Library as Sacred Place: Applying the Psychology of Religion to the Academic Library as Sanctified Space and Implications for Measurement and Evaluation

Trudi Bellardo Hahn and
Heather Lea Jackson
College of Information Studies
University of Maryland
USA

Introduction

The academic library as an edifice serving as a repository of hard-copy knowledge is facing threats to its continued necessity and usefulness. Even as huge collections are shrinking in this age of digital delivery of monographs and serials, many of the changes happening now in response to the threats are focused on changing the building to draw in students by adding features not traditionally thought of as what academic libraries are about.

While generally agreed to be an important aspect of the library, the notion of library as place is frustratingly abstract and seems to defy quantification or evaluation. This study attempted to evaluate the library as a tangible representative of the broader abstract mission and goals of the university as a whole, analogous to how a church building is a tangible representative of the spiritual goals of the church.

The difficult questions around how to measure academic library efficacy are not new. Existing literature in the area of measurement and evaluation includes extensive writings about traditional methodologies, novel approaches, and suggestions on borrowing trends from other fields, notably the corporate world. In corporate settings, evaluating performance by establishing measures of success is a reasonable approach. Corporations are oriented towards reaching concrete goals (e.g., increased worker productivity, profit margin, or sales) that are easily quantified and can be clearly assessed for success or failure.

Institutions of higher education however are typically driven by a mission regarding "knowledge" or "truth" or a similarly abstract principle that does not lend itself to easy numerical examination or even consensus on what the product or output should be. College

mottoes often include themes such as "light," "truth," "knowledge," and "wisdom."[1] All are fundamentally abstract or even metaphoric in nature. Given the abstract and often intangible mission of institutions of higher education and assuming that academic libraries share this mission, the applicability of corporate modeling for comprehensively evaluating academic library efficacy is questionable. Traditional surveys may elicit data showing that the majority of students are "satisfied" with the addition, for example, of a library coffee shop. This does little however to show whether the library itself is effective or useful, and does nothing to show how the library is supporting the university's broader mission.

These missions and goals are much more analogous to the abstract goals of religious denominations and sects than they are to corporate for-profit goals. This is perhaps due at least in part to the religious roots of many institutions of higher education in the United States. A religious sect typically has a fundamentally abstract spiritual goal (such as closeness to God, salvation, or truth) that may be supported by more concrete or tangible goals of a dogmatic or management nature. A church is a multi-faceted tangible representation of the denomination as a whole.[2] A church has certain concrete operational functions that can be clearly measured (e.g., attendance, budget, and staffing needs) just as the academic library has operational functions that can be evaluated in quantitative ways (e.g., circulation, gate counts, and acquisitions). However, neither the church nor the library exists for the sole purpose of operational functions. Both exist to serve, facilitate, or support the mission and goals of the parent institution. This raises the question of how to measure efficacy in the context of abstract goals that are often spiritual or transcendental in nature.

The field of psychology of religion and spirituality offers a foundation of research methods to investigate these issues. While these methods may be useful for any aspect of library evaluation, this study focuses on the application of psychology methodologies to examine the library as place, using a novel approach to measurement and evaluation of academic libraries that seems more correlated to the mission and goals of the larger institutions of which they are a part.

Literature Review: Evaluating Library as Place

The concept of library as place has been much *en vogue* as the field faces a potential crisis related to technological progress and mass digitization. The academic library as a massive structure serving as a repository of a hard-copy collection of monographs and serials is facing a clear threat to its continued necessity and usefulness in the shape, form, and scale of the past (Carlson, 2001, 2006). In part to defend proactively against claims that the library will soon be irrelevant as collections are digitized and user access is increasingly remote, the idea of library as place having independent merits is garnering support. Antell and Engel (2006), for example, assert that the physical space of the library facilitates a form of concentration in young scholars that is beneficial for progress and academic achievement. Their research on the library as place highlights the sense of sanctuary in the library and the library as a symbol of academic tradition.

