

Fellowship as Social Capital:
Student Religious Belief and Religious Organization on a Canadian University
Campus

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Abstract

This thesis is an exploration of strain, its sources, its manifestation, and how individuals cope with it. The particular scenario under investigation is that of Christian university students in a secular academic environment. Using Agnew's general strain theory, Goffman's theory of discreditable stigma, subcultural theory, and recent advances in the study of social capital, the strain experienced by Christian students in a secular university atmosphere was explored. Ethnographic content analysis of on-campus Christian groups, participant observation and semi-structured interviews of 43 Christian university students were used to investigate four postulates:

1. Christian students experience strain as a result of their religiosity on a secular campus;
2. This strain manifests as a discreditable stigma;
3. This strain results in Christian students becoming members of on-campus Christian groups (seeking a subculture); and
4. Memberships in Christian groups provide access to support through social capital.

There was evidence to support postulates 1, 2, and 4, while postulate 3 was not supported by the data collected.

Strain theory proved to be a useful concept for understanding how Christian students interacted with their secular environment. The data suggest that the university atmosphere was challenging to their beliefs both inside and outside the classroom. Christian students also indicated that they often censored themselves in front of their colleagues and peers and did not feel comfortable disclosing their Christian beliefs to new friends. The reason given for this was more time was needed

in order to quell certain negative assumptions and stereotypes that non-Christians may have about Christians. This description is suggestive of Goffman's concept of discreditable stigma, in that stigmatized persons attempt to "pass" so that their stigma (Christianity in this case) will not prejudice current and future encounters. Students did not join Christian groups as a way to cope with the strain they felt within academia, as many students joined these groups upon entry into university (rather than joining after encountering strain). It was found that students experienced benefits from membership within Christian groups, demonstrating the utility of social capital (i.e., network of support) as a conceptual framework.

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Chapter 1- Introduction

INTRODUCTION

In our contemporary secular society many people seem to have no problems openly speaking disparagingly about religion. Recently a CBC news article (“Why Can’t God be More Like Us?”) did just that. Richard Handler compared God to a malicious dictator, who demands perfection from (what Handler refers to as) His “underlings.” Handler then demands, “Why can’t God be more like us?” (Handler 2007). In fact it would appear that anti-religious sentiments are alive and well in our contemporary society as *The God Delusion*, *God Is Not Great*, and *Infidel* (a feminist critique of Islam) were all on the list of best selling books in Canada for 2007 (Adams 2008). Although it is not my intent to begin a discussion about free speech and censorship, it is my intent to draw attention to the ease with which Handler makes statements such as the ones above. In one small article he has insulted three monotheistic religions and their adherents.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that this not just happening in the larger cultural context, but it is also happening on the interpersonal level, for example in the routine interactions within the university setting.¹ The champions of science and free thought, whom universities celebrate, have for years been making disparaging comments about religion. For example Marx famously stated that religion is the opium of the people (Marx 1978:54), and Nietzsche suggested that Christian morals are only fit for the weak, and should thus be obliterated (1990). Reiss contends: “Historically, religious dependence on God has been criticized as a sign of weakness...the desire for dependence...immaturity, mental health problems, an arrest of psychological growth and failure to self-actualize” (Reiss 2000:51). These

¹ For simplicity I will refer to any post-secondary institute as a “university.”

examples are so compelling because academia purports to be accepting and tolerant, and a venue for the free exchange of ideas. Yet even with this mandate, blatantly insensitive comments have made their way into classrooms, not only in course material, but also during discussions among peers. In a Canadian university context I would argue that anti-Christian statements might be more prevalent than disparaging statements made about other religions, because of our respect for diversity, and emphasis on the importance of multi-culturalism. Religions such as Judaism and Islam can be understood as not only other religions, but are also intertwined with ethnic identities. A derogatory comment made about Judaism can easily be interpreted as anti-Semitism, similar to comments about Islam and their connection to Islamophobia. I would attribute this to our respect for diverse ethnicities or nationalities, whereas because of Christianity's ubiquity and historical prominence within Canada, an anti-Christian comment does not become attached to ideas of racism or xenophobia (see Chapter 3 for further discussion). A notable recent experience I have had was in a graduate level seminar. While discussing my research a fellow student responded to my query about why academics appear to be hostile toward Christianity by indicating that it was because "they [Christians] all ride onto campus, banners waving, ready to stuff their beliefs down your throat."

MAIN THESIS

The above situations and examples have led me to a preliminary research question: how do Christian students deal with the challenges associated with a secular academic environment? The argument that will be developed in this study is as follows. The academic environment is hostile (or at least inhospitable) to Christianity and Christian students. This hostility creates adversity for Christian students as they

attempt to integrate themselves into the secular academic environment, causing them to experience what Robert Agnew and others define as ‘strain’ (Agnew 1992; Merton 1938). This strain will manifest as a discreditable stigma (Goffman 1963), such that students will attempt to hide their spirituality from peers and colleagues in order to protect their reputations. As a result of the strain experienced by Christian students, they will seek out a cultural setting (such as a campus Christian group) in which to express and share their values and beliefs. Finally, these Christian groups provide access to social capital to help students them manage their strain within academia in a socially positive manner.

The theoretical framework of this study (to be explained in more detail in Chapter 2) relies heavily on general strain theory (Agnew 1992), as this study is an investigation of *if* and *how* Christian students experience and cope with adversity within academia. An exploration of academic discourse will provide evidence as to how academia has been conceptualized as hostile to religion (specifically Christianity). Goffman’s ideas regarding stigma will be used to frame how students may experience this adversity or strain. In particular, his concept of “discreditable stigma” will be applied to the experiences of Christian students; as their stigma (their Christianity), is one that is not readily apparent to others.

This thesis will also draw upon the ideas embedded within subcultural theory and recent theories of social capital. Cohen’s conceptualization of the subculture (Cohen 1955) will be used to explain the process by which Christian students may join Christian groups. If in conflict with his or her environment, an individual desires a place in which (s)he can reproduce the rituals or attitudes that his or her environment deems deviant or wrong. This is what Cohen referred to as a subculture. Although subcultural theory has been largely abandoned within sociological literature

(Bennett and Kahn-Harris 2004:4-6), it offers a straightforward approach to understanding the reasons why individuals become members of groups. Once members, the social capital literature becomes a rich resource for explaining the benefits group membership can provide to an individual. The concept of social capital can be best conceptualized as the process that exists within a relationship granting each party access to the others' resources. These resources can come in many forms: monetary, political or social privileges, safety, or access to support. Previous studies have found that membership in religious groups provides members with a wealth of social capital (Beyerlein and Hipp 2006; King and Furrow 2004; Putnam 1995; Thomas 2004). This study follows this line of inquiry by applying these insights to the study of Christian university students.

The theories discussed in this thesis, although well established in sociological literature, have not before been applied to Christian students in a secular university setting. There have been numerous studies focusing on religious university students (see for example: Becker 1977; Dillon 1996; Hunsberger, Pratt and Pancer 2002; Johnson 1997), all of which implicitly accept that religious students are in tension with their secular environment. However, none of these studies have contextualized this relationship in terms of strain, or examined the causes of this tension. For these reasons, the current study is an exploratory one, which will utilize qualitative methods. These are further discussed in Chapter 3.

Ethnographic content analysis will be used to locate and describe the mandates of three Christian groups on an Eastern Ontario University campus. Participant observation will be used to investigate the content of Christian group meetings, to inform interview questions, and to corroborate results revealed by interviews (where applicable). Semi-structured interviews will be the main source of

information to investigate the four postulates in the main thesis: (1) Christian students experience strain as a result of their religiosity on a secular campus; (2) this strain manifests as a discreditable stigma; (3) this strain results in Christian students becoming members of on-campus Christian groups; and (4) memberships in Christian groups provide access to support through the mechanism of social capital. This chapter will also include a brief discussion about the ethics and the process of obtaining approval from the General Research Ethics Board for research involving human participants. The results of the study are presented in Chapter 4. The fifth and final chapter will discuss the broader theoretical implications of the study and will suggest areas for future research.

Chapter 2 - Theoretical Framework

INTRODUCTION

This thesis is an exploration of social strain, how it is manifested, and how people cope with it. The particular case for examination focuses on Christian students living on a secular campus. In the present chapter, an effort is made to describe the theoretical context of the study. Accordingly, this chapter will briefly outline the basics of general strain theory and then attempt to situate the current case within this framework. It will outline what the sources of strain are for Christian students, how students may experience this strain, as well as how Christian groups on campus may help them to cope with this strain.

As stated in Chapter 1, the main argument states that because of academia's hostility towards religion (in general, the particular case here is Christianity), Christian university students become malintegrated into the academic environment – a situation that could result in adversity or strain. This strain is experienced as a discreditable stigma, forcing students to “hide” their Christianity. Because of the adversity Christian students face, they seek out religious groups or clubs on their university campuses. These religious groups become a source of social capital (networks of trust, communication and support) as friendships are formed. This results in access to spiritual, social and academic resources for students to negotiate their positions within academia as Christians.

GENERAL STRAIN THEORY

The study of strain has a long and rich history, as some of the “founding” members of the discipline of sociology have grappled with this very idea. Some of the earliest writings about strain came from Marx's (1963) theory of worker alienation (strain felt by workers who are never able to see the fruit of their labour),

and Durkheim's (1951) suicide (strain resulting from excessive or insufficient regulation or integration). Adopted by criminologists, the concept of strain has been used for the last century to explain criminal and/or deviant behaviours (see for example Merton 1938). For the purposes of this chapter I will rely on Agnew's (1992) General Strain Theory, which has attracted considerable research attention (see for example: Baron 2003; Broidy and Agnew 1997; Gendreau 1996; Hagan and Foster 2003).

The main idea of Agnew's strain theory is simply that people face adversity while attempting to achieve their goals. Agnew describes it as a product of negative relationships, or relationships where one is not treated as (s)he desires to be treated. Agnew notes, "Strain theory has typically focused on relationships in which others prevent the individual from achieving positively valued goals" (1992:48-49). He describes three different types of negative relationships: "(1) other individuals may prevent one from achieving positively valued goals, (2) remove or threaten to remove positively valued stimuli that one possesses, or (3) present or threaten to present one with noxious or negatively valued stimuli" (Agnew 1992:50). Furthermore, strain theory assumes that these negative relationships cause the individual to experience negative affect, which results in the adoption of some course of action or coping strategy intended to relieve these emotions. He describes three "adaptations to strain": cognitive coping strategies (ways that the individual re-conceptualizes the strain), behavioural coping strategies (physical actions such as removal from the strain-full situation, or exacting revenge), and emotional coping strategies (the expression of their strain in forms such as creative artwork, exercise, meditation or drug use). An elaboration of the cognitive coping strategies is necessary here, as it is most applicable to the study at hand.

Agnew describes three ideal types of cognitive coping strategies: (1) ignore or minimize the importance of the adversity, (2) maximize positive outcomes or minimize negative outcomes, and (3) accept responsibility for the adversity. The first strategy he exemplifies with the statement “it’s not important.” An individual will feel strain from adversity while attempting to achieve a goal, only if that goal is of personal importance. Therefore, to combat the strain felt by the inability to achieve the goal, the individual can either reduce “the absolute and/or relative importance assigned to goals/values and identities” (Agnew 1992:67). The statement “it’s not that bad” exemplifies the second strategy. In this case the individual will ignore the adversity by either maximizing previous achievements, or minimizing the possibility of negative outcomes. This may be accomplished in two ways: “lowering the standards used to evaluate outcomes or distorting one’s estimate of current and/or expected outcomes” (Agnew 1992:67). The third strategy can be summed up by the statement “I deserve it.” Individuals can decrease experienced adversity by convincing themselves that they are in control of the situation and that they are responsible for their own downfall (i.e. they “deserve” the outcome). The assumption here is that the main source of strain does not result from the inability to achieve the goal, but rather from the violation of what Agnew calls the “equity principle” (the idea that we live in a just society). Should this principle be violated, there would be reason to fear that the individual could feel this strain again in later life. Taking responsibility for the situation will abate that fear.

The specific situation that strain theory will be applied to is that of Christian students within secular academia. This is an especially pertinent issue, as a comprehensive review of the literature would indicate that there have been only four studies that have entertained the idea of academia being hostile to religion (Bramadat

2000; Greeley 1977; Smith 1913; de Witt Burton 1924). However, none of these studies systematically examine whether there are significant sources of strain for Christian students within academia or how students cope with the strain they do experience. This study was designed to address these specific questions, which can be expressed as four postulates: (1) Christian students experience strain, as a direct result of their religiosity, on a secular campus; (2) the strain that they experience manifests as a discreditable stigma; (3) as a result of the strain that they feel they join Christian groups on campus; and (4) membership in Christian groups provide access to the social capital necessary to deal with strain in a socially positive way.

SOURCES OF STRAIN

In this section, it will be argued that the major source of strain felt by religious students results from the fact that the academic environment is hostile to religious students. This is suggested by literature which emphasizes (1) the way some academics conceptualize the dialogue between scientists and religious leaders (including the dichotomization between religion and science), (2) the types of studies that have been done of religion in secular educational institutions, and (3) particular styles of academic discourse.²

As noted by several writers (see for example Barbour 1990; Richardson and Wildman 1996; Russell 2004; Stahl, Campbell, Petry and Diver 2002) it would appear as though science and religion (and by extension scientists³ and religious leaders) are -- and have always been -- enemies. A review of this literature indicates that although the stated purpose of these books is to create an understanding between

² Religion is not always referred to as something negative or detrimental. In the social capital literature religion and religious groups are heralded as one of the most abundant sources of social resources. This will be addressed in a later section of this chapter.

³ I will be using scientist, academic and scholar as interchangeable concepts.

science and religion, the authors actually exacerbate the problem. For example one writer, addressing the work of “scholars of science and religion” states:

What is both crucial and unique is that [scholars of “science and religion”] are committed to the pursuit of such dialogue based on *mutual* respect and a willingness to hold their beliefs self-critically and hypothetically in hopes that such dialogue will lead to deeper understanding and even mutual understanding (Russell 2004:xiii, emphasis original).

This example introduces the idea that creating “mutual respect” between scientists and religious leaders is *unique* to this particular avenue of inquiry. The implication here is that there does not currently exist any real level of respect between scientific and religious scholars. This reinforces the idea that science and religion are naturally oppositional, or there would be no need for this special type of inquiry to create a dialogue between the two. In fact, this idea has been echoed in other sources, that there is a conflict between science and religion, and that mutual respect is lacking.

Many theologians [try] to show either that there never was a basis for conflict between science and religion, or that old differences have been successfully accommodated. Philosophers of science, on the other hand, seem less inclined to agree that any such *rapprochement* has taken place. Clearly, the canons of Logical Positivism leave little room for religion to constitute anything more than humanistic ethics (Stark 1963:3, emphasis original).

There are 2 notable aspects of this quote: the first is that scientists are unconcerned with accommodating religion because it is nothing more than “humanistic ethics.” This insinuates that religion has nothing to offer as far as discovering any type of truth or reality about our world. It would also suggest a certain type of arrogance regarding how “science” thinks about “religion”; the type of truth that religious understanding has to offer is so inconsequential that the inhabitants of the scientific world do not feel the least bit threatened by it. Second, this quote anticipates the second part of my argument: that academic rhetoric creates a dichotomy between what is “religious” and what is “scientific.” In Stark’s quote (shown above) there is an insinuation that because religion has accommodated scientific understandings, it is somehow weaker or more apologetic than science. The dichotomy that is typically

seen in debates surrounding science versus religion attributes more “hard” or stereotypically “masculine” traits to science, and “soft” or more stereotypically “feminine” traits to religion. For example, McIntire notes, “natural and supernatural, material and spiritual... reason and faith, rational and emotional, objective and subjective” (McIntire 2007:13). Another example of this is cited by Lyon, Beaty and
Mixon:

Prior to the academic revolution, one of the professor’s primary roles was to serve as an example of moral integrity for students, and hiring virtuous faculty members was one of the primary means by which such institutions’ maintained their religious identity...After the academic revolution had run its course, university faculties were more devoted to scholarly research and disciplinary mastery and less concerned with the moral development of undergraduates (Lyon et al. 2002:327).

This quote carries the implication of a dichotomy between “scholarly research” and religion (or in this case “moral guidance”). The description indicates that in more traditional times, before the academic revolution, faculty were preoccupied with moral guidance (with no mention of any type of research or scientific inquiry), but after the revolution they shed this responsibility and become involved in “scholarly research.” This creates, what would appear to be two mutually exclusive categories.

As stated earlier, not many studies have directly addressed the possibility that the academic environment is hostile to religious students. A representative example of how some academics address this idea is:

[E]ducation encourages critical thought and is the primary agent by which people are exposed to scientific and other forms of secular knowledge that may be antithetical to religion (Petersen 1994:122).

