Distribution Agreement

In presenting this thesis or dissertation as a partial fulfillment of the requirements for an advanced degree from Emory University, I hereby grant to Emory University and its agents the non-exclusive license to archive, make accessible, and display my thesis or dissertation in whole or in part in all forms of media, now or hereafter known, including display on the world wide web. I understand that I may select some access restrictions as part of the online submission of this thesis or dissertation. I retain all ownership rights to the copyright of the thesis or dissertation. I also retain the right to use in future works (such as articles or books) all or part of this thesis or dissertation.

Signature:

_____ _____

Scott Muir Date

A Community of Imagination:
Constructing Young Adult Faith Through Religious Studies

By Scott Muir
Master of Theological Studies

Candler School of Theology

_____
Steven M. Tipton
Committee Chair

_____
Steven J. Kraftchick
Director of General and Advanced Studies

_____
Barbara Patterson
Committee Member

A Community of Imagination:
Constructing Young Adult Faith Through Religious Studies

By

Scott Muir

Thesis Committee Chair: Steven M. Tipton, Ph.D

An abstract of
A thesis submitted to the Faculty of the
Candler School of Theology
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Masters of Theological Studies
2012

Abstract

A Community of Imagination:
Constructing Young Adult Faith Through Religious Studies
By Scott Muir

Through systematic analysis of in-depth semi-structured interviews with 19 Emory University religion majors and ethnographic observation of the mandatory Senior Symposium course entitled *Religion 490: Insiders and Outsiders*, I seek to illustrate how these religion majors appropriate the abundant resources provided through the religion major in the dynamic (re)construction of an increasingly complex, adequate "faith"[1] to live by as emerging adults. I draw upon Sharon Parks' model of faith development in higher education to describe my subjects' progression through a process which entails:

> 1) The overwhelming of students' conventional conceptions of reality through exposure to a wide variety of religious traditions, beliefs and practices within sustained critical dialogue among a diverse community of scholars, creating a need for expansion of their faith perspectives.
> 2) Exposure to a wide variety of religious representations of the ideal from which students adaptively reconstruct a more personally meaningful and comprehensive conception of "the ultimate conditions of existence" with the assistance of intentionally selected scholarly mentors.
> 3) The acquisition of life skills including analysis of complex social-historical phenomena and articulation and defense of controversial claims and convictions which empower students to proactively engage the challenges and complexities of their social worlds with courage and competence.
> 4) Struggle to reconcile their ideal identities, aspirations and conceptions of the "ultimate conditions of existence" with the actual social realities students confront and the compromises they require.

Though this process varies considerably in terms of degree and particular content, I argue that the general structural progression accurately represents the diverse experiences of my subjects. I seek to be sensitive to (though by no means comprehensively address) the dizzying array of interacting social, cultural, political, intellectual, religious and psychic factors at play in this process. I also strive to indicate, explicitly and implicitly, some wider ethical, political and existential implications of this reality for professors, the university, academic religious studies, confessional religious institutions and our society as a whole.

[1] As defined by and utilized by James Fowler in *Stages of Faith*, to be explicated in thesis body.

A Community of Imagination:
Constructing Young Adult Faith Through Religious Studies

By

Scott Muir

Thesis Committee Chair: Steven M. Tipton, Ph.D

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of the
Candler School of Theology
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Masters of Theological Studies
2012

Acknowledgments

My subjects, primary audience and instructors throughout this project have first and foremost been the undergraduate religious studies students of Emory College: the nineteen individuals generous enough to share their time and stories with me, as well as the students I have learned alongside as a participant-observer in the required capstone course *Religion 490: Insiders and Outsiders* and student and teaching assistant in *Religion 310: Becoming the Buddha in America*. I have been consistently impressed by their maturity, intelligence, thoughtfulness and courage throughout this process and hope to continue learn from them through their candid critique of my representation of their growth through religious studies. If this work sheds any light on any of their experiences I will consider it worth the effort.

I am deeply indebted to the professors who have patiently advised me throughout this lengthy process: for Steve Tipon's counsel and encouragement throughout the early stages of the research process and willingness to advise and evaluate this thesis during his sabbatical; for Bobbi Patterson's voluntary service as reader and critic as well as invaluable enabler; for Tracy Scott's essential instruction in systematic qualitative data collection and analysis and review of my preliminary work through her excellent SOC 585 interviewing seminar; for Tara Doyle's extending the opportunity to participate in her wonderful course as both student and teaching assistant as well as her multi-faceted mentorship throughout my time here at Emory, and for Michael Berger, Dennis LoRusso, Gary Laderman, Steven Kraftchick, John Snarey, Marla Frederick, Nancy Ammerman and Barbara Miller-McLemore all of whom provided enormously helpful guidance and assistance along the way.

My heartfelt gratitude for the support of all my family and friends who have patiently indulged long hours of reflection on this work, its inspirations and challenges. I want to thank my mother in particular for her never-failing support and essential and excellent editing assistance in the final stages of this project (I couldn't have done it without you!) as well as my colleagues/roommates for their insights and support throughout the entire process.

Finally, my thanks to all who take the time to read this work, I greatly appreciate it.

Table of Contents

INTRODUCTION: ESTABLISHING MY ARGUMENT

American Higher Education: A Uniquely Powerful Shaping Institution

In a recent session of *Religion 490: Insiders and Outsiders*[1], the "capstone course" required for the religion major at Emory University, our professor[2] asked the class to raise their hands if their parents attended college, eliciting a response from a large majority. When asked if their grandparents had attended, a number of hands went down, reducing the total to about half of the class. "And now we're at 100%," he observed. The point of this exercise was to illustrate the expanding influence of higher education in our society, a reality highlighted by multiple authors of assigned readings for the course, such as Delwin Brown, who emphasized:

> "The academy has become an increasingly influential arbiter of knowledge during the modern period in Western culture. Until mid-[20th] century in the United States, the influence of the university persisted through the education of a small privileged class in a group of select universities."[3]

Through our instructor's informal survey of the class, we see both evidence for this growing sphere of influence and a persistent overrepresentation of members of upper-middle class elites who are fulfilling an assumed rite of passage normalized over multiple generations of college attendance. When I asked students how they decided to come to Emory, only two mentioned that possible alternatives might have included not attending a four-year college at all. Instead, it was a matter of selecting and being selected through the anxiety-ridden and highly hyped college application process. Despite varying socio-economic status, all of these students managed to gain access to the elite academy and have made considerable sacrifices in terms of money (all told,

---

1 I have been a participant-observer in this course gathering ethnographic research for this project. I will hereafter refer to it as "the 490 course" for brevity and clarity.

2 I use pseudonyms for all respondents and the professors they refer to in their interviews. However, the professor and co-instructor for this course expressed a preference for being referred to as simply "the professor/instructor" and "co-instructor" in my references to the class. As I have been a participant-observer in the class, I have elected to use the collective possessive "our" to call attention to my involvement.

3 Brown, Delwin. "Academic Theology in the University or Why an Ex-Queen's Heir Should Be Made a Subject*." Religious Studies, Theology and the University.* Ed. Cady, Linell and Brown, Delwin. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002. 137.

roughly a-quarter-of-a-million dollar investment), time, opportunity costs, effort, etc. to be here.[4] They are deeply invested in this institutional arbiter of knowledge. How do they perceive such an enormous investment, and how does their perception condition the return they receive?

In *Souls in Transition,* Christian Smith reports that the third wave respondents from a representative sample of 2,458 young adults who have participated in the longitudinal *National Study of Youth and Religion* (NYSR) overwhelmingly approach higher education instrumentally. College is generally not valued intrinsically as a life-enhancing process but a mere means to the end of a decent job and the "American dream" of upper middle-class financial security. "Not very many emerging adults talk about the intrinsic value of an education, of the personal broadening and deepening of one's understanding and appreciation of life and the world that expansive learning affords."[5] And while Smith's respondents tend to exhibit the individualism and deep-seated suspicion of institutional power described by Robert Bellah and his colleagues in *The Good Society*[6] two decades ago, resistance to making this increasingly costly jump through the hoop of higher education is rare. By and large, Smith's subjects are uncritical of the higher educational system and happy to invest enormous amounts of time and money confident that the dividends will ultimately justify their sizable investment.[7] Indeed, Smith's data seems to powerfully reinforce Bellah et al's claim that "from the individual point of view, the educational and occupational systems appear to have an objective givenness that puts them beyond question."[8]

---

[4] An Emory education costs $52,792 annually for tuition, room and board (plus expenses). However, this does not mean that one should assume that "everyone here is rich," as I recently overheard one student put it. 52% apply for need-based financial aid and 47% receive such aid, with 45% receiving a need-based scholarship/grant averaging $31,710. 96% report that their need was "fully met." Its selectivity and prestige (29% acceptance, #20 on U.S. News list of best national universities) are considerable. http://colleges.usnews.rankingsandreviews.com/best-colleges/emory-university-1564

[5] Smith, Christian and Snell, Patricia. *Souls in Transition: The Religious & Spiritual Lives of Emerging Adults.* New York: Oxford University Press, 2009.

[6] Bellah, Robert, et al. *The Good Society.* New York: Vintage Books, 1991.

[7] Smith, C. *Souls in Transition*.

[8] Bellah et al. *The Good Society*. 43.

Bellah and his colleagues argue that this uncritical, but instrumental approach to institutions such as the university as a means to individualistic ends obscures their power. "Institutions are patterns of social activity that give shape to collective and individual experience...providing the standards in terms of which each person recognizes the excellence of his or her achievements."[9] "They are the substantial forms through which we understand our own identity and the identity of others."[10] I argue that higher education is a uniquely powerful shaping institution in contemporary American society for three crucial reasons. First, the widespread social investment in its authority, discourses and methods of individual evaluation leads Del Brown to justifiably assert that "today the university is our culture's central and most comprehensive producer of knowledge."[11] Secondly, its custody over the critical years of emergence into adulthood (most typically from ages 18 to 22) through provisional independence grant it a powerful social function as an "institutional incubator." It facilitates the relativization of one's conventional worldview through rapid expansion of the social world and provides a plethora of resources for the subsequent formation of an independent adult identity. Finally, this latter process has been broadened and deepened by the emergence of traditionally underrepresented voices, extending and diversifying the academy's longstanding role in critiquing other dominant social formations and contesting alternate constructions of power and meaning. [12]

---

[9] Bellah et al. *The Good Society,* 40.
[10] Bellah et al. *The Good Society*.12.
[11] Brown. "Academic Theology." 138.
[12] McCutcheon, Russell. *Critics Not Caretakers: Redescribing the Public Study of Religion*. Albany: State Universityof New York Press, 2001. 29.
McCutcheon, one of the assigned authors for the 490 course, uses Raymond William's categories to refer to "three phases in the life of any social formation: *dominant* (when a social system reproduces its authority effectively in the midst of ongoing natural disruptions), *residual* (when, due to changing natural conditions, a social system formed in the past is no longer able to reproduce its authority and legitimacy yet remains effective in the present), and *emergent* (when in the wake of natural disruptions, novel or experimental forms of authority and attendant social organization are developing."
As I imply here, I consider the university/academy to be a very dominant social formation. I will explicate his particular concept of social formation further later in this work when I explore the dominant authority of Emory University and the Department of Religion.

Of course, this institutional alignment is not autonomous; and Bellah and his colleagues point to the increasing influence of economic and political demands upon its expanding functions and structures. Del Brown concurs, "since mid-century, the academic subculture has become less protected, more vulnerable to various forms of attempted social control, but that is because its role has broadened and thus become more publicly visible and influential."[13] But institutional protections of freedom of inquiry, such as tenure, have helped to both maintain some degree of autonomy and perhaps shield the institution from much of the individualistic suspicion directed toward other structures. I will argue that my extraordinarily engaged, elite subjects have wholeheartedly submitted to the power of this dominant social formation, enhancing and expanding its power to shape their lives.

The Religion Major at Emory: A Uniquely Formative College Experience

My colleagues/subjects[14] seem to afford the university this objected givenness and optimistically expect a good return on their sizeable investment. However, I see them as unique in comparison to Smith's representative sample in that they appear to unanimously value and genuinely appreciate the intrinsic worth and meaningfulness of their educational experiences (perhaps to a far greater extent than their professors, parents and peers recognize). Many specifically chose Emory for its liberal arts educational experience. Some pair their religion major with professional preparation in medicine or business; others plan to pursue careers in religious studies or ministry; and still others chose a religion major simply because it was interesting enough to get them through college. But as a group of individuals who unanimously report

---

[13] Brown. "Academic Theology." 137-138.

