

Exploring Religious Pluralism in Higher Education: Non-Majority Religious Perspectives among Entering First-Year College Students

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Although Christian perspectives persist within the majority mindset in the United States and continue to flourish¹, the presence of countless other faith traditions renders this nation the most religiously diverse in the world². The increasingly pluralistic American landscape is based in large part on non-European immigration patterns in the last half-century³. Williams⁴ points to the influx of Hindus, Sikhs, Jains, Muslims, and Christians from Pakistan and India as a result of changes to immigration laws in 1965. Eck⁵ notes the vast array of places – spanning Asia, Africa, South America, and the Middle East – from which followers of myriad traditions have come. American Judaism, too, has become more internally diverse as a result of immigration from overseas⁶.

While acknowledging the impressive growth of non-Christian religions, Smith⁷ tempers exaggerated portrayals of their size in his assessment that these groups are still relatively small in number (under three percent of the population at large). Followers of Buddhism, Hinduism, and Islam represent half of the adherents of non-Judeo-Christian faiths, whereas the remaining half consists of a wide assortment of religious traditions⁸. Despite their low proportional representation, these groups are multiplying and their imprint on society is unmistakable.

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As pluralism abounds, the United States more than ever before is called to protect the values of religious freedom so intrinsic to the principles upon which the nation was founded⁹. Eck¹⁰ writes,

Today, the United States is in the process of understanding and negotiating the meaning of its pluralism anew....However, in this new struggle to understand who “we” are in the new millennium, it is clearly critical to hear the voices of America’s many religions, new and old, in shaping a distinctively and boldly multireligious society (p. 77).

Although Americans as a whole exhibit increasingly tolerant attitudes toward people of different faiths¹¹, tensions undoubtedly persist and have become visibly pronounced in this post-9/11 era¹². Wuthnow¹³ underscores that “the growing religious diversity of our society poses a *significant cultural challenge*” (p. xv). While it remains a demanding feat to cross ideological boundaries and truly engage the religious “other” in dialogue that develops consciousness and community, the well-being of the nation and its people depends upon learning to live with compassion and kindness as we encounter difference.

As microcosms of American society, colleges and universities in the U.S. must practice these very principles and endeavor to create campus climates that are welcoming to students from all faith traditions. To be sure, institutions are more religiously diverse than they were in the past¹⁴. With this diversity, Cherry et al.¹⁵ observe a continued spiritual vitality on campus that in some ways resonates with previous eras, but that is more voluntary and respectful of difference than it once was.

Because they are not the secular enclaves that once they were assumed to be¹⁶, it is incumbent upon colleges and universities to create formal and informal opportunities for student to not only “understand each other’s differences but also to search together for common ground, for common truths, for shared beliefs and meaning that create the possibility of a new kind of community that embraces diversity” (p. 183)¹⁷. The notion of a “community of communities” articulated by Chickering et al.¹⁸ is exemplified by numerous campuses that have transformed their vision of pluralism into reality, thereby honoring minority and majority perspectives alike¹⁹. Yet, while these admirable efforts are underway, research on students representing non-majority religious perspectives lags far behind. Mayhew²⁰ examines the conceptions that students from various faith traditions (including

Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, and others) have of spirituality, identifying the centrality of meaning-making and connectedness within students' understanding of the construct. Cole and Ahmadi²¹ explore the lived experiences of Muslim women who veil on campus and stress the challenges they face in adhering to this outward expression of faith. Beyond these two qualitative studies, few other empirical investigations that focus specifically on non-majority religious students exist, creating a conspicuous gap between research and practice.

Based upon entering first-year student data derived from the UCLA Higher Education Research Institute's Spirituality in Higher Education Project, the purpose of this article is to enter into the experience of students who are *not* in the religious majority. How do they characterize themselves? What are their attitudes, values, and spiritual beliefs? How do they respond to pluralism in the world around them? What spiritual questions and struggles do they face? Throughout the sections that follow, the terms "non-majority religious student" and "religious minority" are used interchangeably and are intended to include individuals whose perspectives are not situated within the Christian worldview that prevails culturally and religiously in the United States. The scope of this article does not encompass an analysis of the specific doctrinal beliefs and theologies of the religious minority groups represented on campuses today. (For a more explicit synthesis of the ideologies central to various world religions, resources in comparative religion, such as Huston Smith's *The World's Religions*²², are recommended). Rather, students' diverse perspectives on a common set of constructs are the focus of this effort. Moreover, this article seeks to examine religious minority students in their own right, without constant comparisons to majority perspectives (i.e., Christianity). With a few exceptions, non-majority religious groups are compared only to one another so as to capture the wide spectrum of belief evident across their distinct worldviews. In doing so, we come to appreciate the notion that groups typically relegated to "other" in classifications of religious preference are appreciably different from one another.

