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Race and Religion: Gen Z's Religious Participation Along Racial Lines

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Race and Religion: Gen Z's Religious Participation Along Racial Lines

Cover Page Footnote

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INTRODUCTION

Religious participation in the US has significantly declined in recent years, but Gen Z campus ministries remain active. In the midst of that shift, the term “evangelical” has come to be socially associated with a certain demographic; typically a white, older, and politically conservative crowd. Despite such connotations, young Asian Americans make up a significant portion of the evangelical Christian community. This understudied population is a necessary demographic to investigate in order to obtain a complete picture of evangelical Christians. In light of recent events such as the Stop AAPI Hate movement and contentions around Harvard’s affirmative action policies, it is more relevant than ever to examine the dynamics within the Asian American community, especially on Harvard’s campus. Exploring how Gen Z students’ engagement in campus ministries reveals the truth about Gen Z as well as society as a whole. As a result of shifting values and increased secularization, “there are more than four former Christians for every new convert to Christianity” (Baart 2018). The increasing disinterest in religion begs the question: what motivates the students who *are* religious?

The racial component of campus ministries is also necessary to explore; some students select ethnic-specific campus ministries, while others opt for multi-ethnic groups. This project specifically explores the demographics, trends, and motivations behind Asian American campus evangelicals at Harvard. Ethnic-specific campus ministries often provide a space of gathering and fellowship for students of color. Depending on the campus ministry, participation varies by race. This dynamic points to the way in which religious communities are defined by more than just their religious beliefs; social factors are constantly at play. Bonilla-Silva’s structural interpretation of racism points to the social construction of race and the way in which, “a set of social relations and practices based on racial distinctions develops at all societal levels” (1997:474). In a society where racial status is deeply embedded, religious spaces often adhere to racial lines. Recently there has been a strong push, especially among Gen Z, for increased diversity on college campuses. However, this sentiment does not necessarily extend to college religious spaces.

LITERATURE

Research surrounding Gen Z’s religious engagement, specifically within the Asian American evangelical community, is limited. The studies that examine Gen Z participation in campus ministries do not specifically focus on Asian American students. While there is some literature on Asian American evangelicals as a whole and another body that investigates Asian Americans on college campuses,

there is a lack of work honing in on the intersection between the two. Asian American evangelicals operate differently from the widely recognized white evangelical communities, and studies of Gen Z students on college campuses often shed light on the larger secularization discourse. This study will build on previous work examining Gen Z campus ministry engagement on the West Coast, as well as previous studies from the Landscape Study of Chaplaincy and Campus Ministry, a nationwide study on the recent trends within campus ministries.

GEN Z STUDENTS AND CAMPUS MINISTRIES

In *Safe and Seen: BIPOC Gen Z Engagement in Evangelical Campus Ministries*, Rebecca Kim and Rachel Murdock explore the motivations behind students of color who join campus ministries. They find that such ministries have a stabilizing function, as they offer “familiarity and comfort” (2023). This is especially important, they identify, for BIPOC students who seek safety due to their ethnic backgrounds. Students search for a place “where they can safely and unapologetically be who they are, ethnoracially and religiously” (Kim and Murdock 2023:14). Thus, campus ministries’ capacity for secure community-building attracts students. By taking a closer look at the case of Harvard College, this study will reveal specific forces behind Asian American religious behavior in the context of a highly concentrated Asian American population.

Feelings of uncertainty and tension drive students to join campus ministries. Eric S. Mankowski and Elizabeth Thomas conducted a study on campus ministries and found that in the midst of shifting from life at home to college, students search for new forms of identity and social support. As a response, “a campus-based religious community provides psychological resources for its members to use in creating or maintaining personal and collective identity during their transition to the university context” (Mankowski and Thomas 2000:518). Campus ministry communities become a type of “second home” for students going through a significant change. Evidently, belongingness plays a role in Gen Z’s religious participation.