[14] I use both of these terms through this work in order to highlight that my "subjects" are also peers in the learning process and moreover, my teachers (more to come on this from Robert Bellah). It is important to clarify, however, that there are two overlapping but not fully continuous groups in my studied. There are the nineteen interview "subjects" who all individually signed consent forms approved by the IRB and were recording, providing hard data that was then systematically analyzed. And there are the seventeen "colleagues" I have observed as fellow participants in the 490 course, who publicly voted to allow my participant/observation to proceed. Twelve individuals are members of both groups and I have restricted my quotations from the 490 classes to these twelve of those who also interviewed. The five who did not interview did not specifically refuse to, limits of time (mine and theirs) simply precluded interviewing every individual in the course. From my end, none who explicitly expressed interest in interviewing were refused.

enjoying their religious studies education and *appreciating* its influence upon them, they stand out. Still, these students alternate between an individualistic, instrumental approach to their education as a self-selected means to personal fulfillment (and greatly improved job prospects) and awareness of their deep involvement in a community which has profoundly shaped their identities and trajectories. And although this involvement plays a pivotal role in the development of their critical faculties (not infrequently wielded against religious institutions), the authority, power and function of their university and its representatives are rarely critiqued or questioned.[15] One could convincingly argue that this characterization would accurately describe any student who uncritically pursues a college education as not merely a means to an end, but an end in itself. However, there seem to be several salient factors which make the personal investment and impact of the religion major particularly acute.

The college major is one of the most powerful and persistent self-identifying markers an undergraduate possesses, one that they are constantly asked to present—to family members, potential employers, friends back home and student peers in all kinds of social situations. And religion majors generally report that their chosen marker is (a) perceived as odd at best and useless, dangerous or inferior at worst and (b) widely misunderstood. Psychologically, these perceptions and misunderstandings both enhance the significance of the original selection and the need to internalize this choice as a form-fitting reflection of one's identity. For example, Megan, who strikes me as having a particularly strong religion major identity:

> *"My freshman year in particular, when people would ask me what I was studying, a lot of people at Oxford[16]…were very surprised that I was choosing to spend the [scholarship]*

---

[15] The most significant exception to this claim is Evan, who, as I will mention on multiple occasions was exposed to significant resistance to the authority of the "secular academy" from members of his Evangelical Christian community.

[16] One factor that complicates this research is the fact a disproportionate number of my subjects (and the religion major population) at large, attended Oxford College, a small, two-year liberal arts college 40 miles east of Emory's Atlanta campus. Oxford graduates are automatically accepted into Emory College on track to obtain their bachelor's degree through two more years of coursework. Both institutions are governed by Emory University and thus guided by its institutional goals. Thus, while admitting that Oxford students will necessarily have a somewhat different experience, I treat them as one population. Since the Oxford curriculum focuses on the fulfillment of general education requirements and most of its students do not

> *money that I was given to study religion. And "that's what you're gonna do?," "that's all you're going to do?," questions like that often came up. People asked me how my parents reacted, didn't think my parents would be OK with it, just wondered why I was "wasting my time" so to speak, studying religion."*

A solid majority of the students cited this widespread perception of the instrumental uselessness of the religion major when I asked them if anybody had discouraged them from becoming a religion major. A minority also referenced the perception that apostasy was a likely result from such engagement. For example, Evan recalls that, "a lot of mentors and advisors back home were kind of against it because they said Christians who study religion in college become atheists." While a few others candidly lamented that the major doesn't carry as much prestige as a science or business degree. Jennifer reflects,

> *"I feel like I was prouder to be a chem[istry] major because we get more like street cred[ibility]…But it's not that it was like too hard for me, Iike I feel like I'm a smart person, and so I don't like that people, I feel like people judge the humanities majors as like not as smart, which frustrates me."*

Another minority reported that nobody had ever expressed any negative feelings towards it, but only Jonathan was surprised by the question. Several students expressed frustration that many perceived religious studies as a theological endeavor which served as preparation for confessional religious leadership rather than a humanities/social science discipline. While the assumption of vocational ministry training was generally unique to the Christians in the sample, adherents to other traditions, like Ali, reported similar confusion:

> *"Like religion...it's mainly perceived from where I came up from, the background I came from, as theology based or doctrine based. It wasn't looked at as you know the culture of religion or the sociology of religion or the psychology of religion, so all of those aspects, people didn't tie in. So when people found out I was a religion major you know, friends from back home, extended family from back home, the question was always, well what are you going to do with that?...I think people are kind of awkwarded out."*

The sense that people misunderstand religious studies and often perceive it negatively may function as a discouragement to choosing a religion major for some. But for those who select it, this friction is likely to reinforce one's commitment and psychological identification with

---

declare a major until they come to Emory College at the end of their sophomore year, the majority of the religion classes these majors take are administered through the Emory College Department of Religion.

religious studies every time someone asks the question, "what's your major?" For example, Haleema responds to the perception that religion is "not a major that you can take home to your mom and dad," by making a point of responding to the major query "*religion* and chemistry" to indicate that it is chemistry, not religion, that is the "afterthought."

Returning to my three arguments for the unique social power of higher education, the perceived abnormality of the religion major enhances one's personal investment in the authority, discourses and methods of religious studies, if only through the frequency of the necessity to defend. The subject matter of religion serves to enhance the second and third distinct sources of institutional power and I will demonstrate that (a) the critical engagement with religious systems of meaning and power, a protected source of authority in American culture, has a unique power to palpably expose the relativity of one's conventional perspective and (b) provide alternative images of the ideal as resources for the reconstruction of a more sophisticated and well grounded worldview. I argue that this process of deconstruction and reconstruction is instrumental to emergence into adulthood in our complex, pluralistic society. In the case of religion, the conventional truths deconstructed are for many their most cherished, and the images to which one is exposed are time tested symbols of ultimate reality. This engagement in representations of ultimacy renders terms like "worldview" and "belief system," too wooden to capture the deep, constantly evolving dimensions of human meaning-making through commitment to the ideal as stirred by religious phenomena and imagery, regardless of one's affiliation. We need a more affectively loaded term and a dynamic model to account for the sometimes dramatic shifts in one's conception of both the ideal and the real. Consequently I will argue for James Fowler's broad conception of faith development as a universal human process of meaning-making, particularly the adaptation and modification by Sharon Parks of this model for the purpose of

assessing the nuance patterns of growth which occur in young adulthood[17] through higher education. In *Stages of Faith*, theologically trained developmental psychologist defined faith as:

> **"**People's evolved and evolving ways of experiencing self, others and world (2) as related to and affected by the ultimate conditions of existence (as they construct them) (3) and of shaping their lives' purposes and meanings, trusts and loyalties, in light of the character of being, value and power determining the ultimate conditions of existence (as grasped in their operative images--conscious and unconscious of them)."[18]

This is a fairly dense and technical definition, and I will literally "flesh it out" throughout the remainder of the work. For now, I will draw on Farrin's story to illustrate how it is sufficiently elastic to capture the dynamic structural shifts in one's conceptions of the "ultimate conditions of existence," broad enough to apprehend the experiences of individuals who do not affiliate with any particular religious tradition, and particularly promising for the analysis of the complex impact of religious studies education.

My Argument in Three Minutes: An Exemplary Case

Farrin was the only one of my nineteen interview subjects who identified as "non-religious." When I contacted her to follow-up on her expressed interest in participation she questioned whether I was interested in interviewing a non-affiliated individual, and I assured her I was interested in interviewing any religion major that was willing to share the time with me. It was a fascinating and engrossing interview, and it was clear that the religion major experience had been very meaningful and influential for Farrin. Towards the end I asked her if the impact of her religious studies had been surprising in any way (i.e. more or less influential than she had expected). Though the content of her experience is decidedly unique, I believe her three minute response illustrates several common patterns of a process which is not exactly conversion, but is

---

[17] In reference to Christian Smith's *Souls in Transition*, I have used the now generally accepted moniker "emerging adulthood." When Parks wrote *The Critical Years* twenty-five years ago, a consensus for a discrete stage between adolescence and adulthood had not yet emerged in developmental psychology. Thus, Parks makes her case for the uniqueness of "young adulthood" which at the time was defended by Kenneth Keniston. I will use the two terms interchangeably to refer to the stage of life all of my subjects (and I) currently occupy, extending from the late teens up through the mid and late twenties.

[18] Fowler, James. *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning.* New York: HarperCollins, 1981. 92-93.

nonetheless transformation, a process I believe to be best captured by the aforementioned models of faith development:

> *"I didn't really know what I would get out of it. I really didn't think that far into when I first started but I think that it has been way more influential than I thought it would be. Like something that I think about constantly, on a daily basis. So I definitely think it's affected me more than I thought it would."*

In these reflections we see the initial lack of reflection regarding the shaping power of the institution followed by the eventual awareness of its heavy impact and identification with the subject matter. Farrin continues,

> *"And like opening my eyes just to like other people and being more understanding. And [references specific ethical decision involving the giving of money to a stranger relayed earlier in the interview]...Like you should be willing to give. If you have, you should give…And I feel like I wouldn't think like that if it wasn't for my…religious studies. I think it's helped me to understand just like different personal events that have happened. Or just to, like, put them in a perspective and see if I even find something important in them. Is it worth worrying about? No, probably not in the big scope of things. It's just like organized my life, and maybe like take some of the stress of my life away."*

Here Farrin describes what I will present as two discrete but interrelated movements. (1) New insights gleaned leads through "conscious conflict" with religious material lead to the deconstruction of old ways of perceiving reality which are deemed inadequate, unhelpful or misleading. In light of her "daily" contemplation of religious claims concerning ultimate value, Farrin has critically engaged some of her own preoccupations and found them to be less meaningful and therefore not worth worrying about. (2) These representations of the ideal are selectively appropriated to construct a richer sense of reality initiating new, probing commitments to perceive, think and act in more meaningful ways. Her comprehension and interpretation of life events is sharpened, her ethical behavior is critically modified, and life feels more organized. She continues,

> *"I didn't know it would be so influential, so important. I didn't know I would be so like religious I guess…Like I didn't know I would believe in so much of the stuff that I learned...When you're not taught it, you don't think that you would be apt to like believing it. So now that I'm older and I actually have like my own thoughts, it's kind of surprising to me, like you really are, like religious. You do like follow these things that you learn, so it was kind of weird. But it was good, it was positive. I mean I get a lot from like each religion class that I take."*

Here, Farrin describes an emerging confidence in her agency as an adult. Sharon Parks defines adulthood as "a way of making meaning:" "To be an adult is (1) to be aware of one's own composing of reality, (2) to participate self-consciously in an ongoing dialogue toward truth, and…(3) to take responsibility for seeing and reweaving a fitting pattern of relationships between the disparate elements of self and world."[19] We see all three attributes at work in Farrin's reflection above. She has composed a more robust, internalized sense of reality through engagement in self-conscious dialogue with actors and images claiming to represent truth, reweaving an evolved and evolving sense of self and world with ideas that "fit." But now, (4) Farrin finds herself confronted by the daunting challenge of moving from the "probing commitment" which has yielded this crystallizing adult identity to the "tested commitment" of full-fledged adulthood.[20] She continues to describe herself as "non-religious," even while acknowledging that she "really is religious" because the idea of compromising her distinct individual sense of "the ultimate conditions of existence" through commitment to any particular religious traditions or community threatens the integrity of this new identity. Thus she describes her religious identity as "a 'mash up' of different traditions, or rituals, or sayings." When I ask about how her religious studies "mash up" might influence her planned career in medicine, Farrin responds with hopeful ambivalence: "I don't really know that yet. I feel like I kind of have to like go to med school to figure that out. I'm sure it will help at some point. I mean I know it will. But I don't know how yet." Only time will tell how the faith formed through Farrin's religious studies experience will evolve as it is tested as she establishes her place in the world.

To summarize, I will argue the religion major experience is a powerful stimulus in the faith development of my subjects due to four primary processes. I will frame these movements as proceeding in succession, though obviously they overlap and interact with one another. They are:

---

[19] Parks, Sharon. *The Critical Years: The Young Adult Search for a Faith to Live By*. San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1986. 6.
[20] Parks. *The Critical Years.* 84.

> 1) The overwhelming of students' conventional conceptions of reality through exposure to a wide variety of religious traditions, beliefs and practices within sustained critical dialogue among a diverse community of scholars, creating a need for expansion of their faith perspectives.
> 2) Exposure to a wide variety of religious representations of the ideal from which students adaptively reconstruct a more personally meaningful and comprehensive conception of "the ultimate conditions of existence" with the assistance of intentionally selected scholarly mentors.
> 3) The acquisition of life skills including analysis of complex social-historical phenomena and articulation and defense of controversial claims and convictions which empower students to proactively engage the challenges and complexities of their social worlds with courage and competence.
> 4) Struggle to reconcile their ideal identities, aspirations and conceptions of the "ultimate conditions of existence" with the actual social realities students confront and the compromises they require.

