have a bit of extra money to provide it when it is needed—which could include an ice cream date with someone in need of a confidant, or a plane ticket for someone to visit a sick relative. Chloe, who also hopes to be a leader in the Christian community believes that certain material items which might commonly be considered luxury items will be necessary or extremely beneficial to her position—a cellular phone and internet access, for example, would help her to communicate with those she served and to be easily reachable by anyone who needed her help.

This contrasts somewhat with subjects who define minimal living from a slightly different perspective, like Leah, who describes "tithing," having "enough money for basic human needs" (like comfortable living space, good food, quality clothes, and money for her children's education), and giving up certain comforts like "fancy cars, fancy homes, and big screen TV's" as the necessary financial sacrifice for a Christian. Farther along this end of the spectrum was a subject, Sapphira, who described her financial choices in an intriguing way:

When asked how Christians should treat those less fortunate than themselves, Sapphira talked about how difficult the idea of a "rich Christian is to her." "I think it's impossible to be rich and a Christian at the same time. It's contradictory. I will never be rich. Our parents' generation is more materialistic, but I plan on living minimalistically. I will give money to organizations and friends doing mission work. Stuff is not important to me. I am fortunate enough to go to J.Crew and buy jeans for \$85." [Author's field notes]

Sapphira expressed the common value of sacrifice and an understanding of considering how one's own lifestyle impacts others, yet never commented on whether she perceived owning eighty-five dollar jeans as conflicting with her ideals of minimalism. Along with other subjects, she expressed this value in an abstract way that she did not explicitly connect to specific current or future behaviors in her life, nor did she express a sense of tension or conflict between her current lifestyle and the importance of living simply.

These comments are very interesting in the cultural context of the United States, because so few people were able to define exactly what “living simply” meant in concrete terms. In a country where the organized church is fully entrenched in the ideology of consumerism, it is interesting to see how this value is manifested in the lives of individuals. Cultural discourse may very well inhibit all but a very few from understanding this value as anything but an abstract ideal. The ideological tools with which to bring this value into reality are hard to see in the lives of many Christians, which is not a fault, but a reality of cultural influence. If the Christian community truly upheld this value, it would be forced to reevaluate how it functions within the structure of social institutions and discourse.

In *People of Plenty: Economic Abundance and the American Character*, David M. Potter gives specific voice to how American ideology has been shaped by abundance and how individualism arises out of materially abundant social environments. “Americans have always been prone to regard things as resulting from the free choice if a free will,” he says (Potter, 1954: 111). Potter also believes that there is historical precedent which perpetuates the idea that “our abundance will suffice for the attainment of all the goals of social justice” (Potter, 1954: 119). The idea that there are enough resources for everyone to attain the “American Dream” or at least live a comfortable life may have an impact on how nonchalantly the Christian discourse on “simple living” contrasts the abundant lifestyles of many Christians.

Bearing in mind that students making comments about simple living may be heading in the direction of missionary or social service work, as many of them indicated, one can still reasonably consider that these comments were made by students attending a \$30,000 per year liberal arts college who were wearing outfits that probably cost from fifty to one hundred fifty dollars in total. Many have cars. All have a permanent residence. Most own a computer. Desiring to “live simply” is one example of many values whose conflict with societal values is not addressed by many Christians. These values remain abstract ideas for a reason, whether it be a hegemonic cultural discourse

that inhibits those values from connecting to concrete lifestyle choices or a need for Christians to feel that they value others while still feeling as safe and comfortable as their social opportunities allow.

Tithing, or giving ten percent of one's earnings to the church or church-related organizations, was another, more concrete, manifestation of the value of sacrifice, one which often carried a tone of exclusivity or selectiveness on the part of the giver. This form of sacrifice often indicated more explicitly what people or causes were more important to the giver. Jephthah described his financial sacrifices by saying that "tithing is the 'Biblical bare minimum, and that any money that he has above and beyond his tithe will go to missions,' not through church organizations but directly from him to people he knows or connections he has in the mission field. Prisca went so far in explaining her desire to "do what God wants" that she said she "wants her kids to have opportunities," but they "will get more from seeing [her] life than any educational opportunities they'll have," if she doesn't have enough money to send them to school. These ideas about how much money one should keep or give away range from considering "abundance" a "contradiction" to Christian values and feeling justified in tithing, but also having "a little extra in case something comes up" and staying financially secure [author's field notes].

