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## Higher Meaning in Higher Education: An Investigation into the Role of Religion at Harvard

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By signing below, we affirm our awareness of the standards of the Harvard College Honor Code:



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## **Abstract**

Our research question, “What is the role of religion at Harvard?,” aims to unearth the role that religion plays in the lives of undergraduate students at Harvard College, as well as whether Harvard as an institution is doing enough to provide students with faith-based outlets. In order to better understand this question, our three sub-questions are as follows - “How do religious beliefs affect students’ lived experiences, sense of purpose, and meaning-making at Harvard?” “Why do Harvard students opt to join religious groups, and what are these groups’ roles and impacts on campus?” And finally, “What does Harvard as an institution presently do to facilitate religious tolerance?” To yield clear results, we opted to focus on Christians, Muslims, and religious “nones” for the purpose of our study. In terms of campus-based religious groups, we honed in on Harvard College Faith and Action (HCFA), a Christian organization, and the Harvard Islamic Society (HIS), a Muslim organization. We conducted interviews with members of both faith groups, as well as with religious “nones” at Harvard, which we also supplemented with survey questionnaires.

Our research revealed a number of important trends about the role of religion at Harvard. According to the students we interviewed, we found that religion does, in fact, provide students with a deeper sense of purpose and identity, which tend to affect their career choices. With on-campus religious groups, we found that the deeper a student’s involvement, the more the group is a source of meaningful friendships and the more it constitutes a safe space to tackle tough questions. Our findings pertaining to Harvard’s institutional culture concluded that discrimination on the basis of religion, though often implicit, does still occur on Harvard’s campus. We also found that while diversity training has been a focus for the university, the topic of religious diversity in particular seems to have been neglected. Interestingly, Muslim students have also faced more difficulty when attempting to fulfill religious practices. Finally, responses to the question of whether Harvard actively encourages exploration of religion and faith were mixed, with many reporting that it did foster religious exploration, and others claiming it did not.

## **I. Introduction**

Upon first glance, college students often appear to be at an enviable stage of life - unearthing their academic and extracurricular passions, fostering new friendships, and preparing

to embark on exciting career journeys. For many students, however, these perceived experiences differ drastically from their lived realities. As William Deresiewicz writes in his 2014 book entitled *Excellent Sheep*: “Look beneath the façade,...and what you often find are toxic levels of fear, anxiety, and depression, of emptiness and aimlessness and isolation” (Deresiewicz, 8). With ever-growing competition at higher education institutions, students encounter mounting levels of stress and questioning of purpose. While religion may initially appear antithetical to the secular and liberal teachings of universities in western societies, faith has in reality provided many people with a compelling sense of purpose and belonging throughout history, and continues to do so today. Particularly in light of the rising centrality of mental health on college campuses, the intersection of faith and meaning is particularly important to examine.

Our research question, “What is the role of religion at Harvard?,” aims to unearth the role that religion plays in the lives of undergraduate students at Harvard College, as well as whether Harvard as an institution is doing enough to provide students with faith-based outlets. In order to better understand this question, our three sub-questions are as follows - “How do religious beliefs affect students’ lived experiences, sense of purpose, and meaning-making at Harvard?” “Why do Harvard students opt to join religious groups, and what are these groups’ roles and impacts on campus?” And finally, “What does Harvard as an institution presently do to facilitate religious tolerance?” To yield clear results, we opted to focus on Christians, Muslims, and religious “nones” for the purpose of our study. In terms of campus-based religious groups, we honed in on Harvard College Faith and Action (HCFA), a Christian organization, and the Harvard Islamic Society (HIS), a Muslim organization. We conducted interviews with members of both faith groups, as well as with religious “nones” at Harvard, which we also supplemented with survey questionnaires.

## **II. Literature Review**

In order to better engage with our team’s research question, we delved into existing literature surrounding the study of religion and higher education. Through this literature review, we examined the relationship between religious faith, students’ experiences, and higher education institutions. Through highlighting trends and prevalent misconceptions in the literature, we came to establish a framework for our research. Through our research, we

ultimately aimed to both begin to fill prevailing gaps in the literature, and increase the dialogue surrounding religion at Harvard.

## **II.a. Student Experience**

In his book entitled *Excellent Sheep*, Deresiewicz examines the ways in which high achieving students struggle with mental, emotional, and physical health and wellbeing.<sup>1</sup> These students learn to present a confident façade to disguise their inner turmoil surrounding questions of purpose and meaning.<sup>2</sup> Deresiewicz’s research illuminates the questions: Do students at elite universities have a sense of purpose? If so, where do these students find their sense purpose? Do religious beliefs help students establish a sense of purpose apart from their credentials?<sup>3</sup> Smith and Baratta’s work titled “Religion and Literacies in Higher Education: Scoping the Possibilities for Faith-Based Meaning Making” explores the ways in which students and academics alike create meaning in their lives, as well as which practices of mean-making are considered legitimate.<sup>4</sup> They posit that religious faith is generally not considered a “legitimate tool for meaning-making” in the academic world, while simultaneously questioning who gets to discern the legitimacy of these tools.<sup>5</sup> Our research challenges this idea, as many of our respondents utilize their faith as a valid and helpful tool for meaning-making.

For many people, religion is central to their daily lives and lifestyles. In the lecture “Finding Religion in Everyday Life,” Nancy Ammerman introduces the critical concept of “lived religion” and calls for a more nuanced study of religion due to the topic’s widespread impact on social categories and settings.<sup>6</sup> She defines “lived religion” as religion that is not only defined by belief and membership in a congregation, but that also permeates into daily activities in ways that may not be immediately visible.<sup>7</sup> She notes that many sociologists falsely assume that religion has or will soon disappear.<sup>8</sup> Ammerman also warns against reducing religion to what can be identified through a survey.<sup>9</sup> Often time, religious faith and practice are much more invisible

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<sup>1</sup> Deresiewicz, William, *Excellent Sheep: The Miseducation of the American Elite and the Way to a Meaningful Life*. New York: Free Press, 2015.

<sup>2</sup> Deresiewicz, *Excellent Sheep*.

<sup>3</sup> Deresiewicz, *Excellent Sheep*.

<sup>4</sup> Smith, Paul and Alex Baratta, “Religion and Literacies in Higher Education: Scoping the Possibilities for Faith-Based Meaning Making.” *Critical Studies in Teaching & Learning* 4, 2016, p. 68-87.

<sup>5</sup> Smith and Baratta, “Religion and Literacies in Higher Education.”