Many studies do not even directly engage the assumption that the university introduces a new type of knowledge (thus a new way to think about yourself and the world around you), they just cite other studies that have examined students’ religiosity to justify their research. This, it can be argued, is academia naturalizing the process rather than investigating it further. There have been countless studies that have examined the status of religious students on university and college campuses

(see for example Becker 1977; Burchard 1970; Dillon 1996; Feldman 1969; Feldman 1970; Frankel and Hewitt 1994; Greeley 1965; Hunsberger 1978; Hunsberger, Pratt and Pancer 2002; Johnson 1997; Madsen and Vernon 1983; Petersen 1994; Stark 1963) which have all operated under the assumption that somehow an introduction to the university atmosphere will decrease religious commitment. As evidenced by the above quote, academics assume that there is something particular to the university environment (i.e. secular knowledge) which would cause students to “lose their religion.” It is worth noting that there is no consideration that this “secular knowledge” could have been encountered elsewhere prior to entry into university (i.e., high school).

Furthermore, scores of studies have suggested that senior students tend to be less “orthodox” or “conservative” in their religious beliefs and attend church less often than their junior counterparts. However, other evidence shows that in fact some students become less religious during university, some students retain their level of religiosity, and some students become more religious during university (Feldman 1969, 1970). Yet, there is still an assumption widely held that university weakens faith. Even though there has never been strong evidence to support this assumption, a lack of scholarship refuting it, and contradictory evidence some academics still cling to this assumption. For example, as one article states:

Yet none of what [social scientists] have done has seriously challenged the verdict, which has already been written into the record. They could simply assume as a matter of course that formal education introduces a weakening of faith (Johnson 1997:231).

Somehow the assumption that religious students will come to university and lose their religion has become accepted without any real understanding of why or how or even if this process occurs.

Studies of the religiosity of university faculty complement the studies that have been conducted with religious students (see for example: De Jong and Faulkner

1972; Lyon, Beaty and Mixon 2002; Parker, Beaty, Mecken and Lyon 2007). I would argue that such studies by their nature suggest that the integration of science and religion at the personal level is so foreign that it is studied almost as if it were a deviant behaviour. It would appear as though this “debate” between science and religion has permeated our thinking to the extent that academics have a difficult time believing that other academics can be religious people at all. These studies have produced, as was seen with religious students, no real substantial results to conclude either that faculty members are losing their religion, nor that religion has no place in the classroom. For example, Lyon et al. (2002) discuss the opinions of faculty in four self-identified Christian universities⁴ towards integrating faith and academics across six categories: (1) university mission goals; (2) classroom activities and faith; (3) extra-curricular activities; (4) preferential faculty hiring; (5) understandings of academic freedom; and (6) integrating faith and learning. Lyon et al. generally found that faculty members did not have a problem integrating religious and secular goals in the classroom. Although it would appear that faculty tended to be hesitant to discuss personal religious experiences in the classroom, they had no problem discussing such matters outside of the classroom, or discussing religious issues brought up by course material in the classroom. Results also showed that the faculty members at three of the universities would not sacrifice academic freedom for religious ideology, nor did they support preferential hiring practices for religious academics. Meanwhile, other scholars are studying this as if it were a stigmatized phenomenon. Even when accumulating inconclusive results more and more academics become interested in finding out if in fact there are religious faculty, as well as why faculty are religious or

⁴ A Christian University is one which publicly declares that their institution actively fosters values of a particular Christian denomination, and one in which there are explicitly Christian goals in their mission statement.

to what extent faculty members are religious, without fully explaining what they expect to find or why they expect to find it.

The final piece of evidence that academia is hostile to religion can be found within the style of discourse that academics engage in while discussing religion, the most salient of which is secularization theory (or also commonly referred to as the secularization thesis). This theory will be used to illustrate one legitimate way that academics think and talk about religion and the role religion plays in our society (as it is a theory that was created by academics). Also, the reader should be aware that there has been much discussion and debate about the ways in which one should use the term “secularization” and the “thesis” has been changing ever since it surfaced. While a comprehensive discussion would take us too far afield, it is necessary to review the basics of the theory.

Swatos and Christiano (2000) describe both the “bold” and “mild” versions of the secularization thesis. The bold version essentially states that all of our accepted religious symbols and meanings will be replaced by secular ideas, which will reach its pinnacle with a “religionless” society. The “soft” version of the secularization thesis, although less curt, leads one to the same conclusion. The argument follows the logic that with the separation of church and state, more and more institutions became funded by the government or private institutions, and thus began to lose their religious character. This coincided with the advancement of modern science which essentially decreased the church’s authority over things such as medicine and education. The result is that more and more, religion has been pushed from the public into the private sphere. The final state that many academics picture is either religion being something that does not appear in the public sphere at all or that its waning influence will culminate in a gradual disappearance.

Again, there are murmurs that something about academia, something about science is causing religion to disappear or erode. Even in the face of harsh criticism by the (then) president of the Southern Sociological Society (Hadden 1987), scholars continue to use this “theory.” I would attribute this to the “normalization” or the expectation (by academics) that religion will simply fade into the background (Sherkat and Ellison 1999:364). Although the question of why there is this expectation is outside of the scope of this study, it suggests that academics cannot see religion surviving in our current climate, which carries the implication that religion is becoming less important to people in general.

Further evidence of this “anti-religious” academic discourse can be pulled from various sources. While discussing the role of faith-based (non-profit) agencies in the United States, Sosin and Smith argue that:

A religious response may be defined as one where those who make the decision to react claim they actively consulted religious discourse in the process. A secular response is one made on the basis of pragmatic, professional, or other concerns that cannot be directly linked to religious discourse (Sosin and Smith 2006:539-540).

This quote exemplifies the dichotomy that was discussed in an earlier section. It implies that a “pragmatic, professional response” is somehow the opposite of a religious response, or that a religious response cannot be pragmatic and professional. In a discussion about social capital as it relates to democracy, Newton describes the idea of thick trust as cited by Coleman: “Communities of this kind are generally socially homogeneous, isolated, and exclusive, and able to exercise the strict social sanctions necessary to reinforce thick trust” (Coleman cited from Newman 1997:578). He then adds that there are few places that one sees this “thick trust” in the western world, “The West may also have pockets of thick trust formed in total institutions such as small sects, *churches*, ghettos, and minority communities” (Coleman cited from Newton 1997:578; emphasis added).

What can be seen in this quote is a reference to a church as a “total institution,” or a community that has the power to exercise some sort of strict control over its members. In this sense, religion is almost indistinguishable from the popular meaning of the “cult”⁵ which has total control over all of the behaviour of its members (rarely do we think of this as a positive thing, let alone a neutral thing). Some more obvious examples are in cases where the author will describe others’ views or treatment of religion within their studies. For example, “Bourdieu perceives religion almost exclusively in organizational terms, exemplified particularly by a rather Voltairean image of the Roman Catholic Church as an instrument of oppression and exploitation” (Verter 2003:151).

It is also interesting to note that Verter berates Bourdieu for seeing only an organizational aspect to religion. There has been some debate in the literature over the usefulness of operationalizing religion only as church attendance or time spent reading the bible, as was done in past decades (although things have changed since then).⁶ If we can justify operationalizing religion simply as something that someone “does”, not only can we see a lack of respect for the complexity of faith and belief, but it also implies a dogmatic, disengaged follower that diligently attends church without considering the ramifications of such action.

⁵ The term “cult” is no longer used within the sociology of religion, as the very term implies something negative, thus biasing analysis. I use it here simply because the description of communities which have thick trust sound the same as the common understanding of what a cult is.

⁶ Sociology of religion literature has expanded definitions of religiosity to include what is now known as “intrinsic” and “extrinsic” religiosity. Intrinsic religiosity refers to the interest in the spiritual side to religion, or the use of religion to answer the hard questions in life. For example it would be operationalized (with respect to Christianity) with such concepts as: how deeply one believes in God, if they believe Jesus is the Son of God, and if they believe in the virgin birth. Extrinsic religiosity is the more ritualistic aspect of religion, the use of religion for security, social status, and as a way to build a friendship network. For example extrinsic religiosity (as applied to Christianity) would be operationalized by what people do such as: church attendance, time spent volunteering for church events, and time spent in bible study (Ardelt and Koenig 2006).

HOW STRAIN IS EXPERIENCED

As previously stated, strain theory describes individuals who experience negative relationships in which they cannot achieve their desired goals. In the case of students, the goal can be academic achievement, networking, and/or the creation of positive social relationships (friendships). As described above, the strain felt by *Christian* students relates to academic intolerance of their faith. It has been anecdotally suggested that this academic intolerance has implications for achievement of university student goals. A few years ago, while discussing my research interests with a friend, he disclosed that he was Christian (something which I had not known previously) and that before entering university he had attended a Bible College. Although he was happier at university (because of the free exchange of ideas and meeting other students from diverse backgrounds) he indicated that he had higher marks in Bible College. Regardless of grading schemes and the academic difficulty of course material, he felt as though this was related to sometimes feeling like an outsider because of his faith. He also discussed that he found residence life much different, very challenging, and sometimes had a difficult time with course material; because of this he had begun to question his faith. The result of his questioning was increased stress, which he indicated, had begun to disrupt his friendships here and at home, and his academic studies. As indicated in this student's story, academia's intolerance to Christianity has two implications; first that what is different about Christian students is their faith, and second that the academic environment necessarily deems this difference "undesirable." For Goffman, such an undesired difference is termed a "stigma" (1963).

The idea of "stigma" is a familiar concept; it is an indicator of something negative. This can be encapsulated by three ideal types: "(1) abominations of the

body (physical defects), (2) blemishes of individual character (dishonesty, psychological defects, criminal behaviour), and (3) tribal stigma (nationality, religion)” (Goffman 1963:4). As Goffman explains though, the “difference” is relative to the situation (it cannot be positive or negative on its own), so perhaps in the academy faith carries a stigma, but in another location, such as a faith group, it is viewed as positive. “The term stigma, then, will refer to an attribute that is deeply discrediting, but it should be seen that a language of relationships, not attributes, is really needed. An attribute that stigmatizes one type of possessor can confirm the usualness of another, and therefore is neither credible nor discreditable as a thing in itself” (Goffman 1963:3). Goffman explains that there are two ways in which people can experience stigma: the discredited stigma and the discreditable stigma. The discredited stigma occurs when “the stigmatized individual assumes his differentness is known about already or is evident on the spot” (Goffman 1963:4). The discreditable stigma is evident when “he assumes it is neither known about by those present nor immediately perceivable by them” (Goffman 1963:4). In the case of Christian students, I would argue that they carry a discreditable stigma, as it is not something that is readily apparent (as a physical difference would be) and the individual is the only one who can tell other people about their “differentness.”

Goffman describes the experience of the discreditably stigmatized person as being in constant tension because they need to manage information about their difference when in social situations. Should the individual be able to “pass”⁷ the differentness, if discovered, can then discredit them. The consequences of revealing a discreditable stigma are that it will not only change the current social situation, but it will also prejudice future encounters with those persons, and possibly harm the

⁷ Be viewed as the same as others in a social situation.

individual's reputation. Although it may seem as though attempting to "pass" puts the individual in a more risky situation, it is important to remember that being "normal" comes with rewards. As Goffman points out, "Almost all persons who are in a position to pass will do so on some occasion by intent" especially if "the individual's stigma may relate to matters which cannot be appropriately divulged to strangers" (1963:74).

COPING WITH STRAIN

In order to explain how Christian students cope with the strain encountered in academic settings two theories will be used. Subcultural theory illustrates the need for, and development of faith groups on campus. Ideas derived from the social capital literature will be used to explain the benefits of group membership.

There has been evidence to suggest that participation in peer groups leads to positive health and social benefits (Putnam 1995). Furthermore a growing body of literature has discovered that there are positive health benefits for people of faith. Religion has been positively related to higher levels of reported happiness, less substance abuse, depression, and greater overall well being (Ardelt and Koenig 2006; King and Furrow 2004; Maselko and Kubzansky 2006; Vilchinsky and Kravetz 2005). If peer groups are positively associated with health and social benefits, as is religion in general, then religious groups must be a rich source of well-being. In fact, studies of on-campus religious groups have shown that membership (in these groups) helps students to maintain or even increase their religiosity over the course of their university career, as compared to religious students who are not members of on-campus religious groups (Madsen and Vernon 1983). Religious on-campus groups

have also been shown to be positively associated with health benefits and self-reported happiness (Frankel and Hewitt 1994).

Subcultural Theory

Subcultural theory, for years, has been used to describe the process of gang formation, and to understand how deviant (usually criminal) behaviours become normalized. Gourley notes that “Subcultural theories focus on the importance of deviant subculture to the initiation and maintenance of deviant acts” (2004:59). Although this thesis is not concerned with criminality, the importance of subcultures derives from the fact that they create an environment which maintains a certain behaviour, attitude, or belief. The subcultural literature is vast, and as with most theories, riddled with controversy and debate, but for the purposes of this thesis I offer a brief summary of the core argument, relying heavily on Albert Cohen’s model of the “delinquent boy” (Cohen 1955).

Cohen’s discussion of gangs and subcultures (1955) revolves around the experience of the adolescent working-class male. He argues that American society has prescribed certain goals and desires for the average person, such as material wealth, high educational attainment, a desire to be “well-behaved,” well dressed, and charming. The problem is that these attributes are not attainable for all youths, and they are based on middle-class values and ideals. This is a frustration for males who do not have the money or cultural capital to attain these goals. Perhaps a working-class family cannot afford to buy their children clothes representative of the middle-class aesthetic or they must require their children to have a part-time job which hinders their academic performance. These youths then must face ridicule and scorn at the hands of teachers and classmates for not conforming to the accepted norms

prescribed by society. Cohen argues that the main problem is one of conflict with the larger society or atmosphere that one inhabits, which forces action to be taken by the “delinquent.” If the means are not available to assimilate to the cultural setting, the youth may become ambivalent to the demands being placed on him, or perhaps outright reject them (the necessary element for the creation of a subculture or gang).

Cohen states:

The delinquent subculture, we suggest, is a way of dealing with the problems of adjustment we have described. These problems are chiefly status problems: certain children are denied status in the respectable society because they cannot meet the criteria of the respectable status system, the delinquent subculture deals with these problems by providing criteria status which these children *can* meet (1955:121, emphasis original).

The premise is that certain youths have been denied respect or status by the larger culture. To cope with this, they create their own culture (or subculture) in which they have their own status symbols and hierarchy that can be attained with the resources available to them. An important part of this model (which some authors argue tends to be forgotten) is the sign of resistance by youths to the dominant culture that has marginalized them (Brotherton 2008).

Although this thesis does not deal with crime or criminality, the use of subcultural theory suggests an important analytical framework. As Blackman points out, “The concept of subculture at its base is concerned with agency and action belonging to a subset or social group that is distinct from but related to the dominant culture” (2005:2). While this theory has typically been used to describe criminal groups, it can easily be applied to *any* group that is in conflict with the wider cultural setting. As the youths discussed by Cohen were unable to meet the demands of their middle-class hegemonic schoolyard expectations, religious students are sometimes unable to meet the demands of a secular academic environment. Instead of monetary restrictions, religious students are confronted with differences in beliefs and understanding of truth. As was exemplified by Bramadat’s ethnography of Christian

students at McMaster University, perhaps Christian students are unable to meet the demands of an institution that operates under assumptions of “evolution, relativism, moral permissivism, and biblical critiques from feminist and atheist perspectives” (Bramadat 2000:78). Should this be the case, then following Cohen’s model, these students will suffer from a loss of status in the environment that will not accommodate them for violating the norms of the institution.

In order for subcultural groups to form though, youths must take stock in the opinions of others, or there would be no status deprivation.

There is...reason to believe that most children are sensitive to some degree about the attitudes of any persons with whom they are thrown into more than the most superficial kind of contact. The contempt or indifference of others, particularly of those like schoolmates and teachers, with whom we are constrained to associate for long hours every day, is difficult, we suggest, to shrug off (Cohen 1955:123).

Should this be the case for secondary school children, it might be even more pronounced within a university environment, especially for first year students who often live in a university residence. With a desire for acceptance, which will not be granted because of norm violation, Christian students are faced with a choice of assimilating into their new environment (which necessarily implies here, the abandonment of religious beliefs) or seeking out a subculture in which to learn tools for navigating through the academic space, the most lucrative form of which would be the religious club or group.

Subcultural theories have been widely criticized and have fallen out of favour in the literature (with social capital taking its place) mainly because its lack of explanatory power and flexibility (Bennett and Kahn-Harris 2004). Theories of social capital, it is argued, offer a better understanding of civic engagement and disengagement (which can lead to crime). Yet, the language that is used in subcultural theories tends to be more descriptive of the processes involved in creating social groups. Social capital tends to be used to describe the effects of belonging to a

group. In contrast, subcultural theory's "value as a model for explanation rests with its capacity to describe forms of solidarity that contrast with the dominant norms and values of society" (Blackman 2005:2). Although the tendency may be to replace one theory with the other, the two theories in fact complement each other. While subcultural theory offers context to the purpose of the group(s) in question, social capital describes the effects of the group environment and how members relate back to the wider culture.

Social Capital

As David Halpern discusses, there is nothing new or original about the concept of social capital (2005). In fact similar ideas have been discussed for centuries (some theorists drawing parallels back to Adam Smith, Émile Durkheim, de Tocqueville, and even Aristotle). Essentially, the theory states that there are important positive outcomes for people who participate in their community or who become involved in group activities (Halpern 2005). So why the sudden fervour about social capital? One possible answer is that Robert Putnam famously brought it to the forefront with his book, *Bowling Alone*, in which he described how social capital is declining in America (2000).