Tension due to both religious and racial identity drive students to become more deeply connected with campus ministries. Many colleges are predominantly white spaces, adding an additional layer of uncertainty and a feeling of “otherness” among students of color. A study conducted on African American religious engagement found that “some have found the campus ministry to be their outlet during times of tension and adversity at a PWI” (Ward 2017:5). Colleges, like other predominantly white spaces, can make it difficult for students of color to connect with others or develop a strong social network. Ethnic-specific campus ministries offer a way for students to connect with others who share

similar beliefs and experiences. In order to examine this more fully, this study will take a closer look at the racial element of the dynamic and variations across Harvard's campus ministries.

ASIAN AMERICAN EVANGELICALS

The limited studies on Asian American evangelicals reveal a theology that mirrors Anglo-American evangelical hermeneutics and a commitment to biblical inerrancy (Alumkal 2002). Despite these theological similarities to mainstream white evangelicalism, Asian Americans coalesce around racially homogenous congregations due to higher levels of comfortability. Many evangelical Asian American congregations include significant numbers of second-generation children of immigrants. Large proportions of this population were raised in the Asian American evangelical church and continue to adhere to similar religious patterns. While popular discourse holds that Asian Americans, and Koreans in particular, have successfully assimilated into mainstream society, racial marginalization continues to drive the formation of Korean American churches (Kim 2010).

An ethnographic study of second-generation Asian American evangelicals found that church members valued their "Christian" identity over their ethnic one, but shared experiences remained a powerful glue for communities (Alumkal 2003). Rather than shaping their religious services after their parents, second-generation Korean Americans have modeled their worship style after mainstream evangelical churches (Kim 2004). The Asian American evangelical experience is not monolithic; hierarchies exist within the category of "Asian American", and various ethnicities have navigated culture and religion uniquely. The predominant ethnicities within evangelical Asian Americans include East Asians: largely Chinese Americans and Korean Americans, with smaller numbers of other Asian ethnicities (Alumkal 2003). However, broader trends among Asian American evangelicals point to a high biblical reverence and racial coalitions that result from a desire to seek familiarity. This work sheds light on the theological and cultural qualities of the Asian American evangelical community, providing a solid foundation for exploring Gen Z's role in Asian American campus ministries.

ASIAN AMERICANS ON COLLEGE CAMPUSES

College campuses host a variety of Asian American students who have traditionally been portrayed as a "model minority", excelling academically. Research shows that many Asian American students feel pressure to racially assimilate into the "dominant institutional culture" due to exclusion and criticisms of their traditions (Museus & Park 2015). Asian American students have

navigated a unique position in racial justice agendas. Despite facing racial stereotyping and discrimination, the model minority myth perpetuates the exclusion of the Asian American community in conversations about racial equity in higher education (Grim, Lee, Museus, Na, & Ting 2019). The Asian American community has been severely overlooked in analyses of racial discrimination, and in recent years such issues have come to light. Because of Asian American students' unique positioning within universities, they must navigate social circles delicately.

In *God's New Whiz Kids?* Rebecca Kim explores second-generation Korean Americans in campus ministries on the West Coast. She constructs a theory of "emergent ethnicity" to explain the continued racial and ethnic segregation of religious spaces among college students. Her findings reveal that micro-level conditions (the search for belonging, familiarity, and majority status) intersect with macro-level opportunities (ethnic density, racial categorization, and marginalization) to facilitate Asian American campus ministries (Kim 2006). This framework is essential for understanding the success of Asian American campus ministries at Harvard, and their locus in the context of the Gen Z religious landscape as a whole.

LIMITATIONS

While these previous studies offer valuable insight for this project, there is a significant lack of research on the Asian American community as a whole, and the specific dynamics among Gen Z college students in evangelical campus ministries. It is necessary to explore the motivations for Asian American students to join ethnic-specific campus ministries, and why Gen Z in particular engages in religion. The Asian American community has been understudied, and recent events have caused shifts in their student activities. Many of the studies on Asian American evangelicals were conducted before the current climate intensified by Stop AAPI Hate and the Students for Fair Admissions Supreme Court decision. This updated study of the campus community is especially relevant in the wake of increasing racial dialogue. Through a focus on Harvard students, this study displays the realities of one of the world's most famous "secular" campuses. This project provides an avenue to explore the dissonance between the widely-held perception of Harvard as non-religious, and the reality of their lively campus ministry scene. Specific and up-to-date efforts are necessary to paint a more robust picture of the landscape.