<sup>6</sup> Ammerman, N. T., “Finding Religion in Everyday Life.” *Sociology of Religion* 75, No. 2, June 1, 2014, p. 189–207.

<https://doi.org/10.1093/socrel/sru013>.

<sup>7</sup> Ammerman, “Finding Religion in Everyday Life.”

<sup>8</sup> Ammerman, “Finding Religion in Everyday Life.”

<sup>9</sup> Ammerman, “Finding Religion in Everyday Life.”

and have greater internal impacts than one may imagine. In the study “Connecting Religion and Work: Patterns and Influences of Work-Faith Integration,” Lynn et al. used a survey questionnaire to explore which factors play a role in work-faith integration.<sup>10</sup> The findings of the survey were as follows: “work-faith integration was positively associated with faith maturity, church attendance, age and denominational strictness, and negatively associated with organizational size.”<sup>11</sup> As this finding indicates, faith and work can be intricately connected for religious individuals who actively practice, which necessarily applies to Harvard students who are committed to their religious practices.

## **II.b. Religious Community**

Conrad Cherry’s book *Religion on Campus* analyzes a deep ethnographic study and fieldwork on the teaching and practice of religion in American higher education.<sup>12</sup> Cherry and his research team visited three different universities with varying geographic locations and ideologies.<sup>13</sup> Through in-depth interviews and observations, Cherry finds that both the study and practice of religion are flourishing on college campuses, which challenges modern theories of progressive secularization.<sup>14</sup> This literature is useful in illuminating campus culture surrounding religion at the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, which is surprisingly zealous. His research focuses on denominations within Christianity, and provides insight into the purpose and importance of religious groups for undergraduates.<sup>15</sup> He emphasizes the ways in which students find a sense of belonging and escape through their involvement with and commitment to these groups.<sup>16</sup>

In Myers and Diener’s paper titled “Who is Happy?,” they examine religiosity through the lens of satisfaction more broadly.<sup>17</sup> They assert that close relationships, work experiences, culture, and religiosity are the most apt predictors of subjective wellbeing.<sup>18</sup> They find that “religiously active” people, defined as those who actively attend church and engage in faith-based activities, are likely to be healthier, live longer, and self-report higher levels of happiness and life satisfaction.<sup>19</sup> More specifically, they identify a strong positive correlation between

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<sup>10</sup> Lynn, Monty L, Michael J. Naughton and Steve Vanderveen, “Connecting Religion and Work: Patterns and Influences of Work-Faith Integration,” 2011. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0018726710386396>.

<sup>11</sup> Lynn, Naughton, and Vanderveen, “Connecting Religion and Work.”

<sup>12</sup> Cherry, Conrad, *Religion on Campus*. Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2011.

<sup>13</sup> Cherry, *Religion on Campus*.

<sup>14</sup> Cherry, *Religion on Campus*.

<sup>15</sup> Cherry, *Religion on Campus*.

<sup>16</sup> Cherry, *Religion on Campus*.

<sup>17</sup> Myers, David G. and Ed Diener, “Who is Happy?” *Psychological Science* 6, p.10-19, 1995.

<sup>18</sup> Myers and Diener, “Who is Happy?”

<sup>19</sup> Myers and Diener, “Who is Happy?”

strength of religious affiliation and frequency of worship service attendance on the one hand, and life satisfaction on the other.<sup>20</sup> Most notably, “highly spiritual people,” defined as those who consistently agreed with the statement “My religious faith is the most important influence in my life,” were twice as likely to report being “very happy,” compared to their “low spiritual commitment” counterparts.<sup>21</sup>

### **II.c. Institutional Culture**

Singer’s article “Five Trends in Spirituality and Religion” draws critical attention to the present-day interaction between institutions of learning and religion.<sup>22</sup> He identifies the increased prevalence of the question, “What about religion?,” amidst schools’ facilitation of programming on diversity and multiculturalism.<sup>23</sup> Singer’s big question is of how institutions can foster religious understanding, which has similarly been explored in other pieces of recent literature.<sup>24</sup>

An article titled “Faith and Higher Education Can Intersect in Many Different Ways” in *The Economist* points to a shifting understanding of the role of religion at higher education institutions.<sup>25</sup> The article emphasizes the ways in which religion has informed the very fabric of many elite universities, including Harvard and Princeton, which were founded with the purpose of training new ministers and Christian leaders in colonial America.<sup>26</sup> Schmalzbauer and Mahoney’s research indicates that despite the perceived secularization of American universities in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the study of religion at colleges has in fact drastically increased since 2000.<sup>27</sup> They link this resurgence in academic interest to the growing presence of religion in American life and the increase of religious pluralism.<sup>28</sup>

Eboo Patel’s article, “In Promoting Campus Diversity, Don’t Dismiss Religion,” further expounds upon this point about the recent exponential increase of religious pluralism.<sup>29</sup> Patel calls out universities for ignoring the fact that American colleges are more religiously diverse

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<sup>20</sup> Myers and Diener, “Who is Happy?”

<sup>21</sup> Myers and Diener, “Who is Happy?”

<sup>22</sup> Singer, Kevin, “Five Trends in Spirituality and Religion in Higher Education.” 2019, <https://www.naspa.org/constituent-groups/posts/five-trends-in-spirituality-and-religion-in-higher-education-research>.

<sup>23</sup> Singer, “Five Trends in Spirituality and Religion in Higher Education.”

<sup>24</sup> Singer, “Five Trends in Spirituality and Religion in Higher Education.”

<sup>25</sup> Erasmus, “Faith and Higher Education Can Intersect in Many Different Ways.” *The Economist*, June 13, 2018, <https://www.economist.com/erasmus/2018/06/13/faith-and-higher-education-can-intersect-in-many-different-ways>.

<sup>26</sup> Erasmus, “Faith and Higher Education Can Intersect in Many Different Ways.”

<sup>27</sup> Schmalzbauer, John and Kathleen A. Mahoney, “American Scholars Return to Studying Religion.” 2008, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1525/ctx.2008.7.1.16>.

<sup>28</sup> Schmalzbauer and Mahoney, “American Scholars Return to Studying Religion.”

