

College and faith: Charting the path

Campus groups can help students make decisions

By LAURA FRANCIS and CRAIG ALLEN
Staff Writers

Philosophical questioning typically accompanies the development of the mind. And for many, questioning occurs during the college years, when they find themselves challenging their beliefs, leading them to search for a different church or faith.

"College is a time to grow in every area — the threat would be not to grow," said William Peck, associate professor of religious studies, who studies religion in relation to psychology. "I focus on an academic study of the way people construct the world they perceive themselves to be in; in other words, a study of the various varieties of the religious experience."

Peck encourages students to respond to a type of worship that fits their temperament. So a person who is "quiet, steady and ascetic" may prefer the Episcopal Church, which follows rigid rituals, he said.

Each different religion does not appeal only to one type of person, Peck said. "One can find some specific correlation where there's a tendency to attract certain kinds of people, such as with Positive Thinkers or Christian Scientists."

Upon deciding to explore religious options, students may have a hard time deciding because of the choices ranging from the many types of Christianity to Eastern religions such as Hinduism. But they don't have to travel too far to find answers because several campus organizations offer the chance to experience different religions.

Opting for Christianity

With its many denominations, Christianity offers students the chance for participation in various organizations on campus. According to the Rev. Manuel Wortman, the Wesley Foundation tries to involve students in Methodist church with activities, discussions of religious questions and worship services. The group meets every Wednesday, usually holding a dinner before the program.

Although the group attracts many Methodists, it holds a desire to bring students with different beliefs together, Wortman says. "The group is a community of people," he said. "I don't think you can characterize the students as holding a certain set of beliefs."

Kathy Koonts, a sophomore English education major from Shelby, has been involved with the foundation since she arrived in Chapel Hill. She said she liked the group because

of everyone's agreement to disagree. "I'm in Wesley because it's religious without being overbearing," Koonts said. "Religion is not shoved down my throat. Everyone respects everyone else's beliefs, and the people are very caring and open."

The Rev. Bill Gattis, senior minister at University United Methodist Church, said his congregation tried to accommodate students and make them welcome. Besides offering students the chance to sing with the Wesley Foundation Singers, University Methodist sponsors "Adopt-a-Student," a program in which interested students are assigned to families, couples and single church members.

The students dine with their assigned families, worship with them and do other things to become acquainted. Gattis said the program's goal is to "be a home away from home" for students.

Another group offering students the chance to become involved in the Protestant faith is the Baptist Campus Ministry.

The Rev. Bob Phillips, campus minister, says the Baptist Student Union makes up the majority of the ministry. Phillips serves as advisor along with Reverend Harriette Bugel, but they try not to interfere in the administration of the group. That burden is left up to students as a beneficial part of the overall experience.

