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Samantha Phelan
samanthaphelan141@gmail.com

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“You believe your thing, I’ll believe my thing”:

How Christian college students communicate with peers about religion

Samantha Phelan

University of San Francisco

Introduction

Growing up, disclosing my religion to friends was something I rarely thought much about. I felt no need to inform others of my Catholic identity, because everyone already knew. Most of my childhood friends, whom I had known since elementary school, were Christian like myself, and my extended family all subscribed to the same faith. Discussion of religion was about as common as politics or the weather. It was unquestioned, and a part of life. I had attended several public schools growing up, and when I enrolled at a private Catholic university in California, religious disclosure was the last thing I ever thought I would struggle with. Yet, my first few weeks at school, I struggled to find people whom I could have those faith-based conversations with. I decided to join InterVarsity Christian Fellowship, a Bible-study group on campus. While I found in them a community I could “talk faith” with, their agenda seemed far too condensed to me. I missed the way I had grown up, incorporating faith into daily conversations, instead of scheduling it all into one hour of scripture study every week. I left InterVarsity, and before long, found myself tucking my cross necklace under my shirt when my classmates spoke negatively of religion. I saw that it appeared strange and inappropriate to others to bring up God in daily conversations, and I felt burdened when asked to explain to my roommates why I woke up so early on Sunday. As much as I wanted to stop caring about how others might perceive my faith, what I wanted most, was to know if other Christian students felt the same way.

The purpose of this phenomenological study is to better understand the ways in which Christian students communicate their religious identity to peers. For the purpose of this study, religious identity refers to any way in which the participant feels that Christianity is a significant aspect of who they are as a person. The remainder of this paper will examine existing literature

regarding Christian religiosity, analyze themes that emerged through participant interviews at a private Catholic university, and explore what resulting implications this research can contribute in achieving a deeper understanding of the subject matter.

Literature Review

Existing literature regarding Christian religiosity and peer relationships has only begun to emerge. Current research tends to branch in many directions, focusing upon friendships, family influences on religiosity, religious affiliated universities and followership, or romantic relationships. Among such diverse contexts, several themes emerge such as: (1) Communication satisfaction; (2) Relational maintenance; and (3) Religious communication. These themes are further explained in the following review.

Communication Satisfaction

Satisfactory communication is an essential component and mediator when maintaining quality relationships (Forsythe & Ledbetter, 2015; Forward, Daugherty, Michel, & Sandberg, 2009). These relationships include the relationships between an individual and an institution. Communication satisfaction can be a reliable predictor of organizational commitment and identification. There exists a strong positive correlation between communication satisfaction and a religious institution's behavioral policies. If a person is satisfied with their interactions within an organization or institution, they will tend to elicit increased levels of commitment to the organization and its policies. In this same study, communication satisfaction was found to be one of several reliable predictors of organizational commitment to the institution (Forward, Daugherty, Michel, & Sandberg, 2009). Quantitative methods have been used to study communication satisfaction (Forsythe & Ledbetter, 2015; Forward, Daugherty, Michel, & Sandberg, 2009).

Relational Maintenance

Maintenance is a key component to the longevity of relationships in any form. Relational maintenance refers to the actions an individual takes to sustain a relationship in a desired condition (Forsythe & Ledbetter, 2015; McEwan & Guerrero, 2012; Reiter & Gee, 2008). Equity and uncertainty are significant influencers and predictors of relational maintenance among friendships (Forsythe & Ledbetter, 2015). The more maintenance involved in a relationship, the stronger that relationship tends to become. Higher maintenance levels, as well as perceived availability of resources, are positively correlated with higher quality friendship networks. Behavioral indicators of relational maintenance among close friendships were positivity, task sharing, and routine contact. Among casual friendships, these behaviors consisted of positivity, routine contact, banter, social networking, and computer-mediated communication (McEwan & Guerrero, 2012). Regarding romantic relationships, relational maintenance is also an important contributor to relationship satisfaction (Forsythe & Ledbetter, 2015; McEwan & Guerrero, 2012; Reiter & Gee, 2008). However, the specific need for open communication about religion is not significantly predictive of distress in young adult inter/intrafaith romantic relationships (Reiter & Gee, 2008). Quantitative methods of research have been used to analyze relational maintenance (Forsythe & Ledbetter, 2015; McEwan & Guerrero, 2012; Reiter & Gee, 2008).