<sup>29</sup> Patel, Eboo, “In Promoting Campus Diversity, Don’t Dismiss Religion.” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, March 11, 2015. <https://www.chronicle.com/article/In-Promoting-Campus-Diversity/228427>.

than they have ever been.<sup>30</sup> He contends that these higher education institutions are ignoring the importance of religious diversity and consequently turning a blind eye to interfaith conflict and religious discrimination.<sup>31</sup> He proposes that part of the issue is the flawed belief that religion is steadily declining—an idea that has been repeatedly proven wrong by social scientists, but that is preventing institutions from dedicating the deserved amount of attention to interfaith conflict and the need for diversity of beliefs on college campuses.<sup>32</sup> In light of the currently misguided approach to integrating religion and higher education, Patel proposes the ideal of a religiously diverse democracy in his piece “Faith is the Diversity Issue Ignored by Colleges. Here’s Why That Needs to Change.”<sup>33</sup> He defines a religiously diverse democracy as an environment in which students of different faiths interact extensively with one another, thus leading to the betterment of their school and their country.<sup>34</sup> Through highlighting the ways in which one religious group’s ideals might influence another’s, even if there are no intentional exchanges between the groups, also informed our team’s investigation into the interactions between Christianity, Islam, and Agnosticism/Atheism on Harvard’s campus.

For the purposes of our study, we focus on students who maintain higher commitments to their religious faith through participation in religious groups on campus. In Mohebpour et. al’s article on religious practice and student experience at university, she examines the ways in which students’ “degree” of religiosity changes their perception of the school environment.<sup>35</sup> They make an important distinction, positing that the specific religion matters more than the degree of religiosity (religious practice).<sup>36</sup> If a student’s religion is not perceived as “accepted” by the university, then that student’s increased religiosity has a negative impact on his or her experience at the school.<sup>37</sup> On the contrary, if a student’s religion is perceived as acceptable by the university, then that student’s overall experience at the school is more satisfying.<sup>38</sup> This work is helpful in demonstrating that religion is a vastly diverse category that cannot easily be studied as

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<sup>30</sup> Patel, “In Promoting Campus Diversity, Don’t Dismiss Religion.”

<sup>31</sup> Patel, “In Promoting Campus Diversity, Don’t Dismiss Religion.”

<sup>32</sup> Patel, “In Promoting Campus Diversity, Don’t Dismiss Religion.”

<sup>33</sup> Patel, Eboo, “Faith is the Diversity Issue Ignored by Colleges. Here’s Why That Needs to Change.” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, October 29, 2018. <https://www.chronicle.com/article/Faith-Is-the-Diversity-Issue/244953>.

<sup>34</sup> Patel, “Faith is the Diversity Issue Ignored by Colleges.”

<sup>35</sup> Mohebpour, Ida, Stephen Reysen, Shonda Gibson, and LaVelle Hendricks, “Religiosity, Religious Acceptance, Social Interaction, and Satisfaction with University Experience.” *International Journal of Christianity and Education* 21, No. 3, 2017. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2056997117725342>.

<sup>36</sup> Mohebpour et. al, “Religiosity, Religious Acceptance, Social Interaction, and Satisfaction with University Experience.”

<sup>37</sup> Mohebpour et. al, “Religiosity, Religious Acceptance, Social Interaction, and Satisfaction with University Experience.”

<sup>38</sup> Mohebpour et. al, “Religiosity, Religious Acceptance, Social Interaction, and Satisfaction with University Experience.”

a collective variable. The article also demonstrates that the relationship between religiosity and perceived religious tolerance is highly nuanced.

Three additional pieces that complementarily illustrate the complexity of the relationship between education and religion are those written by Hill, Mayrl & Uecker, and Glaeser & Sacerdote. These pieces all empirically examine the impact of education on religion. Hill finds that college educations yield some skepticism of empirical religious beliefs, Mayrl & Uecker point to religious service-based social networks as the primary contributor to differences in the beliefs of students versus non-students, and Glaeser & Sacerdote explain the connection between the prior two authors' conclusions by noting that education simultaneously decreases religious beliefs and increases religious service-based social network benefits.

In "Faith and Understanding: Specifying the Impact of Higher Education on Religious Belief," Hill focuses on classes at elite universities, which aligns with our examination of the impact of Harvard FAS curriculum on religiosity.<sup>39</sup> Hill notes that academic settings have typically been associated with liberal and secularizing influences, and that faculty at elite institutions are particularly secularly oriented, which could cause college educations to be particularly at odds with more traditional religious beliefs.<sup>40</sup> His findings indicate that undergraduate education does not significantly change students' faith beliefs, but their skepticism of empirical religious beliefs and their preference for institutionalized religion increase slightly.<sup>41</sup> Further, he finds that roles contributing to changes in religious beliefs at elite universities may include faculty approaches, student academic engagement, and social identities.<sup>42</sup>

In the piece "Higher Education and Religious Liberalization among Young Adults," Mayrl and Uecker identify several concepts and findings that are highly pertinent to our team's research – specifically pertaining to liberalization, social networks, and religious pluralism.<sup>43</sup> They also dispute the conventional assumption that increased comfort with religious pluralism, stemming from broadened exposure to religious diversity, leads to increased liberalization.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Hill, Jonathan P., "Faith and Understanding: Specifying the Impact of Higher Education on Religious Belief." *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 50, No. 3, September 2011, p. 533–551. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-5906.2011.01587.x>.

<sup>40</sup> Hill, "Faith and Understanding."

<sup>41</sup> Hill, "Faith and Understanding."

<sup>42</sup> Hill, "Faith and Understanding."

<sup>43</sup> Mayrl, D., and J. E. Uecker, "Higher Education and Religious Liberalization among Young Adults." *Social Forces* 90, No. 1, September 1, 2011, p. 181–208. <https://doi.org/10.1093/sf/90.1.181>.

<sup>44</sup> Mayrl and Uecker, "Higher Education and Religious Liberalization."



Ultimately, they find that college attendance has a weak effect on students' liberalization.<sup>45</sup> To the extent that college attendance does influence beliefs, however, they find that this outcome can be explained by social networks.<sup>46</sup>

Finally, Glaeser and Sacerdote's piece "Education and Religion" reconciles Hill's findings with Mayrl and Uecker's by explaining that education increases the benefits of social connections, while simultaneously decreasing the extent of religious beliefs.<sup>47</sup> This dynamic explains their primary empirical finding, which is that religious attendance increases with education across individuals, while religious attendance declines with education across denominations.<sup>48</sup> They note that students who attend college develop social networking skills that enable them to benefit more than non-students from attending religious services, while college educations also convey secular beliefs that clash with traditional religious views.<sup>49</sup>

### III. Methods

Our research team investigated several possible research methodologies in order to design research methods that would most effectively yield answers to our research question. Through David L. Morgan's "Focus Groups as Qualitative Research," we learned that focus groups are group interviews that rely on group dynamics, rather than on a single individual's participation.<sup>50</sup> Through prompting individuals to engage with and react to one another, rather than merely with the interviewer, focus groups facilitate enhanced dialogue and produce more comparative data.<sup>51</sup> Upon reviewing this method, we weighed the relative advantages and disadvantages of creating separate focus groups for Christians, Muslims, and Atheists. While this method could have provided strong comparative data through examining religious tolerance and purpose from different perspectives, our concerns outweighed the potential benefits of this methodology. As religious identity is highly personal and can, in many cases, be a sensitive topic, we ultimately decided that it would be best to instead rely on survey questionnaires and one-on-one interviews.

