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Ivy bashing, part II: the search for meaning

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Quad 136

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[Previous](#) [Next](#)

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Deresiewicz's second criticism in his *New Republic* article is that millennials are not all that curious or interested in the search for meaning. I am not sure exactly how this would be measured, but one place to start would be looking at the UCLA longitudinal study of first-year college student attitudes. **This study** has surveyed entering college students for nearly 50 years.

One of the questions asked is basically, "Why are you going to college?" The answers have been surprisingly consistent over time, with jobs and economic success being high on the list, but "developing a meaningful philosophy of life" was "essential" or "very important" for 44.8% of freshmen in 2013, 39.3% in 2003, 44.6% in 1993 and 44.1% in 1983, about the time Deresiewicz entered college. Also in **fall of**

2013, 70% of freshmen thought a "very important reason for going to college" was to gain an "appreciation of ideas" and 80% wanted to learn "more about things that interest me." While one might hope a higher percentage of freshmen were interested in finding meaning in college, the percentage is not insignificant, and it has not changed from the end of the baby boom to the era of the millennials.

I do think that Deresiewicz's throwaway line about third or fourth tier religious colleges being better at encouraging the search for meaning than their Ivy counterparts might actually be onto something important, though maybe not in the way the author had in mind. As millennials, or anyone, searches for meaning in life, the natural place to start is with what our predecessors might have discovered about these questions over the centuries.

The elite schools—and higher education more generally—are usually quite comfortable with using the humanities in general and philosophy in particular as a starting point for questions of meaning (though I think it is also fair to say that the post-modern emphasis in the humanities today is deeply skeptical of making judgments about meaning and values). The, "I'm OK, you're OK," or "Who am I to judge?" ethos can discourage students from making ethical and moral judgments, believing there is no "Truth" with a capital T and that most, if not all, differences are cultural and socially determined.

It is here that institutions based on a religious tradition can serve most students well. Be they Catholic, Protestant or Jewish, these institutions provide two important things that secular schools (both public and private) lack:

1. A willingness, and even eagerness, to take on questions of meaning.
2. A starting point for the conversation (which is not, of course, necessarily the ending point).

Most religious traditions are built on truth claims or foundational beliefs which are theological in nature but often also have implications for ethical behavior or moral choices. Most religiously based institutions require students, as part of their general education requirements, to explore both the truth claims of the school's religious tradition (a religion or theology requirement) and the ethical tenets that are part of that tradition (an ethics requirement). In addition to this academic engagement with meaning, these institutions will usually have non-academic programming like spirituality groups or religious services that are led by men and women who are committed to the schools' religious tradition.

At Catholic institutions, these leaders would often be priests and sisters. At Saint John's we are especially lucky to have monks from of our Benedictine community living in many of our residence halls where they are available to students and modeling how one might live a life committed to the Catholic faith and Benedictine tradition.

These opportunities at religiously grounded institutions provide students with an easy entrée and supportive ethos for exploring questions of meaning. Of course this is not to suggest that secular institutions prevent or are free from this kind of exploration. Wherever there are young people growing toward adulthood, questions of meaning will arise as part of being human, but I don't think it is a stretch to suggest that some environments are more conducive to the search for meaning than others.

Finally, it should be noted that when done well, religious institutions should encourage exploration that challenges students to find their own meaning and to make that search an integral part of their life and being.

There is not a "right" answer in the human search for meaning and while it may be the case that a religious starting point can encourage the search, the way an individual lives out his or her own meaning over a lifetime, even within a single faith tradition or no tradition at all, is as varied as our students.

So regardless of the academic institutions they choose to attend, there is no reason to believe that millennials are any less curious or interested in meaning than their predecessors were. Unless one believes that something fundamental about human nature has changed in recent generations, the search for meaning seems to be an integral part of the human condition.

By [Michael Hemesath](#) | September 15th, 2014 | Categories: [Higher Education](#) | [0 Comments](#)

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