In *Bowling Alone* Putnam discusses the idea that in American society changes over time suggest that people are voting less, trusting less, and bowling alone (2000). Although his bowling example was a little tongue-and-cheek; his point was that people are bowling more than they ever did, but are no longer bowling in leagues. He explains that when people bowl in groups they are more likely to buy beer, pizza, and stay for a longer period of time. His main point, of course, had nothing to do with bowling alleys losing money, but that social capital (and civic engagement, which he

tends to use interchangeably) is declining in contemporary America. Putnam describes social capital as "...features of social organization such as networks, norms, and social trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit" (1995:67). Although there has been much discussion about the proper definition, and usage of this term, its most rudimentary understanding is that through social networks one gains a significant amount of "capital" (in the economic sense of the word). For James Coleman (1988), social capital is defined by its function, in that it serves as a resource for corporate as well as social actors. He suggests that in all definitions there tend to be two main themes, "...they all consist of some aspect of social structures, and they facilitate certain actions of actors...within the structure" (Coleman 1988:S98).

Although the case was made above that religion tends to be viewed negatively within academic literature, there is one notable exception, and that exception lies within the social capital literature. Greeley notes that, "Religion generate[s] social capital...it is far and away the strongest resource available to those whom Coleman would have doubtless called 'voluntary actors'" (1997:591). There is consensus that religion is one of the "crucial repositories of social capital in society" (Thomas 2004:138; see also: Beyerlein and Hipp 2006; Ellison and George 1994; King and Furrow 2004; Schwadel 2005; Taylor and Chatters 1988; Uslaner 2002; Wood and Warren 2002). In fact, there have been many studies over the past few years which have related religion to higher levels of reported happiness, less substance abuse, depression, and greater overall well-being (Ardelt and Koenig 2006; King and Furrow 2004; Maselko and Kubzansky 2006; Vilchinsky and Kravetz 2005). Although, some authors would argue that even with the positive view of religion in these contexts,

there is still an attempt to explain away the religious character of this phenomenon.

For example Smith contends that,

Sociology has a long history of reductionistic thinking and analysis. With regard to religion, this reductionism has often expressed itself in claims that what on the surface appears to be religious phenomena are in fact revealed by serious analyses to *really* only be about other things quite unrelated to religion. Thus, what appears to be divine or spiritual or transcendent or pious or sacred are *really only* about social class, race, gender, ethnicity, nationalism, solidarity, social control, and so on (2003:19, emphasis original).

In this case, religious affiliation is made synonymous with the affiliative benefits of religious membership. Reductionist or not, social capital has the ability to explain group behaviours, and stresses the importance of collective action. In the present instance, the products of social capital may explain the importance of religious groups on a secular campus.

There have been many responses to both Putnam and Coleman's definitions of social capital in recent years. Many theorists have claimed that both definitions are limited because they focus solely on the outcomes of social capital. As Portes notes, "it is important to distinguish the resources themselves from the ability to obtain them by virtue of membership in different social structures" (1998:5). Portes emphasizes the importance of distinguishing among: "(a) the possessors of social capital; (b) the sources of social capital and; (c) the resources themselves" (1998:6). This is similar to the definition that Newton (1997) and Eastis (1998:66) both use which defines social capital as: "(a) norms and values, (b) networks, and (c) consequences" (Newton 1997:575). In these cases, the authors are trying to emphasize that the outcomes of this process of "social capital" is just one part of the concept. Common to both is the requirement that the network sources of the social capital be identified. While Portes's definition assumes involvement in a group or network, Newton describes that common norms and values must be present in order to build trust. Only when there is

a trusting relationship will people be able to reap the benefits of social capital (Eastis 1998; Newton 1997; Stolle and Rochon 1998).

Another critique of the work of Putnam was that he only focused on the positive side of social capital. For some scholars this not only skews people's understanding of social capital, but also unjustifiably adds a moral component to the concept. As Edwards and Foley observe, "Putnam's adaptation has added moral and ethical value to the concept...this...seriously undermines its usefulness for empirical research" (1998:131). Although this critique is echoed in other works (Beyerlein and Hipp 2005; Beyerlein and Hipp 2006; Portes 1998; Schneider 1999; Thomas 2004), Edwards and Foley were among a minority who explicitly address this in their definition of social capital: "a morally and ethically neutral resource that facilitates all manner of individual and collective endeavours" (1998:131).

For the purposes of this paper, the definition given by Joanne Schneider is the most applicable: "I define social capital as a process whereby individuals or organizations use culturally coded relationships among members of a defined group to facilitate access to social and material resources" (1999:274). This definition, although lacking the direct statement of neutrality, speaks of social capital as a process (rather than just benefits), involving values and norms stated by Newton (culturally coded relationships), and specified outcomes.

Social capital has been linked with numerous positive outcomes, so it is no wonder that many people would be worried about its disappearance. Social capital is "believed to be able to lower the amount of drug use and criminal activity, to increase the success of schools and their pupils, to enhance economic development, and to make government more effective" (Stolle and Rochon 1998:47). It has been suggested that social capital provides emotional support, personal empowerment, and

help dealing with crises (Wuthnow 2002). Newton's description of the "consequences" of social capital (as discussed above) includes: physical things (such as building a Kingdom Hall, providing food), or social things such as a neighborhood watch or a street party. Portes suggests that these "social" outcomes are a product of the members of a group or community internalizing the norms of the group, which allows others to gain security as a type of resource. For example if people in a small community obey traffic rules and drive slowly, parents can allow their children to play in the street, or if people pay their debts on time then more members of the community will be willing to loan money or other resources. Although many of these discussions revolve around ecological communities, we can also find these positive effects at other levels of analysis. Frankel and Hewitt (1994) found that Canadian university students who were involved in on-campus faith groups tended to be healthier (lower use of medical services), reported being happier, indicated fewer stressful life events, and expressed more satisfaction with their everyday lives than religious students who were not part of on-campus faith groups.

While it is accepted that social capital does produce access to resources allowing those in possession to gain positive outcomes, there are some studies that relate religious organizing to some of the most important outcomes, especially for youths. Involvement in religion gives youths "access to intergenerational relationships that are recognized as rich sources of social capital" (King and Furrow 2004:707). King and Furrow suggest that positive outcomes such as altruism and empathy are what emanate from these relationships, causing pro-social behaviours, for example: being able to cope with stress, positive values, school bonding, and positive relationships with parents and other adults. This was echoed by Smith who suggests "religion is one of the few, major American social institutions that is not

rigidly age stratified and emphasizes personal interactions over time” (2003:25). She also suggests that religions have a number of different activities and beliefs that help members to cope with stress, “process difficult emotions, and to resolve interpersonal conflicts” (Smith 2003:23). These may include (among numerous others), prayer, meditation, confession, belief in a loving divinity, and the belief that suffering builds character.

Beyerlein and Hipp (2006) attribute religion’s effectiveness in producing positive outcomes to sheer numbers. They suggest that religious organizations are in the unique position of having a critical mass of people available to help with volunteer organizations within various communities. Thus, it is not just positive outcomes for the congregation’s members, but also for the communities in which they reside. Ellison and George (1994) espoused a similar idea, that positive effects are attributable to large numbers, but also because involvement in a congregation usually lasts a large number of years, if not spanning a lifetime (Taylor and Chatters 1988), and it allows contact with older as well as younger members for support. They also comment that because congregations are usually homogeneous in values, interests and activities they provide “fertile ground for the initiation [and maintenance] of friendships” (Ellison and George 1994:47).

Although it would seem as though social capital is exclusively a positive thing, there are scholars who have brought attention to the negative aspects of this phenomenon. One of the main negative aspects of social capital is that it is by nature exclusionary. The members of the group, congregation, or community, are the ones who have access to the resources made available by their social networks, but this does not include members outside of the group, and this is argued to be detrimental to the outside culture (Beyerlein and Hipp 2006; Schneider 1999). Further, Beyerlein

and Hipp contend, “[the benefits to members] truncate the wider network structure of the community and thus decrease its overall cohesiveness” (2005:995-996). Thomas (2004) describes what he refers to as “ambivalence of the sacred.” Religions have the capacity to create strong belief in certain values and norms, which put them in the position of being able to either “promote ethno-national conflict [or] cooperation and peace-building...[which, in] its most extreme forms can lead to racism, violence, and intolerance” (Thomas 2004:139). Portes describes four possible kinds of negative social capital. The first is the exclusion of others (as described above). Depending on the size of the group and the distribution of wealth/power, there may be excessive claims made on some group members, which can cause enterprises to fail. His example is if someone were to open a small business, they may be hassled by various members of the group for a job. There also may be restrictions of individual freedoms. Often with an increase of security there is a decrease in privacy, especially in very close-knit communities. His final example is what Portes referred to as “downward leveling norms.” “There are situations in which group solidarity is cemented by a common experience of adversity and opposition to mainstream society” (Portes 1998:9). He explains that this creates a situation in which, if people try to break out of the group and back into mainstream society, they will be sanctioned by other members of the group.

These negative aspects of social capital have led to re-definitions of the concept so as to include both the positive and negative aspects, which have been defined as “bonding” and “bridging” social capital. Bonding social capital refers to the inter-group solidarity. It is what is commonly thought of as social capital on the whole. Forming trusting relationships built on common ideologies and mutual respect allows members of a particular group access to the resources of other

members. It has been argued that small homogeneous groups tend to have an easier time creating *bonding social capital*. As Wuthnow (2002:670) contends:

Bonding probably occurs more easily among homogeneous groups than in heterogeneous setting and can be regarded as a form of social capital insofar as it provides emotional support, camaraderie, the kind of personal empowerment that Durkheim associated with first-hand participation in group rituals, and help in dealing with crisis and other life events.

It is bonding social capital that provides strong social support but alienates non-members that can be considered detrimental to the outside community.

Bridging social capital are the bonds that are made between heterogeneous groups and is considered advantageous for the community at large (but does not provide strong internal social support). It is within bridging social capital that civic engagement is encouraged as members of the group are encouraged to make contacts with non-members.

In contrast, bridging is more likely to consist of less intimate, even “weak” ties, and focuses on relationships that span different groups, linking heterogeneous groups together and providing a means of strengthening the larger society (Wuthnow 2002:670).

Many religious organizations have typically been associated with ideas of bridging social capital in the form of various volunteer activities such as clothing drives, soup kitchens, and volunteering in hospitals or with “big sibling” organizations. Research has shown, though, that not all denominations are producers of bridging social capital. Within Christianity it would appear as though the more evangelical or fundamentalist Protestant denominations are more likely to be producers of bonding social capital. Uslander observes:

Many fundamentalist Protestants withdraw from contact with ‘sinners’...they fear that people who don’t believe as they do are trying to deny them their fundamental rights. So they generally withdraw into their own communities (2002:239).

Mainstream Protestants and Catholics tend to be more heterogeneous and more of an emphasis is placed on serving the community at large, suggesting that these communities are producers of bridging social capital.

In contrast, the other... traditions emphasize active involvement in and service to the wider community. Each of the other traditions draws on specific historical and theological resources to motivate engagement in the larger community (Beyerlein and Hipp 2006:100).

Social capital literature will be used to inform the benefits (or possible detriments) of belonging to an on-campus Christian group. As described above religious groups may be one of the most abundant sources of social capital. Furthermore, studies of university on-campus religious groups have been shown to reinforce religious behaviours, causing a lower attrition rate than students who are not members of religious groups. As will be discussed in subsequent chapters, indicators of bonding and bridging social capital will be used to explain why students continue to participate in on-campus Christian groups.

CONCLUSIONS

Using strain theory as its base this thesis attempts to understand the difficulties that Christian students face on a secular campus. This chapter has outlined the basic tenants of strain theory, stigma, subcultural theory and social capital, and attempted to situate the specific example of Christian students on a secular campus within this framework. The premise of this study is that academia is intolerant of Christianity, resulting in Christian students having difficulty (feeling strain) attempting to integrate themselves into the academic environment. As a result of this strain they attempt to hide their Christianity (or their stigma) from their professors and colleagues so as not to tarnish their reputation or mar future interactions with these people. Furthermore, this strain or adversity causes students to seek out alternative environments (a subculture) in which they can re-produce their values, beliefs, and rituals without prejudice. Finally, by creating bonds with other Christian students in the context of an on-campus Christian group, students gain

access to each other's resources which can be a rich source of emotional, spiritual, and academic support (social capital).

Chapter 3 - Methods

INTRODUCTION

As stated in the previous chapter, this thesis is concerned with the study of strain: its sources, how it is experienced, and how it is managed. The data collected will be used to shed light on four main issues: whether Christian (university) students feel malintegrated into the academic environment both inside and outside the classroom (Is academia a source of strain?); whether this strain causes them to hide their Christianity from their peers (Does this strain manifest as a discreditable stigma?); whether the resultant feelings of strain is a source of motivation with respect to the decision to join a religious club (Did they join Christian groups because they felt alienated from other students?); and, assuming the sequence described above, whether students experience direct benefits from joining a religious group (Is this a positive management of their strain?). A variety of methods were employed in this study. These include ethnographic content analysis, participant observation, and semi-structured interviews. With exploratory or descriptive research, the aim is to be able to provide a thicker and fuller description of what the phenomenon is, how it is manifested and who is involved (Neuman 2006). “The generic question qualitative researchers ask is ‘What’s going on here and why?’” (Moon, Dillon, and Sprenkle 1990:359). Quantitative methods can produce less robust descriptions of issue(s) being studied. Thus a full scale survey, for instance, might not generate in-depth data about: if, where, and in what ways Christian students feel segregated or “stigmatized” by their non-Christian peers.

As discussed in the previous chapter the investigation of *how* Christian students endure a secular academic environment has received little attention. The possibility that academia is hostile to religion has received even less attention by

academics. For exploratory studies such as this one, qualitative methods are typically more widely used. Since exploratory research tends to be a preliminary investigation into what a particular social phenomenon *is* (or is about), the researcher needs to be flexible with the use of his or her theory, type of method, and research question. Qualitative methods are more suitable in this regard, as the techniques of investigation allow access to a broader range of data, and can be built upon multiple research questions which can allow some flexibility if new ideas emerge that warrant investigation (Neuman 2006:33-34). This chapter will briefly describe each of the three methods used in this study, their limitations, and possible ethical concerns.

THE METHODS

Ethnographic Content Analysis

Content analysis is used to analyze the content of written documents or of other media of communication, in order to identify specific patterns of symbols, words, phrases, or themes (Neuman 2006). Ethnographic content analysis differs in that instead of only counting occurrences of a particular symbol for numeric analysis, this method allows for a thicker description of the documents analyzed (Altheide 1987). The researcher is better able to give context to the document, explore more subtle meanings, and this method also allows for the document to dictate the categories and themes formed, rather than the researcher imposing categories onto the documents. “[It] enables the researcher to draw on interpretive methods used in other types of qualitative analysis to better explore the subtle meanings of texts in context” (Carpenter 2001:41).

Furthermore by adopting a qualitative stance, as Altheide (1987) argues, the researcher is not held to quantitative sampling methods. For example in a study of

news coverage during the Iranian hostage crisis, Altheide was able to choose which volumes of certain newspapers would be analyzed based on the prevalence of articles on this topic. If random sampling had been employed, some of the more important dates could have been missed (for example around major holidays or if there was anything similar in the news there would be an influx of articles about the hostages and/or their families) (Altheide 1987).

For the purposes of the current research, ethnographic content analysis will be used to provide a description of the Christian group setting of this study. There are a large number of Christian groups (12 in total) on the Eastern University (EU) campus, each with a slightly different mandate, which could appeal to different “types” of Christians (from the more liberal, to the more conservative or evangelical). This necessitates a more in-depth description of the groups that participated in this study, as their mandate may have an effect on how students within the group perceive themselves within academia, and how they manage or cope with their situation. Content analysis allows the reader a more in-depth understanding of the types of Christian students who may be drawn to these groups and how these groups may help students negotiate their way through the secular institution. Based on the fact that ethnographic content analysis is a secondary data analysis technique, there are usually no ethical dilemmas when using this method.

Participant Observation

Participant observation is a qualitative sociological method similar to ethnography (In fact, it is typically the first step in an ethnography.). It involves spending time immersed in a group of people in order to get closer to their uncensored behaviours.

[Participant observation is] the process of establishing rapport within a community and learning to act in such a way as to blend into the community so that its members will act naturally (Bernard 1994, as cited by Kawulich 2005:2).

Participant observation allows researchers access to information that may not be accessible from any other methods. For example, it provides researchers access to behaviours, the natural environment of the participants, the definition of terms and the use of language (Kawulich 2005).

Participant observation provides researchers access to: 1) details forgotten or deliberately omitted from verbal descriptions; 2) actions so habitual that research participants are not aware of them; and 3) information about what happens when activities do not go 'as usual' (Westphal, Longoni, LeBlanc, and Wali 2008:45).

Participant observation is usually used in conjunction with other methods to dictate what the most appropriate methods are in a certain context, what types of questions should be asked, or to put other data into context. Participant observation was used in this study for two main purposes: (1) to find out what types of activities occur in group meetings and (2) to help inform questions to be asked in the semi-structured interviews.