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<sup>45</sup> Mayrl and Uecker, "Higher Education and Religious Liberalization."

<sup>46</sup> Mayrl and Uecker, "Higher Education and Religious Liberalization."

<sup>47</sup> Glaeser, Edward L., and Bruce I. Sacerdote, "Education and Religion." *Journal of Human Capital* 2, No. 2, June 2008, p. 188–215. <https://doi.org/10.1086/590413>.

<sup>48</sup> Glaeser and Sacerdote, "Education and Religion."

<sup>49</sup> Glaeser and Sacerdote, "Education and Religion."

<sup>50</sup> Morgan, David L., *Focus Groups as Qualitative Research*. SAGE Publications, Inc; 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition, December 2, 1996.

<sup>51</sup> Morgan, *Focus Groups as Qualitative Research*.

### III.a. *Surveys*

Lynn et al.'s piece "Connecting Religion and Work: Patterns and Influences of Work-Faith Integration" utilized surveys to explore factors that contribute to work-faith integration.<sup>52</sup> Their research team reached out to 1,809 alumni and received responses from 412 of this pool, constituting a response rate of 22.7%.<sup>53</sup> As Lynn et al.'s research approach demonstrates, surveys have the potential to reach many individuals and thus receive a broad range of responses. Our research team similarly disseminated a survey to Christian, Muslim, religious nones, and religion specialists on campus.

In order to ensure that we collected as many responses as possible, our team used Google Forms. Google Forms, unlike other survey platforms such as Survey Monkey, accommodates an unlimited number of responses. In the survey, we asked a host of questions pertaining to perception of purpose and religious tolerance at Harvard. We made full use of various question formats, including multiple choice, checkboxes, dropdown lists, 1-5 scales, short answers, and long answers - depending on the format that would be most conducive to collecting critical information for the question at hand. Our survey questions can be found here:

<https://forms.gle/NgyVXUfv7XjfAyGw9>. The survey ultimately garnered submissions from 26 respondents, 61.5% of whom are Christian, 30.8% of whom are Muslim, and 7.7% of whom are Religious "Nones" (including Agnostic, Atheist, Humanist, Unsure, etc.).

When designing the survey, we kept several tactics in mind, which we learned in the research methods workshop. First, we ensured that the questions are not leading, in that they did not begin with statements that cause respondents to believe that any one answer would be better than another. Second, the questions were straightforward in nature, asking only one question, rather than tying multiple topics into a single question. Third, we were conscious of the survey's length. In order to capture the respondents' attention and encourage survey completion from all respondents who begin answering the questions, we kept the survey as concise as possible. Fourth, we carefully considered the order of the questions. We opened the survey with more overarching questions about purpose and tolerance, and then we ease the respondents into more personal questions regarding their faith and demographic information. The survey ultimately concluded with demographic information, because we do not want to begin the survey with this

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<sup>52</sup> Lynn, Naughton, and Vanderveen, "Connecting Religion and Work."

<sup>53</sup> Lynn, Naughton, and Vanderveen, "Connecting Religion and Work."

more sensitive, personal information. Further, placing demographic questions at the beginning of the survey could have influenced the respondents' answers by having them think consciously about the findings that we as researchers may be trying to glean. We also made sure to only ask demographic questions that were directly pertinent to our research questions.

Regarding the dissemination of the survey, we sent it to the members of HCFA and HIS, religious nones, and religion specialists on campus. For the religious groups, we sent it over their email lists and GroupMe/group messaging channels. We also drew our interview respondents from these same groups of individuals.

### **III.b. Interviews**

All three of us on the research team interviewed individuals from each of the four respondent groups. In addition to providing an incredible learning opportunity and exposing us to new beliefs, this approach also helped minimize biases that could have influenced the way in which we conducted interviews and interpreted information. In regard to our positionality, we were particularly cognizant of our religious identities - Aly as Muslim and Ashley and Charlotte as Christian.

In their piece "Membership Roles in Field Research," Adler and Adler explain that there are three forms of membership - peripheral membership, active membership, and complete membership.<sup>54</sup> They define peripheral membership as the least intimately connected with organizations, but still helpful in order to more closely observe members' activities.<sup>55</sup> Active membership constitutes a more involved position, in which the researcher partakes in the group's primary activities and thus acquires greater trust from other members.<sup>56</sup> Complete membership, meanwhile, represents full immersion as a "native" who assumes the emotional outlook of the organization's members.<sup>57</sup>

Having been educated on these various forms of membership, our research team was equipped to more sensitively and consciously interview respondents from the three specific groups. We took specific steps at the beginning of each interview to establish transparency and maintain the highest standards of ethical conduct, given that we were conducting research with human subjects. First of all, we were cognizant of the environment in which we conducted the

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<sup>54</sup> Adler, Patricia A. and Peter Adler, "Membership Roles in Field Research." *Sage Research Methods*, 1987.

<sup>55</sup> Adler and Adler, "Membership Roles in Field Research."

<sup>56</sup> Adler and Adler, "Membership Roles in Field Research."

<sup>57</sup> Adler and Adler, "Membership Roles in Field Research."

interviews, making sure that the interviews were in comfortable spaces that maintained the respondents' privacy. Next, we started each interview by educating the respondents on the overall topic and establishing their expectations, so that they knew exactly what to expect and what our research intentions were. We then had each interviewee sign a consent form and asked if they were okay with being recorded, while clarifying that any specific parts they requested would be kept off the record, and that their responses would be kept completely anonymous.

