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Intro to Anthropology

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### Religiosity and Spirituality on the St. Olaf College Campus

There's no mystery about whether or not St. Olaf is institutionally religious; its name is a strong tell. As a person who did not grow up in a religious household and has no religious background, I was concerned about this when I was touring the school, and for this reason I decided to write my ethnography on this topic. As it is easily seen, St. Olaf College is quite obviously religiously affiliated, but that is not what I was curious about. My research involves the question about whether or not the college feels like a religious school to first-year students who go here, or if over time the religiosity of the school has become less prominent.

I interviewed two male students and four female students, all first years. The reason I focused on first years is because I wanted to accurately compare the experiences of students' first full year on campus, and in some ways capture their first impressions of the religiosity at St. Olaf.

A quick Google search of the school gives you a first result of the college's official website, and before you even click the link it tells you that St. Olaf is "A private liberal arts college of the Lutheran church in Minnesota" (wp.stolaf.edu). The college's religious identity can be found in its mission statement as well: "St. Olaf College challenges students

to excel in the liberal arts, examine faith and values, and explore meaningful vocation in an inclusive, globally engaged community nourished by Lutheran tradition” ([wp.stolaf.edu/about/mission](http://wp.stolaf.edu/about/mission)). The college is also officially a part of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. Many people who took an official school tour before committing experienced the tour guide’s description of the religiosity of the school; for me, this included the tour guide explaining the school’s Lutheran identity as well as its inclusivity to any religious/non-religious views. A common fact some tour guides tell is the connection of Rolvaag, Stav Hall, and Boe Chapel symbolizing the “mind, body, and soul” respectively. The school’s religious roots are apparent, but I am more intrigued by the discourse of students and professors around campus in day-to-day life, specifically the experiences of first years who are new to the school. There is chapel time every day of the week, but this is officially called “community time.” This is a common shift of rhetoric; the fact that the institution is attempting to make something that is religious sound less religious is a point of interest for me. There is also a very large spectrum of students in terms of religiosity. From what I’ve observed in my first year, some students are from Norwegian and Lutheran families who all attended St. Olaf, while others are of completely different religious denominations such as Hinduism and Judaism, and still others identify with no religion at all. Overall, the discourse about religiosity and spirituality on campus is extremely varied, and this is why I chose to study it.

The questions I asked the subjects pertained to their personal religious/spiritual backgrounds and how they felt about religion/spirituality on campus. Some questions were very open ended, such as “What does being religious mean to you?” while others were

more specific, such as “On a scale of one to ten, one being the least religious and ten being the highest, how religious would you rate St. Olaf? Why?” My goal in the questioning was to prompt an internal contemplation about religion and spirituality that isn’t often prompted so blatantly. The questions begin in a more personal aspect (ie. asking their own background and identity, asking their personal opinions on the definitions of spirituality and religiosity, etc.) and then they shift to questions about religiosity on campus. I discovered that for many people being interviewed, it took quite a few seconds to think of some answers, and I believe that this stems from the fact that we aren’t faced with these questions every day. Like many people stated in their interviews, religion is primarily spoken seriously about in classroom settings where text is being analyzed rather than speaking directly about personal religious beliefs, and it was apparent that some of the questions I asked required deep contemplation to formulate the appropriate thought. (Throughout the paper I will refer to the different interviewees as I1-6).

The first thing that I found interesting in my research was the difference between backgrounds versus outcomes. The sample of interviewees contained a good mix of people who practiced religion growing up or not at all, and also a good mix of people who either identify or do not identify with a certain faith. I assumed going into this study that people who grew up in predominantly religious households and schooling would identify more heavily with being religious than the people who had no religious background, but that was not the case. I1 and I2 had exactly opposite upbringings when it came to religion; I1 didn’t have any religious background and their family was not religious in any way, while I2 grew up in a Catholic household and went to Catholic private school for fourteen years. Despite

these differing religious atmospheres, their opinions on religion were extremely similar. Both said that the Lutheran faith of St. Olaf had no effect on their decision to come here, both said that they felt a constant religious presence on campus only because of the school's Lutheran heritage rather than a constant pressuring to worship, and both felt like religion is talked about in a very open and respectful way. This extreme contrast of upbringing that resulted in the same outlook on religion was a very fascinating and surprising development.

