

College a breeding ground for religious transitions

Students' faith affiliations evolve over the course of time in college

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The car ride wasn't uncomfortable. Instead of being filled with silence punctuated by occasional small talk, conversation flowed freely. College students Cole Hyman and Steven Ebert discussed everything from mutual friends to schoolwork on their brief drive to a local Mexican restaurant.

Hyman was only a few months into his freshman year at Elon University. In high school, his life had resembled a hackneyed movie — he played quarterback for the school football team, dated a cheerleader and spent much of his time wondering how he could be cooler, better. His transition to college seemed effortless. He went out drinking three nights a week and managed to keep his grades up, despite not studying or spending much time on classwork.

Ebert, a senior, had reached out to Hyman at the beginning of the school year. He knew the leader of Hyman's high school Christian ministry group, a group Hyman joined to please his religious mother. Hyman had been reluctant to take Ebert up on his offer, but after growing tired of his shallow, party lifestyle, he figured he might as well and at the least get a free meal.

Their conversation at that small Mexican restaurant was the start of a genuine connection between the two. Talking to Ebert, Hyman saw through the shallow conversations about girls, sports and parties that filled his days, to something he was "longing for without realizing it": religion.

His shift in beliefs reflects a common journey students experience when transitioning into college. Able to consider what they believe independently of their families for the first time, students often find new meaning in religion, leading them to embrace it, like Hyman, or let it move to the back burner of their busy college lives.

Religious transitions: An ongoing process

If nothing else, the beginning of the college experience is marked by novelty and difference. For 82 percent of Elon students it means living in a new state and for 6 percent, living in a new country. It means living on-campus, surrounded by students and away from family, for 62 percent, and it likely means living alone or with peers for the 38 percent who reside off-campus.

Coming to college also brings with it an exposure to a massive and generally diverse student body that — even at a smaller school like Elon, with an enrollment of 5,782 undergraduate students — is more than seven times the size of the average public high school.

Adapting to these changes and accepting the distance from home can be difficult for students, caus-

ing freshman year to be a time characterized by homesickness and struggle for some. For Hyman, this meant breaking down in tears and calling his mother one night in November.

"It looked like I was doing great, but ... I just called my mom and I just started crying," Hyman said. "As humiliating as it is to say that 'I hate this place. I don't like this anymore. This isn't the place for me.' — I just got to this place where it didn't feel right anymore."

"My mom was like, 'You need to stick it out, Cole. I'm praying for you.' At that point, I was like, 'Come on, mom. Are you serious? I don't care.' Honestly, that's what I was thinking. But she was saying I had to stick it out."

A few days later, Hyman decided to take Ebert up on his offer to hang out — something that dramatically changed the course of Hyman's college career. Instead of maintaining the same lifestyle he'd established over those first few months, Hyman began spending his time doing things he found more fulfilling, like building deeper friendships and mentoring students at local high schools.

University Chaplain Jan Fuller said Hyman's journey is not at all uncommon on Elon's campus, or on college campuses as a whole. These moments, she said, are developmental and are entrenched in the factors surrounding the college years: separation from parents, emphasis on critical thinking, challenging coursework and emotional struggles.

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"[This is when] people are beginning to think for themselves. Young men and women are beginning to kind of consider, 'Is this mine? Or is this my mother's or my father's?'" Fuller said. "It's a normal and very natural developmental moment. You leave home. Nobody forces you to do anything. Now you get to think about this for yourself."

Fuller acknowledged the process of questioning and coming to terms with religion can be a threatening one — challenging everyone from the student experiencing the transition to that student's family and friends to religious institutional leaders in that student's life.

Though Fuller has seen some students become so overwhelmed by the dauntingness of religious questions that they resign before resolving their struggles, she

said she's also seen the process be helpful for those who are willing to stick through it.

"We [in this country] haven't taught our children to think about their religion critically. What we've done is we've said, 'Take it,' and we haven't asked them to think about that very hard," Fuller said. "Students get to college, and they have never thought about it ... So rather than — for some people, they dive in, but that's a small minority — most of us then say, 'I'll think about something else for a while, because I don't know how to think about that.'"

'Losing' religion

Though Hyman grew up surrounded by religion, he never felt particularly invested in the Christian belief system. He went through the motions of "being a Christian" — attending church every week and participating in Young Life Christian ministry — but something just didn't click for him.

