

By Nathan P. Thomas & Robert J. Turning

From Where I Sit

An Interview with Mari Ann Callais and Christian de la Huerta

The central theme of this issue of *Perspectives* is spirituality and religion in today's college fraternity and sorority. The topic is challenging and maybe even controversial today, yet was central in the conversation of many fraternity and sorority founders years ago. Spirituality and religion within fraternities and sororities is a century-old discussion and one that came to the heated forefront within inter/national fraternities and sororities with the elimination of exclusionary clauses in the 1960s. Christian de la Huerta, spirituality author and speaker, and Mari Ann Callais, Ph.D., former National President for Theta Phi Alpha Fraternity (an historically Catholic women's fraternity) and speaker on rituals, share with us the view from their "seats."

To start, the difference between religion and spirituality should be defined, to which de la Huerta offers:

Religion and spirituality are not the same thing; they may fulfill the same purpose, but sadly, too often they may not. Religion is the dogma, traditions, and systems of belief. These can even assist the process of spirituality by offering the support of community, a calendar of holidays and celebrations, inspirational music, etc. Spirituality is our nature, our innate human right. It is who we are.

This issue of *Perspectives* seeks to understand whether conversations regarding spirituality and religion are relevant and important for today's member. If they are, in what ways can we prepare ourselves for these conversations and appropriately guide students through the discussion in our roles within the institutions of fraternity, sorority, and campus? Callais suggests,

I have experienced that more often than not, religion and the discussion of religion comes into play when rituals, specifically initiation, are being discussed, experienced, or even debated. As a journey through time [historically through Theta Phi Alpha], undergraduate members have questioned some of our ceremonies and the content of those ceremonies. I have seen heated discussions at

our national meetings. I have more recently seen a generation of students who are more tied to our founding than before. Today, I believe students want to understand why something is the way it is, as opposed to being satisfied that is the way it has always been done. The challenges with religion and spirituality come when we do not explain it to them and help them work through it.

In their research and predictions on the millennial generation, Howe and Strauss (2000) found today's students as more closely identifying to the values of their parents. College is, and has been, a time for exploration of a student's freedoms and values. Within the millennial generation, will the exploration of spirituality and religion increase or decrease? Additionally, knowing students identify closely to their parents' values, what inner conflicts and challenges will come if students challenge their belief system, as they may also believe they are challenging their parents' belief system in the process?

Religious and spiritual student organizations are active on campuses, and Arthur (2008) cites a renewed openness to religious organizations on campuses. Awareness of religious organizations may now be a topic included at new student orientation and a part of a student's acclimation to campus life more so than it was in the past. Notes de la Huerta,

I have been offering spiritual retreats for the past 20 years, and during that time the majority of those attending were in their 40s and 50s. I have noticed a change in recent years, however, where younger people in their 30s and some even in their 20s are participating.

The involvement of students in conversations about religion and spirituality is likely to continue to expand. According to de la Huerta,

As our world continues to change in dramatic ways, and as systems we took for granted implode in front of our eyes, people are forced to look for answers elsewhere. The worldwide economic downturn, church

scandals, and corporate scandals, among other things, have forced many to wonder where to place their trust. Existential questions (i.e. Who am I, really? What am I doing here? What is my purpose?) become more pressing in times of dramatic social change, uncertainty, and insecurity.

Callais concludes,

I believe in order for religion, spirituality, and basic values to be relevant to today's fraternity and sorority experience, they must be consistent. At any level, if our actions do not reflect our message, then we will never be the kind of organizations we are capable of becoming. As national organizations, if we are going to acknowledge these beliefs are part of who we are, we have to put them into practice. We have to teach our members both younger and older, to be true to whatever values we profess. It is not an easy task.

We encourage you to be engaged with the role religion and spirituality plays in your work with fraternities and sororities and challenge your own reflections that may occur in the process.

REFERENCES

- Arthur, J. (2008, August 1). Faith and secularisation in religious colleges and universities. *Journal of Beliefs & Values*, 29(2), 197-202.
- Howe, N., & Strauss, W. (2000). *Millennials rising: The next great generation*. New York, NY: Random House.

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From Where I Sit is a section in *Perspectives* featuring a personal perspective on the interfraternal community. Do you have an opinion to share on fraternity/sorority life? Tell us how things look from where you sit by emailing your thoughts to the