Visual Data on the Topics of God, Church, Religion, and Spirituality

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this research was to gather visual data from college students regarding their thoughts about God, church, religion, and spirituality. In order to collect these data, I gathered a convenience sample of students who were passing by in a lobby on the university’s campus. I showed the students a set of photographic Soularium cards and asked them to pick a card that resonated with them, and they then wrote on, glued words, or glued smaller images to the card. Participants completed a brief questionnaire after they created their cards. It was hypothesized that the activity would make students feel collectively more open to the topics of God, church, religion, and spirituality. The results indicated that while the majority of participants reported feeling comfortable during the activity, most participants did not alter their views or change in their level of openness towards religious and spiritual topics.

INTRODUCTION

When working to achieve a spiritual understanding, it is beneficial to hear what others think about religious topics. However, difficulties arise. ‘God’ is invisible, the church is imperfect, and spirituality is abstract; sometimes religion seems hopeless because these facts create differences among individuals or make it difficult to form secure beliefs. It is no wonder, then, that since religion was formed, people have disagreed and fought. People with questions, uncertainty, brokenness, and criticisms against God or the church seem to fear being judged for having these questions. Nevertheless, in the midst of disagreement, there is a delicate balance that can be struck in order to prevent people from disengaging or feeling shamed by these topics: These topics should remain open to everyone through the creation of an ongoing, inviting conversation. This project is an attempt to present people with an opportunity to speak about religious topics without fear of judgment in an inviting, nonjudgmental way.

Current research indicates that there is a struggle among people, the church, and finding faith. Art can be a positive and effective means for people to express spiritual concepts. The current project combined these ideas by creating a dynamic in which both can be addressed. I asked whether or not the art activity would allow people to feel comfortable expressing their thoughts, whether or not their level of openness to these topics would change, and whether or not their beliefs would change at all.

Within the church community, a common concern arises: The church is losing the interest of the youth and young adults. In addition, many adults seem to echo a voice of struggle when it comes to following the requirements of the church or God. The Barna Group (2009) surveyed how many adults truly have a biblical worldview. Criteria for a biblical worldview included belief in fundamental truths within the Bible, such as the belief that God is all-powerful and all-knowing (Barna Group, 2009). Their findings indicated that 9% of American adults maintained a biblical worldview.

What, specifically, is it that people are struggling with in their faith, religious pursuits, or commitment to the church? The problem is not in lack of awareness of these topics: The Barna Group (2011a) revealed that 81% of adults claimed Christianity, that they had personally committed to Jesus Christ, and that this commitment was important to them at the time of the survey. Furthermore, 78% of identifying Christians claimed that spirituality was strongly important to them. Although these numbers are high, somewhere along the way there is a disconnection. When asked how many were “totally committed to investing in their spiritual development” or “completely dependent on God,” the percentages shrunk to 18% and 22% for these questions (Barna Group, 2011a). It seems, therefore, that people want to identify with spirituality and a belief in God, but there is reluctance about moving from finding it attractive or important to dedicating oneself to living it.

Barna Group (2011a) research offered four obstacles that may cause friction in a deeper spiritual connection. The first obstacle is commitment, which the previous statistics revealed. The second is repentance, which involves feeling sorry for sinful acts and making an effort to cease. The third obstacle is activity, and while Barna Group notes that many Christians attend church, they do not participate in deeper spiritual activities, such as fasting, quiet reflecting, and meditating on scriptures. The final obstacle is spiritual community, which means finding a group of people to confide in in a personal way. The church is a large group gathering, and people often do not seek of smaller, more intimate groups to share spirituality with more directly. These obstacles, however, point responsibility to people, and it is important that the church is critically evaluated, as well.

Barna Group research (2011b) evaluated the church, as well, and its outreach to young adults and examined the main reasons why 3 out of 5 young people leave the church after the age of 15. These reasons include the following: The church seems overprotective, teens’ and 20-somethings’ experience of
Christianity is shallow, churches come across as antagonistic towards science, young Christians’ church experiences related to sexuality are often simplistic and judgmental, young people struggle with the exclusive nature of Christianity, and the church feels unfriendly to those who doubt. These reasons highlight a struggle that could easily cause young people to feel pain, judgment, and resentment to a community that does not understand them and perhaps does not accept them. While churches may be aware and concerned about these dynamics, they may not know how to face them.

Another possible contributor to the strain between young people and the church and spirituality may be the beliefs of the postmodern era. Christianity, on one hand, claims numerous absolute truths such as the belief that God is real, Hell is real, everyone is a sinner, etc. However, Veith (1994) stated that postmodernist views reject the idea of a single, absolute, and objective truth. Diverse communities live in close proximity and struggle to get along, which requires people to see multiple points of views. Vieth recounted that, “According to a recent poll, 66% of Americans believe that ‘there is no such thing as absolute truth’”. The rejection of absolute truths existing poses a distinct obstacle between postmodernists and most religions. However, Vieth remarked that it is the church’s job to address the culture, and failure to do so means risking irrelevance.

