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## **FEATURE**

### **The Spiritual Experience of Adventist Students: The Case of Newbold College**

*Julian Melgosa, PhD*

*ABSTRACT — Twenty in-depth interviews were conducted among a randomly selected sample of students at Newbold College, Bracknell, England. All of them were between 18 and 21 years of age and came from European countries. The purpose of this project was to investigate the nature of the informants' religious experience past, present, and future and how Adventist higher education had affected their faith development. The following basic themes emerged from the analysis of the interviews: (a) Early faith experiences (i.e., home and family, especially mother, were most significant in early religious development); (b) Conversion (i.e., most participants stated that they had experienced a religious conversion and went on to describe it); (c) The church organization (i.e., the church is perceived as a desirable institution with strengths and areas that need improvement); (d) The Seventh-day Adventist (SDA) lifestyle (i.e., most informants agreed with the expected SDA lifestyle but warned about the danger of forgetting the bases); (e) The role of SDA higher education (i.e., peer positive influence appears as the most prominent factor in faith development during higher education); (f) The importance of religion (i.e., religion consistently appears as one of the most relevant factors in participants' lives); (g) Faith in the future (i.e., almost all participants showed determination to remain faithful members of their church).*

#### **Introduction**

For the past ten to fifteen years, there has been a growing interest to research how college years affect students' lives. These efforts have been made both from the secular level (Astin, 1993; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991) as well as the religious level (Dudley, 1994; Dudley, 1999; Garber, 1996; Moore, 1988; Suyemoto & MacDonald, 1996). Particularly, the question, "Does Christian education make a difference?" has been repeatedly asked. It is no wonder that institutions and individuals would like to have a clear answer to this question. Churches,

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organizations, families, and students themselves incur heavy financial and personal burdens to maintain Christian college education.

Findings show evidence that, albeit imperfect, the Christian environment of Christian institutions does make a difference in the process of faith and religious development, when compared with its counterpart in secular institutions.

Birkholz (1997) in his institutional case qualitative study found that most students felt that they had grown spiritually in a significant way throughout their Christian college experience. Dudley (1994) compared a group of SDA (Seventh-day Adventist) youth attending denominational high schools and denominational colleges with their SDA counterparts in public high schools and public colleges. Those in the denominational institutions obtained significantly higher scores on the Thayer Long-Form Faith-Maturity Scale (Thayer, 1993) than those attending public institutions. Attendance to Christian college yields additional benefits. For example, Serow and Dreyden (1990), in their sample of 1,960 students from eleven colleges, found that spiritual/religious values were positively correlated with frequency of involvement in community service. Schafer (1997), using data from 282 upper-division college students, reported that students having a sense of meaning and direction enjoyed a lesser tendency to personal distress than those lacking that quality of life meaning and direction.

It seems, however, that the spiritual/religious influence of college has to be exerted carefully in order to produce changes that are substantial and durable. Dudley (1998) points out the poor or adverse effect of religious instruction without being accompanied by the appropriate example and behavior. Coercion is also identified as an adverse method that cannot work, as values can only be acquired and internalized through free choice of a variety of options. Alternatively, Winslow (1998) considers that teachers' explanation of truths is insufficient and he recommends the allowance of space where inquiry can be awakened as one of the most wonderful challenges of teaching.

This study was designed to investigate the nature of the subjective spiritual/religious experience of Newbold College students. A qualitative approach was chosen over a survey-style quantitative method in order to allow the researcher to explore the nuances of this complex process. This method also allowed for further questions in order to clarify particular responses. Although questions were open and granted a sense of freedom for responses, they were set with a specified, double purpose:

1. Explore the personal experience of informants in terms of past, present, and future.
2. Find out how Christian college education affect the process of faith development.

### **Methodology**

The interviews were conducted on two separate occasions. The first interview included most of the questions and the second was planned for triangulation and to explore four further questions pertaining to their experience in denominational higher education.