I will make my argument in three broad sections each consisting of multiple subsections. (I) First, I will explicate my research design by (a) positioning myself in relation to my research and its development, (b) present my research question, (c) review the most relevant empirical research and (d) describe my methodology. (II) I will then frame the stimulus (the religion major experience) in its social and institutional context within (a) Emory University, (b) the Department of Religion (c) the wider religious studies discourse, drawing on my ethnographic observation of the 490 course. In the process, I will provide a theoretical context for my (III) conceptual framework built on (a) James Fowler's faith development theory and (b) Sharon Parks' contextualized adaptation which traces young adult faith formation through higher education. I will then apply her model to the (IV) interpretation of the semi-structured interview data which will reframe the four movements above in her terms and explore them in greater depth and breadth. Finally, I will conclude with some reflections upon the limitations and implications of this research as well as potential future directions for expansion.

I. CRYSTALLIZATION OF RESEARCH QUESTION AND RESEARCH DESIGN

Personal Experience and Positionality

When I asked my subjects about whether their professors had explicitly acknowledged their own religious commitments (or lack thereof), most recalled courses where professors had volunteered this information at the outset and others where they had not. Students

overwhelmingly preferred to know where their professors were "coming from," and while some simply cited plain old curiosity or even "noseyness," many offered substantive reasons. Rachel, like many of her peers, insists that there is no such thing as pure objectivity in religious studies; whatever one's religious background, it will always influence their interpretation of religious phenomena. Therefore, she thinks,

> *"it's the best when a professor does tell you [what their religious commitments are], especially if they're teaching about their own religion…It gives them some credibility…because they are a participant…There are obviously going to be some things they miss when describing it, but I feel like they can give you a more in depth description of it if they're good at describing things…Also it's important…to recognize when they're talking about something if they're talking about it as this is the ultimate truth…"*

Thus, while some students seem to think an outsider might have a less biased perspective, Rachel asserts that all are biased, but an insider's perspective might also possess additional insight (as well as idealization). Jonathan concurs, adding that as an insider scholar,

> *"I think you just need to be self-aware and say hey, "I kind of have a bias a little bit with this idea…And I would say that sometimes you can even play into your bias in some ways. I would say that there's times when you can write as an insider and do a research paper as an insider or whatever. And say that this community that you're a part of thinks [this]…So I think there's times when it's to great benefit as well."*

In light of this encouragement from my colleagues (and my methodological commitments addressed below), I will claim my insider status as one profoundly shaped by religious studies and the American liberal arts education tradition as a strength and source of insight, while self-consciously seeking to avoid imposing my experiences onto theirs. I also seek to be sensitive to the fact that I share more and less with particular subjects in terms of my particular religious background (though I find that this sense of identification does not break down neatly along traditional lines). In deference to their request for full disclosure and out of appreciation for their candidness with me, here are a few reflections on my personal engagement with the subject matter and how it has led me to this research project.

The formulation of my research question evolved from my own engagement with an alternate institutional form of the phenomenon I am studying. As an undergraduate at Dartmouth

College, I studied (primarily social) psychology and obtained a religion minor. My religious studies curriculum was fairly diverse in terms of both content and methodology, ranging from ethnography to ethics, from historical-critical examination of the New Testament to broad comparative theory, from historical evolution of distant ancient traditions to the detailed analysis of contemporary American religious phenomena directly influencing my own religious engagement. I brought to this study a fragile and unclarified Christian identity and practice formed by regular participation in the Episcopal Church as a child and substantial though inconsistent involvement in a variety of non-denominational Christian collectives (i.e. Christian summer camping, Bible studies, retreats, etc.) throughout my teen years. Meanwhile, all aspects of my conventional identity had been challenged, deconstructed and confused in this diverse peer culture which felt worlds away from my community of origin. Consequently, I often found it difficult to suspend my personal questions and struggles in my engagement with new and unfamiliar methods of approaching, examining and understanding religion. These courses played a pivotal role in my negotiation of a wide variety of cultural influences in search of a stable social identity and sense of meaning and purpose in the world. My concomitant commitments to the Protestant Christian tradition, free and critical academic inquiry and progressive pluralistic engagement were repeatedly and mutually contested and reconstructed through the discourse of religious studies. Though these experiences were frequently trying, they were extraordinarily engrossing and life-giving, sufficiently so that I emerged from the experience with an additional, though not fully differentiated identification, that of the independent scholar of religion.

In many ways my graduate work at Emory, and this research project in particular, has served to develop and clarify this social identity and vocational trajectory, as well as its relationship to the three cultural commitments mentioned above. I enrolled in the Masters of Theological Studies program at Candler because of the flexibility it afforded me to construct a curriculum blending psychological, sociological, historical and theoethical methodologies to equip me to investigate the intrapersonal and interpersonal dynamics of religious formation. This

pursuit has been a testing of my faith conviction, grounded in past experiences, that I would learn the most about God,[21] the world, its inhabitants, and myself by engaging living individuals with a wide variety of religious commitments. Of course this conviction itself is heavily influenced by my practice of a democratic, interactive and individualistic form of non-denominational American Protestantism. Thus, my own personal engagement with religious studies at both the undergraduate and graduate levels and observations of my colleagues had led me to suspect that others experienced similar bi-directional patterns of influence and exchange between subjective faith and engagement with the academic study of religion. My social scientific training led me to assume that the direction and strength of impact would vary considerably from individual to individual, conditioned by a variety of social/demographic variables, particular experiences and salient psychological qualities and dynamics.

Emergence of Research Question

My observation of my peers in the undergraduate course *Religion 310: Becoming the Buddha in America* during the fall of 2010 seemed to confirm these assumptions and instilled a nascent desire to explore the variety of experiences and dynamics at play. A few students seemed deeply invested in the subject as American converts or "Buddhist sympathizers," and several repeatedly drew comparisons between the material and their own (religious) background and experience. Most of the students were fairly explicit in evaluating the subjective truth value and practical applicability of texts such as Thich Nhat Hanh's *Being Peace*. It was in these first-hand observations of undergraduate engagement with religious studies as a graduate student that the germ of a research question emerged. Meanwhile, I was thinking deeply about the institutional function of the university in our society through my coursework with Steve Tipton. I began discussing the idea of interviewing undergraduate religion majors with my advisors the first semester and cleared the project with the Department of Religion before submitting a brief thesis

[21] While I have tried to refrain from indulging my theistic biases in my data collection, analysis and presentation. I cannot avoid the fact that I ultimately interpret "religion," "faith," and their significance through a theistic lens. I look to my colleagues to help me see if and where I have improperly imposed it.

proposal in the spring of 2011. The following fall I was privileged to serve as the teaching assistant for this same course and continue to observe different responses to the same material among a smaller group with a markedly different class dynamic. Meanwhile, I benefitted enormously from Tracy Scott's *SOC 585* seminar designed specifically for the construction of qualitative, interview-based, research design, while exploring various methodological and theoretical approaches in the relevant empirical literature. It was through these parallel experiences that my research question and methodological approach began to crystallize.

My general curiosity concerning the impact of academic religious studies experiences on the subjective faith and personal religious commitments of students gave rise to four clusters of questions about specific potential patterns. (1) Why do students choose to study religion in the first place? What motivations/expectations influence students' decisions to select a religion major and how do they reflect and impact personal practices and beliefs? (2) How do students characterize the influence of professors, course material, class discussion, etc.? Do they recount engage subjective processes of meaning-making when describing their course experiences? (3) In the opposite direction, do students describe their religious studies experience as impacting their subjective faith commitments and religious behavior? How strong of an influence do they attribute to it? (4) Finally, I was curious about the role that the academic study of religion played in the students' processes of identity construction and maturation as emerging young adults. Do they relate these academic experiences to their experience of personal growth and individuation? How large of an impact do they attribute to their religious studies engagement? All of these subtopics and questions can be subsumed under one overarching question: **How does engagement in critical academic exposure to religious phenomena within a diverse community of practitioners of religious studies influence the subjective faith of young adults?**[22]

[22] The perceptive reader will have noted that I have refrained from using the noun "religion." In the first clause, I have used the adjective form to refer to "phenomena," the verbal, visual and textual presentation

How Does the Undergraduate Experience Impact Faith?: An Empirical Review

Before I explicate my own methodological approach to this research question, it is important to position the question within the body of existing empirical literature on the subject of religious change and faith formation in the undergraduate experience in order to reveal the variety of ways of approaching, framing and analyzing the relevant phenomena. An important countertrend to the expansion of the American academy and deep social investment in its authority is the consistent, vociferous critique of this cultural shift by a significant religiously conservative minority over the last century. Dating back to the emergence of the fundamentalist movement in the early 20th century,[23] religious conservatives have averred that academic indoctrination of claims competing with traditional religious teachings encourage erosion, apostasy and conversion to secularist ideologies. The partial shift from modernist to postmodernist forms of academic discourse in the last half century has introduced a parallel assumption that the relativism pervading academic discourse inherently weakens religious commitments. Republican presidential candidate Rick Santorum's recent reference to alleged statistical evidence that "62% of children who enter college with some sort of faith commitment leave without it,"[24] testifies to the persistent power of this longstanding narrative asserting that the relativized, post-modern academy is a breeding ground for apostasy. The experiences of some of my Christian subjects, particularly Evan, who was actively discouraged from both attending Emory and majoring in religion by members of his home community, illustrate that even those

---

of disembodied empirical data concerning religious rituals, texts, institutions, tenants, narratives, etc. In the second clause, I use the adjective form again in the phrase "a diverse community of practitioners of religious studies," to refer to the Department of Religion at Emory College, one of many diverse, particular institutional manifestations of a dynamic cumulative scholarly tradition (the boundaries of which are quite contested). I have self-consciously chosen the common moniker "religious studies" as opposed to the alternative "the study of religion" because, in light of Smith's critique of reification, I find it to be less problematic.

[23] Motivated in part by the liberalizing affects of education, especially the historical-critical method of Biblical interpretation, on mainline Protestant clergy and their congregations

[24] Robertson, Lori. "Fact check: Santorum on College, Faith." http://www.usatoday.com/news/politics/story/2012-02-27/fact-check-santorum-college-faith/53274624/1

with access to elite educational institutions like Emory may be influenced by such assumptions. What does relevant empirical research suggest about the accuracy of such claims?

There is indeed empirical evidence to support Rick Santorum's assumption about religious disaffiliation and American higher education. However, this data was collected, not "a few years ago," but forty. A significant body of evidence emerging in the late 1960s and early 1970s demonstrated high levels of disaffiliation among those who attended college. During this volatile period of the Vietnam War, the sexual revolution and unprecedented radical political activism, college campuses were widely perceived as the epicenter of the countercultural movement. This narrative of the college experience generally eroding religious commitment persisted into the 1980s without continued empirical support largely because its causal mechanism is quite plausible: provincial values and perspectives are relativized inside and outside the classroom, through left-leaning professors deconstructing conservative ideologies with considerable skill and interpersonal interaction with "the other" which make one sympathetic to alternate worldviews, leading one to adopt a less problematic secular worldview. However, when social scientists turned their attention back to the impact of higher education on religious commitments in the 1990s, they found that while most students experience sharp declines in religious practice, disaffiliation had become relatively uncommon.[25] These surprising findings elicited an enormous body of published material and heavily funded major research initiatives investigating this phenomena over the last 15 years, including the University of California at Los Angeles' *Spirituality in Higher Education Project* and *The National Study of Youth and Religion*, not to mention many dozens of publications. Eventually, evidence emerged suggesting that the college experience might actually help preserve faith commitments, as rates of disaffiliation and decline were found to significantly higher for those who opt out of college.[26]

---

[25] Mayrl, D., Oeur, F. "Religion and Higher Education: Current Knowledge and Directions for Future Research." *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion,* 48(2): 260-275, 2009.
[26] Regnerus, Mark; Uecker, Jeremy. "How Corrosive Is College to Religious Faith and Practice?" *SSRC*. Feb 05, 2007.