Now able to reflect on the person he once was, Hyman said he attributes this lack of religious investment to consumption in himself and his ex-girlfriend — someone he said "wasn't a great influence on [his] life." Add to that the fact that the strongest example of a Christian in Hyman's life, his friend's dad, was diagnosed with Lou Gehrig's Disease, and Hyman hit what he called the "tipping point."

"It was just hard for me to understand why a guy that claimed to believe in God and all that stuff—why God would let that happen to him," Hyman said. "So that was the point when I said, 'I don't know if this is what I'm going for anymore.'"

Senior Kendall Bair had a very different experience. Bair's parents converted to Christianity when she was in second grade, and their family made a collective commitment to live a Christian lifestyle. That meant praying before meals, attending church every Sunday, participating in youth group, listening to "more wholesome" music and making an effort to invest in their faith. And when it came time for Bair to select a college, she opted for a Christian school — Geneva College.

Being surrounded by Christianity all the time drained Bair and weakened her faith. Her reli-

gion became more of a chore than a choice, and she lost herself in a sea of religious complacency.

"I really enjoyed what I was learning, but there's a certain element of 'you get really bored when you're forced to do it,'" Bair said. "It's no longer like, 'I'm excited about this, because I am choosing to do it.' It's like, 'Oh my gosh, I have to do this every semester.'"

"I have to wake up every day and decide what I believe, rather than just going through the motions because that's what everyone else is doing. And obviously there are times that I question what I believe, but there wasn't space for that at a Christian college. There was no space to ask the hard questions ... when you're in an environment where everyone's like, 'I'm perfect, and I just believe everything blindly.'"

For both Hyman and Bair, a specific set of circumstances led them to stray from their faiths. But for many, "losing" religion is a matter of exercising independence or prioritizing other things.

Sophomore Grace Iekel stopped attending mass when she went to college despite her 13-year Catholic school career, because she "wanted to see what [she] wanted to do on a Sunday [instead of] dedicating an hour of [her] life worshipping something that may not even be there."

Fuller said she "took a break" from going to church or participating in religious activities during her first two years of college, simply because that was something she felt she needed to do. She also acknowledged that it may be hard for students to fit religion in at a school like Elon where "everyone has 50 priorities instead of four," but she insisted that those who think it's important will find ways to fit religious practices into their schedules.

Finding or strengthening faith through community

For Bair, renewing her faith meant escaping the complacency by which she felt trapped at Geneva by transferring to Elon her junior year. A new environment gave her opportunities to critically explore her faith and deliberately practice it, which she wasn't able to do within the Geneva community.

"I've gotten to [ask the hard questions] here, and actually I've come right back around to believ-

ing what I believe," Bair said.

She now spends much of her time participating in InterVarsity Christian Fellowship, "being poured into" by the other members of the fellowship and "pouring into others" by mentoring younger students.

Community played a significant role in others' faiths as well. For Iekel, maintaining her Catholic beliefs became much harder after leaving her Catholic school.

And Fuller said having friends in the Christian community encouraged her to go to church again and recommit herself to her faith after her two-year break.

For senior Julia David, community made the difference between feeling too awkward to engage in religious conversations and feeling comfortable being herself on a daily basis. David grew up in a Presbyterian household in the middle of "Agnostic Town" — Silicon Valley, California.

"I grew up in an area where atheism was kind of the norm. Whenever I would discuss anything I would immediately get shot down. It is kind of hard to come up against," David said. "I came here, and I had this really cool RA who was very involved in InterVarsity and she was like, 'Well Julia, you're going to come with me.' ... Something just kind of clicked and that's kind of when everything changed."

Now, David participates in InterVarsity regularly and appreciates the opportunities she has to connect with people who have grown up in different religious environments. People who once "seemed very sheltered" to her are now people she regularly interacts with.

"It gave me the opportunity to really understand where they were coming from and to challenge a lot of what they were saying," she said.

And, of course, for Hyman, this sense of community was the product of a conversation in a Mexican restaurant. All it took was one meal for him to realize there were people who genuinely cared how his day was, guys who had fun without drinking and a group of students who invested their time in their faith and in each other.

Ebert paid for that meal and every other meal the two got together for the rest of the year, saying, "Promise me that you will do this for someone too one day."

GRAPHIC COURTESY OF LINDSEY LANQUIST

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