Assurance of confidentiality was kept at all times. Participants were contacted through a personal, written note asking to come to the researcher's office for just a few moments. Once the initial contact was made, the purpose of the project was explained and each participant was invited to participate in a one-hour interview about their religious experience. All except two were willing to participate. Appointments were set for the interview and the two that preferred not to participate were substituted by two others from the same country (who had been kept on a reserve list). Participants were asked for permission to be audio taped. All except one consented.

Participants were interviewed two times. The average duration of the interviews was 50 and 15 minutes respectively. A few of them took 2 hours for the interviews. On the other hand, there were a few that said everything in 25 minutes. Nevertheless, these extremes were rare.

### **Questions**

The first interview was divided into three distinct sections: Past, Present, and Future. The second interview dealt with their perception of Adventist higher education.

Sample of "past" questions were:

- How do you recall living your faith?
- Do you think you have experienced a conversion? If no, any intense religious experience? If yes, how was it? What was the person or circumstance you consider significant in your conversion?

Sample of "present" questions were:

- What do you think of the church leaders?
- What do you think of the church doctrines?
- What about the lifestyle proposed by the church?

Sample of "future" questions were:

- How important do you expect the church to be in your life in the years to come?
- If marriage is an option, would you only marry an SDA person or are you open to other choices?

Sample of SDA higher education questions were:

- How is Adventist higher education affecting your religious experience?
- What are the main factors influencing your spiritual life, beliefs, and values as a college student? Peers, teachers, staff, others?

Questions were designed to avoid monosyllabic answers or very brief answers. Whenever possible, the interviewer asked informants to elaborate or to clarify their answers for best understanding.

### **Participants**

Participants were selected using a stratified random sampling method to assure participation from all countries represented. In addition, the following criteria were applied:

- Being a SDA members or raised in SDA families.
- Being a national of a European country (East or West).
- Being born between 1975 and 1979.
- Having the necessary ability in the English language to express themselves in an interview (some were EFL students).

Twenty students were selected representing the following 16 countries (number of participants in parenthesis): Albania (1), Croatia (2), Estonia (1), Finland (1), France (1), Germany (1), Holland (1), Iceland (1), Italy (1), Lithuania (1), Norway (3), Spain (1), Sweden (1), Switzerland (1), United Kingdom (2), Yugoslavia (1).

Even though gender was not considered in the set of criteria, the proportion of male and female participants was balanced: eleven men and nine women. Their ages ranged between 18 and 21 years, the average being 20.

Seventeen were baptized members of the SDA Church, while three were not baptized but they were raised in Seventh-day Adventist families. Half of the group (10) had attended an SDA school (primary or secondary or both). The remaining 10 had never been students of Adventist educational institutions before they joined Newbold College.

**Reflection on Methodology**

During the process of gathering, analyzing and interpreting information, the researcher experienced the complexity and uncertainty of interview research. Twenty-two open questions were asked to 20 participants giving a total number of 440 answers to be processed. Some of them were brief, some of them were quite extensive, some were cold and monotonous while others were full of emotion and bore the tone of a psychotherapeutic session. The task of extracting the essence of these statements without leaving behind the real intention and meaning was difficult and necessarily imperfect, but the process was facilitated by the openness and clarity in communication employed by most of the participants.

**Analysis of Answers**

All tapes were transcribed and written notes (for the participant who did not consent to be taped) elaborated and typed. Once on paper, contents were carefully studied seeking the following: (a) the general group trend of the responses, (b) the emerging significant themes and (c) the general conclusions and implications of the experience.

These are the seven significant themes emerging from the content analysis: (a) Early faith experiences, (b) Conversion, (c) The church organization, (d) The Seventh-day Adventist (SDA) lifestyle, (e) The role of SDA higher education, (f) The importance of religion, (g) Faith in the future.

**Early Faith Experiences**

Almost all informants point to their home and their family as the most relevant factor in their early religious experience. And, surprisingly, this is also true for those coming from families of nonbelieving parents. In such cases, participants talk about parents who were tolerant and open enough to set a good foundation for their later conversion.

