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Race Religion: Exploring the Intersections of Race and Religion and the Implications for Student Affairs Practitioners

Sara Lilien Blair

As student affairs professionals it is axiomatic that social identity plays a significant role in the lives of students. In college, many students enter the most intense stages of their developing social identities and, within the profession, we provide space for students to discuss and explore. However, this willingness to discuss seems to end where students' religious identities begin. As a result, students with a faith-based identity explore their non-religious identity to the exclusion of their religious identity. The following article explores the interdependence of racial and religious identities and the importance of welcoming that duality into student affairs discussions. This investigation is based on two studies of African American students and the role religion plays in their identity development. The concept that race and religion play an intersecting role in social identity is then applied to student affairs to generate ideas for including religion in identity building practices and programs.

As a profession, student affairs takes pride in providing space for students to discuss their multiple social identities. These discussions typically include race, socio-economic class, sexual orientation and gender. They do not generally include the religious and faith-based identities of our students. Lack of research regarding religious and faith-based identity development contributes to this inadequacy. I speculate that many practitioners step away from interacting with students regarding religion because it is such uncharted terrain. For students, religious and faith-based identity can be tied closely with other forms of identity development, such as racial identity development (Stewart, 2002).

Religious identity exploration is a fertile ground for significant meaning-making opportunities for students (Stewart, 2002). More importantly, as Stewart (2002) established, religious identity development can be fundamental in the racial development of Students of Color, specifically African American students. It may

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also represent a significant coping mechanism, without which a student cannot function. Insufficient research on the intersections of religious identity and other forms of identity make it difficult to understand the impact religion has on the development of students, especially students of color, in combination with their other identities (Stewart, 2002).

Intersectionality is the new buzzword for the student affairs profession. Exploration of multiple identities, the influence of one identity on another, and viewing students as a *whole* and not a plethora of fragmented identities, underlies this concept of intersectionality. Unfortunately, as mentioned above, student affairs professionals seems to struggle with discussing the religious identities of students, leaving out for some, a crucial component of their whole identity. Applying concepts of intersectionality, this article explores two studies about African American college students and the role religion played in their identity development. Furthermore, in this article I consider implications for student affairs practitioners based on the studies reviewed.

Case Study Review

Race and Religion

Patterns of faith-identity and race. Stewart's (2002) article on *The Role of Faith in the Development of an Integrated Identity*, investigated the role religion and faith played in the identity integration of five African American college students at a predominantly White institution. Stewart presented the idea that identity integration was a crucial concept for African American students as well as for other "cultural minorities" (Stewart, 2002, p. 579). Different from racial identity development models, identity integration views achieving self-understanding as a composition of intersecting identities that influence each other (Stewart, 2002). Each intersecting identity has the potential to influence another and become the interwoven internalized components of an individual. These identities become "salient throughout every area of an individual's life" (Stewart, 2002, p.580) as they move towards self-actualization. Stewart (2002) stated, "identity integration or wholeness is supported as a spiritual concept that is related to faith and the commitments that are made to certain roles, relationships, and concepts, and that is deeply relevant to the development of young adults" (p.582).

Using this concept of identity integration, all elements of identity must be explored, weighed, and balanced. In this sense, race and religion are interconnected. This intersection manifests itself in different ways for each African American student involved in Stewart's study.

The patterns. Stewart's study looked closely at the interconnectedness between race and religion, and analyzed the interconnection through a "three-fold typology of faith-identity patterns" (2002, p.590). Polytheistic faith, henotheistic faith, and radical monotheistic faith focused on the way in which each student's centralized values made meaning. Centralized values could be religious in the traditional sense of believing in God, or in a non-traditional sense of being non-theistic and spiritual, or faith-based. In her study, Stewart (2002) applied these patterns in both ways.

Polytheistic faith-identity is the pattern displayed by those individuals who have more than one center of value (Stewart, 2002). Stewart found two students, Kashmir and Ophelia [pseudonyms], who exhibited this type of faith-identity pattern in combination with the development of their racial identity. Although these two students were operating in this particular pattern, each student led completely different lives, and for reasons described below, shared only the feeling of being an outsider from the African American community at their current institution (Stewart, 2002). Kashmir identified as half Black and half White. Kashmir shifted between her newfound sense of "being Black" with her Black friends, being a woman, and having a close relationship with her White mother (Stewart, 2002, p. 584). Each of these social circles was a strong value center for Kashmir in her search to find wholeness (Stewart, 2002). According to Stewart (2002), Kashmir's shifting from one value center to another clearly demonstrated a polytheistic faith-identity pattern. Similarly, Ophelia's centers of value were also race and gender. These dual centers of value also qualified her as polytheistic. However, Ophelia's commitment to both value centers was not as strong as Kashmir's, and consequently, her making meaning from these two value centers was limited (Stewart, 2002). Thus, while both women struggled, the less committed or value-driven Ophelia had a more difficult time balancing her identities as a Black woman.