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1   A few examples from among many: Albright College: Veritas et justitia—Truth and justice; Brigham Young University: Virtus, Vertitas, Visum—Virtue, Truth, Vision; University of California, Berkeley: Fiat lux—Let there be light; Colby College: Scientia Lux Mentis—Knowledge is the light of the mind; Fordham University: Sapientia et Doctrina--Wisdom and Learning; Yale University: Lux et veritas—Light and truth.
2   The term "church" refers here to any religious structure, including temple, synagogue, mosque, or shrine.

Much of the efforts to adapt academic libraries, however, is focused on changing them to draw in more students, e.g., by adding coffee shops, creating information commons, relaxing rules regarding food and drink, use of circular workstations, increasing number of computers, or adding events such as film screenings or musical performances.

Measuring the effectiveness of such changes is usually done via customer satisfaction surveys. This is not only a binary way of measuring usefulness, but ultimately does nothing to stave off claims that the library is simply turning into another student union or computer lab. A survey may elicit data showing that students are "satisfied" with the addition of a library coffee shop, but this does little to show whether the library itself is effective or useful, and does nothing to show how the library is supporting the broader mission of the university. This issue has been not only been debated within the field of library science, it has received considerable attention from mainstream media (Lane, 2003; Olsen, 2005; Zaslow, 2007).

Literature Review: Psychology of Religion

Borrowing evaluation methodologies from the field of psychology of religion offers the academic library an alternative way to examine the usefulness of the library as place, in terms of the abstract goals of the university necessitating the physical library in its current form. The psychology of religion offers rigorously developed measures for looking at abstract concepts (Fox & Sandler, 2003; Laird et. al., 2004; Slater, Hall, & Edwards, 2001; Tarakeshwar, Pargament, & Mahoney, 2003

Psychologists have conducted extensive research in the area of sanctification.[3] Pargament (1999, 39) offers a succinct definition of the sacred, including how non-religious objects/people/places may be sanctified:

> Regardless of whether the sacred is conceptualized apart from God... the sacred can encompass a set of phenomena that extends well beyond many concepts of the divine to include the full range of objects: material (e.g., crucifix, drugs), space and time (e.g., church, the Sabbath), events and transitions (e.g., death, weddings), cultural products (e.g., music, literature), people (e.g., saints, cult leaders), psychological attributes (e.g., self, meaning), social attributes (e.g., caste, patriotism), and roles.

Not only do studies report affective benefit towards reaching spiritual goals simply due to being in a sanctified space, they have also demonstrated increased emotional, financial, and time investment in such places (Hill et al., 2000; Emmons, 1986; Pargament, 1992).

The investment aspect of sanctification is further explored in research into personal strivings (Pargament, 2005; Emmons, Cheung, & Tehrani, 1998). Emmons (1986, 1059) offers the following definition: "Personal strivings represent the recurring, enduring goals that individuals seek in their everyday behavior, and are defined as 'what a person is typically or characteristically trying to do'." Emmons (1991, 455) later clarified that personal strivings are "broader and more stable" than explicit goals or plans. A salient aspect of the research on

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3   In this study the term "sanctification" is used to represent the setting apart of objects, places or people— transforming them from the ordinary or mundane and dedicating them to a particular purpose or use.

strivings is the concept of sanctified strivings. As with objects, people may imbue certain goals and missions with sacred qualities. The objects and conduits for achieving these strivings may thereby be made sacred in the process.

Sanctifying the Academic Library

The leap from library as place to library as sacred place is supported by Pargament and Mahoney's (2005, 181-182) assertion that "sacred aspects of life can take on a virtually limitless number of forms." An affective model for assessment is therefore appropriate; psychological measures to assess the value of sanctified spaces can be modified to be relevant and specific to the academic library.