However, as Maryl and Oeur argue in their extensive literature review, "most of the voluminous literature on religion and higher education has been normative or theoretical in character, filled with grand claims noticeably lacking in empirical justification."[27] The authors present two bodies of research seeking to explain the apparent evidence that undergraduate religious engagement is "broad" (a strong majority affiliate with a tradition) but not particularly "deep" (low rates of organizational participation and personal practice). Researchers like Clydesdale interpret these results to suggest that students place their religious affiliation in an "identity lockbox" upon arriving on campus, leaving these commitments unchanged and unexamined until some point after their college careers, most typically when establishing a family.[28] This approach seems to explain how undergraduates become increasingly tolerant of other traditions and types of practice and belief[29] without questioning the particular claims of their traditions. However, other researchers argue that while the form of affiliation may not change, the *content* of students' beliefs is transformed. They point to students' reports of increased religiosity and salience, suggesting that, subjectively, faith may become increasingly integral to their identities even as collective religious practice becomes less frequent and formative. Students themselves frequently describe this as a process of becoming more "spiritual" and less "religious" as they distance themselves from conventional institutionalized religious communities and set out on an individualistic "faith journey."[30]

These conflicting narratives concerning the shifts in religious engagement among American undergraduates reveals the limitations of approaching "the college experience" as a global phenomena. It seems self-evident that lumping four years at the sectarian Pentecostal Oral Roberts University, the elite Catholic Georgetown University and the massive public University of Central Florida into the same category obscures a great deal of cultural context and population

---

[27] Maryl, Oeur. "Religion and Higher Education. 260.
[28] Clydesdale, Tim. "Abandoned, Pursued, or Safely Stowed?" *SSRC*. Feb 06, 2007.
[29] Maryl, Oeur. "Religion and Higher Education. 265.
[30] Ibid., 265-266.

variance which will inevitably shape the resultant impact on religiosity. They also show how large-scale pencil and paper surveys must present with terms like "religion," "spirituality," and "faith" to respondents as if they were self-evident concepts when in fact they are theoretically problematic and carry a wide variety of differing connotations for distinct individuals. I will now review the strengths and weaknesses of four different types of studies through examples relevant to my research question in order to inform and frame my own research design: (1) theoretically informed, multiple administration large scale quantitative analyses, (2) broad, highly contextualized ethnographic survey, (3) faith-development-based systematic qualitative interview analysis and (4) anecdotally informed theoretical contributions.

Researchers have employed multi-regression statistical techniques to analyze multiple administrations of large-scale representative survey data collected through *The Spirituality in Higher Education Project* to identify particular factors which might condition the probability of these equally plausible outcomes. Two of these studies build on earlier psychological research which explored the experience of "spiritual struggle," defined in relation to the DSM-IV definition of "spiritual crisis," first included as a form of identity crisis in 1994. These studies generally found it to be associated with negative psychological health outcomes as well as greater open-mindedness, tolerance, principled moral reasoning and helping behaviors, seeking to describe the frequency and contextual correlates of such struggle.[31] The theoretical advantage of this approach is that it places sociological study of religious and spiritual change in college in direct dialogue with relevant psychological research. Spiritual struggle was not found to be uncommon, with roughly one fifth of one large sample responding that they "frequently" questioned their religious/spiritual beliefs, felt "unsettled" about them "to a great extent," and

[31] Bryant, Alyssa and Astin, Helen. "The Correlates of Spiritual Struggle During the College Years." *The Journal of Higher Education*. 79 (1), 2008.

"struggled to understand evil, suffering and death." Women and adherents of minority traditions were found to be particularly vulnerable to such struggle.[32]

Small and Bowman assessed the impact of majority/minority religious affiliation *and* institutional type (private/public, affiliated/independent, ecumenical, etc.). They found that, "interestingly, some of the significant main effects for religious struggle are similar to--and in the same direction as--those for religious commitment."[33] For example, attending a Protestant institution and/or institution with a greater "ecumenical worldview average" seem to facilitate both religious struggle *and* religious commitment. Thus, "The same groups of students and institutions that have greater religious growth also have greater gains in religious struggle."[34] Furthermore, they found that "faculty support for spiritual/religious engagement," to be the most significant predictor of spiritual struggle.[35] The authors interpret this to suggest that "the constant presence of religious topics in the curriculum and co-curriculum at many of these institutions provides all students with ample means for constructively examining their religious beliefs."[36] In support of this conclusion, Bryant and Astin found that discussing religion/spirituality and politics with friends was positively correlated with spiritual struggle, a relationship they interpreted to arise from the capacity of such dialogue "to induce vulnerability, deep reflection, and/or consideration of ideas and philosophies with which the individual is unfamiliar."[37] Conversely, engagement in religious practice with like-minded individuals helped to mitigate these effects.

These studies suggests that our sample of religion majors are more likely to experience both religious struggle and increased religious commitment than their peers at secular, state and

---

[32] Ibid., 12-14.
[33] Small, J.L., Bowman, N.A. "Religious Commitment, Skepticism, and Struggle Among U.S. College Students: The Impact of Majority/Minority Religious Affiliation and Institutional Type." Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion. 50 (1): 154-174, 2011. 164
[34] Ibid., 169.
[35] Ibid., 164.
[36] Ibid., 169.
[37] Bryant and Astin. "Correlates." 14.

less ecumenical Protestant institutions and than their fellow Emory students who engage less frequently with professors and peers concerning religious and spiritual issues. On the other hand, majoring in the humanities (under which religious studies was presumably subsumed), was not significantly correlated with spiritual struggle. Only the psychology major, positively associated with spiritual struggle, produced a statistically significant relationship.[38] The most interesting finding of this study, the dual function of multiple factors in encouraging both "struggle" and "growth"[39] also reveals its major weakness. By utilizing a diagnostic category for crisis one has already imposed a normative, pathological judgment on the phenomena and artificially distinguished positive and negative forms of spiritual engagement. This suggests the need for in-depth qualitative analysis to discover what kinds of educational and social experiences in college contribute to spiritual struggle, as well as a deeper understanding of how "struggle" and "growth" might be interrelated.

The most significant qualitative project to date examining religion in the undergraduate experience is Cherry, Deberg and Porterfield's *Religion on Campus*. These three researchers performed ethnographic surveys of religious phenomena on four distinct college campuses: a large western state university, a small Lutheran liberal arts college in the northern midwest, a small, urban historically black Protestant college in the South, and a mid-sized strongly Catholic university. They took a broad approach, observing religious organizations, communal ritual performance, and religion across the curriculum generally, as well as instruction in religious studies and theology. Their analysis of religion and theology departments (one of the colleges did not have such a department, but offered courses taught by the chaplain) focuses primarily on professors and their approaches, and their assessment of the impact of such instruction on students was fairly surface-level and particularized to the immediate influence of individual courses. The authors administered a standardized course reflection questionnaire to students at all

---

38 Ibid.

39 This also seems to lend support for the function of struggle in growth in the developmental models I draw upon.

four schools at the conclusion of a variety of courses, but they did not attempt to analyze or present such data systematically. Multiple-choice items on the questionnaire inquired about the spiritual and religious impact of the course, and open-ended "short answer" questions asked about any changes in "religious beliefs" as a result of the course in particular or the overall college experience. Generally, these surveys seemed to suggest that students perceived their professors to be fair and objective, that they felt free to express their own beliefs and views, became more tolerant of other traditions and perspectives, and that their own "religious faith" was either strengthened or unchanged.[40] While simple presentations of data from surveys was referred to rather casually the context of prose descriptions of particular professors and courses, the authors skillfully employed anecdotal evidence from individuals interviewed, providing richer illustrations of patterns observed. They concluded that "the religious studies classroom was often a site and resource for religious meaning and personal transformation...many students took religious studies courses because the courses forced them to 'to think' and spoke to their search for meaning,"[41] They drew upon observation and informal interviews to comment upon the characteristically personal investment in the decision to major in religion and the frequently significant increased interest in "spirituality" that resulted.[42]

The great strength of this work is its nuanced comparisons of a wide variety of religious dimensions within highly contextualization campus communities. However, its breadth limits the depth of the analysis of the impact of relevant curricular instruction. The authors' privileging of their anecdotal ethnographic data suggests that qualitative approaches may be necessary to assess the ultimate impact of religious education on faith formation, and a more systematic, in-depth interview approach will likely yield more nuanced explanations of the dynamics at play. Moreover, its measurements suffer from the same theoretical-methodological shortcomings of the

---

[40] The authors do not attempt to synthesize their data from the courses surveyed at the various institutions, but these are fairly consistent patterns that emerge, synthesized by me as a result of my reading.
[41] Cherry, C., Deberg, B.A., Porterfield, A. Religion on Campus. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2001.288.
[42] Ibid., 73-75

large-scale surveys first reviewed: religion, spirituality, and "spiritual faith" are taken to be self-evident categories that are generally not critically engaged. Finally, as a mid-sized private, nationally renowned, research university in the South with a loose affiliation with the United Methodist Church, Emory strikes a very different profile from those of the four unidentified institutions the authors surveyed.

The only systematic qualitative interview study of religious change in college of which I am aware also focuses on a very different type of institution of higher education: Evangelical Christian colleges. Holcomb and Nonneman's execution of the *Faithful Change Project* applies James Fowler's model of faith development to examine the role of "crisis" in encouraging movement from "synthetic-conventional faith" toward a more complex "individuative-reflective faith." The authors interviewed 120 subjects randomly selected from six Christian liberal arts colleges four times using a modified version of Fowlers' interview protocol and administered the Faithful Change Questionnaire and the Big Five Inventory of personality traits. These authors defined crisis as "a prolonged period of active engagement with, and exploration of, competing roles and ideologies," and found all three types to facilitate such faith development: (1) significant exposure to diverse perspectives (people who think differently), (2) substantial multicultural exposure (people who live differently), (3) general emotional crisis.[43] This extensive project lends solid support to both Fowler's and Sharon Parks' theory and helpfully identifies three common types of crises. However, the analysis of these crises was generalized, thus failing to differentiate between curricular, co-curricular, and extracurricular factors. And unfortunately, the cited article provided no examples and little insight into exact outcomes and function of these crises in faith development. Furthermore, the relative homogeneity of the sample and the campus environments observed limits applicability to other higher educational contexts.

---

[43] Holcomb, Gay and Nonneman, Arthur. "Faithful Change: Exploring and Assessing Faith Development in Christian Liberal Arts Undergraduates." *New Directions for Institutional Research.* 122, 2004. 100.

Finally, A few authors have explicitly applied Fowler's model to the assess patterns of faith formation among college students in less systematic ways. Bowman has applied both Fowler's model and Sharon Parks reflections to analyze her anecdotal observations of students' pursuit of "religious education" through religious studies, focusing on three cases in particular. Her brief reflections call for the very kind of research I will pursue here, the application of these theoretical models to "the formative influence of religious studies as an academic discipline on the faith lives of undergraduates."[44] Sawicki drew upon Fowler's and Jean Piaget's developmental models, as well as a variety of theologians, in offering reflections on teaching strategies to foster faith development in undergraduates grounded in her experiences as theology professor at a Catholic university.[45] She ultimately forwards a normative pedagogical argument for developing students' critical faculties in ways appropriate to their current cognitive stage while pointing to the limits of critique in furthering understanding. Corcoran applied Fowler's model in interpreting interviews with church-going college students for his practical theological dissertation on inciting transformation in "seekers" in stage transition. Here the model is appropriated for confessional purposes in articulating the function and purpose of the synthesis of these individuals' life stories and Biblical narratives rather than for descriptive analysis.[46] These more anecdotal, normative studies testify to the fruitfulness of applying faith development theory to undergraduate development, point to promising directions for research and highlight the need for more systematic analysis of the impact of religious studies and theological education upon students. I will now outline a research design which seeks to combine the strengths of the contextual detail of *Religion on Campus* with the theoretically driven in-depth qualitative analysis of the *Faithful Change Project* generally informed by the correlations identified in the two

---

[44] Bowman, L.M.A. "Understanding the Study of Religion in Undergraduate Programs of Religious Studies as Religious Education." *Religious Education.* Vol. 101(2): 143-146, 2006. 143.
[45] Sawicki, Marianne. "Religion, Symbol, and the Twenty-Year-Old Demythologizer." *Horizons*. 11(2): 320-343, 1984.
[46] Corcoran, H.A. "A Synthesis of Narratives: Religious Undergraduate Students Making Meaning in the Context of a Secular University." *Concordia*, 2007.

quantitative studies of "spiritual struggle" and Sawicki's reflections on "religious studies as religious education."