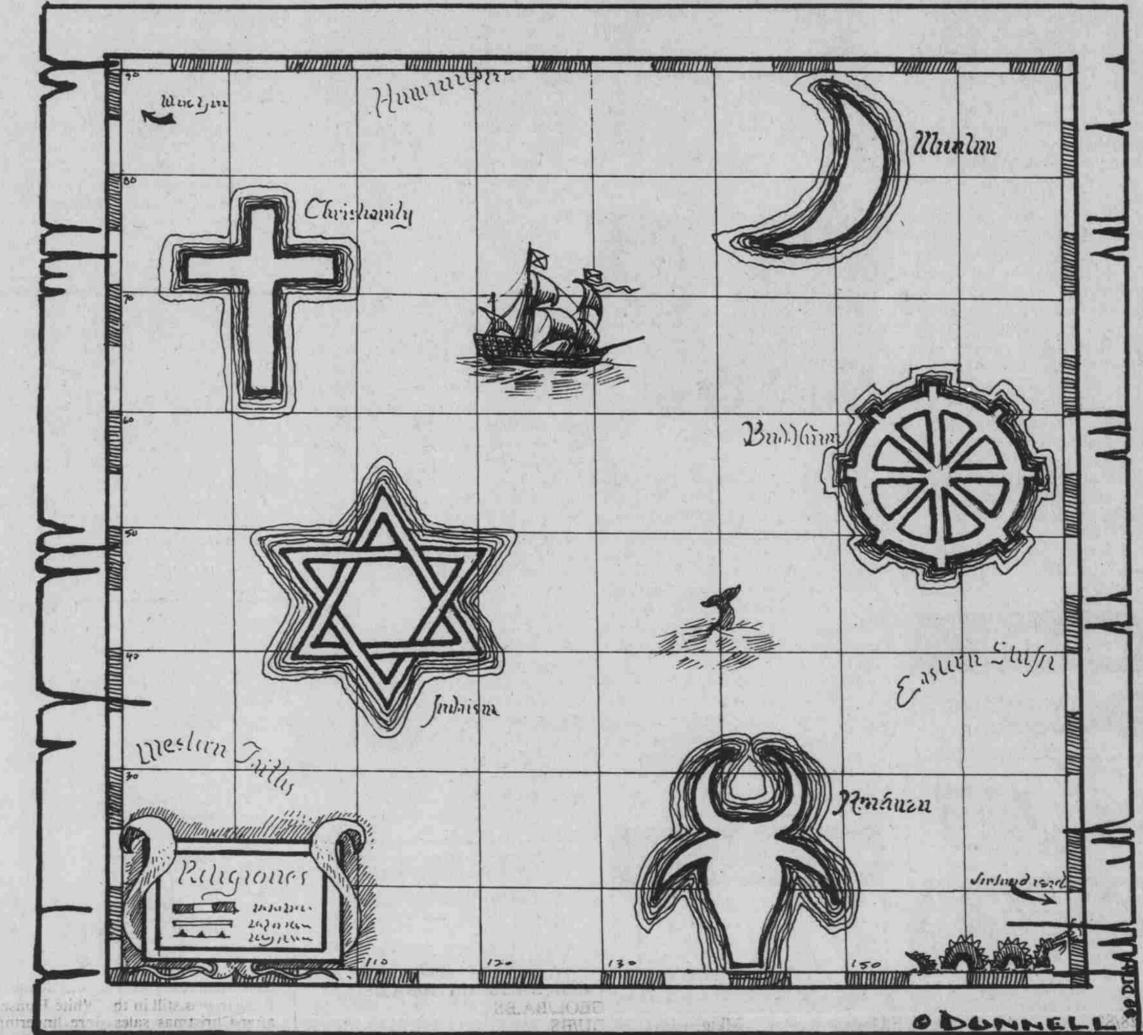
"We have a strong concept of students leading the ministry," Phillips said. The BSU offers weekly meetings and residence hall Bible studies. And the group's center, Battle House, is open to anyone who wants to study, meet friends or escape the noise of the dormitory, Phillips said.

The ministry is not restricted to members of a Baptist church — everyone is welcome whether he wants to worship or just talk. "It has a Baptist flavor to it," Phillips says. "The concept is for there to be a wide range of opportunities for people to grow and develop. As campus ministers, we're available to students. All they need to do is pick up the phone and call."

The Presbyterian Campus Ministry also reaches out to students with various religious backgrounds. "We're open to anyone coming," said the Rev. Rebecca Reyes, Presbyterian campus minister.

The student center, located at 110 Henderson St., hosts biweekly programs on Mondays and Thursdays on community outreach, current issues or fellowship, Reyes said.

"Although the Presbyterian stance sometimes comes through in such



programs on divorce or abortion, we are diverse theologically, politically and socially."

The Rev. Larry Hartsell, Lutheran campus pastor, said the Lutheran campus group had many programs for students, all held at the Holy Trinity Lutheran Church in Chapel Hill. Some of the programs include a Wednesday night worship, dinner and Bible study on Mondays and Thursdays.