Background

The Spirituality in Higher Education project, a major multi-year program of research, was initiated in 2003 with funding from the John Templeton Foundation. Based at the Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) at the University of California, Los Angeles and led by co-principle investigators Alexander Astin and Helen Astin and project director Jennifer Lindholm,

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the project seeks to explore the “inner” lives of college students: the values and beliefs that guide them, the meaning they derive from their education and the world around them, and the patterns of spiritual development that characterize their college years. In conjunction with the goal to understand these complex spiritual realities of students’ experience, the project raises the equally critical question of the extent to which colleges and universities are equipped to support and facilitate students’ quest for meaning and spiritual growth. Foremost among the concerns the project aims to address is the notion that institutions of higher education have come to emphasize the “exterior” facets of the college student experience (e.g., grades, test scores, degree attainment) at the expense of the “interior” dimensions of meaning, values, faith, and purpose that express who students are at their core. The findings and lessons learned from this major research effort are intended to help rectify the current imbalance between the interior and exterior aspects of students’ lives by bringing to light that which primarily exists beneath the surface for many undergraduates.

Formally known as *Spirituality in Higher Education: A National Study of College Students’ Search for Meaning and Purpose*, the project is managed by HERI’s research team and guided by a Technical Advisory Panel and a National Advisory Board. The project’s central questions include:

- How many students are actively searching and curious about spiritual issues and questions?
- How do students view themselves in terms of spirituality and related qualities?
- What spiritual/religious practices are students most/least attracted to?
- How do spiritual/religious practices affect students’ academic and personal development?
- What is the connection between traditional religious practices and spiritual development?
- What in the undergraduate experience facilitates or hinders students’ spiritual/religious quest?

To address these questions, the research team in conjunction with the Panel and the Board developed the four-page College Students' Beliefs and Values (CSBV) pilot questionnaire and surveyed 3,680 college juniors in Spring 2003 as part of an initial pilot administration of the instrument. The full-scale administration of the CSBV took place in Fall 2004 when 112,232 entering first-year students representing 236 colleges and universities from across the nation responded to a six-page questionnaire that included a wide range of questions pertaining to their backgrounds, educational experiences prior to college, aspirations, and spiritual values and beliefs. The first four pages of the questionnaire were devoted to HERI's annual Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP) freshman survey, while the last two pages contained the CSBV items of interest to the project.

The sheer size of the full-scale CSBV sample provides a rare opportunity to examine the characteristics of students whose religious traditions are the minority voice in a nation that primarily operates, however loosely, from a Christian perspective. Indeed, the Christian worldview holds significant implications for life in our culture, from the holidays we celebrate, to the content of our political debates and divides, to our understanding of God and morality. Likewise, in our colleges and universities, the Christian standpoint is often readily identified, while other perspectives are more difficult to locate and study. Although they comprise a relatively small proportion of the CSBV sample, students affiliating with minority religious traditions are numerous enough to examine each of their traditions separately, without resorting to compiling a muddled and incomprehensible "other religion" group.

In an effort to illuminate the defining qualities of students' diverse religious traditions, the research team initially identified two distinct clusters of religious preference²³. The first, a markedly Christian-based cluster, including Mormons, 7th Day Adventists, Baptists, and "other" Christians, is defined by high levels of spirituality, religious commitment and engagement, and religious/social conservatism. The second cluster, including Unitarians, Buddhists, Hindus, Episcopalians, Jewish students, and members of the Eastern Orthodox Church, most of whom qualify as "religious minorities," is relatively less religious and more skeptical than the first cluster. Moreover, the second cluster exhibits greater pluralistic openness and stronger commitment to an ethic of caring and charitable involvement. These generalizations provide a coherent synthesis of the broad diversity among our students, but this article takes these initial efforts to the next level by examining the finer details of religious minority students' lives and faith. Although the earlier analysis conducted by the research team included Episcopalians and Eastern Orthodox students in the second cluster, this study concentrates on individuals in non-Christian traditions and thus leaves further ex-

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amination of these two groups for a later study. Six different worldviews were the focus of this endeavor²⁴: Buddhism ($N=907$), Hinduism ($N=661$), Islam ($N=826$), Judaism ($N=2,102$), Unitarian Universalism ($N=428$), and non-religious ($N=15,598$). While the latter identification (“no religious preference”) is proportionally well represented in the CSBV sample (17 percent), it is a student group that is rarely the focus of research, particularly in a national context in which religious perspectives overshadow those that are non-religious. For each of the six groups, the following questions were addressed:

- What are the demographic and personal attributes of religious minority students? How closely do their religious preferences associate with those of their parents’?
- What are the prevailing religious and spiritual practices of religious minority students?
- How do religious minority students align on political and social issues?
- What characterizes the spiritual beliefs and perspectives of religious minority groups in terms of their understanding of existence, God, the validity of other faith traditions, the relationship between science and religion, and their own spiritual identity and development?
- To what extent do religious minority students struggle with difficult spiritual questions and existential dilemmas? What do they perceive as the implications of suffering for their spiritual development?

The analytical approach involved a series of crosstabulations to explore student responses to a plethora of spiritual and religious items on the 2004 CIRP/CSBV questionnaire by religious preference. Themes derived from this item-by-item analysis are displayed in the following tables to illustrate the defining qualities of each of the six unique worldviews. For the sake of parsimony and clarity, statistically significant differences between groups are not shown in the tables. However, the reader can assume that differences of 10 percentage points or more are statistically significant at $p < .05$. This is a conservative estimate of significance based on the two groups with the lowest N s: Unitarian Universalists ($N=428$) and Hindus ($N=661$).

Results

The findings are summarized in four major sections that detail the demographic characteristics and self-perceptions of non-majority religious students, forms of religious practice, attitudes and values, and spiritual beliefs and perspectives. The latter section further delineates students' general beliefs, spiritual goals, spiritual questing, views on spiritual development, attitudes toward pluralism and scientific epistemologies, and experiences with spiritual struggles.