We then dived into asking questions. We entered into each interview with a standard set of pre-prepared questions, depending on whether the respondent was Christian, Muslim, a religious none, or a specialist (see Appendix), and the questions fell under four primary categories – faith background, lived experiences/sense of purpose, religious groups/community, and religious tolerance at Harvard. For each section, our team collectively devised guiding questions that were broad enough in nature to prompt rich responses, but also specific enough to prevent confusion. As interviewers, we aimed to be speaking for only about 5% of the interview, so that we could glean as much information as possible from the respondents. Although we had questions pre-prepared, we viewed these primarily as a helpful roadmap, rather than as a strict rule book that we needed to adhere to in a particular order. If a respondent seemed to have deep insights on one topic, we engaged with this more deeply. If a respondent went on a tangent that was linked to our research questions, we followed this new direction and adjusted our approach accordingly. At the same time, however, we endeavored to keep the interview focused on the overarching questions at hand and ensure efficiency for time's sake.

We each conducted six interviews, for a total of 18 interviews. Specifically, we interviewed 6 religious “nones,” 6 Christians, 4 Muslims, 1 Agnostic/Atheist/Humanist Chaplain, 1 former HCFA staff member, and 1 Muslim professor. The interviews were approximately 30 minutes in length, on average, and they were all recorded.

### **III.c. *Coding and Analysis***

After conducting the interviews, our team transcribed the interviews, utilizing Temi and Otter.ai services. We then carefully combed through to edit and check for accuracy. While transcribing, we took notes on initial themes that arose. We then built upon these notes when we qualitatively coded the interviews and collected pertinent quotations. These codes then informed our primary findings in response to our overarching research question and our three sub-questions, as explicated below.

## **IV. Findings**

### **IV.a. *Abstract***

Our research revealed a number of important trends about the role of religion at Harvard. According to the students we interviewed, we found that religion does, in fact, provide students with a deeper sense of purpose and identity, which tend to affect their career choices. With on-campus religious groups, we found that the deeper a student's involvement, the more the group is a source of meaningful friendships and the more it constitutes a safe space to tackle tough questions. Our findings pertaining to Harvard's institutional culture concluded that discrimination on the basis of religion, though often implicit, does still occur on Harvard's campus. We also found that while diversity training has been a focus for the university, the topic of religious diversity in particular seems to have been neglected. Interestingly, Muslim students have also faced more difficulty when attempting to fulfill religious practices. Finally, responses to the question of whether Harvard actively encourages exploration of religion and faith were mixed, with many reporting that it did foster religious exploration, and others claiming it did not.

### **IV.b. *Student Experience***

Through qualitative semi-structured interviews, we sought to understand the role of religion at Harvard College. More specifically, we wanted to understand the ways in which faith and religion influence students' understandings of themselves and their purpose. We asked the sub-question: How do students' religious beliefs affect students' lived experiences, sense of purpose, and meaning-making at Harvard? Through these interviews, we found three main findings relating to individual student experience. The first is regarding purpose and identity—religious students expressed strong senses of purpose and identity apart from their accomplishments and career aspirations. The second theme that arose was religious students' tendency to pursue careers that they believed helped others in a tangible way. The last central finding is that nearly all students expressed an interest in exploring religion and increasing open dialogue around faith.

The idea of purpose is one that is intrinsically tied to how we choose to live our everyday lives; however, it is simultaneously one that few students deeply and critically take the time consider. Overall, we found that religious students involved in either Harvard College Faith and Action (HCFA) or the Harvard Islamic Society (HIS) had thought much more about their greater purpose than their non-religious counterparts. When asked if she had a sense of purpose apart

from her career aspirations, one non-religious student responded, “I think right now, no...I thought I had a sense of purpose when I was going through job recruiting...I don't know...But now that that has come to a close, I have no idea what it is.” This student expressed a sense of uncertainty around her purpose in life. Moreover, she highlights the fact that she once attached her sense of purpose to her job search. Similarly, another non-religious student explicitly attached her purpose to her accomplishments as the Harvard Varsity Squash team captain. She explained, “My purpose—I would say the squash team is a lot of it. My academic, social activities orientate around squash and my schedule...And then I guess it's given me a purpose in terms of work. I have to be more strict to myself in terms of work. So is that what you mean by purpose?” This student even seemed to express a certain confusion with the question, indicating that she may not see her purpose in life as separate from her accomplishments.

Distinctively, nearly every religious student we interviewed expressed a sense of purpose directly connected to his or her faith and explicitly separate from accomplishments. Christians and Muslims alike expressed the importance of sharing their beliefs with others as part of their purpose both at Harvard, and in life. One member of HCFA explained that her purpose was to “be a light and an example of a Christian that someone could go and talk to if like they have questions about faith or are thinking about Christianity.” She furthered explained the Christian values of “being a witness” and “letting God speak through [her]”. She identified these pillars as highly important, but also qualified her statement by remarking that she has significant room for improvement in terms of implementing these pillars. A student from HIS elucidated her similar perspective on purpose: “I do feel like I have a sense of purpose; it would be a spreading my understanding of my religion to other people so that they can understand that the end of the day we are Muslim, but there's just some things that we might do differently.” A notable distinction here is that the Christian idea around discussing faith is more directly related to spreading and sharing of faith with non-Christians, whereas the Muslim idea is more related to increasing non-Muslims’ general understanding of Islam.

Even more than sharing about God, religious students conveyed a strong sense of purpose in serving others. One student involved in leadership in HCFA stated, “My purpose specifically is to look like Jesus.” He went on to explain that Jesus lived a life of service to others, and that he wants to follow Jesus’ example in that sense. Similarly, a student in HIS described her sense of duty in caring for others:

I really think that part of my faith is looking out for others and sacrificing some of your time in order for them to be happy, or sufficiently happy, I guess. And it doesn't mean that—at least in my faith—it doesn't mean that you should just throw away your whole life for that reason. But there is a balance that I think my faith encourages, and I'm trying to reach that balance.

Both of these statements reflect an others-centered orientation toward life. The religious student's life is not purely lived in self-service, but rather with a strong sense of service and duty toward others. This sense of duty also often manifests itself in religious students' career choices.