The figure of the mother appears prominently. In many cases, their first religious memories have to do with their mother reading the Bible or Bible stories to them or praying with them. This emphasis of mother may be explained saying that in most cultures, mothers spend a greater amount of time with children than do fathers or other family members. In addition, the absence of the father may be an explanation. Without being asked directly, four participants said they grew up in a home where parents were divorced, children remaining with their mother.

In a number of cases, the father did not belong to the mother's church, leaving her alone in the transmission of religious values. A couple of cases of alcoholic fathers appeared in the interviews. One participant said:

- My father drank very heavily. Once he took a beating to the head and that affected him. His drinking periods would become longer and his sobertimes shorter and shorter. So my relationship with my mother became stronger. She was my best friend and even now she is my best friend. I think because of my father we had to be close to support each other. (PQ2,11)

After the family, the role of the church comes second. These are representative samples of such statements:

- It was fun. The Sabbath School is what I remember best. I enjoyed it thoroughly as a child, especially because we could participate. (PQ1,15)
- The only thing I remember [of my early religious experience] is the church. There was a friendly environment. I always wanted to go to church. Most of my friends were from the church. I liked that. I remember that I never resented going to church. (PQ1,5)

Prayer also appears as a relevant factor. In early stages it is recalled as something associated to specific routines: before eating, before going to sleep, etc. However, many talk about some moment around the age of fourteen to fifteen when they saw prayer as something meaningful. Prayer played a key role in their spiritual experience from early years to adults.

### **Conversion**

More than three fourths of the informants stated that they had experienced a conversion. The majority of them talk about a point in their past that is clear and identifiable. Others refer to their conversion as something imprecise occurring throughout the years. And others – only a minority – admit to not having gone through any form of conversion.

Statements show a great variety in experiences: from those that reached conversion in a calm and progressive manner to those who needed an encounter with the police through delinquency to realize that the direction of their life needed a change. In between lies a rich array of circumstances that favored conversion: The example of a youth leader, the lessons of a Sabbath School teacher, the influence of an evangelistic campaign, or the communion with God through silence, prayer, and meditation.

When experiences of conversion are reported, the personal element is always present. Oftentimes unusual, strange individuals influence young people to have an encounter with the Lord. Other times, conventional persons, such as pastors, are

found as the primary agent. This passage illustrates the peer influence in the process of conversion:

- From fifteen to eighteen I basically lacked the church. Maybe in obedience to my parents I would go to church but felt very uncomfortable there. It was meaningless. I drank regularly. Later on I met one of my old friends. She told me that she had been converted to Christianity. She had stopped drinking and going out and now she belonged to Christ. She confronted me with the issue and asked me questions. . . . What is your faith? What are you going to do? And this was for me the beginning of a new life. From 15-18 my life was not giving me anything, nothing that I wanted to hold on to. I felt meaningless, worthless. So finally I realized that there was in this world something more precious and stable than any other thing I had experienced before. I made a commitment to Christ that I'd follow Him. I felt great assurance that things would get better and the following year was the best year of my life. (PQ4,2)

Another student referring to his experience as a student missionary pointed out to some relevant person met while in this service:

- My family environment helped a lot. But I had this friend I met in \_\_\_\_\_. He was an Australian. He decided to go there for family reasons and stay there to help the church. He did strange things sometimes, but he influenced my spiritual development a lot. (PQ5,3)

Another student refers to someone he just met:

- One time when there was a meeting, I left and ended up meeting a young man there. And we ended up very quickly talking about different things he had gone through in life. I hadn't gone exactly through the same things, but I could identify with him in a way. And so for the first time in my life I actually told him some of the sinful things I had done. And he didn't condemn me. He led me to the Bible, to Isaiah 53 about Jesus and Psalm 51 about David. The pieces started to come together. And I believe the Spirit was working on me, so I prayed, looked at the past and understood why Jesus was on the cross. After this moment I felt like sharing my experience with others. (PQ4,4)

In these examples and several others, the personal influence of someone else becomes apparent. Interestingly, these persons of influence were generally outside the family circle. This should not suggest that the role of the family is unimportant, but rather that the external influence becomes more relevant in late adolescence and youth.