The link between higher education and spirituality is not completely novel. Thalbourne (2004), for example, suggested that studies of mystical experience may be useful to examining higher education. Maxwell (2006) goes even further in claiming that librarianship is a "holy" profession. She does not stop at stating that the library is analogous to a church; she asserts that the library *is* a church, librarians *are* clergy, and library work is inherently religious. Her work is supported primarily by historical review and anecdotal evidence.

For purposes of measurement, an analogous relationship is more useful and needs no claims that the academic library has religious significance or is church-like in any sense other than the notion that people may indeed view the academic library as a tangible representation of the abstract mission of the university. This type of non-theistic sanctification is supported by Pargament and Mahoney's assertion that any object people imbue with qualities such as "transcendence" or "ultimate value and purpose" is in fact sanctified regardless of whether the person claims any belief in a theistic deity (186). Within that context, the library may be sanctified and given special status in the mind of the user. Assessing whether the academic library is a "sacred space" to the members of the campus it serves is relevant in analyzing whether the library as place may provide affective benefits that further the mission and goals of the university.

Given Antell and Engel's question as to whether physical materials matter to the concepts of library as space, it is imperative to focus on these physical materials in any questionnaire addressing the sanctification of the library, as it is possible that there is an iconography of library concurrently at play. Perhaps removing stacks and books would be detrimental to the positive impact of the library as space, much as removing all the crosses from a Christian church might make the church feel less sacred. Pargament and Mahoney (2005, 186) assert that completely mundane objects, once invested with sacred qualities, "represent a deeper and more ultimate level of reality" and are experienced in "extraordinary" ways. Previously we have had no clear means for examining the role of physical materials other than simple utility. However, in some facilities, librarians have fought to keep the card catalog in the library, despite it being redundant in combination with the computerized cataloging system. The idea of keeping an object that is inextricably tied to libraries, but is functionally obsolete and useless, may be intuitively accounting for an iconographic factor that we have not as of yet been able to demonstrate. A possible argument against this type of measure might assert that only generations brought up in the "old" library would embrace the traditional elements of the library as space. This is easily

countered with Antell and Engel's (1996) work demonstrating that younger users were most likely to draw a clear connection between library as place and increased aptitude for scholarly pursuits.

Methodology and Findings

Forty-two subjects were presented with a paper survey and a flipbook of images. All subjects were currently enrolled as students at the University of Arizona, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, or University of Maryland. Subjects included 18 males and 25 females, 26 undergraduates and 17 graduate students, and a wide range of ages and a mix of 30 different majors.

Each survey incorporated twelve questions to assess demographics, current library and electronic resource usage, and self-identification with attributes (technological proficiency, scholarship, sociability, and spirituality). Respondents were then asked questions related to a series of images of academic libraries and items in academic libraries. Each subject was presented with a series of five images that included an exterior photograph of a library, two interior photographs of a library, and photographs of two items found in a library. The images presented to any given subject included a mix of images of "modern" style architecture or items and images of "traditional" style architecture or items. In total, the subjects assessed ten images—five modern and five traditional. Each image was accompanied by a text vignette or brief description.

For the exterior images, subjects were asked questions to assess their affective response to the image, predicted use of materials in that library, and predicted use of that library space. For the first interior image subjects were presented with the same questions to assess their affective response. For the second interior image, subjects were asked to imagine being inside the pictured library and to pick from a series of six adjectives to best describe their feelings while using the library. The second asked subjects to circle a phrase best describing the purpose for which they would most likely use the pictured library. Subjects were then presented with two questions asking them to assess how well the pictured library supports a stated motto and a stated mission statement of the university.[4] For the first item image, subjects were asked about perceived usefulness of the item and predicted likelihood of using the item. For the second item image, subjects were asked about their initial affective response to the item and their predicted use of the item. For all images subjects were presented with a series of 14 binary pairs of adjectival antonyms and asked to choose the adjective in each pair that best describes their emotional response to the image. All these questions provided a data set of 84 items per subject.