There is another dynamic among today’s spiritualists. While 41% of Americans are unable to identify an influential Christian, the majority of Americans would support Christian businesses and brands, and three quarters of Americans see the church as a positive factor in their community (Barna Group, 2011c). Barna Group (2013) pointed out that technology may be having a positive influence by providing spiritual or religious resources to people. According to Barna Group (2013), one third of the millennial generation accesses sacred texts from their phones or online. These mixed results point to a possible conclusion: There are obstacles and adversities between people and religion, but the interest in spiritual and religious topics has not been completely abandoned.

A possible outlet for people to explore spirituality and religious topics is through making art. For example, Bell (2011) wrote: “Art therapy facilitates meaning-making through the use of art materials and images, and thus opens up an intra-psychic space where spirituality can be acknowledged, explored and understood”. Although spirituality is often a metaphysical topic, it can still be explored physically through creative means. Additionally, art connects to spiritual expression in another way; in the same way religion attempts to answer the philosophical question about what happens after we die, art can help to address this difficult question because it is an imaginative process. For example, for patients who are facing terminal illnesses or families who are preparing to lose a loved one, spirituality often becomes a source of comfort in the midst of death. Spiritual expression through art making is a common therapeutic practice among patients who are facing questions about death. Furthermore, Koepfer (2000) noted that religious and spiritual topics increasingly are being addressed in several health care areas, and spiritual develop of the clinician is important if they are to help clients who are interested in these topics.

Following the trend of connecting spirituality to well-being, Swiss Psychoanalyst Carl Jung, who is considered a forefather of art therapy, viewed religious experience as vital to healing (Farrelly-Hansen, 2001). Farrelly-Hanson recounted a quote by Gary Markowitz that carries the themes of art making, spirituality, and being in touch with oneself:

Painting is one way I connect with myself- my higher self- that spark of golden light that lies within... my art is about other dimensions and realities coming together with ours- angelic realms, the Central sun, dimensions of light. It is about accessing distant memories and remembering our origin and ourselves.

Markowitz speaks of making art as a way to get in touch with himself and other realms of a spiritual nature. While people will undoubtedly experience spirituality differently, art appears to be a beneficial resource for individuals to understand, develop, and share their own philosophies about religious topics. Concerning the church’s issue with connecting to certain people, art stands as a possible bridge to lessen the gap or mend past offenses. Art can allow the church and people to be united in a common cause: exploring spirituality.

Frank Warren’s work, “Post Secret” inspired the current project. Warren asked people to anonymously assembled post cards in an artistic manner and sent them to him and he then compiled them into a book. These post cards contain secrets of all types, expressed in an artistic manner. The book reflects a sense of power gained by those who make the bold choice to publically confess a secret; this boldness was encouraged because Warren found a way for people to confess without being judged for what they say said. The book demonstrated that there is power in numbers; seeing many secrets of all levels of depth beside one another produces a sense of unity that overcomes the shame and embarrassment that comes with keeping secrets hidden. One goal of the current project was to create a similar opportunity for honesty because this kind of opportunity is exactly what the church and religion should present to the community on a larger scale. How can people be expected to engage with these topics unless they can make an honest statement about where they are in their journey without fear of judgment?

The project was designed to find a way to present people with visual materials that could represent their opinions on religious and spiritual topics.
METHOD

Participants
Participants were 71 students from a mid-sized private university affiliated with the Lutheran church. Permission to collect data from human subjects was granted from the university’s Institutional Review Board.

Materials
Soularium cards were used as a way to stimulate students’ thinking about religion. These cards are index-sized and have various photographs on them. The Soularium cards did not bear any explicitly religious content on them, but were rather ambiguous and neutral in topic. Markers, typed adjectives, small religious images, scissors, glue, and magazines were available for participants to use. The questionnaire asked three questions: Did you feel comfortable while completing this activity? Did your beliefs change at all after completing this activity? Did your level of openness change at all after completing this activity?

Procedure
Participants were recruited in a busy lobby of a college campus building. A table was reserved and set up with all of the supplies. As students walked past the table they were asked, “Would you like to participate in my senior project?” Those who agreed to participate were told to select a photograph they felt resonated with them concerning their beliefs or opinions on topics of God, religion, spirituality, or church. Participants were told to write directly on the photograph, or to optionally glue words or picture to it, and to express their opinions. They were told they could say whatever they wished, because the cards would remain anonymous. It was then explain that the cards would later be displayed in the campus chapel. Participants were able to ask for help at any time during the process of assembling their card. Once participants had finished, they were instructed to slide their completed cards into a box with a slit at the top in order to hide their card’s content and protect their anonymity. They were encouraged to fill out the questionnaire. After data collection ended, the cards were displayed in the university’s chapel.