Other individuals in Stewart's (2002) study, such as Poke, displayed henotheistic faith and have identity patterns that have a single value center which is the source of meaning in their lives. Poke's single value center was based on his relationships with family and friends and not his involvement on campus. He categorized his Black fraternity as his family as well (Stewart, 2002). Poke described himself as the mediator between identity groups and understood that this aspect of his identity was not adequate in times of need. Stewart (2002) defined Polk's faith in himself as a community builder, as demonstrating henotheistic faith-identity patterns.

Those who exhibit radical monotheistic faith-identity patterns place faith and trust into a value center through which all other commitments are viewed (Stewart, 2002). Sage, the student in Stewart's (2002) study who displayed a radical monotheistic faith-identity pattern, had a single value center outside of herself in which she placed all of her faith and trust in God. Sage was clear about her understanding and belief that, "God created her Black and female and working class and spiritu-

ality centered, and she recognized that the intersection of all those identities had made her who she was” (Stewart, 2002, p.592). Her devotion to God allowed Sage to be confident in her identities as a spiritual Black woman from a working-class background. She found meaning in her intersecting identities with God as the sole value center. Over time, Stewart came to the conclusion that each student she interviewed in her study “recognized that there was a more optimal way of being and seemed to innately trust that they would eventually reach that point” (2002, p.593). In other words, each student trusted that they would find meaning in their life. Stewart’s (2002) final point was that in order for an individual to “appreciate and integrate multiple identities” (2002, p. 594) they would need a certain level of spiritual maturity. Sage was already at the point where she could appreciate and integrate her multiple identities. However, students Kashmir, Ophelia, and Poke were still in the process of developing an integrated identity. This was displayed in their focus on race as a value center, lack of commitment to multiple value centers, or commitment to a value center that was inadequate for making meaning or providing support when needed most.

Racial identity and religious orientation. Similar to Stewart (2002), Sanchez and Carter (2005) explored the racial identity of 270 African American college students and the role of religious orientation within that identity. In their study, Sanchez and Carter (2005) mentioned that when searching for answers to existential questions, college students tend to turn to religion. Focusing specifically on the role religion plays in the lives of African American students, Sanchez and Carter (2005) started with the history of the church and religion in African American communities. According to the study, for African Americans the church plays a significant role starting in early life and offers consistent opportunities for individuals to participate in affiliated organizations, clubs, and social groups that are not part of White society (Sanchez & Carter, 2005). High levels of involvement in the church from an early age establish religion and spirituality as important facets of identity for many African American students.

Sanchez and Carter (2005) used Helms’s (1990) racial identity development model and looked closely at the stages that were described: pre-encounter, encounter, immersion-emersion, and internalization. The authors combined Helms’s racial identity development model with religious orientation, defined as, “one’s psychological attitude towards one’s particular religious or spiritual beliefs” (Sanchez & Carter, 2005, p. 283). Religious orientation included three dimensions: extrinsic, intrinsic, and quest. Extrinsic individuals were self-motivated in their beliefs, while intrinsic individuals were influenced by their beliefs and were considered true believers. Individuals who were in the quest dimension doubted religion (Sanchez & Carter, 2005). Examining the relationship between attitudes around religion and racial identity was the ultimate goal.

Results of the study indicated that there was a significant relationship between racial identity and religious attitudes. Furthermore, the results indicated for African American college students that race and religion – and issues that came with those identities – were crucial to the self-identity process (Sanchez & Carter, 2005). Sanchez and Carter (2005) found that for African American men in the immersion-emersion stage, there were lower levels of intrinsic religious orientation than in that of African American women in the same stage.

African American men in the immersion-emersion stage may have been withdrawing or distancing themselves from any religious beliefs as they searched for a new African American identity and a new set of beliefs that accompanied. However, women in this stage may have been withdrawing in order to feel the solace of private prayer and faith (Sanchez & Carter, 2005). For African American women, their religious beliefs may have been providing a coping method that allowed them to face the stress that came with creating a racial identity (Sanchez & Carter, 2005). Thus, intrinsic religious orientation was providing women with a way to make meaning of the racial situations they encountered throughout their racial identity development process.

Similar differences arose for African American men and women who were currently in the internalization stage of their racial identity development. For African American men, the complexity of their racial perspective and the level of internalization of their racial identity directly correlated with the intricacy of their religious orientation. Sanchez and Carter (2005) speculated that this might have been because African American men in the internalized stage of racial identity development may have felt more free to practice their faith. Furthermore, the resolution of racial situations and issues provided men with a sense of security for future identity and religious exploration (Sanchez & Carter, 2005, p. 291).

On the contrary, African American women who were in the internalization stage of their racial identity development showed lower intrinsic religious orientation attitudes. Sanchez and Carter (2005) attributed this to African American women being more comfortable and solidified in their racial identity. Strong racial identity meant that these women had no need for a coping method. Thus, African American women were distancing themselves from religious belief systems in order to focus fully on their racial identity exploration (Sanchez & Carter, 2005).