Religious Communication

Faith-based communication is an essential component among religiously affiliated relationships (Fife, Nelson, & Messersmith, 2014; Forward, Daugherty, Michel, & Sandberg, 2009; Reiter & Gee, 2008). In the context of family, communication plays a key role in the religiosity, or strength of religious followership, of young adults. Specifically, church attendance growing up, family conversation orientation, and family conformity orientation, all are heavy

influencers of religiosity (Fife, Nelson, & Messersmith, 2014). In addition, the strength of one's religious faith is a significant contributor to organizational commitment and identification. Particularly, Evangelical Christians have been found to have extremely heightened levels of commitment (Forward, Daugherty, Michel, & Sandberg, 2009). Identity is also an important component of the communication between religious leaders and their followers. In religious leader-follower relationships, it is the leader who directs his or her followers toward a certain identity through communication, trust, and support (Frye, Kisselburgh, & Butts, 2007). Among interfaith relationships, increased levels of partner support for one's religion and open communication about religious differences correlate with lower relationship distress (Reiter & Gee, 2008). Various quantitative methods have been used to study religious communication (Fife, Nelson, & Messersmith, 2014; Forward, Daugherty, Michel, & Sandberg, 2009; Reiter & Gee, 2008).

Recent studies on communication of religion have branched out in various directions such as institutional communication, family communication, and communication in romantic relationships. However, research is lacking on the topic of how religion is communicated within one's peer group, particularly when making new friends. Majority of this research has also been conducted solely using quantitative methods. While surely an important means of collecting data, a qualitative approach would supplement these methods with personal narrative accounts of how communication takes place within these relationships. This study seeks to fill these gaps by asking: How do Christian students at a private liberal university communicate their religious identities to their peers when forming friendships?

Method

For this study, a qualitative approach was the most appropriate method of conducting my research. Qualitative research can “empower individuals to share their stories”, allow us a “complex, detailed understanding of the issue”, and fill in the gaps where “quantitative measures and the statistical analyses simply do not fit the problem” (Creswell, 2013, p. 48). Specifically, I used phenomenology to decipher the underlying essence that comprises all my participants’ stories. The phenomenological approach allows the researcher to compile a cohesive description of what trends emerge when a shared phenomenon is explored through various accounts. The intent of this study was to describe and understand how Christian undergraduate students communicate with friends. Thus, the study follows an interpretive paradigm.

Data Collection

Participants.

Participants of this study were investigated using a convenience sample of six undergraduate students at a private liberal university in San Francisco. Of these participants, three were male, and three were female. All participants self-identified as Christian.

Procedures.

Individuals selected for this study agreed to participate in a 30-minute interview, held at a quiet, neutral location. A semi-structured interview guide was used for this study containing questions such as, “How do you disclose your Christian identity to new friends?” and “Can you describe a time when you’ve felt your religious identity wasn’t perceived positively by a peer?” Probing was used when needed. Informed consent was obtained from each participant prior to the interview and all interviews were audio recorded for accuracy. The recordings were transcribed and resulted in 40 pages of single-spaced transcription.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was used to analyze data in this study. This process began with open-coding, where memos were used to summarize key patterns in the transcripts. Development of these memos was guided by the “3 I’s” of qualitative research: insight, intuition, and impression (Dey, 1995). Using Glaser and Strauss’ (1967) Constant Comparison Method, patterns of commonalities and differences were located and compared among interviews. These patterns were coded within the transcripts, grouped into categories, and resulted in three overarching themes: (1) Avoiding Religious Conversations; (2) Communication of Shared Experiences; and (3) Shared Religious Beliefs are Nonessential.

Analysis

Avoiding Religious Conversation

Avoiding religious conversation was a significant element of how Christian students interacted with peers, particularly in their initial interactions with others. All participants exhibited hesitation towards the idea of initiating a conversation regarding religion with someone they just met. Religious conversations in this sense refer to discussing or inquiring about, faith-based opinions or personal preferences. Five of the six participants suggested that they would not initiate a conversation about religion with a peer. Only one participant said he would initiate such a conversation, yet stated that he would be cautious as to how he would approach religious discourse, since it is commonly seen as quite a sensitive topic. Reasons for avoiding the topic of religious faith varied. Some feared coming across as too “preachy” while others saw it as an inappropriate topic to inquire about.