Research Design: An Interactive, Dialectical Process of Inductive and Deduction

All research can be conceived of as processes of induction and deduction. The researcher induces assumptions, hypotheses, procedures, measurements and interpretive theory from their previous knowledge and experience, while deducing data, conclusions, theoretical explanations, and further research questions from the phenomena studied. When performing social research into a complex phenomena like faith development, these inductive and deductive processes must necessarily overlap considerably, informing one another in a dynamic interactive progression. First, it must be acknowledged that my preliminary operationalizations of these questions and concepts throughout my interview schedule (appendix A) were induced from the aforementioned observations, relevant empirical literature, and more generally from my scholarly training and personal experience. I did not begin my research with a highly developed conceptual framework because I wanted to have the freedom to define my theoretical etic categories in light of the implicit emic categories used by my subjects in response to the questions. The interview guide was then deductively modified based on the subject's responses over the course of my first six interviews. My theoretical categories were also selected based on my deduction of emerging patterns in the first round of interviews when my subjects were uninformed regarding the purpose of my research, as well as my ongoing review of relevant empirical literature. These constructs were continually challenged and modified throughout the 490 class as my colleagues/subjects became increasingly aware of my approach, assumptions and methods and were empowered to critique them. The data was organized using a coding system (appendix B) deduced from the interview guide, modified inductively in light of initial findings, reframed deductively in light of the theoretical framework selected, and finally, elaborated by findings which transcended the boundaries of the theoretical framework. But as with all such research, the conceptual framework (section III) and coding system ultimately controlled the data and its interpretation (section IV).

In this manner, this interactive, deductive/inductive process continued throughout, guided and influenced by Tracy Scott's SOC 585: Qualitative Interviewing seminar during the initial phase of research and informed by the theoretical discussions in the 490 class in the latter phase.

Throughout the 490 course several authors described the implications of postmodern theory for religious studies research and theology. Most instructive for my research was Delwin Brown's essay "Refashioning Self and Other: Theology, Academy and the New Ethnography." Brown reflects upon the postmodern discovery of the problematic, value-laden nature of all analytic categories. He laments the self-doubt inflicted by the "loss of essences" which has incited a "process of reexamining the status of [scholarly] investigations, their nature, how they are conducted, and the standards by which these investigations and their outcomes are to be tested," yielding the scholarly phenomena known as historicism.[47] He highlights James Clifford's theorizing of a "new ethnography" conceived of as a "refashioning of self and other," in which both researchers and subjects are collaborative "authors of cultural representations."[48] This new ethnography combines the classic methods of (1) empathic experiential observation and (2) theoretical interpretation with the more democratic postmodern methods of (3) dialogical co-construction and (4) polyphonic critical discourse grounded in the (5) self-understanding and vulnerability of the researcher.[49] I will briefly frame my research along this model, taking each point in turn.

The above narrative describing the interactive process of induction and deduction is founded first and foremost upon (1) my empathic experiential observation of the Emory College religious studies population generally and my subjects particularly. I have learned alongside them for three semesters, building rapport through sympathetic interaction while engaging in increasingly disciplined and self-conscious observation. I am an insider in their learning community self-consciously and imaginatively creating distance for observation. I began with an

---

[47] Brown, Delwin. "Refashioning Self and Other: Theology, Academy and the New Ethnography."
[48] Ibid., 46.
[49] Ibid., 46-49.

open-ended research design in order to maintain a "receptivity and flexibility...[and] open[ness] to whatever appears, including the unexpected."[50] (2) This model allowed me to select my interpretive theoretical models gradually and deliberately, informed by these sensitive observations. I have critically engaged the constructs I have brought to the research (i.e., "religion," "religiosity," "faith") alongside my colleagues and carefully sought out the most appropriate and illuminating terms and definitions. In the next two sections, I will describe this process in detail and offer my justifications for the theoretical model ultimately chosen. And I anxiously await the collective critique of my application of it by my colleagues (advisors and subjects). (3) I have engaged in dialogical interaction and co-construction with my subjects through the 490 course and the semi-structured interviews. From the beginning, these were unusually informed respondents, as they are members of the same discipline of discourse with which I am engaging. Moreover, they became increasingly (though never completely) informed regarding my research question and theoretical categories as the research progressed.[51] This gave my subjects two specific opportunities to critique my design, conceptual framework, and analyses, as well as engage in more informed participation in the interview, particularly the last few subjects who had heard the second presentation. Furthermore, I sincerely invite their critiques of this representation of their experiences and hope that they will continue to inform my analysis as my research progresses. (4) I open myself up to critiques from all corners, including friends and family who are "outsiders" of the discipline, and indeed have already done so through conversations shared over the past months and collaborative editing. (5) I fully recognize my vulnerability and degree of personal investment in this work. As Brown notes "[our] values as scholars are tied to [our] personal values:[52]

---

[50] Ibid., 46.

[51] I gave preliminary presentations on my research aims in the 490 course on two occasions: once during the first class meeting in order to inform the student vote which allowed me to participate in the course as an observer, and again in light of Chesnek's call for research into the existential impact of religious studies upon students (referenced in the following section).

[52] Brown. "Refashioning Self." 59.

> "Ethnographers are not simply observers and recorders. They are colleagues and critics of the other, supporting and challenging native participants as they articulate their structures and values. But, ethnographers are also challenged, and the self thus called into question is not simply a carefully protected professional facade with its assorted techniques and theories, but a person...what is subject to being torn, negotiated, cocreated, reconstructed, and refashioned is the fabric of the whole self, personal as well as professional."[53]

Just as I argue that my subjects have been profoundly impacted by their engagement in religious studies, this project has significantly impacted my own faith and will continue to do so throughout its critical review and extension.

II. CONTEXT: EMORY, THE DEPARTMENT, 490 AND RELIGIOUS STUDIES

The "pragmatic historicist" approach outlined above proceeds from the "historicist turn"[54] of the postmodern academy. The critical deconstructive lens of the academy I highlighted in the introduction has been increasingly turned inward in order to deconstruct its own assumptions and techniques, a process of self-critique which has been featured prominently in the 490 class. Throughout the 490 course, students were exposed to postmodern critiques of the western academy generally and more specifically, the role of religious studies within it. For example, Sam Gill inveighs the entire western academic enterprise for its failure to interrogate its pervasive "embodied theology," which denigrates the importance of the body and in order to privilege the development of the disembodied mind.[55] Essays by Christopher Chesnek, Linell Cady, Sheila Davaney and Russell McCutcheon have all exposed fissures in the boundaries which legitimize the academy's social authority, undermining its apparent objective givenness within a society. Our instructor made a point of making these critiques as personally relevant as possible. For example he repeatedly applied Russell McCutcheon's critique of religious phenomena as merely mundane "social formations," i.e. "ways in which human communities construct,

---

[53] Brown, 49.
[54] Cady, Linell. "Loosening the Category That Binds." *Converging on Culture: Theologians in Dialogue with Cultural Analysis and Criticism.* Ed. Brown, Delwin, et al. New York: Oxford University Press, 2001.
[55] Gill, Sam. "Embodied Theology." *Religious Studies, Theology and the University.* Ed. Cady, Linell and Brown, Delwin. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002. 137.

maintain, and contest issues of social identity, power, and privilege"[56] to the religious studies enterprise itself. "We're all a part of social formations. This university, this class is a social formation. The study of religion is a social formation, because we are arrayed in social structures...why has the academy/university done this?" He thus highlights multiple levels of social formations within which our collective scholarly enterprise is embedded and lifts them up for critique. As I argued in the introduction regarding the larger higher education system, these institutional forms are sources of authority, meaning and identity which my subjects have generally embraced uncritically and wholeheartedly. First, we will examine the construction and maintenance of issues of social identity, power and privilege within Emory University and its religion department, before turning to our extensive survey of the contestation of the terms shaping the wider religious studies discourse by which this department is justified. My aim here is not to undermine the legitimacy of these institutions, but rather to simply expose the ambiguity which belies the oversimplified religious/secular binary, obscuring the impact of higher education on subjective faith formation in the process.

The Institutional Positionality of Emory University

The issue of the political and theoretical implications of institutional positionality for religious studies has been raised repeatedly in the 490 course, both by instructors and authors. Early in the course we encountered Russell McCutcheon's normative argument for the exclusion of all scholarship presupposing a *sui generis* uniqueness to religious experience or phenomena from the "public university."[57] Our instructor subsequently questioned the application of the term public and its applicability and implications for Emory with little response from the class other than the shared knowledge that Emory is private and therefore somewhat less implicated in relevant legal mandates. Our discussion of various arguments for and against the inclusion of "academic theology" in the secular university from Cady and Brown's *Religious Studies,*

[56] McCutcheon. *Critics Not Caretakers.* 24.
[57] Ibid.

Theology and the University prompted the alternative question, "are we a secular university?" This question elicited a range of responses from three of the more vocal participants in the class. Lara quickly responded that Emory "does not align its teaching method with a certain religious tradition and leaves room for the advancement of any religious tradition." Ellie was more ambivalent, stating that it "really is just a matter of definition [of the term secular]." Megan followed, "It's important to be aware of the religious studies department as doing something theologically to its students. Regardless of where you're coming from, it's probably going to change your perceptions in some way." For my part, I would affirm the responses of all three of these women as central to my thesis. It depends how you define secular, because as we will see, religious studies impacts the faith of students who align with a wide variety of traditions in complex ways.

I imagine that a student who graduated from an all-male, all-white, staunchly Methodist Emory University in 1952 would be shocked to hear how casually my diverse group of Emory College religion majors refer to it as a "secular" university just sixty years later.[58] Members of the school's first graduating class would not even know how to interpret the term. It is important to be aware of Emory's peculiar history when considering its relationship to religious phenomena and authority. Emory College was founded in 1836 by the Methodist Episcopal Church as part of the rapid transformation of this enormously successful expansionist evangelical organization into a major mainstream social institution. This growth led to significant gains in political power and influence at the expense of problematic populist and reformist commitments, most notably the earlier opposition to slavery. Shortly after the founding of Emory College, the MEC would experience a geographical schism over the policy shift in the Southern churches to defend slavery. The cultural, political and economic struggles extending through the devastating Civil

[58] The class discussion referenced above illustrates how these students can recognize and critically engage the inherent ambiguity in the application of the moniker "secular" to an institution as influential and engaged with religious phenomena as Emory when challenged to consider the appropriateness of the term. However, throughout my interviews references to Emory as a "secular university" were fairly common.

War and the long road to Reconstruction would continue to define the small school and limit its growth until the end of the 19th century, when the South and its institutions finally began to recover and prosper. Throughout these early decades, Emory College students were offered confessional instruction in Bible, and for many years such courses were required. In 1914, Asa Candler, the founder of the Coca-Cola Company provided the land and money necessary for the Methodist Church to begin to transform Emory College from a small liberal arts college in the Georgia countryside into a flagship university in the suburbs of Atlanta. This vision would not come to fruition for several decades; first stalled by two world wars and the Great Depression, then spurred by more large gifts by enormously wealthy Coca-Cola executives. During this slow, steady period of growth, confessional religious instruction continued to be required. Indeed, the school's Methodist identity defined it, as the rapid expansion and development of the Candler School of Theology into one of the nation's premier Methodist seminaries anticipated the attainment of such prestige in other areas of the university by decades.

The transformation of this patriarchal, segregated southern Methodist institution into an extraordinarily diverse national research university in a mere six decades is truly astounding. It is simultaneously an inspiring story of exceptional ingenuity and leadership in higher education, an unsurprising reflection of the transformation of American society during that time, and an ironic illustration of what the excess profits from the consumption of billions of unhealthy soft drinks can accomplish. The overwhelming force and complexity of the cultural, political, economic and intellectual forces which brought about such rapid change are more than I can or need to account for here. What is of primary interest is the remarkable fact that majors in a Department of Religion which is the direct descendent of over a century of mandated confessional biblical instruction experience their education as "secular" in an institution which is still associated with the United Methodist Church (UMC). Ironically, the man primarily responsible for curtailing Methodist institutional influence (as well as Emory's rapid expansion in size, offerings and prestige) was James Laney, an ordained Methodist minister and former dean of Candler School of

Theology passionately committed to transforming Emory into a community of cutting-edge scholars. As President during the pivotal period of growth from 1977-1993, Laney was able to strike an equilibrium between forwarding the "secular" goals of the growing university and maintaining loosening institutional ties with United Methodist Church (no doubt in large measure due to his longstanding affiliation with the UMC). As a result, Emory was able to rise to the level of national prestige achieved by formerly Methodist Vanderbilt without completely severing ties as this peer institution had done.