In order to discuss the relevance of Christian groups to the lives of students, it is important to have exposure to what membership in these groups entails. In order to understand if membership in a religious group facilitates coping with strain felt in a university environment it is necessary to discover what types of things are discussed in the context of these groups. Thus, it is important to find out if students are regularly encouraged to find friends outside of the group or are more encouraged to find strength within the group (bridging versus bonding social capital). Furthermore, if members are not encouraged to make friends with students outside of the group, how *are* they encouraged to interact with non-Christian students (this could impact how segregated Christian students feel from their peers)? It is also important to be able to experience the type of environment provided by the group (as these group dynamics are sometimes easier for an outsider to see). For example, is there a leader

or expert who answers questions from the group (similar to a pastor or minister), is it a group study/learning environment (such as reading the bible and discussing its meanings in a group), or are they conducted more as a self-help group, discussing problems and issues they have had during the week? All of these factors could influence attitudes toward their non-Christian peers, how they think their non-Christian peers perceive of them, as well as how they are taught to cope with the strain (if any) that they feel within the university setting.

This information is not only necessary to properly understand the struggles of Christian students, but also to help structure the questions to be asked during interviews. It is important to understand what is culturally relevant for interview participants so as not to ask questions which they either have no interest in answering, cannot answer, or are insulting or taboo. Furthermore, integration into the community will also provide the proper language and usage of that language (such as discussing someone's "faith" versus their "religion") to help put participants at ease, and make the questions more culturally relevant. Because I am a non-religious student, knowing what types of issues that Christian students deal with was paramount to not wasting students' time with interviewing. Participant observation is commonly used for this purpose, as an introduction to the community of interest, and to inform the content of interview questions (see for example: Gerdner, Tripp-Reimer and Simpson 2007; Jafar 2007).

There are some ethical (and other) limitations that are very particular to this method. The most notable ethical consideration for researchers is their level of involvement with their research participants. There are times during fieldwork when the researcher must decide if (s)he will intervene in a situation or become more involved in the lives of his or her participants. Furthermore, the longer the researcher

is involved with the group the more likely (s)he will be to lose objectivity (or start to identify with the participants) and intentionally misrepresent or misreport certain behaviours that can be seen as detrimental or unfavourable to the group (Kawulich 2005). There are also limitations such as access to the group or community which need to be considered when entertaining the idea of participant observation. Often the appearance of the researcher (whether of a different ethnicity, style of dress, style of speech) can affect either access to the group or the ability to blend in with the community. Gender can also be a barrier to specific groups of participants or a barrier to candid conversation (DeWalt and DeWalt 2002). These will be addressed below.

Semi-Structured Interviewing

A semi-structured or qualitative interview is one in which the researcher is attempting to collect a more full description of the experiences of the participant.

[The qualitative interview] is an interview whose purpose is to gather descriptions of the life-world of the interviewee with respect to interpretation of the meaning of the described phenomena (Kvale 1983:174).

Semi-structured indicates that instead of asking a strict number of questions, worded in a very particular way, the interviewer has constructed the interview schedule around themes. It is a more conversational way to interview in which questions can be conceptualized more as prompts to encourage a participant to discuss a certain issue or theme or elaborate on statements they have already made. There is room for the interview to head in a new or different direction than the researcher had planned, adding to the complexity of the description (Neuman 2006). Interviews can be completed in more ways than one: face-to-face, telephone, mail, e-mail, or other computer-mediated technologies such as MSN (an internet chat program allowing one to talk in real time).

The use of semi-structured interviewing in this research is to investigate not only *if* Christian students feel strain in a secular academic environment, but also how they *experience* and *manage* that strain. Survey data would not be able to access the detail of how students feel about being in alienating situations with as much ease as an interview. Furthermore, face-to-face interviews were chosen because this method tends to be thought of as one of the most advantageous forms of interviewing (Opdenakker 2006). Face-to-face interviews take advantage of the physical presence of the participant. They allow the researcher to take notes, not only about what the interviewee is saying, but also how they are saying it (tone), and what their body language indicates about the discussion (Opdenakker 2006). The presence of the researcher is also thought to add to the veracity of the participant's comments. This method does not allow time for the participant to "script" answers to the questions. Furthermore, face-to-face interviews tend to have the highest response rate of all the interview techniques (Neuman 2006).

There are some disadvantages to using this method including adverse interviewer effects, and cost. As with participant observation the appearance, dress, ethnicity, age, gender, and in this case religious affiliation of the researcher, can have an effect on the willingness of a participant to discuss their experiences. Furthermore, the reactions of the interviewer can have severe detrimental effects on the interviewing process if she is confronted with a response she was not expecting. As such, the interviewer must be cognizant of her mannerisms and body language at all times, so as not to insult the interview participant. In the literature there are also discussions surrounding self-disclosure (which are usually used to prompt further discussion on a given topic). It is commonly thought that expressing some kind of shared experience between the interviewer and interviewee (or sharing the

researcher's naiveté on the subject) may minimize differences between them and the participant will be more open to sharing more of his or her experiences. This argument has come under scrutiny, and the strategy may not be as useful of a tool as previously thought. In some situations self-disclosure may act as lubrication for the interview, while in others it may halt the conversation by exacerbating differences. Self-disclosure could also highlight power differences in the relationship between researcher and participant. Attempts on the part of the interviewer to draw strong parallels between the respondent and herself may create a situation in which the participant may cease to view herself as the expert regarding her own experiences.

Rather, strategies of 'doing similarity' and 'doing difference' may both, on occasions, be taken as a display of the interviewer's greater category entitlement regarding the topic under discussion (Abell, Locke, Condor, Gibson and Stevenson 2006:241).

Face-to-face interviewing is also reported to be very expensive to conduct if participants are dispersed around a large area (Neuman 2006). The participants in this study are all students who attend meetings on the EU campus. All interviews were conducted on the same campus so there was no travel cost. The location of the interviews was a vacant office which required no expenditure.

THE RESEARCH SETTING

The participants in this study are 43 university students who are involved in one of two Christian clubs on a large Eastern University (EU)⁸ campus in Ontario, Canada. Although most of the Christian groups are made up of undergraduate students, graduate students were not excluded from the study, as they are also part of the university environment both inside and outside of the classroom. For reasons of privacy and confidentiality demographic characteristics were not formally collected

⁸ For the purposes of this study the names of the university and the Christian clubs involved are changed.

in either the participant observation or the interviewing stage. Because of this averages are difficult to estimate, but a rough characterization of the participants in this study is that: most participants were probably between the ages of 18-24 years old, about half were female, most were Caucasian (as a result of the cultural compilation of EU), and most were unmarried.

Christianity

The last two chapters have developed arguments built around religion or religious students in general and Christianity in particular. Many of the studies cited within this thesis deal with religion in general, and as such, many of the arguments may be applicable to other religions. However, the current study is focussed on Christian students exclusively. There are a several reasons for choosing Christianity.

As this is a more exploratory study, the decision was made that it would be preferable to select a single religious orientation for analysis. The inclusion of multiple religions in a study like this one would have made it even more difficult to separate what is the source of strain for students. For example perhaps some religions are though of as more “popular” with the university population than others, thus it would be difficult to ascertain whether religious students felt strain or that a certain type of religious student felt strain. Depending on the number of students who can speak to that particular religion it may be difficult to get an array of students who hold those religious beliefs. There is also the possibility that certain religious theologies require a different level of involvement with outsiders, a different way to think about or embody that type of religious expression, different levels of support may be found within each religion. As well, there may be different ways that practitioners are taught to handle (and/or talk about) stress or strain. In order to

access this information it would be necessary to spend time with at least one group from each religion selected, increasing the amount of data required exponentially. Furthermore, the inclusion of multiple religions would require a much larger sample size, both of which are outside of the scope of this research project.

Second, Christianity is still the most dominant form of religious expression in Canada (Statistics Canada 2001). Seventy-seven percent of Canadians in the 2001⁹ census identified themselves as Christians, and 30% defined themselves as Protestant (the only larger group being Catholics at 43%). It can therefore be argued that there will be more access to Christian students as compared to other religions on a Canadian campus.

Third, one purpose of this thesis is to discover whether or not academia is hostile to religious students, thus interview participants were prompted to discuss situations in which they felt excluded because of their religious beliefs. I would argue that the inclusion of other religious beliefs might introduce the idea of the cultural or ethnic “other.” Additionally, I would argue that some religions such as Judaism, Islam, or Hinduism are intertwined with ideas of ethnicity or *foreign* cultures (“others”). Thus I would purport that because there is an expectation of sensitivity to cultures that we are unfamiliar with (or at least not a part of), some religions (within academia) may not be *openly* talked about in a detrimental way. Regardless of people’s thoughts and assumptions about the religion itself, if it has been intertwined with ideas of ethnicity it could be construed as racism. As stated above, Christianity is still the most widely practised religion where, thus it could be reasonable to suggest that in a Canadian university people would be *less* hesitant to speak negatively about the dominant religion of their own country.

⁹ Figures from the 2006 census were not available.

Finally, there are more Christian clubs on the EU campus than any other religious group. Of the 19 religious clubs listed on the Eastern Undergraduate Society (EUS) clubs website, 12 are specifically Christian groups. This offers the opportunity to choose more than one group from which to draw participants.

Ethnographic Content Analysis

Of the 12 Christian clubs listed on the EUS website, three groups were chosen for the purposes of this study: Fellowship at Eastern University (FEU), Eastern University's Christian Association (ECA), and The Moral Compass (TMC). Three clubs were chosen with the intention of having a variety of Christian experiences (the assumption was made that each Christian group may have a slightly different focus). The different foci would possibly dictate how students from different groups integrated themselves into the academic sphere (for example bonding or bridging social capital). Also, perhaps the groups were of different levels of formality, thus changing the types of conversations that were had in each meeting. This was done in the hopes of attaining a more robust sample of Christian students.

These three particular groups were chosen for a few reasons. The first is that each of the three groups is an international Christian student group, operating on campuses around Canada and the United States. Because of attendance at other universities, their presence was previously known (though not intimately) to the researcher. Second, they were each described as "*inter* or *non-denominational*" groups, suggesting a diverse membership. Third, some groups on the EU campus were for specific sub-groups of students, such as athletes, specific nationalities (for example Chinese Christians), or faculties. The three chosen groups were not directed

toward any particular sub-group of students, which again suggests a certain amount of diversity and diverse experiences. The three groups will be described below.

Fellowship at Eastern University

FEU describes their group as a nondenominational Christian community. Their main focus is on the Bible and the wisdom that can be found within it. They attest that it is important not just to read the bible, but also to ask questions about it and to challenge it. Although not all questions can be answered easily they emphasize that the group is supportive and that they all help each other find the answers they are seeking. Although they open their doors to anyone Christian or otherwise, they also emphasize that it is a pressure-free environment, and one will not be forced to make commitments they are not ready for “we won’t throw a bunch of tracts¹⁰ at you and make you say a prayer of commitment.” The FEU website also points out that it is important for the group to not become a (metaphorically) gated community, and that Christians should not shut themselves off from the outside world and culture. Rather, it is important to engage in the world and be able to see God in it. As the website indicates, “We’re just a bunch of people trying to figure things out together. Life is weird and God is huge, so it doesn’t hurt to pool your resources.”

They describe their mandate from their parent organization as: “The Fellowship’s purpose is to be shaped by God’s word and led by the Holy Spirit, as well as facilitating the transformation of youth, students and graduates into fully committed followers of Jesus Christ.” The parent organization also places some

¹⁰ Tracts are information booklets telling the reader of the importance of Christianity, how to become a Christian, and how one’s life will change after becoming a Christian.

emphasis on witnessing¹¹ to other students and having staff members foster that type of relationship with non-Christians. Information about their parent organization, though, is separated from a description of their local EU group. Furthermore in the description of what their official mission statement and core values are they explicitly state that it is taken directly from the parent organization's website, perhaps in an attempt to demonstrate their local autonomy. Membership in the group is voluntary and the numbers fluctuate on a weekly basis, for the 2007-2008 school year they had anywhere between 10-30 members at any given meeting (average of about 12 students).

Eastern University's Christian Association

ECA describes their group as an interdenominational Christian group, which is looking to change the world. They recognize that there is too much pain and suffering in the world, and the only way to make lasting change is through belief in Jesus Christ. They emphasize the fact that they actively make Jesus known to the world and that they are trying to "win over" non-Christians. As with FEU, members' beliefs all stem from the Bible which they believe is divinely inspired. Furthermore, they express that their "statement of faith" is that they believe in the inerrancy of the bible and that although there are slight differences in various Christian denominations, as long as that interpretation stems from the Bible it will be respected. ECA holds large group meetings once a week, prayer each morning, and small gender-specific discipleship groups. Their mandate is to "WIN students for Christ, BUILD them up in their faith and SEND them into the world to make Christ known."

They are known on campus as a more evangelical Christian group, who actively

¹¹ Witnessing within Christianity is the act of sharing your faith with non-Christians. The purpose of witnessing is to show non-believers the way to Christ and to help them save their soul. A tract, as described above can be thought of as a resource that is used to witness.

recruit people into their group. They are commonly seen giving out prizes (popcorn, lollipops) for answering short surveys about belief in God and how ECA can help to answer all of your questions and to foster spiritual growth. ECA membership is also voluntary, but it tends to be one of the larger religious groups on campus with membership ranging from 90-120 students attending meetings.

The Moral Compass

TMC outlines three main goals on their website: to help students grow in their faith, connect with members of the outside community, and to help change the world, one “life at a time.” They offer weekly large group meetings, weekly in-depth Bible study groups, biweekly pancakes and prayer meetings, and also are involved in community activities such as “running and reading” (a program to help troubled youths learn to read, eat healthily, and get exercise), and soup kitchens at a local Salvation Army church. Their mandate appears to centre upon building strength in one’s faith from a Christian community, but not living in a “Christian Bubble.” There is constant emphasis on living as Jesus did, not solely with his disciples, but rather he spent his days with (what would be considered today as) prostitutes, criminals, and the underbelly of society. Although they do not advocate keeping company with criminals, they do advocate creating and maintaining friendships with people of other faiths and especially people of no faith. They feel that it is important to know what other people are thinking, feeling, and dealing with, to have your faith challenged, and to not only tolerate, but accept people with different views than your own. They also see importance of friendships with people of no faith, because you may show others the “glory of Jesus” simply through being a living example. Membership of

TMC also varies from week to week from 15-40 students. An average meeting would have about 25 students in attendance.

Participant Observation

All three groups were approached to be a part of the current study. This was accomplished by making contact with a “staff representative” listed on each website. A short meeting was held at which the study was explained to the contact person, as well as what involvement in the study would mean for the students in his or her group (for example, my presence at each large group meeting and taking notes during the meeting). The purpose of this meeting was to find out whether there were unforeseen circumstances under which my involvement would be disruptive or impossible, the size of the group, what the group meetings were like, and to allow the staff person to ask any questions about the study before my entrance into the field. ECA declined consent for the participant observation portion. Furthermore, contact was lost with the staff person such that no students from ECA could be contacted for an interview. FEU also declined to participate in the initial stages of this study, but they were willing to give my contact information to potential interview participants. TMC was the only group that agreed to participate in the participant observation portion of this study, and thus will be described more in-depth in my analysis section. Furthermore the contact person provided names of students who would be appropriate interview participants, as well as adding my need for interviewees on their weekly mass e-mail.

Over the course of the winter semester (January-April 2008), I attended 8 group meetings with TMC, which took place on Sunday evenings on the EU campus. This portion of the study was meant to be complete before I began the interviews (in order to help create the interview schedule), but because of interruptions in the school

year this was not possible (i.e. reading week, Easter, cancelled meetings). My participation with the group varied from week to week depending on the content of the meeting (lectures, group discussions, volunteer work). Although I would contribute to group discussions, I was one of the more reserved participants, but more active than the quietest member. At the beginning of each meeting I was given a small portion of time (decreasing with each successive meeting) in which to introduce myself and obtain written informed consent from each member. Only one form was needed from each member, but because the numbers fluctuated from week to week, there were usually a few people who were new or different from the week before. Because of the lengthy consent process, as well as the size of the group, notes were hand-written. Any pamphlets or handouts were collected and stored with field notes.

As stated above there are limitations and ethical issues with participant observation, but some of those issues were simple to overcome. A rough estimate of the demographic make-up of the group was mostly white, roughly 50% female, and between the ages of 18-24. As a white, Canadian, 24-year-old female, I was able to blend in easily. I did my best to be comfortable with the group, and assimilate myself during group meetings, but at the same time attempt keep my objectivity. My religious beliefs posed a theoretical problem; I was worried that my “difference” would cause a barrier between some of the group members and myself. I decided not to explain that I was not a Christian. If I were asked, I would be honest about my beliefs. The staff contact person knew that I was not Christian, and so it is possible that she had told the membership ahead of time. It was only at the last meeting that my religious beliefs were questioned (by a guest lecturer), and at that point I was honest with the membership. My self-disclosure received some very positive

feedback about my interest in this project, about my conduct within the group, and my sensitivity towards beliefs that are other than my own.