Demographic Characteristics and Self-Perceptions

As shown in Table 1, women constitute just over half of the Buddhist, Hindu, Muslim, and Unitarian Universalist groups, and slightly less than one-half of the non-religious and Jewish groups. The racial/ethnic identities of students vary considerably with religious tradition. Whereas White students are the clear majority among the non-religious (77 percent), Unitarian Universalist (87 percent), and Jewish (93 percent) groups, the majority of Buddhist and Hindu students are Asian American (65 percent and 84 percent, respectively), and Muslim students tend to identify as Asian American (39 percent), White (24 percent), or "other" (29 percent).

One of the questions posed by this study is the degree to which religious minority students affiliate with their parents' religious traditions. Hindu and Muslim students exhibit the closest ties to their mothers' and fathers' faith with over 95 percent of both groups reporting the same preference as their parents. Considerable overlap between parents and students also exists within the Jewish tradition (over 80 percent of students share their parents' religion). Students with no religious preference, Buddhists, and Unitarian Universalists demonstrate lower rates of commonality with parental religious affiliations, suggesting that these students opt to define their worldviews independently of their parents' beliefs.

Another angle from which to evaluate student characteristics is in how they perceive themselves. More than 60 percent of religious minority students identify themselves as "above average" or in the "highest 10%" relative to peers with respect to the trait of compassion (Unitarian Universalists and Jewish students consider themselves the most compassionate at a rate of nearly 75 percent). Forgiveness is another quality that the majority of these students – except the non-religious – feel they exemplify. Moreover, although 50 percent of Muslim students and 35 percent Hindu students suggest that they exhibit above average levels of religiousness, Jewish students (19 percent), Buddhists (16 percent), Unitarian Universalists (15 per-

Table 1.
Demographic Characteristics and Self-perceptions

	Religious preference					
	No religious preference	Buddhist	Hindu	Muslim	Jewish	Unitarian Universalist
Percent of the national sample ¹	17.2	0.9	0.7	1.0	2.0	0.4
Female	48.2	53.5	52.4	50.3	47.9	55.8
Race/ethnicity						
African American	3.7	0.9	0.1	5.9	0.3	2.1
Asian American	10.9	65.3	83.5	39.0	1.0	3.1
Latino/a	4.8	3.0	0.7	0.9	2.8	3.7
Native American	2.0	1.1	0.1	0.5	0.2	1.5
Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander	0.6	1.2	1.0	0.7	0.2	1.4
White	76.6	27.5	3.5	24.4	92.9	86.8
Other	1.4	1.0	11.1	28.8	2.5	1.3
Share father's religious preference	52.1	60.8	95.9	97.4	84.0	41.0
Share mother's religious preference	44.9	66.3	96.3	95.0	89.2	62.2
"Above average" or "highest 10%" relative to peers:						
Self-rated compassion	60.6	66.6	69.6	65.4	73.7	74.5
Self-rated forgiveness	47.5	58.4	67.1	65.0	57.9	56.0
Self-rated religiousness	2.4	15.8	34.7	50.1	19.3	15.0
Self-rated spirituality	14.0	32.7	39.7	50.6	25.5	38.4

¹Percentages are based on weighted counts.

SOURCE: Higher Education Research Institute, College Students' Beliefs and Values Survey, 2004

cent), and especially students with no religious preference (2 percent) are much less inclined to identify as religious. A similar pattern is observed for self-rated spirituality, although Jewish students, Buddhists, Unitarian Universalists, and even students with no religious preference appear more comfortable defining themselves as “spiritual” than as “religious.”

Religious Engagement and Spiritual Practice

As depicted in Table 2, students report attending religious services “frequently” to varying degrees depending on their religious affiliation. Muslim students are the most avid religious service attendees (31 percent), followed by Unitarian Universalists (24 percent) and Hindu students (22 percent). Analogous to levels of religious service attendance, Muslims and Unitarian Universalists are more prone than other groups to “frequently” spend time with people who share their religious views (40 percent and 37 percent, respectively). With regard to prayer, while less than half of Jewish (45 percent), Buddhist (38 percent), Unitarian Universalist (35 percent), and non-religious (16 percent) students report praying, the vast majority of Hindu (79 percent) and Muslim (85 percent) students pray. Specifically, one-third of Hindu students pray “daily” relative to well over half of Muslim students (57 percent) who do the same.

The extent to which students engage in conversations about religion and spirituality depends on contextual influences. With the exception of non-religious and Buddhist students whose opportunities for frequent in-class religious/spiritual discussion are in the range of 14 to 17 percent, approximately one student in five “frequently” has such discussions in class. Religious or spiritual dialogue with friends is most prevalent among Unitarian Universalists (43 percent “frequently” discuss these issues with friends). By contrast, Muslim students report the highest levels of engagement in family discussions of religious and spiritual matters. In fact, 47 percent do so “frequently,” a full 12 percentage points more than Hindu students who demonstrate the second-highest level of engagement in spiritual family discussions. Interestingly, Muslim students, followed closely by Hindu students, also indicate the most unease with discussing religious matters: 40 percent agree “strongly” or “somewhat” that these topics make them uncomfortable. This finding is perhaps tied to the failure of American culture to recognize and affirm non-majority religious perspectives, to the climate of intolerance and mistrust in our post-9/11 reality, and to students’ reservations about discussing religion beyond the safety of close family networks for fear of being misunderstood or even persecuted²⁵.