One participant mentioned his fear of offending others with religious conversation saying, “it’s a very intimate conversation to have with another person. It’s a very personal

question. And I feel sometimes like if I bring this topic up, I might offend someone.” The same participant suggested that such conversation could only appropriately occur with a very close friend. He said, “it’s a very personal thing, but if it’s like a friend, it would be a very close friend you’ve known for a while.” Another participant stated, “it’s never really something I first want to bring... it’s not even something that even comes up or something I should bring up when I first meet someone.”

Several participants noted that they would wait for the other individual to bring up the topic of faith first. For example, one participant said, “I’m normally not too forward about it. I don’t bring it up too much unless we get on the topic and then I bring it up.” Some participants also noted that they worried about how the topic would be perceived by others, especially if they did not know the person well. They feared the other person might react negatively. For example, a participant commented, “I wouldn’t bring it up if I’m in a room with a lot of anti-religious atheists”, suggesting that he would rather be at least somewhat aware of the other person’s views before taking the risk of bringing up the topic of religion.

One participant noted that while she tends to avoid initiating religious conversations, she felt it was the responsibility of the other person to make clear if they were uncomfortable with the conversation. In her interview, this participant said, “if they’re really not comfortable, they should be honest with it, or should tell you hey I’m not really in the mood to discuss this right now maybe later, or it’s just something I don’t like talking about.” This alternative perspective places responsibility on the individual who has a problem with the topic. This approach acknowledges that religion is a tough topic for some people, but removes the burden from the individual who initiates the conversation. This point was only made by one participant.

Most participants felt comfortable with the topic of religion themselves, but seemed cautious of how the other party in a conversation would react to the topic. One participant felt that he would be equally uncomfortable if someone asked him about his religion, saying, “I consider it similar to my party association, Democrat or Republican. You know, I don’t like telling people how I vote, I don’t like telling people how I practice my religion, or if I practice at all.”

Each of these participant experiences contributes to my understanding of how significant those initial conversations with peers and new friends are. Religion is viewed as a sensitive topic and disclosing one’s religion is a risk when communicating with relatively new acquaintances. This topic of such sensitivity, however, can be of great value as a relationship deepens, fostering a sense of intimacy between friends.

Communication of Shared Experiences

My research found that communication of shared experiences regarding religion can serve as a bonding point for Christian students. Such experiences involve Christian values, as well as traditions of a Christian upbringing among participants. Values play a role in any relationship, and several of the students who participated in this study felt that their values often resonated with that of other Christians. For example, one participant said,

I definitely have stayed away from people, not necessarily because they told me what faith they were, but because they’ve had some morals that weren’t related to my morals and they I kind of figured out along the way that they were like I don’t believe in God or I’m an atheist and then I was like okay that makes a little more sense as to why our morals don’t align, and so I think I’ve naturally grown apart from people who have different values than I do, like religious, and I think that religious values, like people who

don't have a lot of religion just have different values than like I do as a person with religion.

Recalling times when her relationships did not flourish, this participant identifies a person's incompatible morals as associated with their differing religious affiliations, or lack thereof.

Similarly, another participant laid out his personal values and how they relate to his branch of Christianity saying, "I identify as Catholic and my own personal values as a Catholic is aligned with what the Jesuit values are. Social justice, humanity, and all these wonderful things about helping people, helping the community. I think it's wonderful". Most participants explained that an optimal friendship would include compatible morals and values, and according to several participants, it is other Christians folks who tend to share these values.

Reminiscing of their Christian upbringing seemed to be a topic most participants felt they could connect with other Christians about. As one participant described his upbringing, "You don't forget growing up Catholic as a kid". Another participant who self-identified as "culturally Catholic" said later-on in her interview,

Tradition, yeah, custom and it's like comfortable. Because it's comfortable I'm like, this is what I grew up being used to. It's kind of like going back to that and just, yeah this is calming this is focusing energies which kind of is a little bit spiritual but for me I don't know necessarily if it is.

Seemingly unfocused on the doctrinal element of Christianity, this participant noted comfort as an aspect of Christian individuals and customs that attracted her. Elements of comfort and spirituality were often brought up when participants were asked to comment on the Catholic identity of their school. One participant recalled bonding with a friend over the University's Catholic identity, explaining their interaction during a school project,

He mentioned it because we were in [Undisclosed University] and we have these Jesuit values and then [Carl] was my research partner and so when we talk about academics we talk about school, we talk about [Undisclosed University]. Often times being in a Catholic university comes up and these Jesuit values come up when we talk. So I believe he's Catholic and I'm Catholic. So we share our experiences growing up, being raised in a Catholic family, going to church on Sundays. So when it's mentioned, we talk about it a lot.