Semi-Structured Interviewing

Eight semi-structured interviews were conducted from March-May 2008. The interviews were intended to be about an hour long, but over half were two or three hours in length. Written consent was given at the beginning of each interview, along with the consent that the interview could be tape-recorded. All participants were made aware that they could end the interview at any time, skip over any questions that made them feel uncomfortable, and were given resources should they feel any discomfort after the interview. In an attempt to respect the confidentiality of the participants, any identifying labels were removed from the documents. Interviews (with the exception of one) were conducted in a vacant office in the Sociology Department on the EU campus. There was no incentive offered to be a participant, other than being offered a cup of coffee.

Participants were chosen for the interviews based on recommendations from the staff contact person in both TMC and FEU. Each participant was then asked if they were aware of any other Christian students involved in a Christian group who would be willing to be interviewed. Some participants were selected through informal networks, while others contacted me by hearing about my research through group e-mailings. The only two criteria for being interviewed were being a student, and being part of a Christian group on the EU campus. There were no exclusionary factors such as age, ethnicity, sex, or academic major, and in fact efforts were made to be as inclusive as possible. In the end there were four males and four females interviewed from diverse academic backgrounds. Students represented three different

Christian groups: TMC, FEU, and Richardson House (to be explained in Chapter 4). Seven were Caucasian and all identified as heterosexual.

There were four themes explored within the interviews: the effect of the group on a student's academic/social/spiritual life, why the student joined a Christian group, if (s)he feels different from his or her peers either inside or outside the classroom, and how this perceived difference is managed. As stated above, because the style of the interview was more conversational, there was no particular order in which these questions were asked, and in fact on more than one occasion the interviewee simply started talking about their experiences as a Christian student. The themes included probing questions to assure a deeper level of understanding of the issues facing Christian students.

As with the participant observation there was the issue of my "difference" and self-disclosure. For the purpose of the interviews I asked that participants wait until the end to ask me any specific questions (unless they did not understand one of my questions). Should they ask about my religious beliefs, I would answer them honestly. I was constantly cognizant of my body language and responses to questions during the interview so as not to appear to be passing judgement. The time that I had spent with TMC has prepared me for most of the material that was brought up in the interviews, and as such I was not aware of any detrimental influence on the participants.

ETHICAL APPROVAL

Ethical approval was obtained on November 29, 2007. Although the subject matter was slightly sensitive, there was no real harm posed to the students. On each of the informed consent forms, potential respondents were given contact information

for the Chaplain's office and Health and Disability Services should they feel at all in distress. The application was approved for expedited review at the departmental level and approved by the General Research Ethics Board.

CONCLUSIONS

Through ethnographic content analysis, participant observation, and semi-structured interviews, this study will address four postulates: (1) Christian students experience strain, as a direct result of their religiosity, on a secular campus; (2) the strain that they experience manifests as a discreditable stigma; (3) as a result of the strain that they feel they join Christian groups on campus; and (4) membership in Christian groups provide access to the social capital necessary to deal with strain in a socially positive way. The ethnographic content analysis will give context to the purpose or mission of each Christian group, and also may shed light on what type of Christian students they are trying to attract. Participant observation will be used to understand what type of support the Christian groups may provide for students, as well as to inform the interview questions. Finally, semi-structured interviews are used to directly probe four themes: (1) how the group has affected their lives, (2) why they joined a Christian group, (3) if they feel different from their peers either inside or outside the classroom, and (4) how do they handle this perceived difference. By using a number of different methods, I hope to be able to get a more accurate picture of the lives of Christian students in a secular environment. The next chapter will discuss my findings.

Chapter 4 - Results and Analysis

INTRODUCTION

This chapter will discuss my findings. The main thesis of this project is that Christian students experience strain in the secular academic environment. This strain exists because of hostility from within academia toward religion in general. This strain manifests itself in the form of a discreditable stigma, such that Christian students attempt to “pass” or hide their faith from friends and peers. The strain that Christian students experience, results in a desire to seek out emotional, spiritual, and social support from religious groups on campus. These groups become substantial resources, which aid students’ integration into the secular academic environment in a way that does not jeopardize their beliefs.

As is standard in qualitative research, data were analysed by drawing out themes discussed in interviews and participant observation. The following discussion will parallel the outline found in Chapter 2. I will begin by presenting an overview of the meetings attended during participant observation. This will shed light on the way my data were collected, the context under which statements would have been made, and will identify a key term: “the Christian bubble.” This study seeks to further the understanding of issues that Christian students face within the secular academic environment and it is important to understand how some of the religious groups operate and discuss issues relating to their faith as well as their studies.

PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION

The Moral Compass (TMC), as previously described, was the one Christian group approached which allowed access to group meetings. TMC meets once a week in a space on campus called the Richardson House. The space is a 2-story townhouse

that is used as a residence for spiritual students and operates as a location for not only TMC meetings, but also for 2 or 3 other smaller faith groups geared toward graduate students and faculty members. There are also faith services held on weekday mornings which are open to the EU community.

TMC meetings are held Sunday night at 6:30, and usually draw a crowd of between 20 and 30 students. On my first visit it was explained to me that the students present did not attend each week; sometimes the students attending had never been before, and on occasion students drop in who are not Christian. There were even a few students who came from other colleges in the area. As a result the group dynamic was slightly different each week. The meetings begin with some social time followed by a brief prayer and supper (provided by TMC and Richardson House). After supper the meeting begins with some brief announcements made by a full-time staff member (a recently graduated student from EU) and volunteer staff member (an older man from the community who sometimes brings his wife and 2 small children). They discuss events that are happening in the near future and introduce the chapter of the Bible to be studied at that meeting. This year TMC studied the book of John in the New Testament, focusing on a few chapters each week. The group then breaks up into smaller discussion groups of 4 or 5 students who are given a list of reflection questions to think about and answer as they are reading the chapters for that week. Following about an hour of Bible study all of the members come back into a plenary session to share their insights with respect to the reading. The discussions are conducted as group learning experiences with no one person acting as an authority figure.

Following the Bible study and discussions, other announcements from students (activities on campus, encouraging others to take advantage of opportunities

provided through TMC) are shared and dessert is served. This is followed by more social time, and opportunities for people to chat about what they have learned more casually. People are welcome to arrive and leave as they wish, but most students come for supper and stay about half an hour to an hour after the formal meeting ends. Students are always encouraged to bring some of their friends to the meetings, Christian or otherwise, and as well as to make friends who exist outside of the group. A primary focus of the TMC meetings is to think not only about what it means to be a Christian and what God expects from them, but also to think about how people outside of the church would read and interpret a certain passage, or how they would react if they were to find themselves in the situation described by the passage. TMC stresses the importance of living outside of, what they refer to as a “Christian bubble.” This term refers to people who surround themselves with Christian influences. For example, an extreme case might involve a student living in an environment where: all of her friends and her partner are Christian, she attends a Christian school, and all of her extra-curricular activities are Christian-oriented. TMC likes to stress that although it is important to attend church and to have positive Christian influences in one’s life, it is equally important to spend time with those who are not Christian. It is unclear whether this is only for evangelical purposes, since it would appear to reflect some fundamental Christian principles. According to the New Testament, Jesus not only spent time with his followers, but also with those who did not believe that he was the Son of God. He reportedly spent time with prostitutes, drug users, sinners, the unclean, and the destitute. It is the following of this example that TMC encourages by advocating that its members make friends with non-Christians, and spend time with people to whom they may have an aversion.

This chapter provides an integrated discussion of the results from both the participant observation and interviews. One of the assumptions of the participant observation was that the Christian groups would serve as a council for students who were having problems in the academic environment. The meetings are actually devoted towards Bible study in general, and broader religious practice and expectations than toward specific issues pertaining to Christian university students. As a result, the data collected from group meetings were used primarily to inform question construction for the interview. They also aided the researcher in understanding Christian terminology and concepts that may have been foreign or unfamiliar.

SOURCES OF STRAIN

Strain is experienced when individuals face adversity while attempting to achieve their goals. This thesis argues that for the example of Christian students, strain is experienced when they attempt to integrate themselves into the secular academic environment, which is hostile to religion. In this section the argument that the university environment is hostile to Christian students will be analysed using the arguments found in Chapter 2. These are:

1. The innate incompatibility of science and religion,
2. University causes individuals to “lose their religion”, and
3. Academia downplays the importance of religion by describing it as something that people *do*, rather than something that people *are*.

The main sources of strain that were identified by Christian students will then be discussed.

The Incompatibility Of Science And Religion

As discussed in previous chapters, academic discourse discounts the possibility of the integration of science and religion. Debates about science and religion and whether university faculty can be religious underline the notion that the two are innately contrary. This idea seems to be reinforced within the various Christian groups on campus. TMC had a guest lecturer come in to discuss how to become a Christian academic. Furthermore, through my interviews I discovered that in the same academic year Fellowship at Eastern University (FEU) had two guest lectures on the same topic, and one of the graduate non-denominational Christian groups¹² had a series of Christian professors from the university to discuss their research and how it relates to Christianity. This suggests that integration of spirituality and scholarship is a very difficult task. Yet through my interviews with various students, it would appear that the “problem” of integrating Christianity and academics either is not a problem or a small one compared to other issues, which confront young Christian students.

Almost all of the students interviewed did recognize the possibility of religion and science being at odds with each other, yet the only specific examples students could think of involved debates about the theory of evolution and the big bang theory.¹³ Reflection on the topic led students to the conclusion that it was a childish debate. Most students had no problem integrating ideas of creationism in with ideas of the big bang or evolution

...That’s a good example, this kind of old earth/young earth creation/evolution debates...I don’t bring up any of that debate, but if people bring it up I try and show them that I think that they fit together, but there are definitely people who say, no

¹² This group meets in Richardson House, and I am unaware that they have any specific title or group name. Some participants refer to this group as “Richardson” or “Richardson House” as such it will be referred to as Richardson throughout this thesis.

¹³ It is important to note here that students tended to conceptualize these two things as the same argument, as both were contrary to creationism.

you can't do that tweak that you've done there, or that I've done there, and I'll disagree with them. (Male, 1st yr MSc, FEU 5yrs)

Others decided that evolution was a theory like any other, so there was a choice about whether to accept or reject this theory. Again, they expressed that they see no conflict between their faith and their studies.

To me science is a black box, you put in assumptions and you get out conclusions. Assumptions are not beliefs they are just starting points, that's an important distinction. Evolution, you start and end *believing* in evolution...nobody has the authority at any university to tell me that you must believe this theory. [They are] not really [in conflict], not to me. (Male, 1st yr MSc, Richardson 1yr)

Students were forthcoming with possibilities that other Christian students they knew had conflicts over science and religion, or were having problems integrating the two, but that they themselves did not. Many of the students interviewed offered suggestions as to why they had no problems in this area. Ironically the most popular response was that (s)he was a science student, and so there was little room in his/her subject to discuss the bigger picture, whereas (s)he could see students in the humanities and social sciences having a harder time integrating their faith into their academics. Arts students could be seen to have more issues to contend with because of the greater relativity of truth in the arts. While Christianity offers an ultimate truth, many proponents of post-modernity¹⁴ insist that there is no truth. Perhaps what arts students learned in the classroom would be more incompatible with Christian values. Some students suggested that it was something particular to their personal faith, and their personal relationship with God, or particular to the way that they interact with science.

I see the study of science and engineering as something that can be done for the glory of God, which I consider one of the highest goals of my religion, doing something for the glory of God, so that is something that I can do not just for one specific master, but it's talked about in the Bible like, um, whomever you are serving, whatever work you are doing, do it as to God. And ok, so we have to do our very best for God, so in that respect my Christianity does sometimes push me to do my best in my studies. (Male, 3rd year BEng, FEU 3yrs)

¹⁴ Students viewed the humanities and social sciences as synonymous with ideals of post-modernity.

Of course, it is possible that the reason professors and faith groups address this issue is not because there is an assumption about the incompatibility between science and religion, but because there is an understanding that academia is hostile to religion. In fact the problems that Christian students encountered were in the form of general sentiments toward Christianity, assumptions that are made about Christians, and the widely held stereotypes that exist of Christians. These will be addressed later in this chapter, but the conclusion drawn from these interviews is simply that there is no incompatibility between science and religion, and in fact Christian students themselves think that it is inane to suggest that there is.

Losing Their Religion

In previous chapters it was discussed that there seems to be an assumption that something about the university environment causes students to lose their religion, or at least decrease their religiosity. This had been evidenced by the many studies investigating the level of religiosity among university students (see for example, Becker 1977; Burchard 1970; Feldman 1969; Feldman 1970; Hunsberger, Pratt and Pancer 2002; Madsen and Vernon 1983). Although students did recognize that there are challenging aspects to the university environment, they also expressed sentiments that university has reinforced their spirituality.

Now I can [express my spirituality] with confidence, but I think part of it is that this is an academic environment and so you are kind of restrained to be respectful of my opinions when I talk to you, so I feel very comfortable stating them, without concern. (Male, 1st year MSc, Richardson, 1yr)

Furthermore, the diversity found in a university environment offers Christian students an opportunity to meet Christians from other denominations and other experiences.

But you know I've met a much greater variety of Christians, and partly just because you are thrown into university and it's not like oh ok we're all from this one denomination, no we're from umpteen different denominations so you know we have some slightly different theology...it's really good from that respect to meet a

wider variety of Christians and it kind of encouraged and bolstered my spiritual life. I mean it's exciting to me to meet new people who were also Christians, who didn't go to my church... basically I just got a broader experience of who Christians are and how Christians do their Christian stuff at university. (Male, 3rd year BEng, FEU 3yrs)

Many students also explained how their faith has changed since coming to university. One of the central themes within these discussions was that being in university forces each student to make the choice about whether or not to be a Christian. For many students the university experience marks the first time that they are away from the influence of their parents (as it relates to their spirituality). Some students suggested that the initial influences in the university environment (the friends that you make or the groups that you join) could dictate whether one continues to be a person of faith. Many of the Christians interviewed for this project expressed how they have grown into their faith and made it their own since being in university.

Ok, I think that it has, um I'll use the phrase I've made it more my own. So when you're in high school, ok when I was in high school I was still living with parents, and they were at least able to encourage me to go to church to do certain types of religious activities, but at university it's entirely up to me. (Male, 3rd year BEng, FEU 3yrs)

Since coming to university it has become a lot more alive, a lot more real, a lot more of who I am rather than something that I do. I think just in general with university we engage... a lot in ideas and talking about everything, including faith, but also the environment and government and the world, like poverty and oppression and everything. I just found that the university environment was really good for all these kinds of discussions that really helped me to find my way, I guess. (Female, 1st yr MA, TMC 5yrs)

Another thing worth noting is that one of the explanations for why university erodes faith is because students are being taught to think "critically." During one interview the participant shared his thoughts on critical thinking and losing faith.

I think university does have a tendency to secularize people... by making them more critical thinkers, and then puts them in an environment where most of the critical thinkers around them are biased against religion. So they become a critical thinker and then they're in a secular environment, so that they take on that environment. Yes, but I think that you can also be taught to think, and FEU is good at this, you can be taught to think critically from a religious perspective too, right? And that's what FEU was strong with, different people think different things about FEU and what are good about FEU, but that was my

view, that works well. It teaches me to think critically in a religious environment.
(Male, 1st yr MSc, FEU 5yrs)

Limitations of these data will be discussed in the concluding chapter, but from this evidence it becomes apparent that students who make the decision to be Christian (when removed from the influence of their parents) tend to find university a positive influence on their faith.

Religion Is Something That People Do

A number of journal articles have insinuated that religion is something that people do, something that can be measured by asking about how often a person attends church, or how many hours are spent praying in a day (see for example Becker 1977; Brennan and London 2001). This is problematic, as religious devotion becomes equated with participating in religious rituals rather than the strength of one's beliefs or the significance of these beliefs. This paints a picture of the religious person as a dogmatic follower of rules. While talking with Christian students, it would appear that faith is much more than a set of rules; it is a vibrant living part of their lives. Their faith is more about a personal relationship with Christ than about activities in which they do or do not participate. It seems to be something very individual, and each participant took great care in explaining what being a Christian meant to him or her. Yet, common to each description was a disclaimer that although there are aspects to their faith that can be seen as "doing Christian things", that is a very limited understanding of what it means to be a Christian.

Perhaps I am following a set of rules that I don't understand, in which case, it's kind of not as honourable or respectable to be just following rules blindly in general. I don't feel like I am following rules blindly at all, I have a good reason for everything I do. Reasons that are about my relationship with Jesus. (1st year MSc, Richardson 1yr)

Some students speculated that this was one of the reasons that people do not like the label “religious.” The connotation of this label is that religion is something that people do, rather than experience, and that Christianity is about rules rather than relationships. This is one of the sources of strain that religious students experience in the university environment.

These data help to confirm that there are myths about Christianity found within academic literature and academic discourse. It is being suggested here that these have been allowed to go unchallenged because of the hostility towards religion in general and Christianity in particular. Now that some of the myths (such as the incompatibility of science and religion, and the idea of a student losing their religion in university) found in the literature have been explored, the discussion will turn to what Christian students have themselves identified as major sources of strain within the university environment. During the course of the interviews there were two specific areas that were explored: religion in the classroom and religion in the general university environment.

Religion In The Classroom

As indicated above, the students interviewed for this project tended to not report having any difficulty integrating their faith into their studies. Many of them attributed this to being in the natural sciences (rather than the social sciences or the arts) where issues that would pose a threat to their beliefs did not come up in course material. That being said, there were some students who discussed their experiences with anti-Christian attitudes, or with offensive assumptions made by their peers in an academic setting. Some of these instances involved professors or peers simply stating what they saw as a fact about Christians. For instance, they might contend that looking into history Christians have been the oppressors in many instances.