The circumstances of conversion tended to happen far away from the family environment: school or college, camp, student missionary experience, or a trip somewhere. In order to interpret this findings correctly, it is important to remember that all informants were boarding students away from their family. Interviews with those remaining at home may give a rather different view.

### **The Church Organization**

The free-thinking environment of most European regions made the researcher expect a rather negativistic attitude towards the church organization. However, results did not indicate that tendency. European young people tend to be critical about all types of institutions, the church included. But in this case, criticism seemed moderate, responsible, and mature.

These are a few examples:

- I observed in the last conference session that the church leaders are looking for something, new methods. They are realizing that the old methods do not work and they are honestly looking for solutions. They are open to changes. (PrQ1,3)
- My faith is independent from the church. If the church takes a stand but I believe differently I still consider myself part of that church, but I believe in a different way. Ordination of women, for example. I believe that women should be ordained, but still I want to belong to this church because all other things that are in the church I believe too . . . so even if I do not agree with the stance on women's ordination, I still understand why they chose that position. This way keeps me open and within the church. (PrQ1,5)
- I have observed that during the last years they [church leaders] have encouraged more young people to participate. They have young people on committees. I think this is very positive. Because before they tended to keep it for themselves. (PrQ1,6)

Reactions did not lack areas that needed improvement. The most commented issues were two: The apparent distance between youth and church leaders and the rather formal and rigid style of worship typically conducted by the church. The following statements are representative of several in the group:

- One might forget that the young people are those that actually will be the church of tomorrow. One should do a lot to keep the young people in the church and too little has been done. In my country young people find church



very boring. The church has nothing to offer and it is really sad. My friends are really drifting from the church because there is nothing there. So I really think that the organization should do something about this. (PrQ1,1)

- My suggestions would be to use microphones, keyboards, lots of instruments to improve the sounds inside the church. I think that music would bring young people to God in the church. (PrQ2,8)

There were other criticisms as well. One referred to the church looking upon more liberal thinkers as non-Christians. There were four or five comments along this line. Another participant, however, reported that the SDA church in his country was too liberal and that youth did not have a clear idea as to what is to be a Seventh-day Adventist. One of the informants criticized the leaders for not being sufficiently prepared to manage the finances of the church. Another referred to the risk of Adventist Development and Relief Agency (ADRA) losing its SDA identity by accepting European Union funds. Another talked about the church getting too close to the world.

On the whole, sufficient evidence was found to say that the general attitude of those interviewed was positive and that their vision of the future of the church was hopeful.

No comments against church doctrines were found, even though there was one question to this effect. On the contrary, many emphasized their acceptance of the doctrines giving examples of specific beliefs that gave them strength and encouragement, such as the second coming, righteousness by faith, the Sabbath, and a personal relationship with Jesus.

### **The Seventh-day Adventist Lifestyle**

Again, answers given to the questions in this area were generally mature and reasonable. More than three fourths agreed with the guidelines given by the church in regards to traditions such as attire, diet, recreation, etc.

There was, however, one area of dissatisfaction among many of the group. Although they recognized openly the great value of the SDA lifestyle, they perceived that the church has placed too much emphasis on these behaviors, forgetting some of the more fundamental aspects of Christianity. These are examples:

- I don't see any problem with the lifestyle that we promote as Adventists. But again, I do not expect other people to live up to them right away because it takes time. (PrQ3,4)