Two decades after Laney's presidency, the affiliation with the UMC is seriously downplayed. While the Candler School of Theology proudly advertises itself as a premier Methodist seminary with an ecumenical orientation, it is somewhat of a task to find reference to this relationship in the college's promotional materials. For example, on the university website, the "About Emory" section (to which prospective students are referred) does not mention the persistent affiliation at all, only a brief acknowledgment on the history page that the school was founded by the MEC. One has to find one's way to a brief addendum to the Mission Statement on the "Office of the President" page to find the relationship referenced:

> "The University, founded by the Methodist Episcopal Church, cherishes its historical affiliation with the United Methodist Church. While Emory's programs are today entirely nonsectarian (except for those at the Candler School of Theology)[59], the University has derived from this heritage the conviction that education can be a strong moral force in both society and the lives of its individual members."[60]

This language appears to have been crafted for maximum ambiguity. It seems that the phrase "historical affiliation" encourages the misleading perception that this relationship is no longer in effect. Religion majors will recognize the problematic and obviously intentional indication that the influence of this heritage is merely "moral." Such "secular" moral rhetoric is employed

---

[59] Emory College students may receive credit for Candler's "sectarian" courses.
[60] http://www.emory.edu/president/governance/mission_statement.html

heavily in the Mission Statement: "Emory University's mission is to create, preserve, teach, and apply knowledge in the service of humanity,"[61] as well as in the "University Vision:"

> "Emory: A destination university internationally recognized as an inquiry-driven, *ethically engaged*, and *diverse* community, whose members work collaboratively for positive *transformation* in the world through courageous leadership in teaching, research, scholarship, health care, and *social action*." [emphases mine][62]

Such rhetoric serves to construct and maintain the prestigious social identity and considerable power of the institution in ways that, presumably, are appealing to most of the tens of thousands of individuals affiliated with it. However, as the referenced class discussion shows, my colleagues are able perceive what such language obscures when they interpret their professor's question about Emory's "secular" identity based on their experiences in the Department of Religion. If Emory University is concerned to minimize its religious affiliation with the United Methodist Church in favor of a "secular" moral/ethical orientation in its self-representations of its mission and vision, how does the Department of Religion frame its goals?

Emory's Department of Religion: Analyzing the Aims of the Enterprise

The Department of Religion represents in mission and vision through four "Goals for Religion Study" "that shape its teaching and scholarly work:"

> "[1] Enable students to develop skill in interpreting the plurality of religions in their historical and contemporary settings, and to appreciate critically the influence of religions in shaping human experience and society.
> [2] Help students to understand religious experience, ritual and spiritual practice and cultural expression and to write reflectively about them from social, historical, artistic, theological or intellectual perspectives.
> [3] Encourage students to understand themselves better as moral persons in the world, and make available to students the opportunity to explore the moral or spiritual dimensions of their work in the study of religion and of the relevance of that work for their life in the world.
> [4] Prepare students for graduate and professional study."[63]

We can summarize these four goals as helping students to appreciate the social function and subjective impact of the subject matter, and to be "morally or spiritually" engaged with it in ways

---

[61] ibid.
[62] http://www.emory.edu/president/governance/vision_statement.html
[63] http://religion.emory.edu/about/goals.html

that shape future behavior, which may include continued pursuit of such study as a vocation. As one might expect, the balance struck between these four aims and the degree to which each is explicitly emphasized will vary from course to course. In the mandatory "capstone course," all four are featured rather prominently on a weekly basis. Each class begins with a student presentation on a recent news article of relevance they have selected for the class to read. The two presenters lead the class in analyzing the particular context of the article and the religious phenomena represented through it. The class collectively raises "clarifying questions" concerning unclarified contextual factors essential for appropriate interpretation of the social processes at work. The scholarly collective then applies the analytical power of "the study of religion," with each individual focusing their particular historical, sociological, textual and theological lenses to reveal obscured dimensions of religious practice and expression. From the beginning of the course, this weekly exercise was framed as training in service as public intellectuals, sharing acquired knowledge and analytical tools with others constructively (i.e. helping to educate the religiously ignorant masses of American society).[64] Finally, it serves as a catalyst for brainstorming "research questions" for future exploration as scholars of religion. On an individual level, all four of these goals are united through the structuring of a semester-long, self-selected "case study" of interest. The students choose a topic (ideally one in which they are deeply invested) to analyze and interpret, applying the theoretical perspectives presented through the assigned readings in a continual construction approximating the professional research process. This slightly idealized description of the course serves to illustrate how the faculty has self-consciously attempted to operationalize the stated "Goals of Religion Study" through the mandatory "capstone course." From my vantage point as a participant in the class, I see all four purposes served quite successfully through a variety of teaching techniques. Moreover, the logic

---

64 The 2010 "U.S. Religious Knowledge Survey" conducted by the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life was referenced in the framing of this assignment to highlight the need for these religion majors to educate their peers.
http://www.pewforum.org/U-S-Religious-Knowledge-Survey-FAQs-About-Measuring-Religious-Knowledge.aspx

of these pedagogical methods and their relationship to the skills required in the vocation of religious studies were highlighted candidly throughout the course, enhancing professional preparation.

While this course possesses unique importance and influence as one of the two mandatory courses, it is only one of at least ten courses constituting the religion major experience. The other eight must consist of three tradition-specific upper-level courses from at least two different traditions, two mid-level courses comparing related traditions (i.e. western, Asian, American, etc.), and one of five broad introductory comparative courses (i.e. *Sacred Texts*) and two electives. Within this framework students have a great deal of flexibility in compiling their curriculum and the breadth, depth and emphases vary enormously from student to student. Multiple students pointed to this relative autonomy as a significant motivating factor in choosing the major. While the structure of the major mandates at least introductory exposure to a minimum of two traditions, some have chosen to focus primarily on a single tradition, typically one that they themselves practice, i.e. Evan, Zach and Kevin. Others have concentrated on developing expertise in a particular methodology like the two textualists, Megan and Taylor. And the few with clear, professional tracks shaped their curriculums to inform their vocational pursuits [Ellie, Danny]. The remaining majority have intentionally exposed themselves to a wide variety of traditions. Within this group, some explicitly avoided their traditions of origin because, (a) they feel they already know them well enough, (b) they find them "boring," or (c) they are nervous about how scholarly engagement with their own traditions will affect their identities, beliefs and practices. Of course, these motives are not discrete and often overlap in a variety of combinations, as we see in the case of Stacey, a Christian who cites all three as reasons for focusing more on Asian religious traditions. The wide variety of educational experiences religion majors bring to a majors-only, mandatory class like 490 approximates the kind of diverse community of scholars constituted by a religion department in terms of methodology and content of expertise. Thus, our discussion of theoretical debates concerning the boundaries and governing norms of the religious

studies discourse serves as a simulation of real-life departmental struggles of self-definition described by our instructor.

During one of these lively discussions, our instructor candidly reflected upon how such theoretical arguments play out in the political negotiation of the structure of the department and the requirements of the major.

> *"It's the subject matter that brings it together…the way we talk about it is widely diverse. That's why we have such a difficult time deciding what a religion major should take to be a religion major. We argue about this all the time in our department! Here's 'the wizard of Oz' pulling back the curtain…"*

When we compare the language used in the University Mission/Vision statements and "Goals of Religion study" to "construct, maintain, and contest issues of social identity, power, and privilege" in these two powerful social formations, we see similar appeals to the "nonsectarian" ethical application of the knowledge they construct and disseminate. The crucial difference is that the focus on the subject matter "religion" both enables and requires the Department of Religion to reference the categories of "religions" and "religious" which the university so self-consciously avoids in its self-representation. Moreover, this involvement apparently warrants (demands?) the acknowledgment of potential "spiritual dimensions" to students' scholarship. The crucial foregrounding of "moral" and usage of "or" (as opposed to "and") in the third goal seems to emphasize that the kind of secular ethical orientation which characterizes the university statements is all that is required here, though ("non-sectarian") "spiritual" engagement is welcome as well. The irony that my subjects will appreciate is that while this statement may have seemed clear and self-explanatory when (*if)* they read it when they were considering committing to the religion major, they now recognize that it is full of problematic terms that are hardly as self-evident as they once seemed. In other words, these goals seem fairly straightforward—unless you are a scholar of "religion."

The Religious Studies Discourse: a Contested Cumulative Tradition

I will now explore the formation and continual reformation of the discourse of religious studies as facilitated through the critical theoretical engagement with its terms as shared with my subjects in the 490 course. I will endeavor to illustrate the ambiguity which belies the "secular"/religious binary constraining the official framing of academic and ethical authority of the Department of Religion and Emory University. I have deliberately chosen to place this discussion within a narrative tracing the progress of the 490 course in order to illustrate the fact that the scholars who constitute the Department of Religion at Emory are well aware of the precarious nature of this powerful yet misleading binary and are self-consciously mandating the critical engagement of the religion majors with them. I view this self-critical dialogue as the extending of an invitation to these students for full participation in the dynamic tradition of religious scholarship of which the Emory Department of Religion is one particular institutional manifestation among many. Through this discussion, I hope to clarify the terms of my research question using authors my colleagues have read and highlight the theoretical problems they identify in order to address them in my theoretical framework. We will now turn to W.C. Smith, our course's first assigned author to explicate the historical and cultural evolution of the term 'religion' with its attendant baggage, to appropriate and modify his distinct conceptualizations of the objective and subjective dimensions of "religion."

W.C. Smith: Cumulative Tradition, Insider Faith, and Their Dialectical Interaction

Our class had the great privilege of beginning our theoretical inquiry with W.C. Smith's painstakingly thorough historical and cross-cultural analysis of the concept of "religion." Our instructors set a demanding pace with over 100 pages per class of Smith's dense theoretical treatise, *The Meaning and End of Religion*, published fifty years ago and now widely considered a classic in the religious studies canon. Here, W.C. Smith famously argues that the term "religion" is inadequate, misleading and unnecessary. He first highlights four common usages of the term: (1) individual piety (2) a traditional system of beliefs and practices (3) an ideal form of

transcendent-human relations and (4) a generalized, universal sphere of human experience. He emphasizes that the relative weight a particular individual assigns to any of these four meanings of the term is highly dependent upon their subjective normative view of "religion."[65] For Smith, these forms are in tension with one another, and he painstakingly demonstrates how the evolution of the second and fourth usages in the West following the Enlightenment have degraded the first and third idyllic forms and thus distorted and minimized the insider's understanding of the nature of the behavior he/she is engaged in. Furthermore, they are freighted with imperialistic baggage, imposing a foreign category upon cultures who possess no conceptual equivalent.[66] Our instructor drove home this point more generally, highlighting that "every term we use is actually dragging with it a host of assumptions." It seemed that few eyebrows were raised by Smith's undermining of the very category upon which our collective enterprise is founded. In our postmodern age students tend to respond to such critiques by saying things like "yeah, well what's a better category? There's going to be problems with whichever one you choose."

Smith proposes to solve the problem of "reification" by distinguishing the objective and subjective components of religious phenomena: the observable, historical "cumulative tradition" and the internal "faith" of individuals in relationship to transcendence. He is concerned to emphasize that both components are dynamic and mutually constructed:

> "The cumulative tradition is the mundane result of the faith of men in the past and it is the mundane cause of the faith of men in the present. Therefore it is ever changing, ever accumulating, ever fresh...It is the dialectical process between the mundane and the transcendent, a process whose locus is the personal faith and the lives of men and women."[67]

I find Smith's dynamic dialectical model to be particularly helpful for this particular project, as it enables us to recognize that subjects are conditioned by the historical evolution and contemporary manifestation of relevant cultural traditions while honoring the agency of the individual in appropriating and modifying such traditions. Indeed, I see this dialectical model as illuminating

---

[65] Smith, W.C. *The Meaning and End of Religion.* New York: Macmillan, 1962.
[66] Ibid., 32-46.
[67] Smith. *End of Religion.* 186-187.

not only for the world's major religious traditions but for a whole host of "secular" cultural and intellectual traditions which are constantly interacting and evolving through the constructive participation of particular individuals. Religious studies, reified throughout our course as "*the* study or religion" (emphasis mine) is one such cumulative tradition which my colleagues and I are both shaped by and shaping through our engagement. Of course, in order to apply this constructive category in such an expansive way, we must frame faith in a more inclusive manner that does not depend on the normative judgment of participation in "transcendence," i.e., James Fowler's definition offered in the introduction and explicated further in the next section. First, let us consider our class discussion of Smith's concepts as engagement in the cumulative tradition of religious studies.

Smith discusses the development of Hinduism in order to illustrate the features and dynamics of a cumulative tradition. He imaginatively considers the case of author of the creation hymn in the Rig Veda to argue that this particular individual "added to [the cumulative tradition] something that emerged from the interaction within his personality between the external tradition and some personal quality of his own [faith]."[68] "Multiply this kind of incident a thousand million times, I suggest, and one has the development of the Hindu religious tradition."[69] Similarly, the religious studies tradition is constituted by the efforts of thousands of scholars who have responded differently to religious phenomena and preexisting analytic categories in organizing and articulating their own conceptualizations, furthering the development of the tradition in the progress. Smith's self-conscious fashioning of the concept of "cumulative tradition" out of existing categories is a perfect example of this process.

