

How Do European College Students Experience Their Adventist Faith?

Oftentimes, as I look at young college students, I don't see a clear evidence of religious commitment in their lifestyles. However, after having spent many hours interviewing them, I realize that the sincerity and high quality of religious experience of many of these young men and women could be an inspiration to others.

As one student put it:

"Religion is quite important when I think about it. It affects my life a lot. The Sabbath is a very important part of the week, and there are things that I obviously would not do because of what I believe. Prayer to a certain extent was something ritualistic to me when I was a child (i.e., prayer before eating or going to bed). But now it is probably more like talking to God when I want to and not because I am supposed to, like when I was younger. This is something I practice regularly."

Similar responses were offered by a high proportion of students who, by looking at their outward behavior, would not necessarily be seen as "spiritual" or "religious."

Other responses I have received have been rather negative: "It is worse than before. . .," "It is not a very big part of me at this time." But when they elaborated on their answers,

Picture
Removed

Most participants stated that Adventist higher education positively affected their religious life.

BY JULIAN MELGOSA

even these young people looked hopefully toward the future.

Questions About the Study

In late 1996, I conducted 20 in-depth interviews, with follow-up questions in early 1997. Participants were young people from 16 eastern and western European countries who enrolled at Newbold College in Bracknell, England. All were members of the Seventh-day Adventist Church or had been raised in Adventist families. The 11 young men and nine young women surveyed were born between 1975 and 1979. Seventeen were baptized members of the Adventist Church; three were not. Half of the group had attended our schools—primary, secondary, or both.

All participants were interviewed in depth about their personal religious experiences.

The open-ended questions encouraged free expression. Here are some sample questions:

- *Past*—How do you recall living your faith? Do you think you have experienced a conversion? If yes, how was it? Describe significant persons/circumstances in your conversion.

- *Present*—What do you think of the Seventh-day Adventist Church leaders? What do you think of the church doctrines? What about the lifestyle proposed by the church?

- *Future*—How do you see the fu-

The critical comments [from respondents] centered around two issues: the apparent distance between youth and church leaders, and the rather formal and rigid style of worship.

ture of the Seventh-day Adventist Church? How important do you expect the church to be in your life in the years to come? If you had children, would you raise them as practicing Seventh-day Adventist believers?

• *Current educational experience*—

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

Main Findings

Almost all the students interviewed pointed to their family as the most relevant factor in their early religious experience. This was just as true for those with non-believing parents, especially if adults were tolerant and open enough to set a good foundation for their children's later conversion.

The *mother's* influence appeared prominently. "I remember that my mom would read stories to me at night. . ." was a comment I kept hearing. Even in atheist families, the mother seemed to play the "religious" role: "My upbringing was strictly atheistic," said an Eastern European. "Religion was banned. I grew up as a godless person. However, I could hear my mom whispering sometimes: God exists." The mother's influence may be due to the significant amount of time that, in most cultures, mothers spend with their small children.

However, divorce may also be an important factor. The interviews revealed that at least one-fourth of the participants' parents were divorced and they had lived with their mother. In some cases, family problems had placed the mother in a protective role. "My father drank very heavily," stated one young man. "His drinking periods would become longer and his sober times shorter and shorter. So my relationship with my mother became stronger. She was. . . and even now is my best friend."

The church also appeared to be a strong factor in the young people's early religious experience. Sabbath school in particular was mentioned by the majority of those who grew up as Adventists. "It was fun," said a young woman. "The Sabbath school is what I remember best. I enjoyed it thoroughly as a child, especially because we could participate."

More than three-fourths of the participants claimed to have experienced conversion. The nature of the experience was quite varied: from those who reached conversion in a calm and progressive manner to those who had been able to shift the direction of their lives only after engaging in delinquent behavior. However, all could identify a single person (a friend, teacher, or youth pastor) who, often far away from home, played a decisive role in their conversion.

A young man from a Nordic country explained: "From 15 to 18, I basically lacked the church. . . . I drank regularly. . . . Later on, I met one of my old friends. She told me that she had been converted to Christianity. She had stopped drinking and going out and now she belonged to Christ. She asked me: 'What is your faith? What are you going to do?'" This was for me the be-

Picture
Removed

ginning of a new life.” Said another: “I had this friend I met in Poland while I was a student missionary there. . . . He did strange things sometimes, but he influenced my spiritual development a lot.”

Another male participant wrote: “Accidentally, I met this young man. I hadn’t gone exactly through the same things, but I could identify with him in a way. And so for the first time in my life I actually told him some of the sinful things I had done. And he didn’t condemn me. He led me to the Bible, to Isaiah 53 about Jesus and Psalm 51 about David. The pieces started to come together. And I believe the Spirit was working on me, so I prayed, looked at the past and understood why Jesus was on the cross. After this moment I felt like sharing my experiences with others.”

Their attitude toward church organization and doctrines was quite positive and when criticism arose, it was moderate, responsible, and mature. One participant, returning from a conference session, said: “I observed that the church leaders are looking for something, new methods. . . . They are open to changes.” One young woman said: “I have observed that during the last years they have encouraged more young people to participate. They have young people on committees. I think this is very positive because before they tended to keep it for themselves.”

“My faith is independent of the church,” declared another participant. “If the church takes a stance, but I believe differently, I still consider myself part of that church. . . . ordination of women, for example. I believe that women should be ordained, but still I want to belong to this church. . . . so even if I do not agree with the stance on women’s ordination, I still understand why they chose that position. This way keeps me open and within the church.”