Nearly every religious student respondent, regardless of specific faith background, expressed a desire to help and serve others through their career choices. One student in HCFA noted, "My faith has made me value people in a way that I really want to be working for them on a day to day basis." Several other religious students echoed this sentiment, explaining the importance of justice and service as core religious values. Students with high religious commitment and involvement in HCFA and HIS stated that they wanted to pursue careers in fields that explicitly "helped people," such as law, medicine, technology, and public service. One student in HIS asserted that, "With Islam, there's this huge push for social justice, advocating for the poor, and I think my drive for public service and law comes from that. So I'm not planning on going the corporate route or patent law. I definitely see me being a lawyer being more tied to public service, so I think those values themselves drove me towards that route." This student clearly illuminated the difference between being a corporate lawyer and being a lawyer who is oriented toward public service. Correspondingly, a student in HCFA differentiated her desire to be a doctor by explaining that her goal was to start a clinic, with the specific mission of helping "young women who've gotten pregnant" by providing free medical care and support. Lastly, a Muslim student in HIS expressed that he would not "be able to live with [himself]" if he were to pursue a career that "stratified wealth gaps" or "contributed to marginalization" of certain groups. These students seem to be more interested in the positive impact they can have on the lives of others through their work and less interested in the status associated with their work.

Moreover, religious students tend to attach less value to money and more value to who they become through their career paths. One Christian student in HCFA reflected,

There was one point where money was a pretty important factor to what kind of career I was thinking about. And because of my faith values about what I think is the most important, I think money's not really up there anymore... Of course I want enough to be

able to support myself and a family if I have one. But it's much more like if I have any extra [money], I'd give it away.

This student demonstrates the way in which his faith has completely reshaped the way he understands the value of money. He also expressed that his purpose is to live like Jesus and does not believe in hoarding wealth, but rather in giving it away. One Muslim student in HIS stated, “I definitely do not think my career aspirations define me.” Accordingly, this mindset puts much less pressure on students to achieve and leaves room for academic risk-taking. A student in HCFA finds relief and security in his faith: “Believing that God has a plan for me...has taken a lot of the stress out of grades. It's not about achievement as much as about honoring God in the way that I do it.” There is a sense of freedom intertwined with a sense of security for this student. Several Christian students referred to “God’s plan” and the immense sense of security and hope it provides in their lives.

Lastly, all students, regardless of religious beliefs, expressed a strong interest in increasing dialogue and openness surrounding faith. Many non-religious students articulated that they had explored or been exposed to religious faith during their time at Harvard. For a few of the non-religious students, their time at Harvard has been characterized in part by an exploration of religious faith. One non-religious student noted, “I have been open to learning about faith through Christian groups, and I've gone to church with my other friends.” Another non-religious student said that college is “the time where [she] should explore [her] faith.” Yet, all students, both religious and non-religious, felt that Harvard faculty and administrators did not do enough to foster this kind of exploration or open dialogue, particularly in the classroom. One non-religious student explains, “[Faculty and administrators] don’t know how to talk about religion. That’s something that Harvard doesn't do very well. It's not brought up in classes as race and sexuality tend to be the main two criteria that people think of... [Professors] are like, okay, let's think about how they like address race and sexuality in these texts but never religion.” She understands this as a large failure on the part of the university, but believes students are making a notable effort to increase dialogue about religious faith among the student body.

#### ***IV.c. Religious Community***

To address the sub-question “Why do Harvard students opt to join religious groups, and what are these groups’ roles and impacts on campus?” of our team’s broader research question, we specifically focused on Harvard College Faith and Action (HCFA) and the Harvard Islamic



Society. HCFA is a Christian fellowship that is not race- or ethnicity-specific. It is also non-denominational. This is in contrast to some other Christian groups at Harvard whose members share the same racial/ethnic identity markers and denomination. HCFA is a fellowship under the umbrella of a ministry called Christian Union. Founded in 2002, Christian Union has chapters at the premier universities in the United States, and the ministry's emphasis is placed on intellectual analysis of the Bible and the development of Christian leaders. The Harvard Islamic Society (HIS) is the predominant Muslim group at Harvard, for both undergraduate and graduate students. Founded in 1955, the organization has a rich history of constituting the hub for Islamic life on Harvard's campus.

Our team interviewed six undergraduates in HCFA, four undergraduates in HIS, and one former staff member of HCFA (who is still involved with the fellowship through hosting HCFA Bible studies). It is first of all important to note that the culture and outputs of religious groups shift frequently, due to the intrinsically transient nature of the groups' student membership. As the former HCFA staff member explained, "it is tied to upperclassmen [and] to everyone who has been in the max in any given year." She went on to describe this constant change as "the blessing and curse of a place like a university." Despite these fluctuations, the interviews revealed several key themes of religious groups, specifically pertaining to potential for meaningful friendships, inward-facing diversity and exposure, and outward-facing focus.

Regarding the potential for students in religious groups to develop particularly strong bonds with fellow members, this was found to be true in both HCFA and HIS. A clear distinction was made, however, between student leaders and general members. Whereas general members often were involved only tangentially in the religious groups, often viewing them primarily as an outlet to learn more about God, leaders tended to have met their best friends and even blockmates through their religious groups. As one HCFA general member stated, "I don't think I really am involved enough to identify myself with HCFA." She only attends weekly Bible studies and explicitly said, "I don't want to go to their other events, and I don't feel as connected to the community because of that," and another member approximated that "40% [of HCFA members participate] in everything," and "60% [participate in] just the Bible study." A member of HIS noted that their organization faces similar challenges. She said, "We're both trying to provide a community and provide people with the space to grow religiously...when there are both, you're tasked with a lot." Given that this respondent was a former leader of the

organization, however, she explained that her closest friends are her three blockmates, all of whom are also in HIS. She explained that many Muslim students, perhaps because they are raised with a heavy emphasis on fellow Muslim community, “feel that affinity to be with other Muslims.” Along this vein, she noted that in her class, she knows of three Muslim-majority blocking groups and that she has “noticed that tendency, maybe also because there are so few” Muslims at Harvard. An even more extreme example is of another leader of HIS, who explained that she met her closest friends at a HIS dinner during Visitas, prior to her freshman year. When asked whom she confides in most during tough times, she specifically named a student who was her “Big Sib,” or informal mentor, through the organization. An HCFA leader shares a similar experience to these two HIS leaders, as all but one of her blockmates are from HCFA, “because that is where [she] spend[s] so much time.” She elaborated that the HCFA has “definitely influenced friend groups and also priorities” for her.