METHODS

In this study, the initial stage included a content analysis of websites and public resources. The online content analysis included an evaluation of student opinion pieces from the Harvard Crimson, which revealed student perspectives on the campus ministry landscape. Each of the campus ministry websites was also analyzed, with particular attention to the mission statements and affiliations. Harvard's demographic data on racial and religious identity also offered a preliminary insight into the population of undergraduates. Following the evaluation of Harvard's religious and racial context, interviews were conducted.

During the interview stage, students and campus ministers were interviewed from a variety of campus ministries at Harvard. The semi-structured interviews lasted from 60-90 minutes via Zoom, with prior consent to participate. Of the nine interviews conducted, four of the participants were Asian Americans, three were white, and two were Latinx. Throughout the interviews, students answered questions regarding their own spiritual journey, involvement in campus ministry, the racial and ethnic makeup of Harvard and their campus ministry, general religious campus climate, difficulties facing students, and how tensions in society translate to their own experiences. For campus ministers, questions focused on their role in campus ministry, the purpose, organization, and funding of their ministry, how students typically get involved, demographics, campus climate, and recent challenges facing their work. Participants included students, campus ministers, and pastors from InterVarsity's Harvard-Radcliffe Asian American Christian Fellowship (AACF), Campus Crusade for Christ (Cru), Christian Union's Harvard College Faith and Action (HCFA), Symphony Church, and Highrock Church.

All interviews were conducted during the summer of 2023, and subjects were contacted by email with background information regarding the study and a request for their participation. Subjects were selected based on the relevance of their position, obtained from the websites and social media pages of the various campus ministries at Harvard. After agreeing to an interview, subjects received a consent form that outlined the details of participation. Interviews were recorded on Zoom and transcribed. Among the participants surveyed, approximately 33.3% identified as white, 44.4% identified as Asian, and 22.2% identified as Latinx. This pool of interviewees varied by age, gender, and race, providing for a dynamic range of perspectives.

Following the completion of interviews, the data was analyzed to determine the ways in which race and ethnicity impact student participation in campus ministries. In order to get a comprehensive understanding of the forces at play on Harvard's campus, accounts from students, campus ministers, and pastors of all backgrounds were analyzed. Leaders of both ethnic-specific and

multi-ethnic campus ministries were given the same set of questions to fully display the similarities and differences between the two. Each of these components worked together to portray the various motivations behind student religious participation.

RESULTS

HARVARD CULTURE

The campus ministry landscape at Harvard displayed a diverse range of religious backgrounds and organizations. On their website, Harvard lists twenty-four student organizations under the category “religious and spiritual life”. According to demographic data as reported by the student newspaper *The Harvard Crimson*, the majority of students in 2023 identified themselves as Agnostic (28.4%), Atheist (15.1%), or Other (11.7%). 16.5% identified as Protestant. When asked about the level of religiosity, the majority of students were either “not at all religious” (32.8%) or “not very religious” (25.5%). 26.4% claimed to be “somewhat religious”, while 13.4% stated they were “very religious”, and only 1.8% were “extremely religious”. Evidently, the numbers of Harvard’s campus display low rates of religious participation among the students. These statistics represent that as levels of religious commitment increase, the rate of student participation decreases.

According to the research subjects, the general sentiment on Harvard’s campus is one of indifference towards religion. While there are a substantial number of campus ministries and students who participate, non-religious students typically remain neutrally detached from religion. Many of the interviewees expressed surprise by the lack of hostility within such a secular campus. Both students and campus ministers alike remarked on how different the campus culture was from their initial expectations. A Chinese American male student leader of AACF outlined, “There is a lot of indifference on campus to spiritual and religious groups... [they are] not a priority to many people.” For the most part, those within campus ministries did not feel an overwhelming sense of negativity regarding their religious identity. However, this was not always the case. When asked to describe the general campus climate for religious life at Harvard, a Korean American AACF leader explained, “There is not much hostility... though there are cases where Christian groups have been faced with hostility in specific circumstances.” The major exception to general indifference was Harvard College Faith and Action (HCFA), one of the largest Christian organizations on campus.