The critical comments centered around two issues: the apparent distance between youth and church leaders, and the rather formal and rigid style of worship. “One might forget,” said a female student, “that the young people are those that actually will be the church of tomorrow. One should do

a lot to keep young people in the church, and too little has been done. In my country, youth find church very boring. . . . They are drifting from the church because there is nothing there, so I really think that the organization should do something about this.” Regarding the style of worship, one young woman said: “My suggestions would be to use microphones, keyboards, lots of instruments to improve the sounds inside the church. I think that music would bring young people to God in the church.”

Adventist lifestyles are accepted but should not be a second gospel. Although I expected criticism about the church-approved lifestyle, more than three-fourths agreed with the guidelines given by the church in regard to traditions such as attire, diet, and recreation. And even those who expressed negative opinions used qualitative terms such as “a bit constraining” or “a little behind the times.” Typical statements included: “No problem,” “I think it’s wonder-

ful,” “There are good reasons behind it,” “Personally, I am convinced that the Adventist lifestyle is the best.”

There was, however, one area of dissatisfaction among many in the group. Although they openly recognized the value of the Adventist lifestyle, they perceived that the church has placed too much emphasis on these behaviors while forgetting more fundamental aspects of Christianity. Some made the following comments: “I don’t see any problem with the lifestyle that we promote as Adventists. But again, I do not expect other people to live up to them right away because it takes time.” “We should consider the culture, the background of the people. For example, in my country, the culture is so much different from the rest of European countries, especially the western countries. When it comes to vegetarianism, that is a taboo—it is something really weird. But certain Adventist ministers come and emphasize vegetarianism.” It is not the lifestyle, therefore, that bothers

Picture
Removed

Many in the group. . . perceived that the church has placed too much emphasis on [lifestyle] behaviors while forgetting more fundamental aspects of Christianity.

them. It is when, in the words of one of the respondents, lifestyle becomes a “second gospel” that young people become uncomfortable.

Most participants stated that Adventist higher education positively affected their religious life. More than half referred specifically to the positive role that other students at the college played in their spiritual growth. Statements like these were common: “Other students have affected my spiritual growth significantly. Indeed, with my friends and my fellow students I discuss not only my beliefs, my faith, but also my problems.” “The main factor in my religious experience is friends. It is stronger than teachers, worships or anything else.” “For me, it is fellow students. . . . The friends I have, they really changed me.”

Teachers are also important: “Teachers challenge you and make you think of your beliefs.” “For me, teachers come first, you see that they hold Christian beliefs and, at the same time, you see them teaching business, history, religion. . . . Their Christianity comes across. And a lot of them are very practical with their Christianity.”

Although mandatory worships were generally disliked, students appreciated the integration of faith and academic life they saw on campus. “If I were going to another university, religion would be in my own time. Here it is seen more as part of the ethos of the college.” “I find it interesting to be at an Adventist college because religion is linked with anything you are studying.”

Young people look to the future with hope both for the church and for themselves as individuals. Here is what they said: “I believe that the time will come when many people will leave the church, but again, many people will join.” “There is a lot of potential in the church. . . for me it seems like a bright

Picture
Removed

future, even though I also realize that the future is short.”

Eighteen of the 20 participants said they intended to remain in the Adventist faith. One participant, who was in the middle of a spiritual crisis, answered this question by saying: “Yes, of course [I see myself as an Adventist in the future]. This is what I’ve been living for.”

As for the two participants who showed doubts about the future, one ended up saying: “It really bothers me that if I am not on God’s side, I am on the devil’s side. And I don’t like that. I would not like to cause suffering by working against God. So maybe yes [I see myself as a Seventh-day Adventist].”

All of the participants showed determination to train their children—should they have any—in the Adventist faith. This was also true for those few that did not see themselves as Adventists in the future. One of these said: “I’ve been thinking about it. And if I do not become an Adventist, I will not have children because it will be hard for me. I know what is right and I want my children to have the best thing.”

Conclusion

This project constitutes a small attempt to gather information on the way

a number of Christian college students live their faith. Additional qualitative research from other colleges in different locations is needed. Replications of this type will reveal the necessary details and perspectives to understand youth and to formulate plans of action.

I personally learned a few things from this survey. It reminded me as a parent that parental influence is of great significance while children are growing. Those years provide the strongest spiritual foundation. As children grow, parents need to accept that—while they must be available—other persons may play a more powerful role in leading them to the Lord.

I also learned that reasonable suffering, difficulties, and uncertainties may be crucial to young people’s spiritual growth. As a teacher, I am convinced that I can have a very significant spiritual effect upon my students. I believe that teachers at all levels—not only primary and secondary but tertiary as well—are powerful agents in helping students to think and act in Christian ways. At the college level specifically, the information gathered suggests that the way to encourage spiritual development on our campuses is not to institutionalize activities but to allow room for their formation and development within the student body.

Finally, we all need to unite in our efforts to trust and encourage our youth. It is very probable that they are more committed to their convictions, more loyal to the church, and more hopeful toward the future than we may think. ✍

At the time this article was written, Julian Melgosa was Director of the Master’s Program in Education at Newbold College in Bracknell, England. He is a teacher and an educational psychologist chartered by the British Psychological Society. In March 1998, he became Dean of the School of Graduate Studies at the Adventist International Institute of Advanced Studies in the Philippines. This article is based on presentations made by the author at the Hispanic-American Educational Convention, River Plate University, February 1997 and the Adventist Higher Education Summit, Loma Linda, California in March 1997.