

Under God?

When it comes to religion, students sure aren't sheep

Losing your religion? Apparently not. Although you chastised us for the wording of our October poll question, "Do you believe in God?" (We meant "a higher power." Really.), 75 percent of you said that you do. And your responses reflected beliefs formed not by passive acceptance but through active learning, questioning and individualizing.

So, independent of the poll, we decided to explore this trend of DIY spirituality. Sure enough, students are finding their own personal — no, we won't say Jesus. You fill in the blank.

"Religion? What religion? All I see now is commercialism," says a Boston College junior and spiritual cynic who asked us not to use his name.

"My family's strictly Roman Catholic. They'd crucify me if they heard me say that."

Uh....

"Pun most definitely intended."

Drugstore Santas notwithstanding, it makes sense that many college students are religious skeptics. It's hard to believe in Adam and Eve when we're being presented with reasonably conclusive proof that our ancestors dragged their knuckles through cave life. Still, some students have managed to maintain their faith.

"Judaism is still a really important part of my life," says Shari Bock, a State U. of New York, Stonybrook, senior. "If anything, I'm closer to it. It's helped me get through a lot of rough times."

Others argue that religion shouldn't be used as a crutch. "If there's a God up there, he must get pretty sick of people using him — it's the ultimate fair-weather friendship," says a U. of Pennsylvania sophomore who knows God will forgive him for not revealing his name.

"Get your own damn sandwich!"

Some students have modified their original religious ideas. Islamic beliefs dominated the Kuwaiti upbringing of Nadya Sbaiti, a Tufts U. senior.

"Religion was a central part of my life," she says, "and I was pretty much taught not to question it."

Sbaiti's decision to attend an American university posed a problem for her traditional father. To a degree, his fears were realized; her outlook has changed since she left Kuwait.

At Tufts, she confronted her reservations and found that most of her problems with Islam are gender-based. "It's a patriarchal religion. I'm a modern female, and I'm a Muslim — a walking contradiction."

"When I went to Lebanon this past summer, I argued with my family over things I would've accepted without question a few years ago." One day, a male

cousin told his sister to get him a sandwich. The girl complied without question as Sbaiti's jaw dropped. "He tried that with me. I told him, 'Get your own damn sandwich!' He didn't ask again."

Islam isn't the only religion to fall under fire for "sexual discrimination" — most commonly practiced faiths confer more power upon males.

"Judaism, Christianity, Islam, you name it. I haven't found one that works for me yet," says a self-proclaimed ultra-feminist U. of Michigan sophomore who also doesn't want her friends and family to know that she's religiously challenged.

Sbaiti points out, though, that applying Western values to Islam is like judging a Grateful Dead concert by standards you'd usually use for Pavarotti.

"I've tried to pick and choose which parts of each culture I follow and come to terms with it that way. You have to reconcile the contradiction, or you'll go insane."

"If you're into religion, you're into physics."

Tufts freshman Josh Levitt was inspired to consider religions other than Judaism by a friend named Ruby, whom he met in junior high.

"Ruby's been practicing Siddha Yoga since she was 9. Her mom was into it, so she grew up with it." Ruby's practices, which include meditation and a special focus on nature, kick-started Levitt's own religious explorations and research.

Today, Levitt's set of convictions reads like a "choose your own adventure" novel. He subscribes primarily to the values and ideas set forth in Eastern religions, especially those that center on nature.

"Religion was created by man to explain natural phenomena. Nearly every major religion has a flood story, and all the floods seem to take place around the same time. Coincidence? I think not."

Levitt finds Taoism particularly appealing, because it aims to resolve the mechanics of why the world works the way it does.

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Judeo-Christian tradition lacks one practice covered by many Eastern religions: meditation. A cross-country

runner, Levitt discovered long ago that meditating helps him concentrate during a race.

"It doesn't have to mean sitting in the lotus position, palms up, chanting 'oouummm, oouummm.' Sometimes I meditate just by staring at the clasp on the necklace of the guy in front of me."

"It's hard to relate to the Bible when you live in L.A."

"Well, Sodom and Gomorrah come pretty close," amends UCLA senior Patrick Shiflett. "Me, I'm probably a pagan, or a druid of sorts." Officially, he's an unconfirmed Roman Catholic.

"I don't want to offend hard-core Christians — although it's fun to watch their reactions when I tell them I'm a druid — but I just believe a little more in the longevity of nature than the infallibility of human germs."

Shiflett's philosophy is fairly straightforward: "People can't be right or wrong in their beliefs — just a little funny-looking during religious fervor."

If anything has desensitized him to organized religion, it's having it forced on him by those who don it as a garment of self-righteousness. Southern Californians, he says, fall into two religious classes.

"Some have resigned themselves to the fact that they'll probably burn in hell and are applying eternal sun block, SPF 99 million, even as we speak. Those who haven't just listen to religious music in their spare time and try to convert the general populace."

In God we trust?

Instead of relying on teachers and books for religious instruction, some students just follow their instincts about what moves them.

"Once I had a religious experience at a car race," Shiflett says. "I watched the cars, heard the noises and got all choked up and started crying. That sounds kind of weird, but I can't deny that I felt some higher presence."

And what of this "God" thing? Do runners like Levitt ever appeal to God — or gods — to make their feet fly?

"Well, I wouldn't necessarily want to go on the record and say that I don't believe in God," Levitt says. "It's not quite that simple. Let's just say that I do believe in myself, and right now, that's enough."

Some folks believe in a higher power — even if they're hesitant to give it a name.

"There's something out there," Bock says. "I don't know if it's God, or fate, or what, but I believe there's something stronger than we are."

Shiflett suggests that God's a "good dude," although "genderless — probably above all that male-female sloppiness. But I don't think God has anything to do with suffering. People do."

The college years tend to mark the death of blind faith in everything from parental wisdom to governmental policy, and religion is certainly no exception. But simultaneously, these years can signal a rebirth — a reconciliation of faith with its contradictions to form a hybrid spirituality that's all our own.