Examples such as the crusades, the witch trials, and the residential schools paint certain types of Christians in a negative light. Although these examples may be historically accurate, some students felt as though they were being used to make insinuations about Christians today, which are not appropriate in an academic setting.

Some of it is related to history of some people who claim to be Christians, and also it's sort of subtle things of professors, who, I get the impression that they are against Christians, or maybe it's like kind of, off the cuff kind of comments about Christian beliefs that are like... not too many though, like they are few. (Female, 3rd year BSc, TMC 3yrs)

Other students indicated that people simply treated them differently because they were Christian. Interview participants made references to insinuations about their intelligence because of their beliefs. For example two or three students indicated that their peers would often make comments to the extent that people who believe in creationism are somehow intellectually inferior to those who believe in evolution; or professors would callously refer to the creation "myth", without regard for that particular wording being offensive (in that context). Some students indicated that their professors or peers would simply make insensitive comments about religion either inside the classroom, or in other academic settings.

I was talking to a professor in a group, so there were other people there, we were talking about methodology and how do you do qualitative research and these sort of things. And I was having a hard time understanding the point about this specific methodology, and this professor knew that I was a Christian, that I self-identified as a Christian, and said to me, "Maybe you're having a really hard time understanding this because you are a Christian, and Christians don't necessarily see the world with multiple realities." And I thought wow, you obviously don't understand how I view Christianity, but these sorts of things come up all the time. (Male 3rd year PhD, Richardson 3yrs)

Furthermore some interview participants did suggest that they found course material challenging at times. Discussions revolving around the carbon dating of certain fossils, or the discovery of Australopithecus could be difficult regardless of how strong their faith is. As stated above although they saw these discrepancies, they did not see this as completely detrimental to an integration of their faith and academics.

In fact students who expressed these problems with course material found that the violation of human rights committed by The Church (for example, the treatment of Aboriginal populations in residential schools) was much more difficult to negotiate than evolution.

We talked about, some sort of basic anthropology stuff in historical geography about Australopithecus, and like that 3.8 million years ago and things like that where I believe in creation and so things like that don't mesh definitely. I totally am fine with people believing that, and as long as people are ok with me believing in what I believe in... In history I was most interested in Canadian history and particularly first nations and so there's a direct conflict when it comes to residential schools and Jesuits and missionaries going to aboriginal populations and basically trying to assimilate them. I understand that their intentions were good, but their methods were terrible to say the least. And so as a Christian I have really had to reconcile how I feel about what they did as Christians representing God. (Female, 1st yr MA, TMC 5yrs)

Religion In The University Environment

There are two stereotypes displayed in almost any popular cultural representation of university life - promiscuity and the over-consumption of alcohol. A stereotypical understanding of Christianity would lead one to think that it is exactly these things that would pose the biggest struggle for a Christian student. Although the data will reveal that this is a correct assumption, there are many other challenges. Furthermore, the reasons that these two issues pose a problem is more interesting than whether the assumptions are correct.

The consumption of alcohol in the university environment was brought up in a large number of interviews. It is hard to tell if this is because students were expecting to be asked about it, or because it was a constant problem. In either case, the views on the consumption of alcohol varied widely. Most students believed that in moderation the consumption of alcohol was perfectly acceptable and that intoxication was what posed the problem. Many expressed this simply as a practical matter - why would anyone want to become so intoxicated so as to lose control or suffer a hangover? Other students did mention biblical references regarding their

decisions to not become intoxicated, and there was also a discussion of the physical ramifications (especially the state of one's liver) of consuming alcohol in the same quantity as some of their peers. Even more interesting was their view of those who do consume or over-consume alcohol.

It's kind of sad that they are not able to talk or think, and are on the ground and that kind of thing. Just sad that they made that choice. I don't know if that is more personal, like some others might not think the same things. One of the things is how much alcohol is on the campus and is a way for people to find relief and release from, that's one of the things for me. It's not like a huge issue, but its something that's sort of...makes me sad. (Female, 3rd yr BSc, TMC 3yrs)

Students who expressed that intoxication is the issue (rather than alcohol in general), tended to adopt similar views of the problem. Rather than demonizing students who choose to consume large quantities of alcohol, they assumed that this behaviour was in response to an inability to cope with the stresses of university life. It is important to note that this was not always framed in a religious light. Only sometimes did Christian students express the view that they would like to share their faith with these students, at other times the desire was simply to act as a friend and show others alternative ways of dealing with stress.

A minority of students believe that it is not the act of being intoxicated that is the problem, but rather the behaviour that might result from intoxication:

I don't think I see that much problem getting drunk, I don't think that this act of crossing the line is like "oh, there's the sin" I think it's more of a by product of what can happen in the environments that you are in. I don't think that, if you're going to get together a group of Christian friends to lock yourself in a room to get drunk, that seems kind of stupid to me, like what's the point? But yeah, um, it's kind of like, what else can go on here. (Male, 1yr MSc, FEU 5yrs)

Several students expressed their frustration with many social events at university because they tend to revolve around drinking. Despite a desire to be involved in social events, they would seek to avoid them if they involved situations characterized by drunkenness. One student expressed the view that once his friends realised he did not drink to the extent that they did, he may have been invited to fewer social events.

The openness of sexuality was another topic that came up in most interviews. Yet unlike the topic of alcohol, participants were either hesitant to divulge their views on sex and sexuality, or it was treated as a non-issue. Many interview participants simply stated that it sometimes made them uncomfortable to hear about other people's sexual history, simply because it is a private matter. Other participants explained that they would not (or in some cases did not) have sex before marriage, and that this was their choice. Furthermore some participants were sceptical that people were having sex as much as is generally assumed. Because this is much more of a private matter, participants were not probed to disclose any information that was not initially offered. None of the participants talked about homosexuality as it pertains to struggles adapting to a secular university environment.

As stated earlier there were many other struggles that Christian university students face apart from the temptation of alcohol and sex. Some were more mundane¹⁵ struggles such as academic honesty, time management, homesickness, wanting to be loved, or the desire for friends. Although these issues may not have any specific relevance to being a *Christian* student, it is important to note that while Christian students did express that some issues were directly related to being Christian in a secular environment, there is still the gamut of problems that every student faces, irrespective of religiosity.

A more specific Christian issue that came up in almost all interviews concerned the desire to express and share one's faith in a meaningful way. The idea of living and expressing religious faith is relevant to an issue discussed earlier- "making faith your own." The first decision that needs to be made in a Christian

¹⁵ Something that had no reference to the spiritual realm.

student's life is whether he or she will continue to be a Christian. As one student expressed, this is the most crucial step to take for those leaving for university.

In Christian circles some say God has no grandchildren. So the idea is that you are not going to get anywhere [in reference to spiritual development] by having Christian parents even if they make you go to church like every week for your whole life until you leave the house. (Male, 3rd year BEng, FEU 3yrs)

Once the choice has been made to continue being a Christian, the individual must decide how to live his or her faith. Other than the decision about refraining from the temptations of the university atmosphere, it is also necessary to make decisions about what might be seen as the appropriate degree of involvement in religious activities. Examples of the types of issues students discussed when deciding the level of involvement in religious activities were: the decision to go to church, the decision to join one or more Christian groups; how often one is required to pray or read the bible. Connected to these activities is the motivation for doing these things; is it to avoid guilt or to deepen one's understanding of and relationship with God and Jesus.¹⁶ Beyond the individual activities students need to make decisions about, students also indicated their desire to express their faith in a meaningful way to other people.

So I think it's definitely just like, being able to like live it out and be open about what you think about things. (Female, 2nd year BA, TMC 1yr)

Not only how are we growing in our relationship with God, but also what is the product of that, and how is my faith shaping the way that I act and interact with others and being in the world and interacting outside of Christian circles and meaningfully interacting, and all these things and really making an impact positively on society and not just as a Christian but in general. (Female, 1st yr MA, TMC 5yrs)

Furthermore many students indicated that they want to express their faith to other people, but a first step is to become comfortable with their own faith. One student asked the question: How do I tell people the religious reasons why I am not participating in an activity if I am not completely sure myself? Many students

¹⁶ Students said that although some people may simply go through the motions (going to church, reading the bible) not to feel spiritual guilt that was not a spiritually healthy way to experience your Christianity.

indicated that they need to be able to critically examine their beliefs before they are able to share them with other people. Almost all of the students involved in this study grew up in Christian homes, which implies that they have practices and beliefs that were passed on from their families. Many students candidly admitted that when they first came to university they had never really questioned why it is that they do particular things (such as why they are not having sex before marriage, or why they do not drink). It was only through attempting to share their faith with their friends that they really began to examine the Bible and the demands of their religious convictions. This is what some students alluded to when talking about “making their faith their own,” as well as becoming more comfortable or confident in their faith.

When students addressed the idea of sharing their faith it was in a context of simply sharing something that was important and personal to them. From an outsider’s perspective this can conjure up notions of evangelizing or proselytizing to non-Christian students, and so it is important here to have a discussion about these students’ views on evangelism. Many Christian denominations (Bramadat 2000:119-138) feel as though it is their duty, as Christians, to share the gift of salvation with other people. During my time spent with TMC, it became apparent that this was at least part of the reason for members to spend time outside of their “Christian bubble.” They believed that they had an amazing gift (realizing the glory of God, forming a relationship with Him, and having eternal life) and that it would be selfish not to share it. Although this topic did come up in the context of each interview, many students indicated that they were hesitant to evangelise to other students. Participants indicated that it was never their intent to “shove my faith down your throat,” but should the conversation arise they felt it was part of their duty to explain their beliefs and offer support for a student should they wish to pursue Christianity. All of the

students that I talked to throughout this study mentioned that they are aware of an ever-growing stereotype of Christians who are “militant” about their beliefs, and who force their faith on other people. In fact, some students admitted that this type of behaviour characterized their first year in university until they realized that it was damaging their relationships with other people. A few students shared an incident that happened on the EU campus four or five years ago which completely changed their views on evangelizing. One student summarized the event as follows:

[One religious group] had this sort of campaign, and I don't know what you know about it but they had these posters up “I agree with Jamie” and they didn't tell anyone what it was about, they just said “I agree with Jamie” all around campus. And he talked, on the date of this talk all of these people showed up, like what is this what are we agreeing with. Is this political, is this about the university, like what is this about. And everyone shows up and it's this guy whose like I think you should be Christians. And people were, I think a lot of people were pretty nonplussed... But what bothered me about it was this attitude that like, and it really came out, I always knew this side was there, but this attitude like, notches on your belt or you know the score card of I've saved X-number of people or whatever. (Male, 1st yr MSc, FEU 5yrs)

The students who brought this up indicated that the idea of “saving X-number of souls” is not only offensive, but also that it ruined a number of their relationships with non-Christian students. The student quoted above explained that he had become close to a non-Christian and that they had started discussing his beliefs in an open manner prior to this campaign. Afterwards there was some suspicion about his intentions with these discussions and they never again achieved the same sort of intimacy. Although it would appear that evangelising is an important aspect to living out a Christian life, students were very aware that it is not always welcome, and in fact they would do more damage than good to try and shove their beliefs on other people.

HOW STRAIN IS EXPERIENCED

As outlined in a previous chapter, Goffman's concept of discreditable stigma (Goffman 1963) can be used to illuminate how Christian students experience the strain of not being accepted in the academic environment. As stated previously, the difference between Christian students and other students is that they are indeed Christian, and because of academia's hostility towards religion, it is an undesirable difference. The goal of this section is to identify whether university students' Christianity *is* a discreditable stigma. This will be explored by first considering the definition of discreditable stigma to see if it is applicable to Christian students. Then to unpack what the term means, evidence will be provided to suggest: (1) that Christian students do try to mask their difference by "passing", (2) that Christian students believe that by disclosing their Christianity their reputation will be harmed, and (3) why they feel this way.

Goffman's definition of discreditable stigma applies when "[the stigmatized individual] assumes [the stigma] is neither known about by those present nor immediately perceivable by them" (1963:4). Although it can be argued that there are "signs" of Christianity such as a crucifix pendant or earrings, a rosary, carrying a Bible, or a "Jesus fish" tattoo,¹⁷ these labels are not worn by every Christian, nor are they difficult to hide. Furthermore these signs of Christianity are voluntary "accessories" rather than being permanent and immediately apparent (such as a physical deformity) and can be worn (or carried) by those who are not Christian. It is only through disclosure of that information that other people will realize that a particular sign is worn because of her Christianity. For these reasons it can be asserted that Christianity fits the definition of a discreditable stigma.

¹⁷ This is a picture of an outline of a fish, sometimes with the word JESUS in the middle.

Goffman's idea of "passing" is simply that in some cases, a person who can hide the stigma will. The reason that one would do this is because there are social repercussions for being different, and social rewards for being normal. The students involved in this project all indicated that they have friends who are non-Christian (either through discussions of their non-Christian friends during group meetings or through the interviews). The amount varies from student to student, but in all cases it was at least more than two. When asked if their non-Christian friends knew that they were Christian the responses varied. Some students said that their friends definitely knew that they were Christian, while others were not so sure. The reason for this is that none of the students interviewed indicated that their Christianity was something that they explicitly stated to their friends. Rather, as their friendship grew it would happen "organically."

Oh yeah, yeah. They know. It's kind of awkward sometimes, because sometimes you are like, I have to go to a bible study meeting. And they are like what? A bible study meeting, you know those. But they are aware that I am the Christian one. I wouldn't really make an effort [to tell them] it really just comes up. TMC has like taken over my life, ha ha, so it's really hard to have any kind of conversation about like how's your weekend, or how's your week without something coming up, so it's like people find out by accident, or like I'll say some really random thing and they are like..."You're a Christian aren't you?" And I'm like, "hey how you doing?"
(Female, 2nd yr BA, TMC 1yr)

Many students indicated that it would be incongruous to bring the topic up out of nowhere. Similar to other parts of a person's identity, to just blurt out that you are a Christian seems to violate many of our social rules about getting to know other people.

When you introduce yourself to someone, the first 5 questions are pretty predictable and pretty boring like sometimes I wish we could skip that completely and go into something interesting right off the bat, like what we are doing now. (Male, 1st yr MSc, Richardson 1yr)

No students reported explicitly telling friends or peers about their Christian identity, but neither did students report trying to hide the fact. Students tended to admit that

although it was awkward the first time that it comes up, they would not deny that they were Christians. Furthermore participants were asked if they would ever disclose their Christianity in the classroom. Many participants simply stated that they could not imagine a context in which it would be appropriate to do so. Reasons given were either that the subject simply did not come up in class, they were not exposed to smaller classroom settings (such as a seminar) where discussions were encouraged or appropriate, or that they did not speak in class anyway. Some students indicated that even if they did have the opportunity to disclose their beliefs in the classroom, they may choose not to do so because they felt it is generally more accepted to be an atheist or agnostic than to be a person of faith.

Such a disclosure can harm a reputation by changing the context of the current social situation as well as prejudice future interactions with that person. In the case of disclosing their Christianity students indicated that the reason why they are hesitant to do so is because they may not have the adequate time to explain what being a Christian means to them. The fear is that if she cannot fully explain herself then people will assume certain things about her, which she will not be able to address. One male student explained:

I guess part of my mindset is that when I say I'm a Christian people will um, be tempted- at least tempted- to think ok he's a religious fundamentalist who likes to check his brain at the door when he does his religious stuff. I can almost see it being characterized as fear, but I don't see it that way. Fear that I will not be able to quell certain assumptions right from the get go, so you know they can be festering and people who I have never. I know this sounds stupid, I know but that's the extreme. Certainly I like to be able to discuss all my assumptions and I can't do that in one short conversation that involves me saying. Oh by the way, I am a Christian. (Male, 3rd yr BEng, FEU 3yrs)

Other students described similar fears, that upon disclosing that they are Christian, they will automatically be categorized in a certain light.

It's not something that I just want to announce all the time, and often that's the way the evangelical Christians are portrayed in our society, the way that they are understood in the media. I think when many people, I suspect when they hear the word Christian, they automatically think of right wing, they think intolerant, they

think is somebody who's, well you know all the stereotypes, like gay hating, supporting the war, all those sorts of things. So I certainly don't introduce myself as a Christian. If it comes up I will say that I am a Christian, but it's kind of ridiculous, but I often feel as though I need to put a little disclaimer on there, like you know I am a Christian, but I am a liberal Christian, and I really feel that the message of, the point of my Christianity is far more an agenda of social justice, than about evangelising, it's far more about simple living and looking for mercy, justice and humility than about anything else. And I do feel that if I identify myself as a Christian, I do need to make those qualifiers. (Male, 3rd yr PhD, Richardson 2yrs)

In fact one of the guest lecturers that came to talk to TMC about being a Christian academic discussed that she had noticed this phenomenon. During her talk she brought up that she found Canadian Christians to be a bit of a strange phenomenon. In other countries people are being persecuted for being Christian, whereas in Canada each religious group is protected under our Charter of Rights and Freedoms. Originally from Africa, she said that her main source of culture shock coming to Canada was that the Christians here were not rejoicing their faith in a loud boisterous manner. She has noticed that Christians tend to be apologetic about their faith rather than celebrating it, and students here cannot or will not allow themselves to freely be Christian. She challenged the group by saying, "If I can't be proud of my faith, then who should be?!" During the question and answer portion of her visit, she was asked why she thinks Christians here do not celebrate their faith as she expected them to. Her reply echoes the concerns raised by the students interviewed for this project. She postulated that it was because of Christianity's history. The term Christian has become synonymous with conservatism and is the stamp of the "white, male oppressor." She explained that these things are not the values that are found within Christianity and that because we are human we make mistakes and misinterpret divine words. Although it does not excuse some of the things that were done in the past by people claiming to be Christian, it does not characterize all Christians.