Why is it that students who are actively involved in these religious groups often grow so close with fellow active members? The interview responses imply that this largely stems from the students’ shared values and sense of purpose. As expounded on in the section above, many religious students’ career aspirations are largely informed by their religious beliefs. Further, they often perceive their purpose in life and at Harvard to be to spread God’s word and exemplify His love. When members are grappling with important questions about their beliefs, they also value the ability to turn to one another. As one HCFA member explained, “there’s a lot [of] openness of...talking about...the big questions that everybody’s wrestling with and not shying away from them.” Among religious groups, these shared values also often manifest themselves in the ways that members of the groups treat one another. One member of HCFA shared a pertinent and moving anecdote of a time when she was studying in Lamont and was “having a really hard time,” when “all of a sudden,...somebody (from HCFA) appeared with a cupcake and just left it there and walked away.” She recounted this story as a key example of the “culture of HCFA - being there for each other, [and upperclassmen] putting aside their time and volunteering to help out younger students with their studies.” Particularly at Harvard, there is a widespread perception that students primarily focus on their own individual needs and on maximizing their own opportunities and gain, rather than care for others. As a result, this HCFA member described HCFA’s culture as “counter-cultural at Harvard.”

Despite the values and beliefs that members of religious groups share, they also place great value on diversity within their groups. One HCFA member specifically cited the diversity as one of the reasons that she so greatly values the group. She went on to explain that HCFA is diverse “not only in terms of people’s actual origin, but also within beliefs.” For instance, some students are Catholics, while others are “evangelical evangelicals,” as well as everything else in between. As compared with Christianity, sects of Islam have more contentious relationships with one another - the primary divide being between Sunnis and Shias. In most Muslim communities, Sunnis are in the majority, although Shias comprise the majority of citizens in Iraq, Bahrain, Iran, and Azerbaijan. Due to this greater tension, one member of HIS approximated that there are “less than 15” Shias on Harvard’s campus, which has led the group to historically feel marginalized and excluded. She recalled that one of her leaders at a pre-orientation program chose “not to be a part of [HIS] anymore, because he just felt like they weren’t representing him.” In recent years, however, this same respondent noted that the organization has been trying hard to “accommodate...more Shias on campus.” Further corroborating this observation, another member of HIS referred to it as currently “somewhat diverse,” and another called it “inclusive.” One member of HIS specifically explained that her experience in the organization has “opened [her] up to different forms of practice, because people come from different faith backgrounds.” Further, she was “exposed...to different ways of worship that [she] hadn’t really thought about.” In other words, it is striking that despite the strong affinity that religious group members feel for one another, they simultaneously value their differences and view them as a powerful tool to learn about their peers and expand their horizons.

While religious groups are meaningful social and educational outlets for their members, these groups also place a heavy emphasis on their outreach to the community. A member of HIS detailed the “External” committee of the organization, which is its political advocacy group. Specifically, they host events like documentary screenings for the broader community, and also spearheaded the group’s involvement with the Act on a Dream walkout. As another member of the organization more straightforwardly stated, “we’re an activist based group.” He further explained that social activism is woven into the group’s missional fabric through fulfilling the obligation that the members feel to “stand up for...those underrepresented or...sidelined groups.” HCFA also focuses on the external community, although in different ways. Rather than placing such an outspoken emphasis on social activism, HCFA members strive to exemplify Jesus’ love

through loving others, even if in very small ways. For instance, they have undertaken initiatives such as “Random Acts of Kindness,” through which they left post-it notes with encouraging messages or snacks with students whom they had never met.

In addition to serving their communities due to the sense of duty and purpose that they derive from their religious beliefs, members of these religious groups grapple with struggles inherent to spreading the word about their faiths. As a member of HCFA explained, the organization distributed flyers at the beginning of the year, and there was “really good outreach from upperclassmen to freshmen.” These are some of the reasons that she perceives the organization’s “name [as] out there.” As these quotes imply, HCFA invests significant time and effort into attempting to spread the word of Christianity to others on campus. Members of HIS, on the other hand, expressed significantly more hesitation with such outreach. One member of HIS noted that “there isn’t a huge outreach effort on the part of bringing in non-Muslims.” She specifically linked this to members’ fear of being “read as trying to proselytize people.” She went on to say, “we don’t want to look like we’re trying to convert everyone, but at the same time, we want to show solidarity.” As this quote expresses, members of HIS often find it difficult to strike a delicate balance between serving the external community, and not being perceived as overly pushy or forward with their religious beliefs. This ties into the point in the next section, about the tolerance at Harvard for watered-down beliefs, rather than more established and traditional ones.

#### **IV.d. *Institutional Culture***

With the increase in international students and students from across the United States at Harvard over the last few decades, the university has had to adjust to accommodate the influx of diverse backgrounds. But how much has Harvard really been able to create an institutional culture of tolerance and understanding surrounding religious diversity, in particular? Does Harvard, as an institution, create an environment that is open to and welcoming of all faith backgrounds? Where might there be room for improvement? Between our surveys and one-on-one interviews, our research team asked a series of questions to address these questions and concerns.

The clearest way for us to begin understanding the institutional culture of religion at Harvard was to inquire about how many students had directly faced and/or indirectly witnessed discrimination on the basis of religion. While the majority of students said they had never been

explicitly discriminated against on the basis of their religious beliefs at Harvard, some students did point to specific scenarios of more implicit discrimination. One Muslim student in HIS describes a lack of response from the Harvard administration in the wake of the Christchurch mosque shootings in New Zealand in March of 2019, which specifically targeted Muslims: "there was zero response from the administration; [they] didn't send out any information." While this may not constitute outright discrimination, she went on to explain, "comparing that to the Tree of Life shooting [which targeted Jews] - obviously both were tragedies,...but the fact that that got a huge response from the administration but [the Christchurch shootings] didn't was a little suspicious." Another specific case of discrimination that was mentioned occurred shortly after the 2016 election of Donald Trump. A hijab-wearing Muslim woman was confronted in the middle of Harvard Yard and told to "go back home." While this occurrence of explicit discrimination was likely an outlier, it is nevertheless interesting to see that even at an institution like Harvard, one that prides itself on its ability to foster diversity and understanding, such instances of outright harassment and discrimination can still occur. Regarding faculty members in particular, one student noted that faculty may not be appropriately trained to navigate dialogue concerning religious diversity. This same point was made by a Muslim faculty member, and he described a number of instances in which faculty members made inappropriate comments in lectures.

The lack of religious diversity training for faculty seems to speak to a larger issue of diversity training in general. One faculty member underscored the significance of this matter upon reflecting on his time at Harvard when he himself was a student. He noted that compared to the present attitude toward religion at Harvard, he "could've been [a student] at a different institution. It's totally changed." He recounts the increase in diversity, in general, that he witnessed at Harvard. With that came a larger focus on formal "structures" such as women's centers, multi-cultural/ethnic centers, and LGBTQ centers. Despite this increased dialogue, he stated - "It's interesting; they've just ignored religion". While this represents a single view, it is one put forth by a professor who has had decades worth of experience at Harvard as both a student and as a member of the teaching faculty, and thus should not be taken lightly.