Table 2.
Religious Engagement and Spiritual Practice

Practices	Religious preference					
	No religious preference	Buddhist	Hindu	Muslim	Jewish	Unitarian Universalist
“Frequently” attended religious services	4.3	10.1	22.0	30.8	14.3	23.6
“Frequently” spent time with people who share your religious views	23.1	15.9	28.3	39.7	29.1	37.2
Do you pray?	15.8	37.9	78.6	85.2	45.4	34.7
Pray daily	3.4	6.1	33.3	57.4	7.9	4.9
“Frequently” discussed religion and spirituality:						
In class	13.8	16.8	20.5	23.1	19.1	22.9
With friends	20.5	22.5	31.6	33.4	28.4	42.8
With family	11.4	18.5	35.1	46.7	25.7	28.5
Agree “strongly” or “somewhat” that I am uncomfortable discussing religious matters	32.3	32.9	37.0	40.0	30.2	23.8
Agree “strongly” or “somewhat” that I know someone I can turn to for spiritual guidance	38.8	53.8	71.0	76.2	60.5	59.0

SOURCE: Higher Education Research Institute, College Students’ Beliefs and Values Survey, 2004

The distinctions between Unitarian Universalist and Muslim students in terms of the context for spiritual dialogue – with friends or with family – illustrate the reality that close to 100 percent of Muslim students share a common faith with their parents, while the same is true for roughly half of Unitarian Universalists. Paralleling this is a discrepancy between Muslims and Unitarian Universalists in knowing “someone I can turn to for spiritual guidance.” Fifty-nine percent of Unitarian Universalists compared to 76 percent of Muslims agree that this statement adequately reflects their experience. Similar to Muslims, the pattern of high levels of affiliating with parents’ religion and readily available spiritual guidance exists among Hindu students, while the opposite pattern (low levels of affiliation with parents and less available spiritual guidance) is apparent not only for Unitarian Universalists, but for Buddhist and non-religious students as well. Jewish students are unique in that they exhibit strong affiliation with their parents religiously (similar to Muslims and Hindus), but, like Unitarian Universalists, are less inclined than Muslims and Hindus to agree that they have access to spiritual guidance.

Attitudes and Values

When it comes to political identification, relatively low proportions of students across all six groups identify with a “conservative or far right” orientation (see Table 3). Muslim students most often define their political leanings as “middle-of-the-road,” whereas Hindu, Buddhist, and non-religious students are fairly evenly split between “middle-of-the-road” and “liberal or far left.” Over half of Jewish and Unitarian Universalist students identify as “liberal or far left.” Nearly three-quarters of Unitarian Universalists, in fact, are politically “liberal or far left.”

Specific political and social attitudes differentiate religious groups in myriad ways. A distinct pattern emerges with respect to issues of sexual behavior, abortion, and sexual orientation: When compared to one another, Unitarian Universalists, Jewish students, and non-religious students hold the most liberal attitudes (permissive of casual sex and supportive of abortion rights and same-sex marriage), while Buddhist, Hindu, and especially Muslim students are less liberal by varying degrees. Contrasting the ends of the spectrum, 67 percent of Unitarian Universalists agree “strongly” that “abortion should be legal” relative to 17 percent of Muslims. Also striking, 75 percent of Unitarian Universalists “strongly” agree that “same sex couples should have the right to legal marital status,” but just 18 percent of Muslims feel similarly.

Table 3.
Attitudes and Values

Attitudes/Values	Religious preference					
	No religious preference	Buddhist	Hindu	Muslim	Jewish	Unitarian Universalist
Political identification						
Conservative or far right	11.1	9.5	11.6	12.0	13.2	5.2
Middle-of-the-road	41.4	44.1	45.9	53.4	32.1	21.2
Liberal or far left	47.6	46.4	42.6	34.7	54.7	73.6
Agree “strongly”:						
If two people really like each other, it’s all right for them to have sex even if they’ve known each other for only a very short time	25.2	14.9	10.1	10.4	22.2	21.0
Abortion should be legal	49.8	34.1	27.9	17.4	60.5	67.2
Same-sex couples should have the right to legal marital status	55.7	49.5	43.0	18.1	60.0	75.0
The death penalty should be abolished	15.1	12.7	14.6	15.6	15.6	37.2
Wealthy people should pay a larger share of taxes than they do now	24.8	24.3	21.8	19.9	22.5	38.5
Federal military spending should be increased	5.6	2.3	4.2	2.5	5.7	4.4

SOURCE: Higher Education Research Institute, College Students’ Beliefs and Values Survey, 2004

Questions pertaining to whether the “death penalty should be abolished” or whether “wealthy people should pay a larger share of taxes than they do now” do not distinguish student religious groups with one notable exception. On the issue of the death penalty, strong agreement with its abolishment ranges from 13 to 16 percent for most students, but Unitarian Universalists endorse abolishment at a rate of 37 percent. Likewise, approximately 20 to 25 percent of each religious group agrees “strongly” that the wealthy should pay more taxes; however, a full 39 percent of Unitarian Universalists are fervent proponents of taxing the wealthy. All religious groups are unanimous in their *lack* of support for increasing federal military spending: Just 2 to 6 percent of each group agrees “strongly” with raising spending.