The strong political divides in America are reflected in the interactions on Harvard’s campus. Contentious issues such as sexuality are especially delicate in

the context of religious organizations. In recent years, HCFA has gone through a number of conflicts with the wider Harvard community. *The Harvard Crimson*, Harvard's student newspaper, has several articles detailing the controversy surrounding HCFA. HCFA's event called "What is the Good News for my LGBTQ+ Neighbors?" promoted a celibate lifestyle for those with same-sex attractions. As a result, over twenty students from the LGBTQ+ community attended the event and protested. The same group (HCFA) pushed out a leader who was in a same-sex relationship, resulting in strong backlash and sanctioning. In a *Harvard Crimson* article, one student exclaimed, "Someone who is a leader within a homophobic or any sort of discriminatory organization like HCFA, and who continues to defend it and assert that there's no discrimination present when there clearly is, should not be in such a position of power" (Lu and Teichholtz 2022: n.p.). While those within HCFA claimed to observe higher degrees of hostility against religion, those in other ministries tended to uphold that HCFA was part of the problem. One white campus minister for Cru claimed, "[HCFA] picked a fight around issues related to sexuality, which brought harsh reactions." Evidently, not all religious students on campus felt welcomed or safe in their religious identity, but on the whole, there was more indifference than expected.

What did align with previous expectations, however, was the cutthroat culture that shaped students' experiences at Harvard. Student interviewees mentioned the culture of competition and stress that creates a constant struggle. One Korean American student described his experience of Harvard's culture: "You need to know exactly what you are doing for the rest of your life when you are 20... all your worth is whatever job you're able to secure. Goals in college are driven by the fear of not living up to expectations, falling behind peers, not knowing what they are doing." As a result, he explained, this dynamic drives people both towards and away from religious groups. Students either push harder to chase achievement and success, or they find religious groups as a way to become recentered on religious values and ideals.

Participants generally had positive sentiments regarding the racial and ethnic diversity at Harvard and within the multi-ethnic campus ministries. Many explained that Harvard has more diversity than the surrounding areas. A white male campus minister claimed that Harvard has "the most diverse population in the area." Interviewees from multi-ethnic campus ministries such as Christian Union (Cru) and HCFA said that their campus ministries are proportionately diverse. Those describing Cru's ethnic demographic claimed it was a "reflection of the campus as a whole," and one Latinx student leader said HCFA is "representative of Harvard's campus", with Black, white, Asian, and a few Latinx students. However, the student leader remarked that as a Latino, it is not easy to find a congregation with people who look like him. He explained, "In general, Latinos fly under the radar... since many are white-passing, it is easy to

assimilate.” That student was able to find other Latinos within HCFA and said that they became his closest friends. This displays the unique challenges and dynamics that occur within different ethnic groups as they navigate campus life. Harvard is a school that intentionally prioritizes diversity, and yet obstacles remain for students of color in finding the right community.

On Harvard’s campus, Asian American students have a strong community and are generally more established than marginalized. A Korean American campus minister for InterVarsity described how Harvard is in a location (Boston and Cambridge) where “Asian American students are more mainstream,” and “the largest chapters of InterVarsity in the greater Boston area are Asian American specific.” This is a significant finding, as it displays the sheer size of the Asian American evangelical community in the area. A Korean student leader of AACF estimated that the demographics of the ministry are 40% Chinese, 40% Korean, and 10% students of other ethnicities. Multiple of the Asian American students explained that although they were not initially looking for an ethnic-specific campus ministry, they felt the most welcomed in the Asian American spaces.

WHO PARTICIPATES?