- The standard should be the Bible. We cannot make excuses to do things that are contrary to the principles of the Bible. On the other hand, I'll say that before coming to a conclusion we should consider the culture, the background of the people, how they grew up. For example, in my country, the culture is so much different from the rest of European countries, especially the western countries. For example, when it comes to vegetarianism, that is a taboo: it is something really weird but certain Adventist ministers or independent ministers come and emphasize vegetarianism, or Christian behavior: we shouldn't watch TV, we shouldn't hear certain programs, and we shouldn't read anything. And we cannot preach sanctification before we are convinced that we have preached justification. (PrQ3,10)
- I think the lifestyle is pretty good. It is. They don't recommend movie theaters, night clubs, and pubs, all those kinds of secular places. Even though a film seems innocent, in most cases it is a waste of time. It leads you away from God because you sit there and waste your time watching. There is no interaction. You just receive information. Still I understand why people revolt against it. It's because our leadership doesn't follow it. (PrQ3,13)
- I think that people in my country have understood it the wrong way. Not that the lifestyle is wrong, but it has not been explained well. Maybe the problem is our own explanations to them. (PrQ3,14)
- When it comes to diet and food in my country, most people are against meat and alcohol, but cakes, sugar, they love it. They have big parties. The food is not too healthy, even though they don't eat meat and I find that is a contradiction. (PrQ3,18)

Lifestyle is, therefore, well accepted in general. Only when certain persons start making it, in the words of one of the participants, "a second gospel," do young people start to feel uncomfortable.

### **The Role of SDA Higher Education**

More than half of the participants referred specifically to the positive role that other students at the college play in their religious growth. Informal conversation, discussion, friendship, example, prayer groups, etc., offered more spiritual nourishment than any other source. These are representative examples:

- Other students have affected my spiritual growth significantly. Indeed. With my friends and my fellow students I discuss not only my beliefs, my faith, but also my problems. This is very important to me, especially when you do

not have your family close to you. I would actually say that I can relate to many of my fellow Christian students better than I could relate in some areas with my parents. (HQ12,2)

- To me it is basically students. We all – most of us – come here because we want to be attached to the SDA church. We may not be perfect Christians yet. We are young and want to try life before we calm down, but still the friends I have, they really changed me. (HQ12,18)

At times the example of peers is not positive. These are comments from two female participants:

- I don't know. (Doubting). But there are these students coming from Christian backgrounds. It feels like they get away from home and they do everything they can. They don't come to study and this pulls you down a little. It is very interesting because when people come from non-Christian backgrounds and they see the students here who are fourth-generation Adventists and they are not very strong, then they feel like, 'What's that faith for?' (HQ3,14)
- I tend to notice that people are baptized when they are 13 or 14, and they still think that they are Christians, but really they are not. I know a lot of students. They hardly pray. They told me themselves. They do not have time for God. It is this tendency to exclude God. They don't really take it all that seriously. I don't know if this has affected me, but I do know that this can be negative for the college. I have talked to a number of students who think that it is actually harder to be a Christian, because you are actually more tempted to do what you shouldn't do here than in secular colleges. (HQ3,18)

Although not as commonly as that of peers, the influence of teachers through their example and class discussions/activities appears to be another significant factor in faith influence. In general, students tend to think that the Christian perspective presented by teachers helps them grow spiritually. This was especially emphasized by Business students.

The attitude towards mandatory worship seemed, for the large majority, a negative one. These comments came from all types of students and countries of origin.

- I understand that each student has agreed to it when they choose to attend, but the picture that the school is giving is very negative in my eyes. I am

referring to actual recording of your worshipping God. I think some students go because they are forced they know they have to be recorded. (HQ3,1)

- Sometimes you don't feel like going to worship. You could have a moment of meditation and prayer in your own room, but sometimes you feel the pressure that you have to go – you have to attend worship because they take attendance. (HQ3,11)
- The main problem with worships is that people go there just to get the record of being there. Even the person who is leading the worship just comes and reads something out like saying, OK, let's get it over with. (HQ3,12)

Although in less extent, the other side of the argument was also present:

- This is an Adventist college. Now, people need to make their choice before they come here. They know very well that this is part of the curriculum. (HQ3,10)
- Worships are positive. They create in me the habit, every day and every week. I did not have this before I came here. I did not have it at home. This has affected me positively. (HQ3,18)

Another strength perceived by many of the participants was the social atmosphere. They refer positively to a family-like community of a small SDA college—assemblies, musical programs, trips to prison, trips during the breaks that enhance spiritual growth, etc.