Overall, participants in this study seemed to recall these bonding moments positively. Shared values and similar childhood memories brings Christian students closer to one another, supporting the overarching claim that the communication of shared experiences is a significant element of how Christian college students communicate religiosity to peers.

Shared Religious Beliefs are Nonessential

This study found that most participants felt having shared religious beliefs with another individual was nonessential to the success of their relationship. They felt no stronger a desire to be friends with someone who is Christian-identifying versus someone who is of a different faith, or no faith at all. As one participant put it, "You believe your thing, I'll believe my thing".

Several participants noted that interfaith communication can prove to be an excellent learning opportunity for both parties. For example, one participant said,

A lot of my friends aren't Catholic and they want to hear what my perspective is on. Like spirituality or things like that. Like I'll ask them about theirs, if they have any, or if they're atheist, what that's like. It's just kind of a conversation.

Most participants also felt that while religion is a great subject of discourse, it's not a mandatory component of a friendship. When talking about his values in a friendship, one participant said, "I

don't think my friend needs to be Catholic like me, but tell me a little bit about what their worldview is and if there is a religious component to it that's great, I'd love to hear it". When asked about the openness of the Catholic University in educating students about a variety of religions, another participant commented,

No I think it's really cool. Like, in my class I'm learning about so many different religions that I just had no idea about what they believe or what they practice. I think it's so interesting [...] I don't think that it should be specific to Christianity because I feel like there's so many people here that have so many different views that like, learning about them all has been crazy. Things I just never even knew about.

This participant felt that interacting with peers of different faiths was an enriching experience. Other participants felt this same way, and several mentioned friendships they've fostered with people of different religions. A veteran participant recalled his time in the Army, stating,

I have friends that have been Muslim. I have some friends that claim to be witches. They were allowed to worship the devil on Sundays in the military. No joke. [...] everyone should have the right to worship what they want to worship.

Similarly, several other participants made note of their own non-Christian friends, and one mentioned his girlfriend, who practiced Buddhism. One participant even mentioned participating in her roommates' Jewish traditions,

They had a mezuzah, which is the.... It's a scroll, it's a really small scroll and it has a piece of the Torah in it, and so you put it on the doorway like leading into the house. So when you enter the house and, maybe when you leave, I'm not sure, you kiss it [...] and they were like you don't have to do it but I was like no, you guys brought it in and even

though I am Catholic, it's like something that's cool and I do live in this space, like I'm definitely benefiting from whatever spiritual energy this is bringing

The participants' accounts of their non-Christian friendships support the overarching claim that shared religious beliefs are nonessential in religious communication among peers.

Discussion

Implications

The results of this study may provide scholars, universities, parishes, and individuals with a deeper understanding of the way Christian students communicate their faith to others. On an individual level, Christian students may find solace in knowing that other individuals share similar experiences and wrestle with the same dilemmas when disclosing their religious identity to peers. University and parish resources may find use in reading the personal accounts of students as they navigate their religious identity throughout a collegiate setting. This knowledge could lead to the modifications of current mentoring, counseling and psychological services offered to students, and increase awareness surrounding the underrepresented topic of Christian students' faith communication. Finally, this study may spark the interest of other dedicated scholars eager to supplement these findings with future research of their own.

Limitations

Though this study discovered findings of significant value, it was not without error. Time was one limitation, for I was allotted only one semester to conduct this research. Another factor was the study's small sample size, as there were only six participants. While this study was designed to analyze Christian students of any variety, five of the six participants in the convenience sample happened to be Catholic. Keeping this in mind, generalization of these results to broader sects of Christianity may not be appropriate.

Future Research

There is ample still to be learned regarding how Christian students communicate. Future research should, more intentionally, focus on how one single branch of Christianity interacts with other branches of the faith. Further research could also focus on a specific geographic location, such as rural or urban universities. In addition, a comparative study could be conducted to investigate how Christian students communicate at private versus public universities. Such research would be beneficial in understanding the impact that various universities have on the faith-identity of their students.

Conclusion

This study was designed to answer the question, how do Christian students at a private liberal university communicate their religious identities to their peers when forming friendships? Results of this research have found that trends in communication occur via the avoidance of religious conversations, the communication of shared experiences, and without the necessity of shared beliefs. This examines both positive and negative experiences that occur when Christian students communicate about faith, and sheds light on the internal contemplation of whether to disclose this identity at all.

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