



The Quest for Meaning and Wholeness: Spiritual and Religious Connections in the Lives of College Faculty

Lindholm, Jennifer A.; Astin, Alexander W.; and Astin, Helen S.
Wiley, 2014

Book Review

Tags: faculty | meaning making | spiritual formation

Reviewed by: William Yoo, *Columbia Theological Seminary*

Date Reviewed: December 23, 2014

Jennifer A. Lindholm begins her work on the spiritual proclivities and religious perspectives of college faculty in the United States by noting that they teach in a “spiritually engaged nation” where nine in ten adults profess belief in God or a Universal Spirit (1). Religion is ubiquitous in American life – 80 percent of Americans consider religion as important to their lives – but it is also a complex and contested matter that fosters community and generates conflict across the country.

Although college students are no different than other Americans in their spiritual and religious seeking – three in four college students are “searching for meaning and purpose in life” – Lindholm argues that they are not receiving sufficient instruction and mentoring from their professors. Two-thirds of college students report that their professors “never” encourage discussion of religious topics and nearly half are dissatisfied with how their college experience has provided opportunities for spiritual reflection (212). Yet Lindholm astutely demonstrates that college professors are no less spiritual or religious than their students. Drawing upon a 2012 survey of 8,447 tenured and tenure-track faculty from 264 diverse colleges and universities, the author finds that 19 percent of faculty self-identify as “not spiritual and not religious,” a figure only four percentage points higher than the general American population (50). Students are still disappointed in the lack of religious dialogue on their campuses in part because their professors experience competing tensions in their own attempts to incorporate their spiritual and religious lives into their work.

In the second chapter, Lindholm uses faculty perspectives to provide helpful delineations of what is meant by self-identifying as “spiritual” or “religious.” She interprets her data in the

following five chapters to illumine the substantial challenges faculty face when seeking to connect the spiritual and religious dimensions of their lives in the academy. Although faculty who are able to freely and openly express their spirituality are “more likely to view themselves as being authentic in their work and personal lives,” respondents often stated that they encountered overt hostility in the form of religious discrimination from colleagues and stumbled over more subtle obstacles like institutional expectations to be available to work on weekends (ix). One of the many fascinating points in Lindholm’s study shows how faculty from all faiths and in every kind of educational institution – public, private, and religious – experience these tensions. Evangelical faculty at public schools reported the highest levels of occasional discrimination (39 percent), but faculty from other religious traditions, such as Buddhism, Islam, and progressive Christianity, explained how they felt no less like outsiders at work (126-146).

Lindholm accomplishes her primary purpose successfully and presents a rich, data-based account of the spiritual and religious lives of college faculty in the United States, and also articulates several cogent and compelling prescriptions to create “valued space for the spirit within the academy” so professors and their students can more fully connect higher education with human wholeness (216). Theological educators will also benefit from this book. Lindholm’s call for greater consideration of spiritual and religious diversity within the scope of collegiate intercultural development applies equally to seminaries with student bodies that are increasingly becoming more ethnically, racially, and theologically diverse.

https://wabash.center/resources/book_reviews/the-quest-for-meaning-and-wholeness-spiritual-and-religious-connections-in-the-lives-of-college-faculty/