RESULTS
According to the questionnaire results, 59 out of the total 71 participants filled out a questionnaire. The first question asked if the activity altered the participant’s views on religion or spirituality in a negative way, positive way, or not at all. The results indicate that no participants felt the activity altered their views in a negative way, 22% felt the activity altered their views in a positive way, and 78% of participants felt their views stayed the same. The next question asked whether or not the participant felt comfortable while completing the activity, to which 97% answered that they felt comfortable and 3% felt uncomfortable. The final question asked whether the participant felt less open, more open, or the same level of openness towards the topics of religion and spirituality after completing the activity. Less than 1% of participants felt less open (one participant), 47% felt more open, and 52% felt the same level of openness.

DISCUSSION
This study examined whether an art project could change college students’ views about religion and spirituality, was comfortable for students to express their spirituality, and made students more open to religious or spiritual activities. According to the results, the majority of students’ views stayed the same. This is not a particularly surprising result, because the activity did not present any kind of ‘teaching’ material, and it made no attempt to change the minds of the participants. The second result, which inquired about whether participants felt comfortable during the activity or not, was very clear: Students did feel comfortable expressing their opinions during the activity. The third result, however, was more difficult to assess. When asked if their level of openness towards spiritual or religious activities had changed, the participants’ answers were largely split, but the majority indicated that their level of openness did not change. Most others answered that their level of openness towards the topics became more open rather than less open, but this number did not exceed those whose level of openness stayed the same.

These findings provide weak support for the idea that the activity would make people feel more open towards religious and spiritual topics. A majority answer supporting an increased openness would have supported the study’s goal. There could be a few reasons for this result: It is possible that the question was vague and that students did not understand why the question was being asked. Perhaps it may have been better to ask: “After completing this activity, do you feel more comfortable expressing your opinions and being asked about your religious or spiritual opinions?”

It is believed that the comfort reported by participants and the openness reported by some participants was due to the fact that they were expressing themselves through art. As Bell (2011) indicated, art serves as a gateway into a space where abstract and meaningful concepts, such as spirituality, can be explored. Art provides a space for people to connect with their inner worlds and self-reflect (Farrelly-Hanson, 2001). The research concerning the struggles that cause many young people to stop attending church fueled the hope that participants would feel more open towards religious and spiritual topics by making art (Barna Group, 2011a). A main goal in attempting to increase openness towards these topics was for students to feel more inclined to voice their
opinions, listen to the opinions of others, and be more inclined to explore religious or spiritual environments.

The dissemination process was successful. The project was recounted at the university’s weekly chapel and received a great deal of positive feedback. As suggested by faculty, future research could continue the project and post the images to a website. Positive feedback was received from several participants during the execution of the activity, and they seemed appreciative for the opportunity to express their opinions for someone who was not trying to shape their answers on account of a personal agenda.

Overall, the activity successfully provided a comfortable setting for students to express their opinions about religious and spiritual topics. Previous research indicated that a comfortable environment for expression about these topics is lacking. However, recording whether or not participants’ altered their actions after completing the activity could be examined in future research. Altered actions could include additive behavior such as attending a religious event, having a religious or spiritual conversation, or reflecting on these topics in a personal way. Questions regarding participants’ level of openness could be modified in the future, as well. In addition, the activity could be directed toward a more specific question, such as, “What is your biggest struggle regarding spiritual or religious topics?” along with the follow-up questions, “Do you think this struggle can be overcome, and if so, how?”

A possible limitation could be the student recruitment method used. Although I attempted to gather a random sample, it is not guaranteed that the people in the lobby accurately represented the overall population or opinions of the university’s student body.

This activity and research offered opportunities for self-reflection and to learn about others. A greater understanding of spirituality, art therapy, and how they can complement each other was gained. A personal passion has been strengthened regarding encouraging others to speak and providing a safe environment for expressions of honesty. Furthermore, the following insight has been embraced: People often carry around more emotional weight with them than is noticeable from their outward appearances. Many of the cards students created were emotionally deep and demonstrated a genuine wrestling with the hard, unanswered questions of life; many of them express questions about identity, which demonstrates a high level of emotional depth and questioning. Overall, the project yielded a deep sense of personal satisfaction because project required vulnerability, and it was a humbling experience witnessing students respond positively and courageously in the midst of difficult topics.

REFERENCES