The most prevalent of common symbols of sacrifice, however, came up when interview subjects were asked, "What do you think is the most important value to guide Christians during their daily life?" With rare exceptions, the response was "love." In many instances this response was worded in the context of the "greatest commandment" story from the New Testament, where Jesus is asked what is the greatest commandment, and he says, "'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind' This is the greatest and first commandment. A second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself'" (Matthew 22:37-40, NRSV). How the Biblical reference was paraphrased differed, however, between emphasis on the love of God or the love of one's neighbor, sometimes to the point of excluding one of the two entirely. The interview subjects often fell more or less into one of two groups, those whose religious value system stressed love of community and communalism or love of God and individualism.

Likewise, when describing how they manifested this "most important value to guide Christians in their everyday lives," subjects tended to fall into two categories according to their approach to love. Most subjects for whom love for God was of primary importance described the way they showed love as being very personal or internal, involving solitary behaviors such as reading the

Bible and praying, whereas those for whom love for their neighbor was most important described more external ways of showing love which involved other people, such as giving to others, making time for friends/family/strangers, and generally behaving lovingly towards others.

In the case of those who value loving God and consider their faith to be expressed one more personal and individual level, subjects tended to talk about how they feel “closer to God” through behaviors that are very private. Jephthah talked about both “loving God” and “loving your neighbor” but put clear priority on the former talked about acting out this value in a very individualistic context:

Jephthah says that loving God, which is the most important of the two commands, is a whole life thing, that you devote your entire life to Him. You follow the Bible and worship. There are, he says, an infinite numbers of ways to worship; you can sing, pray, read the Bible, live for Him at all times...you don't have to think.

Jephthah put very clear priority on personal behaviors, and was less descriptive about how to “love your neighbor,” saying that it is “just what it sounds like.” On another occasion, though Prisca discussed both loving God and her neighbor, the means used to act this out were to, “‘spend time with God daily’ (through prayer, the Bible, musical worship, praying throughout the day, books speakers, and Bible studies), because ‘you have to make God number one and have nothing above him.’”

Those who primarily believed in showing love for their neighbors spoke to varying degrees of their responsibilities towards other people—sometimes friends, sometimes strangers on the other side of the globe, and sometimes not specified—explicitly stating or implying that this was what God wished of them and/or what Jesus had preached. One subject, Talitha, summed up her approach simply: "What can I do for someone today? How can I show someone my love?" Other subjects described this love in more complex ways. Junia described her philosophy regarding love as coming from Kirkegaard, saying that the love she felt was expected of Christians was a "deep, intentional love for whatever is in front of you...that should resonate in everything we do" [Author's field notes]. For these subjects, the love they believed was necessary of Christians and/or expected by God had no specific

intended recipient. Others, however, cited specific external causes about which they felt passionate, explaining that the obligation they felt to help others had influenced them to consider these causes important. Drusilla said she felt a "calling to work for peace and justice," citing being politically active, devoting her studies to learning how to help others, and working to protect the environment as ways in which she showed her love, and issues such as homosexuality, the death penalty, foreign policy, and social welfare services as things about which her conviction to show love for others has motivated her to be concerned.

Hazael who paraphrased the Biblical passage from Matthew, cited specifically that the "ultimate Christian value" is to "love your neighbor as yourself." His language was very focused on the needs and thoughts of others within the sphere of his close community:

He feels that "a lot of issues in the church come up because people condemn their neighbors and say that they're un-Christian." Hazael says that acting out this Christian value is about "being open, and able to listen, and able to talk." It's important for people to feel they can talk "knowing that I'm not going to come up with why they're wrong," he says. It's about being an open, respectful, honest person" [Author's field notes].

Though not carrying the same tone of social justice or desire to change injustices in the world, the expression of this religious value is entirely communal in nature, as opposed to individual.