Analysis of the data revealed that broadly, subjects expressed an overall preference for those images classed as traditional versus those classed as modern. On all items assessing affective response to the images, the traditional images were given a coded mean score of 3.7 on a scale of 1 to 4 with 4 representing the most positive affective response, whereas modern images were given a coded mean score of 2.5 across all subjects. This result was highly significant with $p < .0001$ in a one-way ANOVA and in a t-test. This result is illustrated in Graph 1.

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[4] The university motto was "knowledge and truth" and the mission statement was "We are dedicated to scholarship, academic achievement, creative accomplishment, cultural enrichment, and social responsibility."

Graph 1: Affective Response to Architectural Style


Mean Score by Style
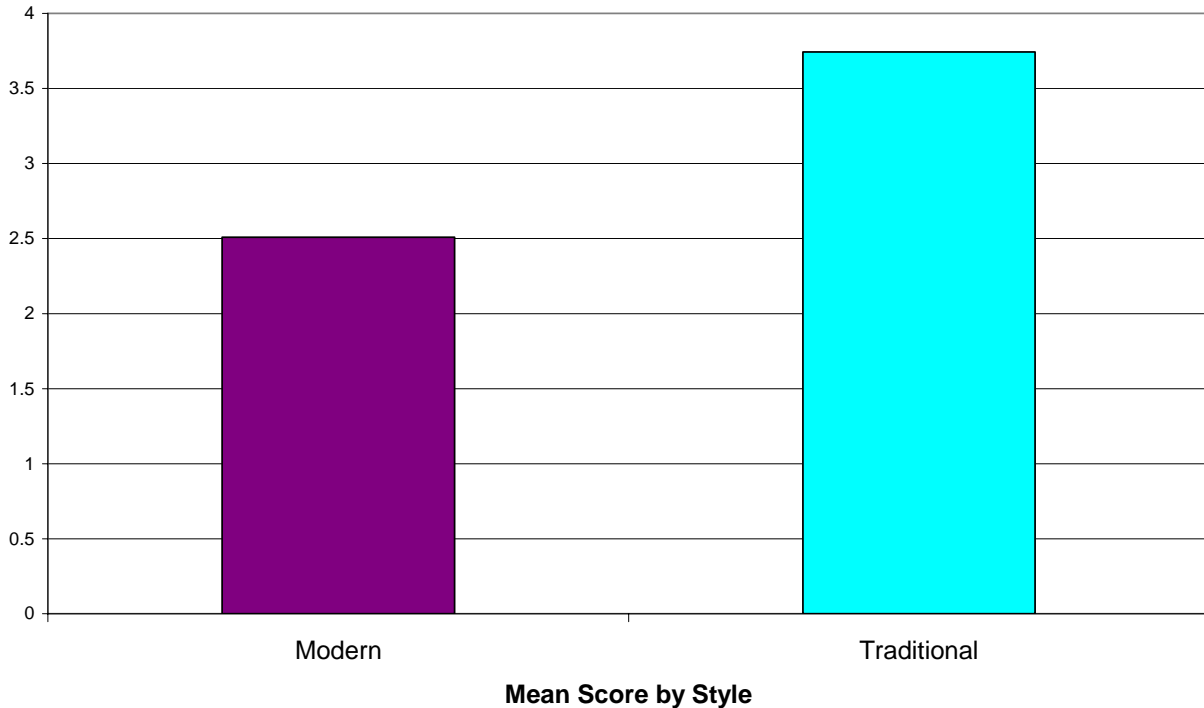
Style of architecture also was borderline significant when analyzed as a predictor for increased or decreased hypothetical use of the pictured libraries from the actual reported use of the subjects' current library. Analysis of variance using all subjects' reported current use and style of library as a factor for predicted use revealed a p value of .051. Subjects were likely to predict that they would use the pictured modern libraries less than they currently use their existing library. They were conversely likely to predict that they would use the pictured traditional libraries more than they currently use their existing library.