In responses related to the expectations of Adventist higher education, the group splits roughly equally into two categories:

1. Those with relatively high spiritual expectations that were disappointed at first as they thought that students and staff would be impeccably committed to the Lord and their beliefs; and
2. Those with rather low expectations who were surprised to find a community of believers that were willing to accept them.

### **The Importance of Religion**

One of the more crucial questions to explore was: How do you live your religion? How does religion affect your life?

For the majority of the participants, religion emerged as one of the most relevant factors of their life, something that accompanies them permanently. Two of them even declared that they had tried unsuccessfully to separate themselves from religion. These are typical answers to this question:

- Religion today makes me ask questions and I think it's good. Religion means a lot to me. I want to tell others about it, but I am not really sure how. (PrQ5,3)
- It is quite important when I think about it. It affects my life a lot. The Sabbath is a very important part of the week, and there are things that I obviously wouldn't do because of the way I believe. Prayer, to a certain extent was something ritualistic to me when I was a child (i.e., prayer before eating, prayer before going to bed), but now it is probably more like if I want to talk I will and not because I am supposed to like when I was younger. This is something I practice regularly. (PrQ5,6)
- I think it makes a difference in my attitude. It makes me excited to find out more about it. I like to attend religious meetings. Also, the social aspect is important, because you cannot think about religion without people. If I did not have religion in my life, I would be like other nonbelievers nice but thinking more about myself than about other people. I would not back up my religious ideas. (PrQ5,7)

One young lady evaluated her religious experience as low. Yet, her statement immediately takes a positive direction:

- It is worse at the present. I don't know why. Maybe is my fault. Now it is worse, but in the future (even this very year) my relationship with God will be better and better. I know. Because He knows me and I know Him. (PrQ5,8)

### **Faith in the Future**

Eighteen of the 20 participants showed their intention to remain in the Adventist faith in the future.

One participant, who gave indications of being in the middle of a spiritual crisis, when asked about his faith in the future, said:

- Yes, of course (I see myself as an Adventist in the future). This is what I've been living for. (FQ2,15)

As for the two participants that showed doubts about the future, one ended up saying:

- It really bothers me that if I am not on God's side I am on the devil's side. And I don't like that. I would not like to cause suffering by working against God. So, maybe yes (I see myself as a Seventh-day Adventist). (FQ2,18)

Another question about future plans and expectations was: "If marriage were an option, would you only marry an SDA person or are you open to other options?"

All the informants were single. Fourteen of them did not allow for any other option except to get married to an SDA man or woman. The remaining six were open to the possibility of marrying a non-SDA person. Interestingly, one of the participants did not see herself as an SDA member in the future. However, she answered yes to getting married to a Seventh-day Adventist.

Among the six who were open to mixed marriages, three referred to the idea of gaining the other person to the gospel, whereas the other three could not see any guarantee of success in having an Adventist spouse, arguing that there are many good men and women among non-Seventh-day Adventists.

Everyone in the group showed their determination to train their children should they have them in the Adventist faith. And this is also true even for those who did not see themselves as SDA members in the future.

### **Conclusions**

1. Contrary to some appearance of worldliness, young people stated their active search for faith and religious values. This was a clear, strong position of the majority of participants.
2. Their family of origin was seen as a source of religious nourishment during the growth years. However, at this postadolescent stage, their family was perceived as having a secondary place on the matter of religious and faith development.
3. Difficulties were seen by most interviewees as a way to get closer to God.
4. The informal influence of peers is perceived as the main factor of spiritual growth. Teachers and pastors are also considered important but not as crucial as peers.
5. Participants recognize that, although negative influences can be found, there are many possibilities of spiritual growth in the environment provided by a Christian college.

6. Young people participating in this study showed a relatively high degree of acceptance of SDA doctrines and traditions.

7. Looking at the future, most informants expect a growing level of commitment to their spiritual growth as well as to the church organization.

This project constitutes an attempt to present in-depth data on a single institution of Christian higher education. Additional qualitative research from other such centers in different locations is needed. Replications of this type will reveal details and perspectives that are necessary to understand youth and to formulate plans of action.

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