While discrimination and diversity training provide good indicators of the institutional culture of religion at Harvard, the university must also be assessed on its tolerance and facilitation of religious practices. While no Christians highlighted struggles faced in performing

religious practices, a number of Muslim students spoke about issues pertaining to food choice, prayer spaces, and Ramadan observance. On the topic of food choice at Annenberg, a student lamented that “at Annenberg, the choices are...[food with] pork in them,... cooked with alcohol,...and then options like beef, which again I don't eat if it's not halal.” She continued to describe her troubles when scouring the ingredients to ensure that the food aligns with her religious beliefs, saying, “At least like I wish...they wrote Halal and then they crossed it out or something, so I'd just know instead of having to read all the ingredients and keep everyone in line.” At first, prayer spaces were equally hard to come by. A Muslim faculty member recounts that HIS “didn't used to have a dedicated space, so early on Fridays they would get a space in Phillips Brooks House, one of the little rooms there, and there they would lay out their sheets and so on.” When the Muslim population at Harvard began to grow and the space HIS was using was no longer viable, this faculty member became involved in assigning an appropriate space for prayers. He recalled, “I remember in part of these discussions I would have with some of the people in the College's Dean's office, they wanted to put them way back, like...Vanserg Hall [that is] way past the Semitic Museum.” The faculty member described how he fought hard to secure a space for HIS members to pray in, and expressed his frustration that it required faculty intervention for the university to devise a suitable solution. Finally, the holy month of Ramadan is also a time of difficulty for a number of Muslim students. One student argued that Harvard makes it extremely difficult to observe fasting during Ramadan, as they don't “accommodate Muslims who ha[ve] to break their fast at eight, [because] Annenberg closed earlier.” While Harvard did try to solve this issue by giving grants to the Muslim chaplain to buy meals for affected students, this chaplain then became responsible for feeding not only the undergraduates, but also the graduate students. As one Muslim respondent noted, “That's an even bigger population, and you have a small cramped room. Everyone's sitting on the floor trying to eat and it's like, again, no one should have to struggle when trying to follow their faith.”

Regarding the question of whether Harvard actively encourages exploration of religion and faith, the answers were mixed. Some students felt that course offerings were sufficient - a Muslim student recounted a class she was taking on Islam, and that she was pleasantly surprised to see that the course and its readings, were not Sunni-dominated (as they arguably are in the Arab world). She also spoke of a Harvard-sponsored visit to Mecca during the time of Hajj, describing it as “a form of exploring faith and committing an act of faith that [Harvard]

allow[s].” Conversely, another student lamented that Harvard does not actively promote the exploration or practice of religion, and rather requires students to do so themselves. This respondent lamented, “I think that their solution is providing you with money for you to...perform your own workshop to educate other people on campus on your situation.”

Other students were even more actively frustrated with Harvard’s lack of encouragement of religious practice and exploration, particularly regarding the way in which Harvard is often perceived as a secular institution. One student said, “I feel like they don't take steps to encourage people to be faithful or have an atmosphere in which you feel open with your faith or you would not feel judged.” Along this same vein, a faculty member claimed that students often feel that practicing religion is stigmatized, saying, “the other big complaint I've heard is that,...generally speaking, Harvard is such a secularized institution, both in its faculty and students, that sometimes they feel that they're looked down upon because they're religious, because religion is seen as something backward or superstitious.” One Muslim student argues that by virtue of the students who come to Harvard and the professors who are hired, “there is an unspoken understanding that religion is not discussed in class,” and rather that issues are discussed in “purely secular terms.” Given the discrepancy between academic discourse and religious belief, there seems to be a desire from students of all faith backgrounds for more open dialogue on issues pertaining to religious life.

It seems that while Harvard has actively attempted to fill gaps in its offerings and institutional culture, it still has significant room for improvement in countering stigmatizations of traditional religious practices, overcoming faith-based challenges (particularly for Muslim students), and fostering religious exploration on campus.

## **V. Conclusion**

Overall, our qualitative investigation into the role of religion at Harvard illuminated the fact that religious faith does play a large, yet often invisible, role on campus. Through one-on-one interviews and survey responses, we found that highly religious Christian and Muslim students find their sense of purpose within their faith, which allows them to largely transcend the constraints of credentialism. Even more, we found that religious students maintain a strong sense of service and commitment to justice, as exemplified by the missions and actions of both Harvard College Faith and Action and the Harvard Islamic Society. Though popular narrative

would state otherwise, religious community on Harvard's campus is still thriving and providing a strong sense of community, solidarity, and belonging for those who invest in them.

Students had varying thoughts on the institutional culture surrounding faith and religion at Harvard. One Christian student poignantly noted, "We live in such a culture of tolerance...Tolerance of anyone's gender identity, anyone's sexuality, anyone's beliefs or anything like that, until someone thinks that you ascribe to a belief system that is intolerant and then they are, in turn, intolerant of you, even when they're preaching tolerance. And that is super toxic..." This student highlights what she perceives as hypocrisy within Harvard's culture of "tolerance." Several religious students pointed out that this facade of tolerance masks a deeper unwillingness to engage with religious differences. A non-religious student stated, "I think sometimes Harvard is trying to be so tolerant that they don't even want to talk about the differences, but we're not a homogenous group. We are very diverse;...I would love for people to be okay talking about differences in religion." Students want to see the campus shift toward a culture of open dialogue, one that transcends fears of "political correctness." Every student we interviewed, even those who identified as non-religious, have some relationship with religion—one that is central to their understanding of the world.

In future research, it would be interesting to examine Harvard students' definition of tolerance, in terms of religion, politics, gender, sexuality, and the like. Potential research questions could be: How do Harvard students define and understand the concept of tolerance? How do students' identities and backgrounds inform their interpretations of tolerance? These would be fascinating questions to explore with more time and resources. Our study was limited by a small sample size and our snowball sampling methodology. In future research, it would be helpful to draw a random sample of each population and also include more populations with greater specificity—such as separating Agnostic students from Atheists, or including students who identify as Jewish, Buddhist, Hindu, etc. Moving forward, we would like to see Harvard take religion, both as an identity marker and as a legitimate tool for meaning-making, more seriously, by facilitating greater dialogue both in and out of the classroom.



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