> "By the very words 'cumulative' and 'tradition' I have meant to stress that the concept refers in a synthetic shorthand to a growing congeries of items each of which is real in itself but all of which taken together are unified in the conceptualizing mind, by a process of intellectual abstraction."[70]

---

[68] Smith. *End of Religion.* 158.
[69] Ibid., 159.
[70] Ibid., 168.

Smith argues that the evolution of the cumulative tradition is not driven only to elites who author scriptures, but to ordinary, "average" practitioners who "preserve" or discard elements of the tradition, gradually and subtly modifying it to maintain its adequacy in meeting the demands of the particular age. Likewise the religious studies tradition evolves not only through the contributions and instruction of professionals, but by the engagement of students who selectively appropriate the scholarly tools which help them to better navigate their evolving worlds. At any given moment along this trajectory, the contemporary manifestation of a religious tradition "crystallizes in material form the faith of previous generations, and it sets the context for the faith of each new generation as these come along. But it neither includes nor fully determines that later faith."[71] And in the same way, the crystallization of the religious studies tradition in the current curriculum shapes student experiences by providing them with the intellectual resources they will adapt to their own engagement as either lay "public intellectuals," or in a minority of cases, professional religious studies scholars. We can see these parallels clearly illustrated through students' selective appropriation of Smith's theory.

When our instructor first asked the class if these categories work, if they enhance the religious study tradition, global responses were tentative. Ali ventured that the dialectic relationship between the two might provide a more holistic picture; Rachel wondered if the debate was merely or mostly semantic; and everyone seemed confused as to which came first, the tradition (chicken) or faith (egg). But when the conversation progressed to more particular critiques, responses were much stronger, suggesting that most were not willing to either wholly reject or embrace Smith's theoretical model, but rather preserve some elements and discard others. There was certainly much that the students found could not meet the demands of our age. Megan was skeptical of any definition of faith that purported to define it for all people everywhere, while Ellie was suspicious of the theocentricity of Smith's theory, contesting that, "God is at the ultimate center of his argument." The biggest problem people had with the theory

[71] Ibid., 159.

was the exclusive normative judgment Smith's conception of faith as participation in transcendence suspended over "cultural" religious engagement not experienced as transcendent. Throughout the book Smith argues that religious practice without faith is dead and that religious scholarship which does not apprehend faith is empty and misleading. "The traditions cannot be interpreted in human history if the fact of the transcendent element in men's participation in them is denied or neglected." Here Taylor became frustrated by what she perceived to be a methodological impasse, for by definition faith "is something too profound, too personal and too divine for public exposition."[72] She asks, "How am I going to study faith? It's a little depressing."[73] In Smith's view, such challenges confront "all serious study of man as personal." Faith, like all human subjectivity can only be studied "by inference" through its expressions and is thus "apprehended" though never "comprehended."[74]

McCutcheon: Religious Studies as Critical Deconstructive of "Religious" Social Formations

Our second author, Russell McCutcheon, aggressively argues the opposite point: "religion," like all human social behavior, can and should be critically deconstructed as merely one more "social formation;" a method for "constructing, legitimizing and contesting power and privilege."[75] In *Critics Not Caretakers,* McCutcheon argues that emic categories like Smith's "faith" are primary examples of such unjustified sociorhetorical legitimization of cultural and institutional "religious" power. This privileging of internal "experience" of "transcendence" as a *sui generis* phenomena constitutes a "default of critical intelligence" which renders the religious studies tradition impotent to speak to religiously tinged social realities and contribute to the wider

---

[72] Ibid., 170-171.

[73] In her interview Taylor cited this as a persistent problem confronting her probing commitment to the cumulative tradition of religious studies as a vocation. As a textual scholar increasingly interested in comparative theology, she reflects:
"I guess I have maybe what you would call a problem, in that I am uncomfortable with the idea that I would try to study something where I can't reach it. I know that you're supposed to try to get as close to studying, for example, faith as you can, but you can never fully reach that. So it's a frustrating intellectual problem, and sometimes, I'm like, that's quite exciting, and sometimes, I'm like, God, I'm frustrated."

[74] Smith. *End of Religion*.188-189.

[75] McCutcheon. *Critics*. 24.

conversation of the human sciences in the academy. For McCutcheon, all scholars who grant a reality to "religious experience" have failed to fulfill their role as critical public intellectuals and opted to merely legitimize religious social power.[76] In contrast, McCutcheon contends that functional public scholarship is dependent upon the self-conscious "redescription" of arbitrarily identified and organized "religious" data through the construction of synthetic etic categories purged of any supernaturalistic speculations. "Public scholars of religion study the way communities artfully deploy and manipulate discourses on such topics as evil, their mythic past, endtimes and nonobvious beings in an attempt to authorize their contingent historical worlds."[77] Critical theory must be strictly limited to the redescription of empirically observable behavior in order to be testable.

McCutcheon's sharp-tongued attempt to delegitimize many of the forms of religious studies scholarship my colleagues have found to offer substantial resources for the demands of our age did not win him too many ardent supporters. But once again, they were reluctant to reject his argument whole cloth. Our instructor played a rather convincing "devil's advocate" in confronting students' tentative prodding for holes in McCutcheon's argument that might justify the discarding of his particularly unsavory conclusions. The attempts made during our first discussion were largely unsuccessful, and our instructor encouraged the class to think about how McCutcheon might inform their case studies, acknowledging that his theory of religion as "social formation" often instigated a "turning point" or even a "crisis" of self-doubt concerning one's research aims. Our second discussion of McCutcheon was cut short before the students could probe their way to reveal that McCutcheon's totalizing reductionism is undermined by the same flaw he critiques in a *sui generis* approach which protects the utter uniqueness and inviolability of religious phenomena as its own cause. Ultimately, our instructors highlighted they problem that

[76] Ibid., 4-17
[77] Ibid., 239.

in McCutcheon's model, religious phenomena is *a priori* always merely an effect of nonreligious political and cultural power dynamics and never possesses any force of its own.

Chesnek and the Search for a Middle Path

Fortunately, our third set of readings, essays from Cady and Brown's *Religious Studies, Theology and the University* complexified our dichotomous debate between Smith's privileging of insiders' experience and McCutcheon's limiting of religious studies to the critical perspective of outsiders. Sam Gill provocatively argued that the seminary and academy are much, much closer in their "theological" assumptions than Russell McCutcheon would like to think, only secular academics leave their mind-privileging, body-denigrating "theologies" unarticulated.

> "An academic historical and descriptive theology should contribute to the growing self-awareness of the specific religious/theological conditioning of the academy in all its subtlety and to the descriptive, comparative, and interpretive study of the theological elements in cultural practices of others."[78]

Christopher Chesnek's essay in the collection more specifically argues that "the academic study or religion is irreducibly religious, regardless of the shape it takes."[79] He recognizes the secularist critical position McCutcheon maintains constitutes a sociorhetorical power move in its own right, one instrumental in legitimizing the establishment of religious studies within the secular academy along the artificially simplistic lines drawn by the the 1963 Abington vs. Schempp Supreme Court decision which distinguished between the constitutionally intolerable"teaching of" religion and the socially necessary "teaching about" religion. Chesnek argues that both "naturalists" (McCutcheon) and "religionists" (Smith) rely on a limited supernaturalist distinction between religious and secular[80] which,

> "encourages a kind of false academic consciousness in which scholars do not recognize the religious impact of their classes on students, or their larger role in shaping the religious landscape and future of the cultures in which they teach…Religious thought

---

[78] Gill. "Embodied Theology." 92.
[79] Chesnek, C. "Our Subject 'Over There?': Scrutinizing the Distance Between Religion and Its Study." In Cady, L.E., Brown, D. (Eds.) Religious Studies, Theology and the University: Conflicting Maps, Changing Terrain. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002. 48.
[80] Ibid., 56. In McCutcheon's case, the position is one of "irreligiosity" defined by Chesnek as "belief in the natural to the exclusion of the supernatural"

> goes on imperceptibly, furtively and in silence in even the most 'scientific' classes, not only because it is beyond the control of the instructor, but even the control of the student."[81]

Our instructors highlighted Chesnek's appropriation of Ann Taves' threefold typology to drive home the fact that the binaries defining religion and science, naturalists and supernaturalists, and insiders and outsiders as polar opposites eventually break down. As we reviewed Chesnek throughout the course, students repeatedly expressed their appreciation for his making room for both voices and advocating a dialectical middle path between the extremes of "reductionism" and "antireductionism." Megan observed in response "poles are dangerous; you miss something," prompting our instructor to muse, "there may be an orthodoxy within the study of religion that has to be investigated."

Chesnek draws three conclusions instructive for this project in light of the inevitability of these subjective and social religious implications of the enterprise. First, Chesnek argues against the dogmatic "false ideals" of both religionists and naturalists which delimit the boundaries of admissible scholarship based on its unavoidable (but properly incidental) religious implications in favor of a sound intermediate approach which strikes a balance between the two, allowing "religion" to be both a cause and an effect. He points to Ann Taves' threefold typology which illustrates that "religion and the human sciences are not intrinsically antagonistic idioms, but historically dynamic idioms that are frequently and quite naturally found in dialogue and creative synthesis."[82] Secondly, Chesnek postulates a broader, non-supernatural conception of religiosity to include "seekers" who explore religious/existential questions through the human sciences. And finally, Chesnek advocates the application of the discipline's analytical tools to the study of its own impact. "The academic study of religion should not be exempt from the larger project of 'imagining religion'…I see it as being essential to it."[83] I will now attempt to articulate such a middle path approach in order to analyze subjective meaning-making through religious studies. I

---

[81] Ibid., 48-49.
[82] Ibid., 52.
[83] Ibid., 50.

will "adopt two voices, those of the sympathetic insider and critical outsider, and make [myself] the site of their dialogue, mutual critique, and, when circumstances allow, corroboration."[84] However, I will do so using James Fowler and Sharon Parks more precisely articulated and dynamic psychological model of faith development rather than Chesnek's vague broadened concept of religiosity. I argue that their models enables us to simultaneously attend to the external forces of social formation and the internally directed search for meaning and coherence.

III. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK: A CONTEXTUALIZED MODEL FOR FAITH DEVELOPMENT

Fowler's Conception of Faith: A Universal Dynamic Process of Meaning-Making

Returning to the definition of faith offered by theologically trained developmental psychologist James Fowler, I will argue for its power for illuminating the subjective impact of participation in the cumulative tradition of religious studies. Fowler defines faith as:

> **"**People's evolved and evolving ways of experiencing self, others and world (2) as related to and affected by the ultimate conditions of existence (as they construct them) (3) and of shaping their lives' purposes and meanings, trusts and loyalties, in light of the character of being, value and power determining the ultimate conditions of existence (as grasped in their operative images--conscious and unconscious of them)."[85]

This definition has a precision that Chesnek's "religiosity" lacks,[86] yet is also broad enough to illuminate "religious" and "secular" forms of conceiving the "ultimate conditions of existence," as well as the vast diversity of subjective conceptions within any particular religious tradition. Fowler argues that this search for meaning and coherence is an anthropological fact: "faith [is] a *human phenomenon*, *an apparently generic* consequence of the universal human burden of finding or making meaning."[87] Thus, Fowlerian faith is infinitely inclusive; free of the problematic normative judgment of participation in transcendence we see in Smith's concept. It is the backdrop of conceived meaning and power, both conscious and unconscious, that our minds

---

[84] Ibid., 61.
[85] Fowler. *Stages of Faith*. 92-93.
[86] Additionally, using the term faith allows to preserve the utility of the conventional usage of religiosity to refer to the form, degree and frequency of an individual's engagement with the diverse array of phenomena we call "religious."
[87] Ibid., 31.

require to navigate the world effectively. Like the developmental model of his theoretical mentors Lawrence Kohlberg, Erik Erikson and Jean Piaget, Fowler seeks to comprehend and describe universal, linear *structural* stages of faith development rather than apprehend or assess the particular content of one's faith. This approach enables us to account for significant changes in the (re)construction of self, world and meaning among our subjects even when there are no observable changes in terms of religious affiliation, communicable doctrines or practice. Furthermore, neither external influences nor internal agency are artificially excluded from analysis; but are always perceived to be mutually constructed. While alternatives like "religiosity," "worldview" and "belief system" imply a static affiliation faith is dynamic and relational,

> "a constantly modified framework shaped by our imaginative engagement with others and the world around us. As this reciprocal relationship between imaged ultimate environment and everyday living suggests, faith's imaginal life is dynamic and continually changing."[88]

The dynamism inherent in Fowler's model makes it particularly powerful for assessing the rapid and dramatic shifts which can occur during emerging adulthood, particularly in the enormously stimulating context of a diverse college environment like Emory.