One of the most important objectives of the Lutheran church is to carry its message to anyone willing to listen, Hartsell said. "God calls us to say to all people that they are loved."

Similarly structured in ceremony and belief to the Lutheran church, the Episcopal Anglican Student Fellowship meets at The Chapel of

the Cross. According to David Stanford, associate for campus ministries, the strength of the Episcopal church is its retention of the good qualities of both Protestantism and Catholicism.

"The strength of the Episcopal Church is the middle way between Catholicism and Protestantism," he said. "We talk about the three-legged stool: scripture, reason and tradition."

The Newman Catholic Student Center also welcomes everyone, according to Tom Krebs, student campus minister. On Wednesdays, students gather at the Newman Center for dinner followed by a program. "Student night encourages all aspects of community development," he said.

Prayer heals

If a student is looking for a less traditional form of Christianity, Christian Science could be the answer. "Christian Science is a church based on the teachings of Jesus with a complete focus on spiritual healing, not faith healing," said Clinton Kurshildgen, Christian Science college organizational adviser.

The healing prayer is based on an understanding of the divine Principle, which the founder (Mary Baker Eddy) discovered to be a synonym for God. "It takes constant study and devotion to begin to understand and use the divine Principle," he said.

Beyond Denominations

Adhering to a particular denomination may not appeal to some people, leaving them the choice of non-denominational or interdenominational churches. According to Reggie Kidd, pastor of worship at the Chapel Hill Bible Church, this type of church "has a more generic approach to Christianity on more peripheral issues than a church of a specific denomination."

This church "lines itself up with the conservative evangelical mainstream that draws people from several different backgrounds such as Episcopalian, Catholic, Charismatic, Pentacostal, Baptist and Methodist to name a few," Kidd said.

The Bible Church operates on four basic principles: teaching, worship, fellowship and outreach. "Ideally, our church should be characterized by a balance of these four foci," Kidd says.

On the other hand, an interdenominational church encompasses all beliefs and religions. The Community Church of Chapel Hill focuses on a sense of community,

"Wherever people feel comfortable and feel that they belong, that's where they should stay."

— Rev. Larry Hartsell, Lutheran campus pastor

evident in its name. Founded in the 1950s, the Community Church "strives hard to listen to truth from a variety of traditions," said the Rev. W. W. Olney. "We try to maintain the integrity of all."

"We are concerned with justice and peace," Olney said. "What draws people here is our desire to pursue justice in this community, state, country and the world."

A different philosophy

Hillel, the Jewish student group, is based on a different philosophy than groups of the Christian doctrine, but it provides similar fellowship for participants.

Students can find social interaction on Tuesdays at Hillel, when the members have the chance to get to know one another. Worship services, varying from orthodox to reformed, take place on Fridays.

Lauren Stone, director of student activities at Hillel, said the group tried to be more than just a student organization.

"Being Jewish is a way of life for a lot of us," she said. "Jewish family is very important to the Jewish faith. Hillel becomes that family for students on campus. We pray together, eat together and sing together."

And further East . . .

Hinduism, which originated in India, also has a strong representation on campus. Hiten Patel, a sophomore originally from India and an officer in the Sangam Association, said Hinduism was less different from Christianity than most people think.

"It's not atheistic. The different deities represent different aspects of God."

Patel said Hinduism stressed morality rather than a specific way to reach God. "I like Hinduism because there are many different ways to reach God — you take your own path and live morally."

The major philosophical difference between Hinduism and other religions is the concept of reincarnation. "I think Hinduism is best known for reincarnation," Patel says. "Your next life is determined by what you do in this life. The goal is to reach godhead, to become one

with God." Islam, another religion that originated in the East, is characterized by a devout people who perform good deeds in their religious practices and in the community as well.

A Muslim is expected to pray five times a day toward Mecca, give a percentage of his or her income to the poor, go on at least one pilgrimage to Mecca, if affordable, and celebrate the Ramadan fasting from sunrise to sunset for one month during the year, says Qasem Shehadeh, president of the Muslim Student Association.