Another strong correlation between most all of the subjects was their numerical rating of how religious St. Olaf seems to them. The question asked for a rating between one and ten, one being the least religious and ten being the most religious. Five out of the six subjects rated St. Olaf as a seven on the religious scale. What was most curious about this fact was that all the subjects who gave the school a seven justified their answer by saying that while religion is clearly the basis of the school, it is not too prominent in everything we do. Seven is only three away from ten, or the most religious school of all, and so for this reason seven sounds like a high number to rate a school that most people said doesn't shove religion down people's throats. However, the commonality between the ratings cannot go unnoticed, especially due to the varying religious backgrounds of the interviewees. This finding begs the question; if the subjects are inclined to rate the school a relatively high number on the religious scale but justify it by describing how unreligious the school is, does this imply that the school is truly more religious than it advertises itself to be and its students only partially notice it? Or does the sheer fact that the school is based

on the Lutheran faith cause the higher rating even though its practices aren't intensely religious?

A distinct point of interest that came up after typing out each subject's response to each question from the voice recordings was comparing I5's answers to the rest of the subjects' answers. I5 is the subject with the most background in the Lutheran faith and they are the only one to maintain that strong relationship with the Lutheran faith into college. They arguably have the strongest connection with the same heritage as St. Olaf has, and this was fascinating to observe through the questions. I5 was the only subject to describe the way people talk about religion on campus as mostly negative (skeptical, with disdain and distrust). All the rest of the subjects articulated that religion is spoken about with openness and respect.

I5 also was the only subject to confidently say that religion does not have a constant presence on campus, while all the rest of the subjects said it does, whether in a cultural way or in classes or choirs. This stood out to me, especially because I5 participated the most in religious related activities than the other subjects; I5 tries to consistently attend chapel services and participates in a bible study group. I would think these things would lead them to believe that religion does have a constant presence on campus, but it could be that religion is so normalized and part of everyday life for them that the chapel services and bible study sessions are seen as typical.

Lastly, I5 was the only subject who confidently stated that religions other than Christianity do not get talked about differently (albeit they do get talked about less). The other interviewees mentioned the "otherness" that is attached to religions differing from

Christianity, and even that they are talked about almost as gossip rather than theological conversations. All the subjects that said that other religions are talked about differently mentioned the fact that generally, students who go here know less about those other religions (Islam, Judaism, Hinduism, Buddhism, etc.) and therefore don't know how to appropriately go about talking about them. Perhaps I5 was commenting on the fact that they feel like religions in general are spoken about in a skeptical, analytical manner, especially in classroom settings, and in this way they are all talked about in the same ways. It is surprising that someone under the Lutheran faith attending a Lutheran-based school wouldn't think different religions were looked at with slightly more skepticism just because of the school's predominantly Christian population, but again this could be due to the normalization of their own faith.

Overall the exploration of how first year students feel about the religiosity at St. Olaf was intriguing and surprising, and actually created more questions than the ones I started with. The sample of interviewees was relatively well varied; a decent spread of hometowns, many varying extracurriculars, all different majors, and most importantly an array of contrasting religious upbringings that have affected their religious outlook in varying ways. If I could do this study in a more elaborate fashion, I would sample from all years, all religious backgrounds, all different majors, and all different dorms, but for this specific study that just wasn't feasible. The results don't hold one specific answer, but rather many equally interesting and diverse answers. Religiosity and spirituality are possibly the most personal aspects about a person, and being able to get a glimpse into a handful of minds about the topic was very enlightening. The general consensus from first year students is

that St. Olaf provides the resources one could need to worship Lutheranism and other denominations of Christianity, but it's only a big part of the college experience if you want it to be. Religion is certainly on campus if that's what you desire to find, but for people of different faiths and backgrounds or no faith at all, religion certainly doesn't have to play a large role in everyday life. Religion can be a source of peace, joy, and consolation through hardship, and it is also an institution that has and continues to shape the world around us, and St. Olaf College provides the means to further one's understanding of religion as a whole. As subject I6 noted, college is a time to analyze what you believe and why you believe it, and this is made possible by the liberal arts education based in Lutheranism at St. Olaf.