Other factors examined statistically were whether the subject's designation of an image as spiritual or secular had an effect on affective response to the space or item, or likelihood to use the space or item. Analysis bore out that this did in fact have a significant effect across questions.

When affective response (represented in Graph 2 as "feelings") to the images designated as spiritual and secular by the subjects were analyzed, $t = 7.2$ and $p < .0001$. When use of materials was analyzed in this context, $t = 2.76$ and $p = .0035$, well within the threshold for significance. Predicted visits to the space pictured in the image also were significantly impacted by whether the subject deemed the space spiritual or secular with $T = 3.45$ and $p = .0005$. The difference in means for each question is illustrated in Graph 2.

Graph 2: Spiritual vs. Secular Responses
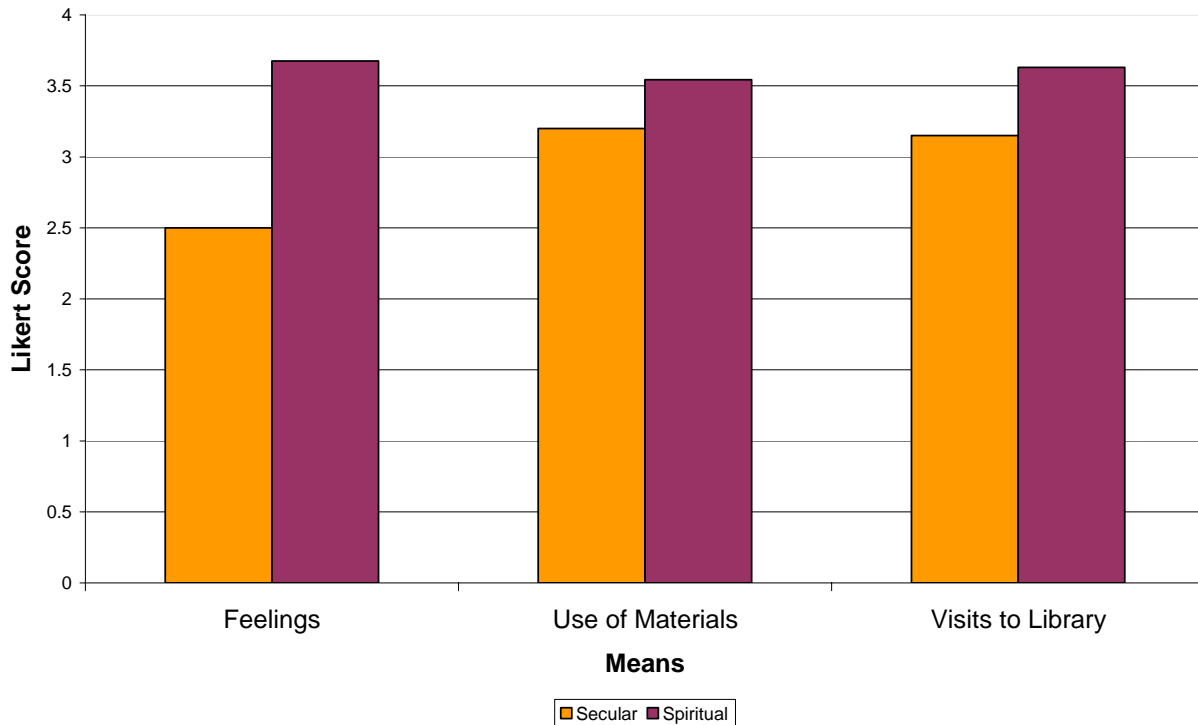
Subjects demonstrated a significantly more positive affective response to those spaces they designated as spiritual, as well as increased desire to use the materials in the library and the space itself.

Data were also analyzed for correlations between the spiritual/secular designation and the subject's perception of whether the pictured library met the abstract and concrete goals of a university as expressed in the motto and mission statement. Once again, the spiritual/secular designation was indeed a significant factor in whether the subject believed the library was supporting the goals of the university. When the support of the motto (an abstract goal) was analyzed by t test, $t = 4.11$ and $p < .0001$. Effect on perceived support of the mission statement was equally significant with $t = 4.53$ and $p < .0001$. Graph 3 illustrates the differences in mean responses for both questions.