Spiritual Beliefs and Perspectives

General spiritual/religious beliefs. Students’ theological convictions represent a wide spectrum of belief, as illustrated in Table 4. Close to 60 percent of Muslim students “believe in life after death” to “a great extent.” By contrast, this belief is firmly endorsed by a minority of students in the other five groups. Just under 40 percent of Unitarian Universalists and Muslims identify with “believing in the sacredness of life” to “a great extent.” Not only does their shared awareness of life’s sacredness set them apart from other groups, it also represents a point of commonality between two groups that are vastly different in many other aspects of religious practice, attitudes, and values. Belief in God is strongest among Muslims (99 percent) and Hindu students (81 percent). While both groups use names other than “God” in reference to the transcendent, the concept of “God” is perhaps a general enough construct in American culture such that a wide range of faiths are able to interpret its meaning and connect to it if they do indeed hold to the existence of a higher power. Approximately six in ten Jewish students believe in God compared to 37 percent of Unitarian Universalists and 32 percent of Buddhist students. Although the non-religious students are the least likely to believe in God, it’s noteworthy that over a quarter, in fact, do believe, illustrating the reality that identifying as non-religious is *not* synonymous with atheism. Even so, Muslims are the most inclined to “feel a connection with God that transcends my personal self” to “a great extent” (44 percent). Other groups are much less likely to adopt this self-description.

Signifying the centrality of faith in their life, Muslim students acknowledge more so than any other religious minority group that their spiritual/religious beliefs “have helped me develop my identity” (44 percent) and “lie

Table 4.
Spiritual Beliefs and Perspectives: General

Beliefs	Religious preference					
	No religious preference	Buddhist	Hindu	Muslim	Jewish	Unitarian Universalist
Describes you to a "great extent":						
Believing in life after death	17.0	31.7	36.9	59.1	19.1	23.7
Believing in the sacredness of life	16.9	27.8	27.4	39.2	26.5	37.5
Feeling a sense of connection with God/Higher Power that transcends my personal self	5.2	9.4	20.1	44.2	13.6	13.3
Believe in God	26.4	31.8	81.0	98.5	61.1	36.9
Agree "strongly" that my spiritual/religious beliefs:						
Have helped me develop my identity	9.2	20.2	23.4	44.4	17.8	28.0
Lie behind my whole approach to life	5.0	12.6	20.3	32.8	7.7	15.8
Have been formed through much personal reflection and searching	11.7	23.5	21.3	27.5	12.2	33.3
Agree "strongly":						
I do not expect my religious convictions to change in the next few years	39.2	28.9	36.0	54.8	36.2	32.0
"Very important" or "essential" to:						
Develop a meaningful philosophy of life	44.3	48.1	42.8	47.6	49.8	63.7
Integrate spirituality into my life	12.8	33.3	36.1	44.9	25.2	36.3
Find answers to the mysteries of life	45.2	56.2	56.8	53.5	48.8	47.7

SOURCE: Higher Education Research Institute, College Students' Beliefs and Values Survey, 2004

behind my whole approach to life” (33 percent). In describing their spiritual/religious beliefs, one-third of Unitarian Universalists indicate that their beliefs have “been formed through much personal reflection and searching.” With the exception of Muslims, who are a close second (28 percent), this represents the largest proportion of any group agreeing “strongly” with this statement. Regardless of whether they have formed their beliefs through reflection and searching, many students are fairly confident (i.e., they agree “strongly”) that they will *not* be changing their convictions over the next several years. Over half of Muslim students (55 percent) suggest as much, followed by non-religious students (39 percent), Jewish students (36 percent), Hindu students (36 percent), Unitarian Universalists (32 percent), and Buddhists (29 percent).

Spiritual goals. Turning to the importance of various spiritual objectives in students’ lives (see Table 4), slightly less than half of most groups report that “developing a meaningful philosophy of life” is “very important” or “essential.” Yet, a higher percentage – 64 percent – of the Unitarian Universalist group stresses the value of cultivating a meaningful life philosophy. “Integrating spirituality into my life” is of greatest value to Muslims (45 percent responded “very important” or “essential”), while approximately one-third of Unitarian Universalists, Hindus, and Buddhists feel similarly. Jewish students (25 percent) and non-religious students (13 percent) are less likely to ascribe importance to integrating spirituality into their lives. Students are more unified and the spectrum of group difference is narrower, however, in the value placed upon “finding answers to the mysteries of life.” Roughly half of each group confirms that this is a “very important” or “essential” objective in life.

Spiritual quest. As shown in Table 5, when asked to identify the “ultimate spiritual quest” for their lives, non-religious and Jewish students are most prone to respond, “I do not consider myself to be on a spiritual quest” (47 percent and 31 percent, respectively). Unitarian Universalists and Buddhists perceive the purpose of their quest to be “discovering who I really am” (32 percent and 28 percent, respectively). Hindu students are unique in defining their quest as the means to “becoming a better person” (29 percent), and Muslim students seek most often to “follow God’s plan for me” (29 percent).