In fact, the distinction between love for God and love for one's neighbor, and the different ways in which they are manifested by Christians, was something that was mentioned by Junia, as well as by a member at a Progressive Christian Fellowship meeting. Each of these Christians referred to a particular St. Olaf religion professor who apparently speaks of the "Me and Jesus" mentality versus the "Me, Jesus, and my Neighbor" mentality, and used these terms to describe this distinction. In both cases, it was implied that the "Me and Jesus" mentality was something with which these Christians did not agree, as it was leaving out what they felt was the necessary component of love for one's neighbor. (Additionally, everyone present at the PCF meeting at which this was mentioned seemed to agree with the member who brought it up

that this "Me and Jesus" mentality was misled.) However, the fact that the "Me, Jesus, and my Neighbor" mentality is described as such, as opposed to simply "Me and my Neighbor," implies that Jesus is just as important a component of this mentality as is love for one's neighbor, and this was reflected in several subjects' responses. Chloe described love for God and Jesus as "a given" part of simply being Christian and went on to describe the other ways in which she tries to show love, such as by being a supportive and loving friend and putting others before herself.

A general pattern emerged regarding which understanding of love dominated the discourse of each subject. In interviews with FCA members, conversation tended to be dominated by the language of a "loving God" spirituality, while PCF members talked more about social action or behaviors that would typify a "loving your neighbor" spirituality. All interviews included aspects of both of these, and sometimes they were so intertwined that they weren't distinguishable.

There was a striking contrast between the content and tone of conversation of two groups. The very structure of an FCA meeting lends it to a certain type of conversation. Opening with worship and prayer make God-language a central part of conversation, and the sermon format of the speaker each week encourages the citation of Bible verses or stories and the assertion of beliefs and issues of faith a logical choice for content of these speeches or sermons. The fact that the large group sits and listens for the majority of the meeting, except for perhaps the worship portion and whatever personal conversation they have also affects the tone of the meetings. Issues of belief and faith, including the mention of a member's "two-year Christian birthday party," another person's struggle in coming to terms with "God's plan for her life and her faith in Him," and the importance of appreciating the vast community that makes up the "Body of Christ, up in one meeting [Author's field notes]. So, much of the discourse is reflection upon intellectual or spiritual realization or action, at least equally to physical action, which gives the tone of this group a distinct character.

PCF, on the other hand, was characterized by a noticeable lack of conversation regarding beliefs. Conversation was instead centered around issues in the outside community (from local to international), rarely touching on the theological reasons for why such issues were felt by all group members to be important—it seemed to be a given that the members' Christian beliefs dictated how they approached such issues, and therefore did not need to be reiterated. At one point when beliefs did come up in conversation, one member

stated that he was often reluctant to state that he was a Christian when asked; to him, he said, the term “Christian” implied something in today’s current social context which he does not consider himself to be. Other members nodded appreciatively and added similar thoughts. The general consensus seemed to be that, while these people were passionate about their Christian beliefs, they did not approve of the way Christianity is currently portrayed in society and do not feel that their beliefs are fairly represented by such a portrayal. These beliefs reflect rather closely the frustration one PCF member expressed towards the “Me and Jesus” mentality, as well as the tendency for PCF members to be more focused on social actions and behaviors as opposed to beliefs.

Another definition of the distinctions between the two ways of loving that correlate to the language distinction between love for God and love for neighbor are offered by C.S. Lewis, who gives two names to the way human beings love: Need-love and Gift-love. Gift-love is God, is the ideal. It is selfless and loves without requiring benefits from that love. It is self-satisfying. Need-love is the most common form of human love. It begins in childhood, when we find comfort from our parents and love them because we need them and their protection. Lewis says that “every Christian would agree that a man’s spiritual health is exactly proportional to his love for God, from the very nature of the case, must always be very largely, and must often be entirely, a Need-love” (Lewis, 1960: 13). Many Christians interviewed spoke of love for God in Need-love terminology, having a need for God because it fulfills them. One subject, Vashti, said, “When I get depressed or upset I have hope that it’s going to work out. My relationship with Christ has a huge impact on how I act. I can’t do it on my own, and I realize that, and it doesn’t bother me that I’m weak without Him.” Their language about love for neighbors carried tones of Gift-love and sacrifice, with phrases like “the idea of service has taken over my life” and discussions about career choices being “based on a sense of compassion.”