Graph 3: Fulfillment of Goals
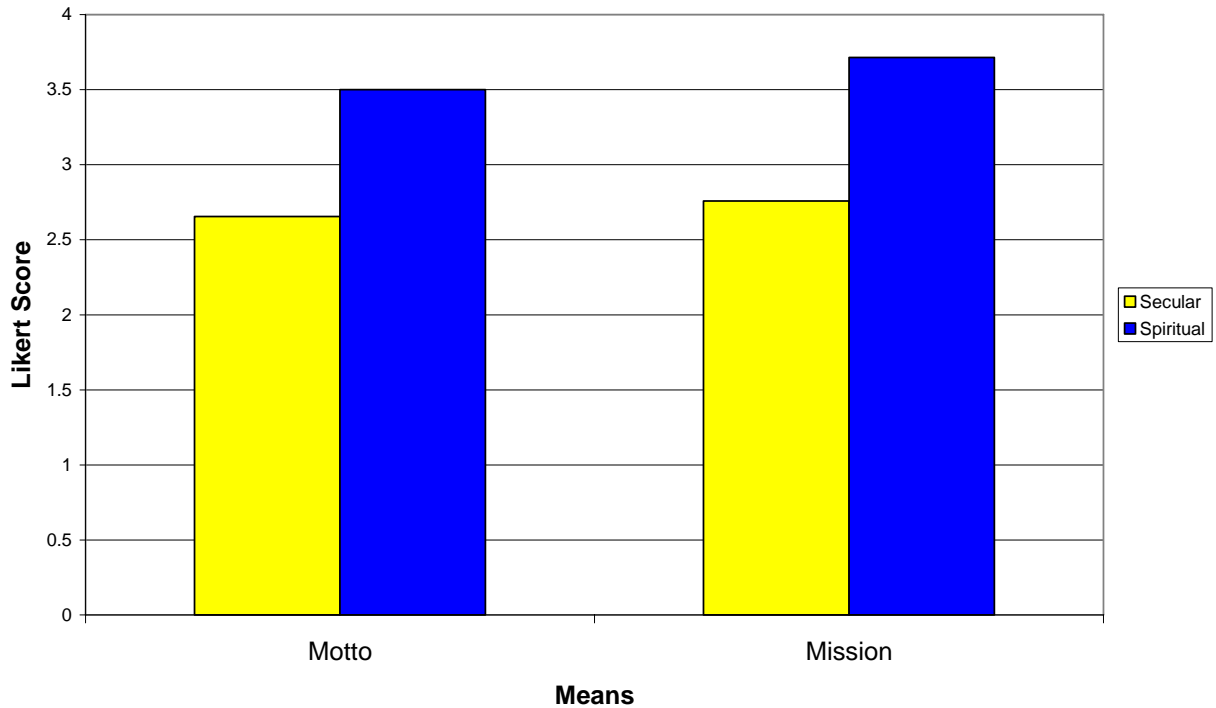
Finally, the effect of the spiritual/secular designation at the item level was examined. The spiritual/secular designation did not seem to have an effect on the subject's responses to questions at the item level. Interestingly, the positive nature of the "spiritual" designation at the item level did not seem to outweigh the impact of the item's perceived usefulness. While no significant effect of the spiritual/secular designation was seen on subject responses at the item levels, the perception of usefulness by the subject had a significant effect on the other responses to item questions. As observable in Graph 4, the difference in mean scores was minimal.