Students who get involved in campus ministries are almost always those who grew up in Christian communities. Conversations with students, campus ministers, and pastors all pointed to a common Christian upbringing. As participants revealed their personal faith journeys, they largely grew up in Christian households, attended Christian schools, and were surrounded by communities of other believers. Within AACF specifically, East Asian Christian-raised students are the most common. When asked who would feel most welcomed at AACF, one Chinese American student leader responded, “2nd or 3rd gen East Asian American immigrants, people who are familiar with Christianity or who are coming back to the faith.” Many of the students in AACF share the identity of being children of immigrants who grew up Christian. This specific demographic allows for close connections and a higher level of understanding within the community, thus reinforcing the ethnic-specific culture.

The main avenues for new students to get connected to campus ministries are social networks and social media. Typically during the beginning of the year, incoming students at Harvard are met with enthusiastic upperclassmen, social media postings, and other forms of advertisements inviting them to campus ministry events. Those who were raised in Christian households or communities are often drawn to this invitation and may be inclined to check out events. Those who have existing connections with members of campus ministries are likely to join. The use of social networks often encourages ethnic-specific formation. Symphony Church, a college church for students in the Boston area, initially did

not intend to be an ethnic-specific church, but now its members are predominantly Asian-American. One of the Korean American pastors attributes this to the majority Asian American church planting team and their utilization of social networks. At Harvard and other colleges, Asian American students often invite other Asian-American students who are already in their social network to campus ministry events. Similarly, students of other ethnicities go through the same process, and racially homogenous groups continue.

Despite the common conception that all Christian evangelicals are conservative and white, this study reveals that there are several members from other backgrounds. One Korean American campus minister commented, “The hyper-nationalist white view of evangelicals is real, but it is very different from those on the ground.” His own experience in campus ministry opened his eyes to the diverse, multi-faceted world of Gen Z religious groups. There are compelling reasons for students to join both the multi-ethnic and the ethnic-specific campus ministries, which accounts for the continuation of both.

CAMPUS MINISTRY AS “HOME”

Students who join and commit to campus ministries do so often out of a sense of belonging. A Korean American campus minister for InterVarsity explained that groups like “AACF and others have community appeal, a real exceptional gift, a sense of belonging.” He goes on to reflect, “Students join ethnic-specific groups both intentionally and unintentionally... there is a community that they feel belonging in more rapidly and securely.” Not only do the shared values and Christian mission bring students together, but also their ability to connect over common experiences. A Chinese American AACF student leader recounts exploring other campus ministry groups, but “they did not offer the same instant connection and comfort” that AACF did. Ethnic-specific groups provide a unique dimension of community that multi-ethnic campus ministries simply cannot offer. When students of color connect with those who share similar experiences or stories, a heightened level of understanding can take place. This dynamic was evident among the Asian American students.

While Asian American students do not necessarily feel like minorities at Harvard, their shared experiences and social networks push them to join the Asian-specific campus ministry. According to a Korean-American student leader, Asian students were especially drawn to such ministries because “finding people that relate to the immigrant experience brings relatability and comfort” as their shared cultural background and tendencies “raise similar questions and struggles... how to honor parents, interact with families...” Students appreciated the ability to find others in AACF who grappled with the same identity and family issues, creating a strong support network. One Chinese American student

explained that AACF was one of three major organizations in which she felt the most at home in college. She listed AACF, the Organization of Asian American Sisters in Service, and the Asian American Dance Group. This example highlights how powerful ethnic-specific communities can be in welcoming students and building strong relationships.

Students listed additional qualities of the AACF community that drew them in. Many pointed to the intentional connections across grade levels, genuine investment in relationships, and a higher level of religious commitment as key qualities. One Chinese American student leader explained that in AACF, there is an “emphasis on upperclassmen caring for the underclassmen... an expression of Asian American culture and community and mentorship.” She recalled her first few visits to the campus ministry, and how she admired the older students for their model of how to follow Jesus and the way that they cared for others. AACF’s cross-boundary connection model brings students closer together and amplifies the powerful effect of welcoming newcomers. Other participants pointed to the high level of commitment that members of AACF adopted. A Korean American campus minister explained, “AACF is more missionally serious than many of the other fellowships,” as Christianity is “central to their lives.” This relates to the idea that higher tension with society, and thus a higher level of commitment, strengthens religious organizations. AACF’s unique qualities paved the way for Asian American students at Harvard to feel “at home” and remain committed to the campus ministry.