Views about spiritual/religious matters. Corresponding to assurances that their religious convictions will not change significantly during college, religious minority students’ most common responses to a question about the status of their current spiritual/religious views reveal a similar theme (see Table 6). Students in four of the six groups indicate feeling “secure” in their

Table 5.
Ultimate Spiritual Quest

Religious preference	Most often cited “ultimate spiritual quest”:
No religious preference	I do not consider myself to be on a spiritual quest (46.9%)
Buddhist	To discover who I really am (28.3%)
Hindu	To become a better person (29.4%)
Muslim	To follow God’s plan for me (28.8%)
Jewish	I do not consider myself to be on a spiritual quest (30.8%)
Unitarian Universalist	To discover who I really am (31.6%)

SOURCE: Higher Education Research Institute, College Students’ Beliefs and Values Survey, 2004

Table 6.
Current Views about Spiritual/Religious Matters

Religious preference	Most often cited description of spiritual/religious views ¹ :
No religious preference	Not interested (46.2%)
Buddhist	Secure (28.1%); Seeking (26.2%)
Hindu	Secure (42.6%)
Muslim	Secure (58.4%)
Jewish	Secure (32.4%)
Unitarian Universalist	Seeking (37.3%)

¹Students were asked to “mark all that apply.” Other options not shown include “Conflicted” and “Doubting.”

SOURCE: Higher Education Research Institute, College Students’ Beliefs and Values Survey, 2004

views, as follows: Muslims (58 percent), Hindus (43 percent), Jewish students (32 percent), and Buddhist students (28 percent; 26 percent also describe themselves as “seeking”). The most common descriptor of spiritual/religious views among Unitarian Universalists is “seeking,” whereas non-religious students report most often that they are “not interested.”

Openness to pluralism. Several items on the 2004 CSBV survey, represented in Table 7, explore the degree to which students demonstrate openness to worldviews that differ from their own. Unitarian Universalist students exhibit the highest levels of comfort with pluralism: A full 40 percent report “having an interest in different religious traditions” to “a great extent.” Likewise, 55 percent agree “strongly” that “most people can grow spiritually without being religious” and upwards of 87 percent hold “strongly” to the notion that “non-religious people can lead lives that are just as moral as those of religious believers.” Among other groups, interest in different religious traditions ranges from 16 percent for non-religious students to 29 percent for Buddhists; the remaining groups fall somewhere in between. Acknowledgement of the spiritual and moral capacities of non-religious individuals is also quite variable, but belief in the ability of non-religious people to lead moral lives is “strongly” endorsed by well over half of each group, with the exception of Muslims (31 percent “strongly” agree with this proposition). Muslim students are also the most inclined to feel committed to introducing people to their faith – over one-quarter indicate that such commitments describe them to “a great extent.”

Scientific skepticism. Most students, regardless of their religious worldview, are reluctant to suggest with certainty that “the universe arose by chance” or that “in the future science will be able to explain everything” (see Table 7). “Strong” agreement with the former ranges from three percent for Muslims to 14 percent for non-religious students and Unitarian Universalists. Strong assertion of the explanatory power of science is, again, lowest among Muslim students (7 percent) and highest among non-religious and Hindu students (15 percent for both).

In completing the CSBV survey, students were given the opportunity to classify the relationship between religion and science as one of conflict (and side with religion), conflict (and side with science), independence, or collaboration. Non-religious students tend most often to report that the relationship is conflictual and side with science. Buddhists, Hindus, Jewish students, and Unitarian Universalists are prone to perceive science and religion as independent from one another (or, secondarily, as collaborative). Muslim students most often observe collaboration between religion and science, but are also much more likely than other groups to perceive conflict and side with religion (23 percent compared to four percent or less of other groups).

Table 7.
Spiritual Beliefs and Perspectives: Pluralistic Emphasis and Scientific Skepticism

Beliefs	Religious preference					
	No religious preference	Buddhist	Hindu	Muslim	Jewish	Unitarian Universalist
Describes you to a "great extent":						
Having an interest in different religious traditions	16.1	29.1	24.1	18.5	18.9	40.2
Being committed to introducing people to my faith	2.2	5.8	12.1	28.2	6.3	10.6
Agree "strongly":						
Most people can grow spiritually without being religious	39.7	34.6	25.3	14.0	29.6	55.0
Non-religious people can lead lives that are just as moral as those of religious believers	76.0	61.9	57.7	31.3	69.6	86.6
The universe arose by chance	14.0	8.6	10.8	3.2	10.6	14.2
In the future, science will be able to explain everything	14.8	10.9	15.3	6.5	8.6	9.6
Relationship between science and religion						
Conflict (on the side of religion)	1.5	2.2	4.2	23.3	2.3	0.2
Conflict (on the side of science)	42.1	20.6	11.3	4.0	22.4	29.2
Independence	35.9	41.2	45.6	27.3	41.7	38.1
Collaboration	20.5	35.9	38.9	45.4	33.6	32.4

SOURCE: Higher Education Research Institute, College Students' Beliefs and Values Survey, 2004

Spiritual struggles. Overcoming spiritual struggles is paramount for college students, as the task of developing a spiritual or religious identity may involve varying degrees of challenge and uncertainty along the way. Existential dilemmas lie in resolving the problem of evil, seeking to know and understand the nature of God and the universe, and establishing an identity that is chosen and distinctive from one's parents. As Table 8 illustrates, the problems of evil and suffering in the world do not persist unnoticed, and in fact close to half of Unitarian Universalists (47 percent), Buddhists (47 percent), non-religious students (45 percent), Jewish students (44 percent), and Hindu students (42 percent) agree that "it is difficult to reconcile the existence of a loving God with all the pain and suffering in the world." Along with their acknowledgement of this difficult paradox, 15 to 21 percent of students with these religious preferences "frequently" "struggle to understand evil, suffering, and death." Muslims stand apart from the other groups in that just 31 percent agree with the proposition that reconciling suffering with the notion of a loving God is a perplexing conundrum. Likewise, just 11 percent of Muslims "frequently" struggle to make meaning of evil, suffering, and death – approximately half the proportion of Jewish and Unitarian Universalists who struggle with these issues.