In the previous chapter, the case was made that perhaps Christianity (as opposed to other religions) is sometimes the target of certain negative sentiments

(such as being illogical, rigidly conservative and intolerant). Some interview participants raised the suspicions as to whether this stigma is applicable to all religions, or to Christianity in particular. There were some mixed feelings about whether Christianity gets the brunt of religious attacks, as our political climate has become infused with religious undertones (for example the deaths that occurred on 9/11 were perpetrated by fundamentalist Muslims). But some participants thought that perhaps in a Canadian secular academic environment, Christianity did face more religious attacks than other religions.

I think that Christianity does get singled out a lot and I think that it's probably true. It does sort of seem like it's kind of, I don't know what you want to call it- religious political correctness. Um and maybe I just see this because I am in a Christian environment a lot, but it does seem like there is this political correctness [that] extends more to cover other people than Christians and that kind of makes sense. I think that it's maybe because Christians are the majority... you don't have to be as careful around the majority maybe, I don't know, but it does seem as though there is some bias... not necessarily because it's the majority but... the mindset that I see is that it's Buddhists and Muslims and other religious groups [that] are different than us and we need to be tolerant of minorities and multi-cultural and that kind of stuff. But Christians are not multi-cultural, they are just Canadians that went wrong or something like that, right? And so that's kind of the sense I get. (Male, 1st yr MSc, FEU 5yrs)

Although students will not deny their Christianity, it does appear that they feel as though it does carry a certain stigma. Censoring themselves in front of recent acquaintances is a way to ensure that their Christianity does not become entangled in the popular stereotypes. Only when a friendship reaches a certain level of understanding and respect do students feel comfortable disclosing their Christianity, ensuring that they will have the opportunity to explain what being a Christian means to them. To reiterate an earlier point, if Christian students feel as though they need to hide their Christianity from other people, and that Christianity does carry a stigma, then from their point of view at least, Christianity must be an undesirable difference.

COPING WITH STRAIN

The final piece of the argument is that because of this hostility, Christian students seek out groups (or subcultures) to join for emotional, social, and spiritual support. Subcultural theory was used to illustrate how deviant¹⁸ sections of the population form smaller groups in which they can feel free to reproduce those behaviours or beliefs that the outside population deems deviant. When interview participants were asked for the reason that they decided to join a particular group, the responses varied greatly, but very few of them indicated that it had anything to do with a need for this type of a cultural environment. A few participants expressed the desire for a more intimate community to join in which they could explore their faith, but none of the participants said that it was in response to the hostility of the environment. There was only one student who mentioned looking for a Christian group because she had heard that university could be tough, so in anticipation of the temptations in the secular university atmosphere she actively sought out a group. In fact many students responded that they were influenced by parental or what they saw as societal pressure.

Um, when I first came to the university it was just sort of the thing, the traditional thing that a Christian student would do, look around at the university groups, Christian university groups. (Male, 1st yr MSc, FEU 5yrs)

Some of the students also mentioned that they had been part of their church youth groups, or a high school Christian group. When they left high school they were looking for an opportunity to reproduce that community, and they knew that by joining a group it was going to be much easier to make friends. It appears as though the argument for why Christian students join Christian groups (to relieve the strain

¹⁸ Deviant is used here in the broader sociological sense of a behaviour or trait that differs from what is deemed “socially normal.”

felt while in academia) is faulty. However the benefits of social capital seem to be experienced by these students.

Social capital involves the relationship that exists between people, which allow for mutual access to each other's resources. The benefits of social capital come in many forms from emotional and economic resources to health benefits (Putnam 1995). In the case of Christian students, the benefits seem to come in the form of spiritual, academic, social, and emotional support.

Students indicated that being part of a Christian group has helped to deepen religious understanding and expectations. The three groups to which these students belong seem to tackle issues in a similar way. Members are encouraged to ask hard questions that may not always be appropriate in all Christian settings, and are given the support to work them out in a spiritually positive way.

But on a deeper level FEU seemed a better environment to challenge me in sort of what I believed what I thought about Christianity, Christians in general. And it was a safe place to ask those kinds of questions that are sometimes considered questions that you shouldn't be asking maybe in some other groups. They let me kind of push boundaries a little. It's been positive. (Male, 1st yr MSc, FEU 5yrs)

Being part of TMC group and the questions that we were asked and the things that we would discuss on Sunday nights and in our small groups and just really wanting to pursue a relationship with God. Which is something that I knew I wanted to do, but I just really didn't know how. So TMC really helped me with the how of it and so it's become more of who I am. (Female, 1st yr MA, TMC 5yrs)

The grad group was cool because it was a group of grad students, and we did things from a bit more of an intellectual level and that was good. I was ready for that, I was ready to ask some of those questions. I remember the very first book that we did at Richardson, "The Meaning of Jesus" by Marcus J. Borg and N.T. Wright. In the first chapter that he writes, he starts going on about how he gives tours of the holy land, and he passes this area and says, "Well this is the area where people say that Jesus gave the Sermon on the Mount. Well chances are that Jesus never gave us just one sermon, but these are teachings from him from all kinds of different places." This is a place where they say Jesus performed his miracle of turning water into wine, that probably actually never happened, so Marcus Borg just starts talking, this is a Christian historian who is writing about the meaning of Jesus, and starts by saying that a lot of these stories are probably not historical fact. And that just blew me away, I never thought that way before, and the chaplain at Richardson was very much an intellectual and really had room for those, that sort of thinking, whether or not he believed, I am not even really sure exactly where he was on all these issues, but it was neat for me to start to think about those things. (Male, 3rd yr PhD, Richardson 2yrs)

Some of the students indicated that being part of a group has helped them to be more comfortable in their faith, and more open about sharing it with their peers, or simply more comfortable discussing religious matters in public places.

One of the things is just being more comfortable speaking about my faith in a more public way, um... [staff member] encouraged me to like, meet up with her in a coffee shop and we would talk about spiritual things there as opposed to in a church building or in a set out 'this is a spiritual conversation place'. (Female, 3rd yr BSc, TMC 3yrs)

When students were prompted to discuss the impact the religious group has had on their academics, the responses were varied. Some students discussed how the group has had a negative impact on their academics in the sense of time taken out of doing schoolwork, while others offered that members of their group helped teach them time management skills. Other students offered that being in a group gave them an opportunity to engage with their course material in a new way.

I don't know, I actually I think it had, it sort of influenced a little bit the way I think about things too. I mean there's sort of philosophy behind physics, sort of unspoken philosophy there and um so I think kind of being around people who have the same sort of philosophy did influence the way I synthesized information from my classes, and the framework that I put, yeah, that same information into me. (Male, 1st yr MSc, FEU 5yrs)

All of the students expressed that being part of a Christian group has been a very positive experience. Many described that they had made a lot of new friends through the group; others met their partners there. There seemed to be a consensus that the Christian group had given them a comfortable, relaxed environment in which to study The Bible and to gain a deeper understanding of who Jesus Christ is, and why He came to earth. Furthermore a few students discussed the importance of role models, and how great of a resource a religious group can be to find people who have the same questions, face the same issues and have managed to survive. Although many of them admitted that there was no way to know if their spiritual development would

have been different without a group, they feel as though going to weekly meetings strengthens their faith and inspires them to be better Christians.

It is important to note that although students did have a generally positive outlook on their experiences within their groups, some students did mention that there were groups on campus that were not as welcoming as the group that they had found. A few students divulged that they initially attended meetings at a few different faith groups to find out which one suited them the best. Furthermore groups change over time, and with a transient membership base (students), the group dynamic will shift as will the content of the meetings (because of the interests of the members). One student wondered how effective the on-campus groups were at attracting students who are questioning their faith, or are looking for a faith. She was worried that sometimes these groups may close themselves off from, or seem intimidating to “questers.”¹⁹ In the social capital literature this is referred to as the difference between bonding and bridging social capital. A group that is rich with bonding social capital will tend to close themselves off from non-members, while a group rich with bridging social capital will be more appealing to questers as the group tends to be more involved in the larger community.

CONCLUSIONS

Using data collected from this project, more accurate statements can now be made about the experiences of Christian students in a secular university environment. It would appear that the academic environment is, if not hostile then, at least inhospitable toward Christian students. Many students expressed that they do feel strain between their beliefs and what they see socially in the academic environment.

¹⁹ This term refers to a spiritual person who is open to questioning their beliefs, changing their practices, and challenging the rigidity of certain beliefs (see for example Goldfried and Miner 2002).

From drinking and sex, to academic dishonesty and battling stereotypes, it would appear that these students do struggle to integrate themselves into the university environment. Furthermore, students do not feel as though people are generally accepting of their faith and their beliefs. They face struggles in the classroom with insinuations that their beliefs simply reflect an intellectual inferiority, or that creationism is a myth.

This strain manifests in the form of a discreditable stigma with students censoring their beliefs. Only through repeated interactions and more solid friendships will students disclose that they are Christian to their peers. These disclosures come with caveats and disclaimers though. They are aware of the negative stereotypes of Christianity and feel as though in order for their faith to be accepted by friends and peers they must have the opportunity to explain what their Christianity means to them.

It would appear that students do not choose to join a Christian group in order to deal with the strain that they feel within the academic environment. The use of subcultural theory was to postulate that joining a Christian club would happen *following* experiencing the tension between their beliefs and academia, yet none of the students indicated that this was the case. As described above, students joined a Christian group immediately after starting university. Although students do not join Christian groups as a result of this strain, they have expressed that there are many benefits from membership. The on-campus faith groups give students an opportunity to meet other Christian students, to mentor and be mentored, and to find positive examples of how other students live their Christianity. In an accepting environment, they study The Bible, ask difficult questions about their faith, and deepen their relationship with God and Jesus Christ.

Chapter 5- Conclusion

INTRODUCTION

The larger cultural issue, which contextualizes this thesis, concerns the way in which Christianity is understood and depicted in contemporary society. In the past decade numerous documentaries depicting Christianity in an overtly negative way have been edging their way into North American mainstream culture. Although purporting to be neutral in their depictions of Christian events and Christian culture, documentaries such as *Jesus Camp*²⁰ and *Hell House*²¹ explore some of the more fanatical and fundamentalist versions of Christianity. Coupled with a degree of political anxiety amongst some groups about the so-called “rise of the religious right” in the United States, as well as several contemporary sexual abuse scandals involving Catholic Priests, it would appear that popular views of Christianity are disparaging, drawn as they are from small sub-categories of Christianity.

For many the idea of a contemporary anti-Christian landscape came to a head in 2005 with the controversial publication of satirical cartoons depicting the Prophet Muhammad, in Denmark. The controversy began when 12 cartoon representations of the Prophet Muhammad were printed in a Danish paper, *Jyllands-Posten* (*Guelph Mercury*, Jan 31, 2006). This sparked international discussions about freedom of expression versus religious freedoms (Burman 2006). In Islam, it is considered a sin to have depictions or representations of the prophet Muhammad, and it is thus disrespectful for anyone to create any pictures of the Prophet (never mind cartoons of

²⁰ A documentary film depicting one evangelical Christian sect in which families are encouraged to home-school their children in order that they are not taught secular ideas such as evolution. Children are encouraged to speak in tongues, and their pastor is constantly referring to the training children as members of “God’s Army.”

²¹ Hell house is a documentary that focuses on an evangelical Christian group who creates a “haunted house” each year during Halloween. Congregants are chosen to act out various skits depicting teenagers and adults making various bad decisions. The skits involve topics such as: a botched abortion, a homosexual male who is dying of AIDS, drinking and driving, family violence and date rape.

him with a bomb in his turban) (Guelph Mercury, Jan 31, 2006). Many Canadian newspapers and television stations refused to show copies of the pictures while reporting on the story (Mansbridge, CBC, 2008). It is interesting that while there was international outrage over 12 cartoons printed in a Danish newspaper, Christianity, Christian figures, and the Christian church (as an institution) are continually insulted in many facets of our media -- shows such as *Family Guy* and *The Simpsons* -- movies such as *Saved* and *Stigmata* -- and in books such as *The DaVinci Code* and *People in Glass Houses*. How is it that our media can protest religious events and reactions in one arena while simultaneously ignoring the same behaviour in another?

Academia tends to be thought of as a more enlightened environment than the one provided by mass culture, with an abundance of egalitarian ideals such as tolerance, acceptance and a purported commitment to the open exchange of ideas. It was therefore surprising to see the same anti-Christian sentiments reproduced in a university atmosphere (both inside and outside the classroom) as are evident in mass culture. Anecdotal evidence consisting of stereotypical views of Christians surfaced in various classes that I attended. Suggestions have been made that those who believe in creationism are intellectually inferior to those who accept evolution. References to the empty headed, dogmatic, rule-follower as a representation of a Christian, and suggestions that Christians are worse than any other religion (as their faith is built upon converting others and they are just waiting for their chance to “stuff their faith down your throat”) also colour the perception of Christianity in the university setting. This has become even more pronounced in recent years with the legalization of same sex marriages in Canada and in some American states. Discussions aimed at locating the oppositional voice of same sex marriage inevitably ends up targeting “fanatical Christians” and the Catholic Church. These issues amalgamate, begging the question:

if this is the case, how do Christian students survive in our current academic environment?

The main argument of this project has been broken down into multiple stages, each asking a slightly different question with the aim of investigating how Christian students deal with the challenges of a secular campus. The argument begins with the postulate that academia is hostile to Christianity, which causes strain for Christian students. As these Christian students attempt to integrate themselves into the academic atmosphere they experience specific problems which non-Christian students do not experience. This antagonism has been conceptualized using Agnew's strain theory (Agnew 1992). For Christian students strain manifests itself as a discreditable stigma. Christian students recognize that their faith is not readily apparent to others, and if discovered could taint their reputation and future interactions with those who know they are Christian. It is because of this hostility that Christian students experience their faith as a stigma within academia. Christian students thus seek out a subculture in which to reproduce the behaviour, attitudes, and values of their religion in a prejudice-free environment. The possible direct benefits of this approach are suggested by the social capital literature: once in a group atmosphere, students have access to other Christian students' resources in the forms of spiritual, emotional, and social support.

Ethnographic content analysis, participant observation and semi-structured interviewing were used to investigate four postulates: (1) Christian students experience strain, as a direct result of their religiosity, on a secular campus; (2) the strain that they experience manifests as a discreditable stigma; (3) as a result of the strain that they feel they join Christian groups on campus; and (4) membership in Christian groups provide access to support networks in which to manage their strain.

Ethnographic content analysis was used to investigate the mandates of three Christian groups on an Eastern University (EU) campus: The Moral Compass, Fellowship at Eastern University and Eastern University's Christian Association. Only one of these groups gave permission to be involved in participant observation: The Moral Compass. Participant observation was carried out for the duration of 8 large group meetings. During these meetings any material distributed by the groups was collected and notes were taken. The data collected during this portion of the study were used to inform the construction of an interview schedule, as well as corroborate evidence from the interviews (where applicable).

Semi-structured interviews were used to illuminate the struggles faced by Christian students and the methods they used to manage these struggles. Interviews were intended to last an hour (many lasting two or three hours), conducted with eight students, and covered four main themes: why they joined a Christian group, how the group has affected their lives, if they feel different or segregated from their non-Christian peers, and how they manage this perceived difference.

Data collected during the course of this project reinforced the use of three of the four theories described in this paper: strain theory, discreditable stigma, and social capital, while subcultural theory proved to be less applicable. These three theories provided important heuristic devices for understanding how Christian students interact with their academics, the university environment, and other Christian group members. As will be discussed below, subcultural theory was found to not offer significant insight into how Christian students cope with the strain they feel within academia.

SOURCES OF STRAIN

The data collected for this study indicated that the academic atmosphere is hostile to Christian students. Chapter 2 identified three ways in which academic discourse can appear to be hostile towards religion and religious students:

1. The innate incompatibility of science and religion;
2. University causes individuals to “lose their religion”; and,
3. Academia downplays the importance of religion by describing it as something that people *do*, rather than something that people *are*.

These three arguments were initially used as evidence of the possibility that academia is hostile to religion, as there was no empirical data available to make this case.