In conclusion, Sanchez and Carter (2005) determined that religious orientation attitudes in the encounter stage of African American racial identity development were more quest-like than intrinsic or extrinsic. Quest religious orientation was attributed to searching for meaning about the importance of race. The concept of quest religious orientation was found to be most present during the encounter stage of African American racial identity development.

Both studies established that, for African American students, there can be a significant intersection between racial and religious identities. Stewart (2002) and Sanchez and Carter (2005) mentioned in their studies that while African American students were the main focus of their research, similar orientations and attitudes could be found in other groups of Students of Color. While the research is limited, it is clear that there is a need to recognize the intersection between race and religion for many students.

Intersectionality

Crenshaw (1989) coined the concept of intersectionality in 1989 to emphasize the need for women who were Black to be seen as Black women. Crenshaw (1989) introduced intersectionality in her piece *Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics*. Crenshaw (1989) argued that in cases of race-discrimination the case was viewed in terms of sex and class privilege. When the case was about sex-discrimination it was viewed in terms of race and class privilege. In other words, Black women were viewed as Black in sex-discrimination cases and as women in race-discrimination cases, never as Black women; both identities were treated as exclusive from one another (Crenshaw, 1989). Crenshaw (1989) went on to say that, “antidiscrimination doctrine essentially erases Black women’s distinct experiences and, as a result, deems their discrimination complaints groundless” (p. 146).

Intersectionality challenged, and still challenges, the way in which individuals view certain issues involving the social and cultural construction of identities. Crenshaw (1989) brought the concept of operating out of multiple identities to the forefront of the legal world. Overtime, some disciplines adopted Crenshaw’s (1989) ideas concerning intersectionality and applied the concepts. However, when it comes to adequate study in student affairs, little to no discussion has occurred on the methodology of intersectionality (Nash, 2008). It has been difficult to find a way to answer some of the fundamental questions when it comes to studying intersectionality on its own (Nash, 2008). Research in the field seems to indicate that it is simpler to focus on one or two intersections at a time. It is clear that those conducting studies like Stewart (2002) and Sanchez and Carter (2005) have focused on the intersections of two identities, religion and race, and not necessarily all of the intersections an individual holds.

Although Crenshaw (1989) made it clear that intersectionality of identities is specifically for better understanding the experiences of those who are marginalized, Nash (2008) states that “intersectionality refers to multiple oppressions experienced...but more generally to all women” (p.10). The concept of intersectionality is important to keep in mind when there is a dominant and non-dominant identity held by an individual such as African American and upper class or White and

queer. It is also important to keep the concept of intersectionality in mind when working with those who hold only dominant identities such as White, male, upper class, and heterosexual. The concept of intersectionality pushes practitioners to take into consideration the wholeness of the students with whom they work. As practitioners, if we are unable, as practitioners, to embrace the whole student then we are silencing a section of that student's identity.

For Practitioners

Sanchez and Carter (2005) mentioned the need for continued research in the area of religion and race. While they focused specifically on African American college students, their study, and Stewart's (2002), could be replicated with other African American college students or with other underrepresented groups. Future research could provide practitioners with more insight into the impact that religion has on other identities and vice versa.

Students in Stewart's (2002) study spoke about a lack of space in which they could explore the multiple sections of their identity. Furthermore, Stewart's students mentioned a significant lack of mentors who were able to guide them through exploration of their intersecting identities (Stewart, 2002). In order to provide this space we must be willing, as practitioners, to educate ourselves on religion, faith, and spirituality and must continue the research in the area of religious identity.

According to Nash and Murray (2010), "on many nonsectarian campuses, there is outright disdain for those students who make and find meaning in their faith experiences" (p. 58). It is also important that we, as practitioners, start the conversation around religion so we are opening the door for our religious and faith based students. The goal is to provide an environment in which they feel comfortable discussing their religious identities and meaning-making in their identity exploration. As Nash and Murray (2010) recommend, learning to talk respectfully and openly about religion is also fundamental in opening the door for our students.

Nash and Murray (2010) recommend two more ways in which practitioners can create spaces for students to discuss their religious identities. Their first recommendation is to reexamine personal biases for and against religion. They also suggest making sure that the curriculum we use includes concepts around religion, spirituality, and faith. Both recommendations support the creation of space for exploration around religious identity. In these spaces it is important to continue conversations around the intersections of identity and the ways in which multiple identities influence each other.

It is imperative that as practitioners we begin to take the steps necessary to educate ourselves more fully on religion, faith and spirituality. Conducting research on

religion and the impact that it has on our students who identify with a religion, as well as the impact it has on our atheist or agnostic students, is essential. Continuing to operate under the notion that religion is an unmentionable subject in the halls of our institutions does not serve our students in the best way possible. Regardless of discomfort, it is necessary that multiple identities, including those that are faith-based, be recognized so that students can feel whole.

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