Another dimension of love and sacrifice emerged regarding subjects’ treatment of themselves; and how they used their time and made choices such to take care of their own bodies, spirits, and minds. A few subjects who placed a large emphasis upon love for one’s neighbor spoke of being unsure of where to draw the line between serving others and serving oneself. "What do I put first?" Chloe asked, saying she felt strongly about living to serve others but sometimes found that in putting others first, she neglected her own emotional needs and became burned out. She mentioned that giving help and support to others was among the things that her spirit needed to be happy, yet she describes having come to the understanding that giving emotional support to

others can't be her sole method of providing emotional support for herself. Luckily, she has found that her friends are aware of her giving nature, and she says that they look out for her to make sure she is not "giving too much." Other subjects echoed many of the same sentiments.

Summary and Conclusions

Even among a body of believers who have the same basic theological background for their beliefs, there is diversity. The Christian community at St. Olaf is comprised of Christians of various denominational backgrounds, but the diversity in beliefs that was demonstrated did not center around the typical issues over which different denominations of Christianity typically disagree, but general issues put forth by the Biblical text, such as the interpretation of certain Biblical passages, the meaning and purpose of sacrifice, and the ways in which one should demonstrate love. The variation in priorities and interpretations of these symbols is evident in the approaches taken by FCA and PCF, and possibly other Christian organizations on campus as well, where subjects' approaches to a given symbol or interpretations of a given Christian teaching determined what campus organizations they would attend regularly, effectively creating a divide within the Christian community.

As would be expected, and as is the case in many areas of life and not just in regard to religion, subjects tended to congregate with those who shared beliefs similar to their own. In general, the students who expressed their beliefs and values as centering more around love for God were much more likely to attend FCA than PCF, whereas those whose expressed beliefs centered around love for neighbors, were more likely to attend PCF (there were, of course, exceptions, and there was one subject who occasionally attended both). This is not surprising, given the degrees of emphasis each organization places upon the two kinds of love. However, it is significant because it demonstrates a divide among a community which is defined by a common purpose of living, acting, and worshiping according to the ideals and teachings of Jesus.

However, we question to what degree this division is a social construction. Each individual subject had his or her own interpretation of the

significance of Christian symbols like the Bible, sacrifice, and love; yet when it came to putting those interpretations to use within the Christian community, the institutional structures available (the Christian organizations on campus) did not represent the full range of beliefs expressed by the subjects. For example, with the recent controversy both in the media and on campus regarding GLBT rights, much of the discussion at PCF meetings centered around this issue and how it relates to Christianity. As noted above, it seemed to be understood that all members of PCF were in favor of GLBT rights, and indeed no attendee expressed otherwise, yet it is probably safe to say that the people present at the meeting would not have agreed about everything related to Christianity and the interpretation of its various symbols. GLBT rights became the issue that defined the organization and spoke for it and its members, thereby defining members as Christians in favor of GLBT rights. This, in turn, would likely cause some people to conclude that members of PCF were “progressive” (as its name would indicate) or “liberal” Christians. Consequently, regardless of whether or not members of PCF would define themselves as “progressive” or “liberal” (which many likely would), or express similar beliefs and interpretations apart from the issue of GLBT rights, they each belong to an organization that assumes such.

Similar topics that were the focus of FCA meetings might have a similar effect for FCA members (though possibly not to the same degree, as FCA is about ten times as large as PCF and it is therefore harder to find a consensus on a single issue), defining their beliefs through the positions of the organization as a collective. It is arguably much like the United States’ two-party system in which there is often no middle ground, and no opportunity to vote on every particular issue because we vote for candidates who represent a variety of view points on various issues, with which we may not always agree.