Graph 4: Spiritual vs. Secular Items
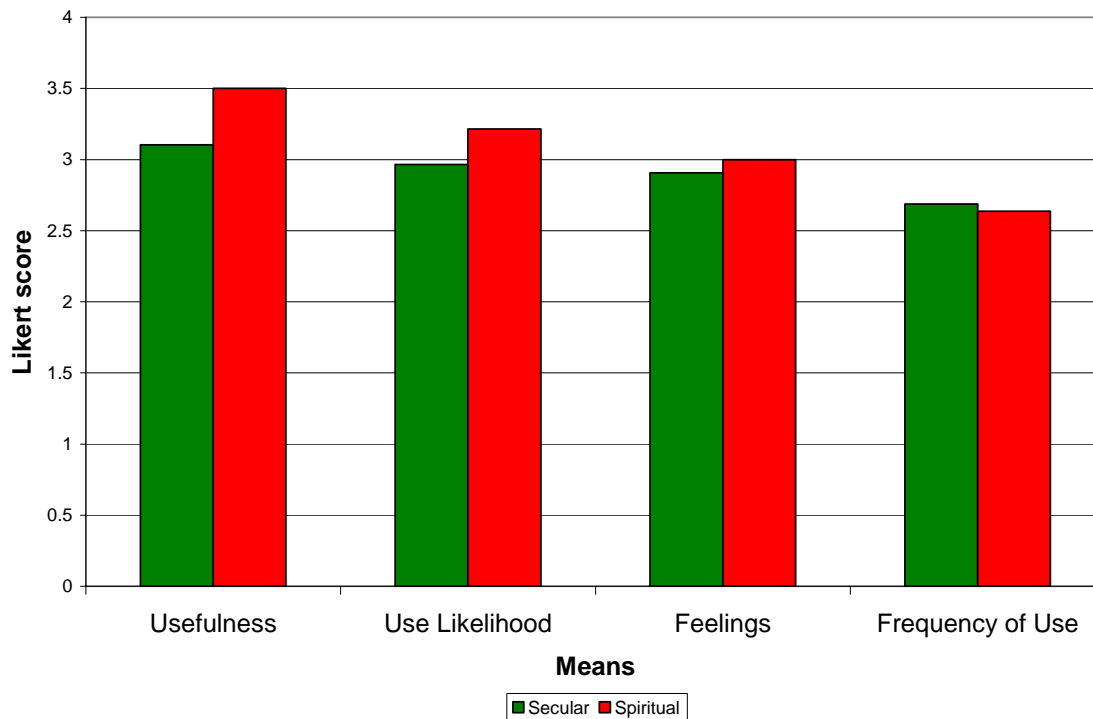
Conclusions and Recommendations

The positive effect of the subjects' perceived "spiritual" nature of a space supports our initial hypothesis that those places deemed as "sacred" produce affective benefits for the subject that extend beyond attitudes and into the realm of behavior. We also predicted the types of goals expressed in higher education might also be sanctified and would thereby be best supported by places that were also sanctified.

The spiritual vs. secular does seem to have an impact on how well people judge a library to be meeting the motto and mission of the university. That seems directly in line with some of the research on strivings and goals that suggests that the goals of a university (or possibly the way students perceive their goals at a university) are sanctified strivings and are better supported by tangible elements on campus that are similarly sanctified by students.

One could argue that because those elements students feel most positive about are those they sanctify, they then ascribe spirituality to the goals those things support. We feel it is more the former though, because if the latter were the case you would expect to see all images of academic libraries being designated as spiritual, not just those with traditional architecture.

The data also revealed that computers are uniformly valued and praised as objects. However, students do not like a tech-heavy looking space. It appears that, just as "dream" kitchens typically feature the latest in high-tech gadgets and appliances, they also maintain the traditional

woods and natural stone of old-fashioned country kitchens. This finding has implications for library remodels or new construction—students want new technologies, but presented in traditional academic surroundings.

Overall, our study demonstrates that borrowing evaluation methodologies from the field of psychology of religion may offer the academic library a viable way to examine its usefulness as place, in terms of the abstract goals of the university necessitating the physical library in its traditional form.

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