Besides following these religious practices, a Muslim is also encouraged to help his or her fellow man, Shehadeh said. This concept stems from the teachings on Islamic brotherhood presented in the Koran, the religious book of Islam. "All Muslims are brothers; we are a community."

The choice is yours

The basic principle involved in choosing a religion, according to several religious leaders, is to experience many of the different options, then make a decision based on what you have learned.

"A lot of us grew up in our parents' church," Hartsell said. "College is a good chance to check things out. Wherever people feel comfortable and feel that they belong, that's where they should stay."

Stanford agreed, saying that the Anglican group was made up largely of students who are not Episcopalians. "I would say that 60 percent are not Episcopalians — they're just there checking it out."

Students may discover that choosing a religion to suit their character may be extremely difficult. "People don't ask themselves, 'Would my temperament be complemented at this church?'" Peck says.

With a range of 500 to 1,000 definitions of religion in existence, according to Peck, a person's choice of religion often depends on class, wealth and education level.

"A religious experience is a strategy for coping with the universe," Peck said. "This integrated response to the universe can be established either in or out of the church."

A course of agnosticism for those who aren't sure

By ANNA TURNAGE
Staff Writer

"Blind loyalty is a horrible thing."

These are not the words of a prophet. These are the words of Lisa Kirkpatrick, an agnostic.

Kirkpatrick is a UNC student who believes that no one should stay with one religion out of blind loyalty, and no one should choose a religion without questioning its doctrines first. She also says she doubts the existence of God.

Raised in a Methodist household, the senior from Lake Summit began to question the doctrines of her religion during high school and college. "People get scared to question their religion because if they do, it may go against everything the church and their parents told them is right," she said. "You cannot be afraid to define who you are even if it does go against what the church or your parents taught you."

"College is a special time for doubting because you have a lot of stimuli going on, and you have to rethink things," she said.

According to William Peck, associate professor in religious studies, college is one time in people's lives when they question religion the most. "It is a transitional period in life when you doubt and think about a lot of different issues," he said. "It's a very natu-

ral and healthy process."

For people to define themselves and find out who they really are, they may have to give up their parents' answers to a lot of questions, including religious ones, Peck said.

"Religion cannot be genuine if it's based on somebody else's hearsay," he said. "You need to find out who you are, what you care about and what you're committed to on your own."

The university is designed to help students break from their childhood roots and provide space for them to reassess their values, Peck said. "Even if you ultimately end up with your parent's religious answers, it should be because you chose them on your own. Religion, of all things, cannot be second hand."

Peck said the fear that came with doubting should not stop students from searching for a satisfactory truth.

However, fear sometimes inhibits students from questioning religious values. According to Rich Henderson, area coordinator for the InterVarsity Christian Fellowship (IVCF), it may be fear that leads students to "shelve" religion during their college years.

"Since it was forced on so many of them while they were growing up, they leave it behind and say,

'I'll deal with it later, I just want my degree right now,'" he said.

Typically, students question the existence of God or the relevance of God to their lives, Henderson said. "It's the people who are afraid to ask themselves these questions that are harming themselves."

Henderson said he believed people should not buy a religion lock, stock and barrel. Trying out different religions and talking to people of different faiths is essential in finding what is right for a person, he said. "College is a great time to play around with these thoughts and to try new things because you have the freedom to search."

IVCF student coordinator Todd Hahn, a junior from Charlotte, said students should use groups and other people to come to terms with questions about religion.

"InterVarsity helped me to re-evaluate questions about my faith," Hahn said. "I ended up accepting the same things I had been told, but it wasn't because it was dictated to me. It was because I wrestled with it myself."

"Questioning is healthy as long as the questioner truly wants to come to a decision," he said. "It's OK to doubt, but it's not OK not to seek answers."