Harvard’s culture of competition places significant pressure on the students, which campus ministries work to address. By providing space to step back and recenter focus on Christian beliefs, campus ministries can act as a relief for evangelical students. One Korean American student leader shared that AACF is “one of the only spaces on campus where I am loved not for what I do or what I achieve... especially at a place like Harvard where you always need to be achieving and are surrounded by people who do those things very well... that can be very stressful and burdensome. It’s nice to have a place where you can go where nobody is talking about achievements or competition. It’s a place where you can just be and you are valued just for being there.” Harvard’s status as one of the most prestigious universities in the world places students under significant stress. As a result, when students join campus ministries, the Christian ideals of unconditional love and supportive community are inviting. Between their shared personal experiences, social networks, and counter-cultural ideals, Harvard students in ethnic-specific campus ministries (especially Asian Americans) find safety and comfort.

DISCUSSION

Students from a variety of backgrounds and experiences joined campus ministries in response to several factors. Multi-ethnic campus ministries such as HCFA and CU provided space for a diverse group of students to connect through their shared Christian identity. Political factors also played a role, as those with similar political views bonded in the face of opposition (such as in HCFA's LGBTQ+ controversy). Students who did not feel a need to seek a level of racial/ethnic understanding were drawn to multi-ethnic fellowships. Alternatively, those like the Latinx student who could not find an ethnic coalition turned to multi-ethnic groups out of default. These communities were composed of many ethnicities, typically reflecting the diverse makeup of Harvard. Ethnic-specific campus ministries, on the other hand, allowed for an additional layer of community. Students of color expressed feeling seen and heard when they entered such spaces. The students interviewed all indicated that they connected most with those from similar backgrounds, and that their ministries felt like home. Even one of the students in HCFA, a multi-ethnic campus ministry, explained that his closest friends in the ministry share his Latinx identity. Asian American students in particular connected over shared values, family experiences, and religious ideals.

The Asian American student experience at Harvard is unique. While typically it is difficult for students of color to feel welcomed and connected, the high concentration of Asians in the greater Boston area and within the University has allowed Harvard students to easily join Asian-specific communities. Since Harvard's Asian community is so substantial, it was both feasible and favorable for Asian students to join ethnic-specific campus ministries. Many who were not intentionally seeking out an ethnic-specific campus ministry still ended up in AACF. The powerful draw of "belonging" combined with a high concentration of Asians created the perfect storm for a thriving, highly committed Asian-American evangelical Christian community.

The results indicate that at Harvard, race played varying roles in Christian religious participation depending on each student's identity. Those who had access to a large network of coethnics (like Asian Americans) easily found themselves involved in ethnic-specific ministries, while those who made up a smaller minority of the student population (such as Latinx students) instead sought intimate, interpersonal ethnic connections *within* multi-ethnic ministries. Despite assumptions of widespread secularization on Harvard's campus, this study revealed that evangelical Gen Z students of color remain active and dynamic along racial lines.

CONCLUSION

Gen Z's religious engagement is directly shaped by racial identity. Harvard is a university famous for its cutthroat competition, increasing secularism, and recent political tension. In the midst of such struggles, campus ministries have provided a space for student connection and community. With a commonly shared evangelical Christian background, students encounter a sense of belonging in campus ministries. They bond over religious ideals that release some of the burdens of Harvard's intense and competitive environment. Those seeking a sense of safety and comfort outside of predominantly white spaces were able to do so within campus ministries. For many Asian Americans in AACF, their shared cultural experiences facilitated easier bonding and a level of understanding that was not offered in other campus ministries. The flourishing Asian American community on Harvard's campus facilitated student involvement in campus ministries like AACF through existing social networks. Students remained committed to religious engagement due to the strong support system, cultural connection, deep religious devotion, and relief from the pressures of achievement.

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