As they struggle to varying degrees, more than half of each group recognizes that "pain and suffering are essential to becoming a better person." Over two-thirds of Buddhist, Hindu, and Muslim students agree that experiencing pain is necessary for furthering personal development, whereas non-religious students (60 percent), Unitarian Universalists (53 percent), and Jewish students (51 percent) agree at lower rates. The possibility that difficult life events may actually strengthen religious/spiritual beliefs is apparent particularly for Muslim students. In fact, notable percentages of these students report that their beliefs were strengthened by natural disasters (28 percent), the war in Iraq (35 percent), the events of September 11, 2001 (38 percent), and the death of a close friend or family member (39 percent). Non-religious students are least likely overall to perceive these events as "strengthening" their beliefs, perhaps because religious and spiritual frameworks are not central to their experience.

In the end, despite their awareness of painful realities, only a minority of students within each group feels particularly "unsettled about spiritual and religious matters" (ranging from 11 percent of Hindus to 20 percent of Unitarian Universalists) or disillusioned with their religious upbringing (ranging from 6 percent of Hindu students to 13 percent of Unitarian Universalists). Related to this, most non-majority religious students report low levels of perceived obligation to follow their parents' religious practices. Muslim stu-

Table 8.
Experiencing Spiritual Struggles

	Religious preference					
	No religious preference	Buddhist	Hindu	Muslim	Jewish	Unitarian Universalist
Agree “strongly” or “somewhat”: It is difficult to reconcile the existence of a loving God with all the pain and suffering in the world	44.9	46.8	41.6	30.7	43.6	47.0
Pain and suffering are essential to becoming a better person	59.8	69.2	66.7	66.6	50.8	53.1
“Frequently”: Struggled to understand evil, suffering, and death	16.9	15.0	16.4	10.9	20.0	21.2
Difficult events that “strengthen” religious/spiritual beliefs:						
Death of a close friend or family member	11.9	23.1	25.3	39.1	22.7	20.1
The events of September 11, 2001	9.8	17.7	24.9	37.8	20.8	17.6
Natural disaster	4.7	10.3	17.3	27.5	8.6	4.4
The war in Iraq	6.6	15.5	16.7	35.2	10.3	11.6
Describes you “to a great extent”:						
Feeling unsettled about spiritual and religious matters	15.2	15.0	10.8	14.0	13.0	19.9
Feeling disillusioned with my religious upbringing	11.1	9.4	6.3	9.8	7.2	13.4
Feeling obligated to follow my parents’ religious practices	2.1	7.4	19.0	31.4	11.2	1.1

SOURCE: Higher Education Research Institute, College Students’ Beliefs and Values Survey, 2004

dents are again the exception, with 31 percent indicating a sense of obligation “to a great extent.” (The remaining proportions per group range from 1 percent of Unitarian Universalists feeling compelled to adhere to parental traditions to 19 percent of Hindu students.) Importantly, the sense of obligation expressed by Muslim students is not matched by high levels of disillusionment with their religious upbringing.

Discussion and Conclusion

The characteristics, practices, attitudes, and beliefs of religious minority students reflect a diverse set of worldviews and distinctive approaches to life. Without question, members of non-majority religions contribute not merely one “other” voice to the religious discourse in the U.S., but a *collection* of voices, each expressing its own unique perspectives, principles, and foundational ideologies and values. Based on this analysis of entering first-year students, several patterns are clear.

First, the degree to which students identify with and act upon religious and spiritual convictions varies substantially across groups. Muslim students are the most religiously devout in both belief and behavior compared to other religious minority groups. This trend is apparent in how they perceive themselves religiously and spiritually relative to peers, their fervent belief in God, their commitment to prayer and religious service attendance, and the evident link between faith and the central aspects of their identity and life purpose. Coinciding with their high levels of religiousness, Muslim students’ faith is rooted in strong familial bonds. Nearly all Muslim students share the same religious preference as their parents and are more inclined than other groups to “frequently” discuss religion and spirituality in the context family conversations. Although many do not feel disillusioned with their religious upbringing, close to one-third feel obligated “to a great extent” to follow their parents’ religion. With some exceptions, and to a somewhat lesser degree, Hindu students parallel Muslim students in their religious commitment and ties to family religious practice. Confirming these observations more broadly, the role of family bonds in transmitting religious values and beliefs among Muslim and Hindu adherents has been noted by Williams and later by Mayhew²⁶.