Cooley’s theory of the “looking glass self” might be applied here to members of the Christian organizations to describe what is going on. The theory states that people portray themselves according to how they perceive others to see them, as opposed to how they actually perceive themselves. This is a complex theory because the way in which one is perceived by others is undoubtedly due to the ways in which that person initially perceives herself and portrays herself to others; here it may be best to consider this a cycle in which one projects an image, pauses to see how that image is being perceived, and modifies that image accordingly.

In the case of subjects who were members of FCA and PCF, the image of the organization to which each subject belonged (if they belonged to either),

both from within and outside of the organization, and the values that this image projected upon the organizations' members, could arguably impact how the subjects perceived themselves as Christians. This could, in turn, cause a subject to modify her Christian behaviors and beliefs—possibly to become better aligned with the “progressive” or “conservative” side of Christianity, as dictated by her respective organizations, if she felt either definition was favorable, or possibly to become less well-aligned with the organization, if she felt that the definition was unfavorable. In this way, the diversity of Christian beliefs and behaviors on campus might move towards two distinct and separate approaches.

However, when such a division is present, symbols common to anyone of the Christian faith, such as the Bible, sacrifice, and love never fully become universal. The problem is not a genuinely different interpretation of the symbols themselves by individual Christians, but the emphasis of different aspects of those symbols within the discourse of the broader groups to which members are looking to for further self-definition. Most interview subjects, for example, talked about love in terms of personal behaviors to express love for God as well as more public or community-oriented behaviors to express love for their neighbors. Their emphasis on one or the other could just as easily have been a reflection of group ideology as personal preference. This manifestation of the looking glass self phenomenon indicates that it is entirely possible that the universal symbols of Christianity are not universally understood in the same terms because of group divisions rather than insurmountable ideological chasms.

Appendix A: Verbal Information Protocol & Interview Script

Thank you for agreeing to take part in my project for a research methods course required for my major in sociology/ anthropology taught by Professor Carolyn Anderson, who is supervising my project. My project is about the social behavior choices and religious values of students at St. Olaf who are members of Christian student organizations. I will be asking you a number of questions, and the interview will take about an hour. I will be writing a paper that will be available on the sociology/ anthropology department web site, and I may present a summary of my findings at a professional sociology or anthropology conference.

I will protect your identity and the confidentiality of the information you give me. This means that I will not disclose your participation in this project to anyone else or include information in any papers, presentations, or discussions about my project that would allow someone else to identify you.

I hope the results of my study will contribute to a campus discussion of how to make the community a more morally conscientious place.

Your participation is completely voluntary. You may decline to respond to specific questions, or you can stop the interview at any point. If you change your mind about allowing me to use your information after the interview, please let me know by April 30, 2004.

Do you have any questions? Thanks again for agreeing to be interviewed. I am anxious to hear your responses to my questions.

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INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

- 1) What is your name and year in college?
- 2) Where are you from?
- 3) Did you grow up going to church?
- 4) If so, what denomination of church did you go to?
- 5) If so, what was your involvement in your church growing up?
- 6) What denomination are you now?
- 7) What Christian-affiliated student organization(s) are you a part of?
- 8) Why do you choose to be a part of this organization?
- 9) Can you describe for me the different “spheres” of life a person has in society? The different roles they have perhaps, or groups they associate with? (i.e. family)
- 9) How do you think Christians should use their faith as a basis for making decisions outside of church?
- 10) How does being a Christian impact how you behave as a member of your community and society?
- 11) What particular behaviors are guided by your religious values?
- 12) How do your beliefs influence your behavior in close, personal relationships?
- 13) Can you give an example of a time when your Christian beliefs affected how you responded to a situation?
- 14) What behaviors do you see among other students that you try to refrain from because of your religious beliefs?
- 15) What do you think is the most important value to guide Christians during their daily life?
- 16) If you do this, how do you do it?

- 17) Can you tell me about a time when you realized or felt that you were doing something that is encouraged by society that is *not* in accordance with your Christian values?
- 18) In what ways do your political beliefs or values relate to your political opinions?
- 19) How do you believe Christians are expected to behave towards those less fortunate than themselves?
- 20) Can you tell me a little bit about your choice of major and intended career?
- 21) How do you plan to incorporate your beliefs into managing your finances?

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