These three postulates can be seen as hostile to religion, as these data indicate that they are myths yet they have remained popular (mis)understandings of the juncture between science and religion. The data also indicate that there are numerous aspects of the university atmosphere that make Christian students uncomfortable, or are in conflict with their beliefs. Furthermore, these students do not feel as though they can express their beliefs to their peers either inside or outside the classroom without prejudice, or without being typecast as a religious fundamentalist. As this project was borne out of a desire to explore assumptions and anecdotal evidence, it seems fitting to share an example of this type of stereotyping. While discussing this project with a fellow graduate student, I outlined that one main argument was to make a case that academia is hostile to religion in general, and I was most interested in Christianity. My colleague’s initial reaction was to warn me against making arguments like this because it sounds as though I am making a case for Christianity to be taught in the classroom (she inquired, “That’s not what you are doing, right?”). When describing a study, which has nothing to do with curriculum and everything to do with tolerance

and acceptance, it is interesting that her assumption was that I was somehow advocating for creationism to be introduced into the classroom. I explained that I found it interesting that academics can be tolerant toward a myriad of issues, yet we draw the line at religion (specifically Christianity), and that perhaps we need to be more reflexive about how we talk about Christianity. Although she agreed that it might be an interesting project, she warned against the possible uses of such data, that they might be taken out of context to further a “religious agenda.” This is exactly the point of this study; her reaction was to jump to the conclusion that since I was investigating whether academics are closed-minded and hostile to religion, my data could be seen as advocating some sort of right-wing, religious (and therefore fundamentalist) political agenda. This reaction exemplifies the stereotypes that some academics hold of Christians and Christian students.

HOW STRAIN IS EXPERIENCED

The data have supported the use of Goffman’s discreditable stigma (Goffman 1963) as a useful tool for understanding the way that strain is experienced by Christian students. Not only does this case fit the definition of a discreditable stigma, Christian students also indicated that they try to “pass” with their peers and new friends. They offered that the reason that they do this is because they are aware of the stereotypes that exist about Christians, and if they are going to tell a friend that they are Christian, they want the opportunity to explain their beliefs, and quell any assumptions that would be made about their character. Furthermore they explained that if they were to make a point of telling their friends that they are Christian, they might appear to be “shoving my beliefs down their throat.”

COPING WITH STRAIN

The assumption that Christian students seek out Christian groups because of the strain they feel within the academic setting gained no support in this study. None of the students mentioned this as one of the reasons why he or she chose to join a Christian group. Rather, these data suggest that students join these groups to continue group memberships that they pursued while living at home with parents, and it is the atmosphere that Christian groups create which supports participation. Temporally, the argument would not make sense, as these students do not experience strain with their environment that prompts them to join a Christian group, thus membership is not reactionary. A re-interpretation of the data can lead to two possible interpretations: the first being a possible explanation of why the strain is experienced after membership, the second is an explanation of how Christian students cope with strain.

There is a possibility that the temporal order does make sense, but in a manner opposite that which was originally conceptualized. Students' involvement in a Christian group may be the *reason why* Christian students recognize the adversity. If students joined Christian groups upon entrance into university, perhaps it was exposure to older students that made them aware of this strain. Realizing that other Christian students experience strain with a secular academic environment because of their religious beliefs could cause them to see (or perhaps make them more sensitive to) the strain they experience in their own lives. In fact, there is precedence in the criminological literature to suggest that this could be a plausible explanation (Sacco 1993). This 1993 study (about fear of victimization) suggests that integration into the lives of others may increase the chance of exposure to stories of victimization, or exposure to actual events of victimization, making the possibility of victimization even more salient.

The second interpretation of why subcultural theory did not prove useful is that students cope with strain in alternative ways. One interpretation reflects the benefits discussed in the social capital literature, but another interpretation of responses fits into Agnew's cognitive coping strategies (1992). Agnew describes cognitive coping strategies as ways that individuals who are experiencing strain re-conceptualize the problem in order to deal with it more effectively. His theory describes three different cognitive coping strategies. The first strategy is to ignore or minimize the importance of the adversity. Agnew explains that this strategy is accomplished by minimizing the importance of the goal, value or identity. Often times during interviews after explaining some of the problems they had experienced with non-Christian students they would admit that it is not just non-Christian students who have different values from them, but also other Christians, and other Christian students. This downplays the importance and the standardization of a Christian identity. A student who admits that often times he or she has more in common with and gets along better with non-Christian students is attempting to show that it is not the label Christian that is important, but rather what Christianity means to him or her that is important.

The second of Agnew's coping strategies is to maximize the positive outcomes and minimize the negative outcomes. During discussions about feeling segregated from their peers, or being able to openly express their faith a few participants interjected with the comments similar to, "Yeah, this is Canada, I don't feel discriminated against because I am Christian." (Male, 1st yr MSc, Richardson 1yr) This is an interesting statement because during a conversation about Christian stereotypes, and how difficult university life can be for Christian students, participants downplayed the intensity of the strain they felt. Another common

sentiment was that with each difficult situation that a student faced, there was a lesson to be learned, and their faith could be strengthened by the challenge.

Hearing comments I guess, my faith provides me with a way to say in my own life, like why would I believe my faith is not like that, or I think sometimes almost if you have someone say something against it [her faith], it provides strength, it's kind of weird but, how do I describe it, it's almost recognizing how it's not the way they say it is or that I believe that they have a wrong view of it, and things around like evolution and stuff, ah, having like it represent that, I can recognize things as being, like in my mind that it's not really logical, or I have had some teaching how it could happen or like, how I believe my beliefs are more true, I don't know. I guess it's like the ways of like their argument as opposed to what I believe and it makes mine seem to weight more on the true side. I guess that it shows that it is strong, because if it were weak then it would fall. (Female, 3rd yr BSc, TMC 3yrs)

In cases similar to the one above, students are admitting that they feel tension with their environment, but that there is always a stronger positive outcome that can result from this negative situation.

The last of Agnew's three coping strategies is to accept responsibility for the adversity. During the first meeting I attended with TMC a student was sharing an experience she had on a Christian retreat the previous year. She was referencing the things that they had discussed and noted that sometimes non-Christians have a difficult time accepting Christianity because it was inherently offensive. Although this was the first time I had heard this, it would not be the last. Throughout the rest of my time spent with TMC, the offensive character of Christianity was brought up several more times, and was mentioned in several interviews. The concept, in the contexts under which I have heard it expressed, unpacks the idea of having *the* truth, or *the* way to live your life. In our multi-cultural, tolerant, post-modern society there can be no *one* truth or no *one* way. If one group claims to have this truth (or the keys to it), then it is being intolerant of other practises, beliefs, and understandings of truth. This idea was used as a justification for why non-Christians do not like Christians, and why there are so many negative stereotypes about Christianity.

Like what Jesus says can be offensive, and he says that he is *the* way to *the* truth, not *a* way to *a* truth. And a lot of our society is like things are ok, if you want to choose that that's ok. Everyone is so inclusive and Jesus' way, I don't know, he loves

everyone, but his way is the way kind of thing. Jesus says like, you're not ok on your own kind of thing. You are not ok where you are, and I think it's the idea of only one way. (Female, 3rd yr BSc, TMC 3yrs)

And it is kind of risky to explain, maybe it's not, but it feels like it, that it's risky to explain to people what I believe, because our culture is very multicultural, so there is an immediate offence to the gospel which says that it's the only thing that is true. Christians truly believe that other religions are wrong and that's extremely offensive to other cultures. The truth that I believe is offensive, so I feel like reluctant to bring it out because of that. Because I don't want to be an offensive Christian, because I think that would be an unhealthy situation. Which is kind of easy to see, you kind of see that as the stereotypical sometimes especially in places where Christians are in political positions like in the United States. (Male, 1st yr MSc, Richardson 1yr)

Another idea that surfaced during interviews was the idea of being “comfortable.”

Students were asked how they dealt with some of the struggles that they encountered while in the university environment. Many students mentioned talking about their struggles with other Christian students, some suggested that they simply needed to pray or look for answers in The Bible. A few participants indicated that being in uncomfortable situations was part of being a Christian, and being a Christian living in the world (as opposed to living in a Christian bubble).

The point is that my comfort cannot be the number one motivator of my decision-making process. Obedience to Jesus has to be the number one motivator, if I am to have a rich Christian experience. It's quite possible to have a miserable Christian experience, just like it's possible to have a miserable marriage that doesn't last. But I really want to have a really good relationship with Jesus and that involves submitting to his smart, better plan about what I am going to do with my life. (Male, 1st yr MSc, Richardson 1yr)

This is another example of how their decision to become Christian and accept the gift given to them by God, comes with a more difficult life. They thought that this is something that Christians need to understand and accept.

Through their understandings of the perception of their faith, students have been able to cope with the negativity that exists toward their beliefs. To downplay the severity of the difference between “secular” and “religious” they highlighted the difference between different understandings of Christianity. They expressed their frustrations with other Christian students, other Christian on-campus groups and some aspects of Christianity. Highlighting how conflicts with the secular world strengthen

their beliefs can be conceptualized as downplaying the negative outcomes of their experienced strain. Finally by admitting that their religion is offensive to those who do not share their faith allows students to control the adversity that they face. It was their choice to become a Christian, and Christianity needs to be offensive in order to provide the truth about the universe, the truth about existence, and the truth about humanity's place within it.

Even though subcultural theory did not fit with these data, some principles derived from the social capital literature are still applicable to these students. All of the students expressed that they have had a wholly positive experience as group members. Many students cited spiritual benefits, others cited social benefits (such as meeting friends or meeting their partner), and some cited academic benefits associated with membership (such as the development of time-management skills). Although the reasons why they join does not reflect the strain felt within academia, membership in Christian groups seems to have provided an outlet for understanding their strain, and some tools for coping with it.

LIMITATIONS

As is common with exploratory studies, this project had many limitations. The study focused only on Christian students affiliated with a Christian group on one campus. This is a small sample of multiple Christian experiences. This group, I would argue, tends to be more committed to their spirituality, has an affinity toward their particular group, and almost all of them came from Christian homes. This leaves out the voices of those who have decided not to be Christian (upon entering university), those who are not in a Christian group, and those who are disgruntled with their Christian group. Furthermore this sample leaves out the perspective of the

non-Christian students, who may have a very different perspective about Christianity on a secular campus.

In the course of my interviews, I have discovered that the three Christian groups whose members participated in the interviewing shared similar mandates. They all seemed to be focused on asking hard questions about God, and faith, and all emphasize the building of a personal relationship with God. Many students, at the end of their interviews, suggested that I should interview some students from Eastern University's Christian Association (ECA). They described ECA members as more literal in their interpretations of the Bible, and as less likely to encourage the hard-hitting questions that are addressed in TMC, FEU, and Richardson. The students who broached this topic also alluded to ECA being slightly more evangelical, and more interested in witnessing²² as a main goal. They suggested that the ECA students might have very different experiences from students from either TMC or FEU especially because they tend to engage less in the personal meaning and relationship building, and more in the theology. A few participants also indicated that they had gone to ECA meetings in the past and their comments suggested to me that they are richer on bonding than bridging social capital; again this group would have given a different perspective on the climate at EU toward Christians.

During the interviews the possibility that the students were censoring themselves in front of me became apparent. This is nothing new in any sociological research, but in this case may simply add to the point that Christian students feel as though academia is hostile to Christianity. A few students jokingly said that some of the responses that they had given could be construed in a very different way than they were intended, and inquired if I was searching for "scandalous sound bites."

²² This term refers to speaking with non-Christians in an attempt to convert them.

Although this became a joke between the interview participant and myself, this could have been a real concern for some students. In retrospect, some of the questions could have been re-worded or phrased in a more moderate way. Many students asked for clarification when I asked about whether they thought that Christians are somehow particularly targeted for anti-religious sentiments in academia. At the time it did not occur to me, but it is possible that students were worried that they would appear to be saying that no other religious adherents face adversity. Comments that within Canada there is no religious persecution could have also been a reaction to shield from appearing too negative about their treatment in academia. Furthermore, a few students insisted that my interview should also explicitly ask students what it means for them to be Christian, and that by failing to do so I am missing half the story. Others simply used the interview to speak about their faith, more than about their experiences as a Christian student. This could reflect the desire to fully explain themselves to peers and friends, and to address any assumptions or stereotypes that I may hold about Christianity or Christians.

Time became a limitation during the course of this study. Using university students as participants creates many challenges for access. During the school year there are interruptions such as: snow days, reading week, Easter long weekend, midterms, and exam time, which limit the access one has to participants. Furthermore, it became readily apparent that the time set aside to conduct the interviews was insufficient as many reached two or three hours in length.

AREAS OF FUTURE RESEARCH

As an exploratory study, this research has opened up multiple avenues to pursue in the future. As mentioned above, the specificity of my sample may have

limited the range of responses gathered from this study. Future research in this area should include Christian students from a wider range of groups on campus, Christian students not involved in a Christian group, and non-Christian students. To give more robust data it would be advantageous to not only look at how Christian students feel the secular academic environment affects them, but also how Christian students who are not in groups manage their strain, and look at how non-Christian students think of Christianity within academia. Furthermore, a cross-comparison between various religious groups could shed light on whether this is a strain felt solely by Christian students, or by religious students in general.

It would be interesting to further explore the coping strategies employed by Christian students. Although it is clear that on-campus groups are a source of support it is unclear if the use of Agnew's coping strategies is relevant to these students. The inclusion of Christian students who are not part of on-campus groups may illuminate whether this is a useful theory in understanding how Christian students cope with a hostile environment. Furthermore stemming from the argument that students may learn to experience strain from their older colleagues, inclusion of Christian students who are not members of an on-campus group may further understanding of the detriments of social capital and social networks.

To make the data more generalizable, this study could be taken to a campus-wide survey. Random sampling would allow not only for Christian students, but students from all religions (or of no religious background) to discuss how the secular academic world impacts their beliefs. It would also be interesting to perform this research across universities, or campuses across countries. Since most of the religious fervour about the "religious right" comes out of the United States, this could

be accomplished by investigating if American campuses are any different than Canadian campuses.

In order to understand the long-term impact of the strain felt by Christian university students a longitudinal or cohort study could follow Christian students from high school and throughout their university career. A study such as this could find changes in the experience of strain, change in the coping strategies, and the impact this has on their faith. Retroactive questions could also be posed to Christian faculty members to enquire about their experiences as Christian students. Questions about their current situation could flush out what the long-term impact of this strain is on their faith, and if an anti-Christian environment is still present in their lives. This could be juxtaposed against the opinions of non-Christian faculty as to their understanding of the academic environment and its treatment of Christianity.

Furthermore, comparing a secular campus to a Christian campus would also enrich our understandings of whether the strain discovered in this study is particular to a secular campus. Not only in terms of course material, but also whether the Christian university environment has a different emphasis on lifestyle than that of secular campuses (i.e., drinking and promiscuity), and if the strain Christian students experience in a secular environment exists in a Christian environment. If these institutions have any non-Christian students attending, one could investigate how these students manage on a Christian campus. If it were possible to find these data, to study the enrolment rates of Christian students in secular universities versus enrolment rates in Christian universities could illuminate whether this strain or the possibility of this strain affects the decisions that Christian students make.

To add a different perspective to this idea, looking at the history of this phenomenon might show the impact of our current cultural context. Many

universities in Canada were originally religious institutions. To track the switch from religious (in Canada that would mean Christian) to secular and the fallout of that switch would be fascinating. Although survey data would not be available from students in that time, it would be possible to read any archival evidence or publications stemming from that institution, to see if the anti-religious undertones present in modern-day literature are prevalent, and when that switch happened.

As discussed in Chapter 4, when students were asked about integrating their faith and academic studies, most of them indicated that they had no problems doing this because they were in the natural sciences. This finding is quite ironic, as one could imagine that the sciences would be more difficult as it deals with “facts” and scientific evidence. Yet, these students not only said that they had no problem with it, but also indicated that they thought students in the humanities and social sciences (what they referred to as the arts) would have a much more difficult time in the classroom because of the relativity of truth.²³ They suggested that because Christianity has the truth, they could imagine it being difficult to learn about everything being relative, about the absence of objectivity, and about social constructions of knowledge. These ideas were seen to be completely contrary to Christian understandings about the world, whereas creationism and evolution could easily be integrated into a more sophisticated idea about humanity’s origin. Furthermore, one student explained that in the sciences you start with a big picture of the world, and as you advance in your studies the “world” that you are looking at gets smaller and smaller, thus coming less and less in contact with philosophical ideas. In the humanities and social sciences you begin with a small piece of the world, and as you advance you begin to look at larger and larger issues, and how we are all

²³ As indicated in Chapter 4, any arts program was synonymous with basic ideas of post-modernity for these students.

connected and interconnected. This makes it more difficult to integrate faith and academics because you begin to look at the larger philosophical issues at play. I address this here because it seems to be counter-intuitive, that faith would be easier to integrate into science than arts. This phenomenon warrants more attention. A more representative sample of students would allow for perspectives in both the arts and the sciences. Furthermore, access to students in the medical sciences could produce very different results as compared to students in engineering and chemistry.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

This thesis has laid some groundwork for future studies into how contemporary academia views and responds to Christian students, and hopefully students of other religions. Although research has been lacking in this area, it is becoming more and more important for these issues to be raised. As Mark Rosenfeld (2007:32) comments, “The growing religious and cultural diversity of students on university campuses has raised questions about tolerance and accommodation.” Although typically this tends to focus on physical space (for example Muslim students asking for prayer space), what I have attempted to do in this thesis is draw attention to tolerance and acceptance. Although it is not my intention to blur lines of academic freedom, or scientific integrity, it is my intention to bring consideration to stereotyping and sensitivity (or lack thereof) to different views of life and truth.

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