Political differences are also worthy of note. In particular, religious minorities as a whole are less inclined to adhere to conservative orientations prevalent within the evangelical Christian tradition. Even Muslim students, who are arguably the most conservative of the six groups included in the analysis, lean more toward a moderate or middle-of-the-road orientation,

whereas evangelical Christians are more heavily concentrated on the right. All the same, issues surrounding sexual behavior, abortion, and same-sex marriage clearly distinguish Muslim students and Unitarian Universalists, who lie at the conservative and liberal poles, respectively, of a wide spectrum of opinions. Unitarian Universalists also stand out from the rest in their strong support for abolishing the death penalty and taxing the wealthy.

In identifying students' perspectives on the "ultimate spiritual quest," group differences in the most commonly cited forms of questing are quite telling. Buddhists and Unitarian Universalists quest most often for the purpose of self-discovery, whereas Hindu students desire self-improvement. In both emphases, attention is focused internally on shaping and coming to understand the self. Muslim students identify most with the quest to discover God's plan for their life, and as such direct their energy externally toward the transcendent. The commonalities between Jewish and non-religious students are evident in their tendencies to report that they do not consider themselves to be on a spiritual quest. Although Jewish students are more likely than non-religious students to believe in God and to pray, both groups tend to be the least inclined of the six worldviews to believe in life after death, to describe themselves as spiritual, to consider spiritual/religious beliefs to be central to their identity and approach to life, and to strive to integrate spirituality into their lives. In other words, spirituality seems less relevant to these students' experience when compared to other religious minorities. Yet, it's also possible that non-religious and Jewish students are simply averse to the term "spirituality."²⁷ When spiritual concepts (e.g., meaning-making, purpose, compassion) are introduced without mention of the word itself, Jewish and non-religious students do not differ substantially from students following other faith traditions. They are clearly committed to developing a meaningful philosophy of life, finding answers to life's mysteries, and treating others with dignity and compassion.

Students' views on pluralism and science reveal how they contend with different interpretations of reality than their own traditions provide. Unitarian Universalists exhibit the greatest openness toward other faiths and are most inclined to agree that non-religious individuals can grow spiritually and live morally. This trait of Unitarian Universalists is rooted in the ecumenical values that define their particular tradition. On the issue of science, religious minority students are reluctant to concur absolutely with naturalistic explanations for the universe, and four of the six groups (Buddhists, Hindus, Jewish students, and Unitarian Universalists) are prone to perceive science and religion as largely independent from one another. Indicative of their greater skepticism of religious frameworks, non-religious students observe

conflict between the two entities and prefer to side with science. Muslim students, conversely, with their greater religious propensities, argue that science and religion are collaborative, but also are the most likely group to conclude that they conflict and side with religion.

On a final note, a continuous theme throughout the analysis was the confidence first-year religious minorities place in the stability of their respective beliefs. All groups, with the exception of Unitarian Universalists (who describe themselves as “seeking”) and non-religious students (who describe themselves as “not interested” in spirituality and religion), most often report feeling “secure” in their spiritual views and unlikely to change them in the future. They also tend not to struggle appreciably with religious or spiritual matters, nor are they particularly disillusioned with the religious ideologies with which they were raised. They are, however, apt to acknowledge the *potential* for struggle in their recognition of the difficulty inherent in reconciling the existence of God with suffering and the necessity of pain in producing personal growth. Buddhists, in fact, are the most likely to concede both points, demonstrating their cognizance of trial and hardship in the world around them. Nonetheless, the assuredness and conviction these students bring to campus is found among students within majority religions as well²⁸. In short, first-year students as a whole feel fairly established with respect to the worldviews that define their experience, yet perhaps are on the verge of discovering the challenge and disequilibrium that come when multiple faith traditions collide on campus.

This study marks one of the first quantitative efforts to examine non-majority religious traditions within the context of higher education. Rarely have ample data been available to consider the spiritual practices and beliefs of individual groups that are invariably small in size. Nevertheless, this analysis is by no means exhaustive and much work remains to add depth and further definition to the findings presented here. The results of this study pertain to entering first-year students. What are the experiences of religious minorities *during* college? How do their ideological identities shape their academic, social, and spiritual development over time? Does college have differential implications for students with different religious preferences? In what ways do encounters with majority religious traditions affect non-majority students? These questions require longitudinal follow-ups of students as they near the end of college that are linked to their initial responses at college entry. To complement these quantitatively-oriented assessments, interviews or focus groups with religious minority students would also be beneficial to elaborate qualitatively the finer details and complexity of their experiences and development.

Above all, the findings of this study highlight the need to attend to the dimension of ideological and religious diversity in the student body. Students matriculate with a host of characteristics that ultimately shape their experiences in college. Although we often think of diversity in terms of race, gender, class, sexual orientation, and so forth, religious and spiritual traits have received less consideration, particularly in the empirical literature, despite their evident importance in students' lives. The worldviews that students bring with them to college serve as the lenses they use to make sense of their encounters within the classroom and beyond it. Understanding students' perspectives enables us as educators to consider how the services and teaching we provide might be interpreted depending on the individual's ideological frame of reference. Students' receptivity to the campus at large, to the lessons we profess, to the people they meet, and to the developmental tasks set before them, is undoubtedly influenced by their personal beliefs and values and the degree to which they feel accepted within the campus community. An enhanced consciousness, then, of the religious and ideological diversity in our midst marks the first step toward creating communities that are welcoming, engaging, and enlightening for students from multiple spiritual traditions.

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