Fowler's model traces a linear progression through six stages roughly corresponding to his mentor Lawrence Kohlberg's model of moral development: from the (1) intuitive-projective faith of infancy to the (2) mythic-literal faith of childhood to (3) emergence into synthetic-conventional faith in adolescence and potentially onto (4) individuative-reflective faith, (5) conjunctive faith and the rare sixth stage of (6) universalizing faith. Because Fowler's subjects in the age range of our sample were nearly all assessed to fall between stage 3 and 4, I will only address this portion of the model.[89] Individuals generally enter into stage 3 in the early and middle teen years with the development of what Jean Piaget called "formal operational

[88] Ibid., 33.
[89] Ibid., 323.

thinking."[90] They are now able to formalize and defend the perspective of their social group, but not yet able to critically engage its contents (though they may simply rebel and reject them whole cloth).

> "Despite that genuine feeling of having made choices and commitments, a truer reading is that [adolescents] values and self-images, mediated by the significant others in their lives, have largely chosen them. And in *their* choosing they have, in the main, clarified and ratified those images and values which have chosen them."[91]

Transition to stage 4 is initiated through critical reflection on this tacit value system which precipitates an "interruption of reliance on external sources of authority."[92] This transition is by no means inevitable, and Fowler argues that some individuals never make it at all, while others fail to complete it, remaining in a state of transitional equilibrium for a protracted period of time. Even among those receiving a top notch education, one source of authority (i.e., one's family and conventions of the home community) may simply be exchanged for others (i.e., a fraternity, an academic discipline, a professional guild, etc.). The translation is completed when authority is relocated within the self which is actualized through intentional social commitments and self-conscious fashioning of a "lifestyle."[93]

> "Stage 4's ascendant strength has to do with its capacity for critical reflection on identity (self) and outlook (ideology). Its dangers inhere in its strengths: an excessive confidence in the conscious mind and in critical thought and a kind of second narcissim in which the now clearly bounded, reflective self overassimilates 'reality' and the perspectives of others into its own world view."[94]

Many would argue that this characterization of stage 4 expresses the strengths and weaknesses of Fowler's model as a whole.

Like his mentor moral development theorist Lawrence Kohlberg, Fowler is vulnerable to critiques that his "universal" model reflects and imposes a western/American rationalist, individualist ethos. One might convincingly argue that in more collectivist societies,

---

[90] Ibid., 153.
[91] Ibid., 154.
[92] Ibid. 162.
[93] Ibid., 179.
[94] Ibid. 180.

individuative-reflective faith might be perceived as inferior to synthetic-conventional faith in terms of social adaptability and functionality. Consequently I would caution against the assertion that stage 4 faith is necessarily "better" than stage 3. It depends upon the context. Thus, Fowler's concept of faith is vulnerable to Talal Asad's critique of W.C. Smith's. Asad argues that the problem with "faith" is that it,

> "it is here conceived of as an inner state and not as a relationship created through, maintained by, and expressed in practice. (By practice, I refer here to activity that depends on the developed capacities, the cultivated sensorium, of the living body and that, in its engagement with material objects and social conditions, makes meaningful experience possible.)"[95]

By focusing on the shaping of the mind through internal agency and the external influence of the social environment, Fowler has implicitly undervalued the formative role of embodied practice. However, I argue that both of these weaknesses of Fowler's model as a universal model of faith development turn out to be strengths in the context of the American undergraduate experience. My subjects occupy a cultural space which is profoundly individualistic and intellectualist, and while some may engage in practice more than the largely disengaged representative sample of the *National Study of Youth and Religion*, the vast majority are much more engaged with faith on an individual and intellectual level than they are through embodied practice. For this particular context and population and research question, Fowler's model fits fairly well. Moreover, his student Sharon Parks has specifically appropriated and modified this model to more precisely comprehend the transition from stage 3 to stage 4 in the context of higher education.

Young Adult Faith Formation within the Community of Imagination

Sharon Parks wrote her doctoral dissertation on faith development in higher education under the direction of James Fowler at Harvard, drawing upon years of experience observing and mentoring young adults in American higher educational settings through various administrative, ministerial and pedagogical roles. Her research eventually yielded the 1986 publication *The*

---

[95] Asad, Talal. "Reading a Modern Classic: W.C. Smith's *The Meaning and End of Religion*." *History of Religions*. 40 (3), 2001. 208-209.

Critical Years: The Young Adult Search for a Faith to Live By. Parks highlights both insights and limitations of Fowler's theory for this stage of life and particular environment and proposes an additional discrete stage of "probing commitment" between Stage 3 and 4. This contextual specificity and greater theoretical nuance yields a greater degree of precision and appreciation of the particular socio-cultural forces at play in such settings. The model provides an ideal theoretical framework to consider the impact of a still more particular stimulus within this context, the undergraduate religion major.

Sharon Parks follows Kenneth Keniston in defending a concept of young adulthood as an (often extended) stage between adolescence and adulthood. Like Keniston, she sees this "new" stage as created in large part by our social and institutional structures, i.e. technologically accelerated social change which has resulted in extended education and delayed self-sufficiency and family founding. In recent years, A slew of academic and journalistic articles have observed how these increasingly entrenched cultural trends have been compounded by the employment challenges of the current recession, which have hit young workers particularly hard. Parks identifies the onset of adulthood with the crystallization of an independent identity, typically occurring some time between the late teens and mid-twenties. However, she has observed that in our increasingly complex society, this sense of identity does not translate as easily and quickly to actionable social commitments (i.e. a vocation) as has been assumed by developmental theorists like Fowler. Rather, there is typically a protracted period in which the young adult struggles to reconcile their ideologically defined self with the realities of the world they inhabit. Reflecting on Keniston's research, she writes "This new self, is, as yet, 'over-against' society or 'the world as it is'...what this postadolescent has not yet accomplished, is a fitting relationship between the promise of the new power of the emerging self and the power of the social world." Thus, the young adult is faced with the daunting task of "integrating the critically aware self with integrity

into society, in a way that is both effective and satisfying."[96] It is in this ambivalent stage of enhanced "promise and vulnerability" of young adulthood that we expect to find our undergraduate religion majors.

Parks argues that these challenging tasks and acute tensions which define young adulthood open them up to prophetic imagination of a compelling vision of the "ideal," i.e. faith. "Never before and never again in the life cycle is there the same constellation of forces available to enable the formulation of a life-transforming vision."[97] However, this promise of possibility also carries the threat of various pitfalls, including fanatical zealotry, self-absorption, destructive experimentation, nihilistic alienation, or permanent deferral of dreams in the name of practical instrumentality. Consequently, it is the responsibility of higher education to provide plentiful resources for students to formulate and pursue a vision of the ideal and adequate support to guard the vulnerability which attends this dynamic stage of transition.

> "The dynamics of young adulthood conspire to make young adults forge some sort of dream for the orientation of self and world, 'making do' with whatever images are accessible within their environment...Higher education serves as the primary mediator of the images by which they will reimagine self, world, and God."[98]

Parks thus argues that the college environment serves as a "community of imagination" charged with developing the imaginative powers that are the foundation for intelligent constructive thinking. Parks draws upon the developmental work of Jean Piaget, Immanuel Kant and Samuel Coleridge to articulate a conception of imagination as (1) the prime agent of perception, (2) a partially conscious mental process which (3) "struggles to unify" through (4) vital, dynamic engagement with the world.[99] This definition accounts for and highlights the essential role of the creative imagination in the everyday process of perception and the constitution of one's environment affirmed in my own undergraduate training in cognitive neuroscience. Furthermore, higher-order "imagination" is the capacity to wield images to construct meaning, and "whatever

---

[96] Parks. *The Critical Years.* 79-80.
[97] Parks. *The Critical Years.*96.
[98] Ibid., 139.
[99] Ibid., 116.

we know transcendent truth, we know by means of an image—an object or act of the sensible world—that gives form to our intuition of the character of ultimate reality."[100] Parks draws upon the work of James Loder to describe five successive "moments" in the act of imagination facilitated by the community (i.e., the university): (1) conscious conflict, (2) pause, (3) image, (4) repatterning and release and (5) interpretation; a process she refers to as "imagination as praxis."[101]

Expansive concepts like Fowler's "faith" and Parks' "imagination" present considerable methodological challenges in operationalization and measurement. Thus, these complex processes of meaning-making must be broken down into constituent parts using more precise etic categories. Fowler defined seven substructural features of faith to be analyzed: form of logic, social perspective taking, form of moral judgment, bounds of social awareness, locus of authority, form of world coherence and symbolic function. Parks references most of these categories as well in her analysis, but reframes and synthesizes them, focusing upon three primary developmental structures which she calls form of cognition, form of dependence, and form of community (as well as secondary forms, including form of self). In the following analysis, I will employ a hybrid model addressing the development of six features of faith found to be most relevant to my interview data: (1) locus of authority, (2) form of cognition, (3) form of self (4) symbolic function, (5) form of world coherence and (6) form of community. Rather than describe each element here, I will illustrate them through the forthcoming analysis. Though these features of faith development are mutually constructed and interdependent, for the sake of clarity I have chosen to demonstrate each through a specific "moment" in the process of "imagination as praxis" (adding the initial engagement with the community of imagination as the first preliminary step). Before proceeding to this six-stage analysis of young adult faith development through engagement in the community of imagination known as the Emory College Department of

---

[100] Ibid., 109.
[101] Ibid., 140-165.

Religion, I will describe the diversity of backgrounds and conventional faith commitments of these nineteen religion majors.

IV. INTERPRETATION: FAITH FORMATION THROUGH RELIGION MAJOR

Sample Characteristics, Identity and Affiliation

If we take the third wave of the *National Study of Youth and Religion* as our comparison, then this select sample of 19 Emory undergraduate religion majors are anything but "normal." While this group shares many broad values, assumptions, discourses and much of the general social and cultural context with their wider population of peers, their engagement with religious traditions, beliefs and practices is clearly much broader and deeper. Smith asserts that the vast majority of his respondents are largely indifferent to religious practice, minimally engaged with it personally or socially, and tend to relegate it to the long list of things to attend to when one "settles down" to raise a family. They express a very thin affiliation and understanding of their tradition of origin, practice sparingly and are typically unable to articulate the content of their beliefs with any degree of specificity.[102] Emory religion majors clearly differ, raising questions: does the exceptional educational achievement of these students render them cultural outliers generally? Can this unique engagement be reduced to a recreational privilege of young elites? Are religion majors already exceptionally engaged with religious phenomena before arriving on campus or does the religion major experience transform a mild curiosity into a personal specialty and powerful source of identity? The answer to the latter question is that it is always both, but there is a great deal of variance regarding the character, style and degree of engagement prior to attending Emory.

While demographic representativeness is not possible for such a small sample, these 19 students constitute a fairly balanced and diverse group in many ways, with a few regrettable gaps. The gender balance (ten women, nine men) is roughly represent of the overall (and Emory)

---

[102] Smith. *Souls in Transition*. 75-87.

population. Socioeconomically, the wealthy are slightly overrepresented and the acutely impoverished are excluded, but the majority represent a broad swath of the middle class, from the daughter of an immigrant taxi driver to the children of doctors and business owners. An inordinate number (9) spent most of their childhood and teen years in Georgia or neighboring southern states (not including the three from central or southern Florida, which is generally not considered part of the cultural South), but two of these were born in Pakistan. Most of the remainder are from major urban centers around the country, including Los Angeles, Philadelphia, Chicago and Baltimore. Racially, fifteen are white and four represent various South Asian ethnic groups, resulting in a regrettable lack of representation of African-Americans, East Asians and Latinos.[103] Nine respondents identified as Protestant,[104] including three Presbyterians, two United Methodists, one non-denominational Evangelical currently engaged in high church practices, and three Southerners who vaguely identified as "Christian" and indicated that they had been exposed to a variety of denominations and forms.[105] Three Jews, all female, represent a variety of denominational persuasions from modern Orthodox to syncretistic Reconstructionism. Two young women identified as non-orthodox Catholics. Two identified as Muslims, both from Pakistan, one a male Ismaeli Shi'a and the other a female Sunni. Two had been raised without any religious affiliation; one had converted to Buddhism prior to coming to Emory and the other is Farrin, discussed in the introduction.

The meaning and salience of a student's official religious affiliation varies widely. A minority of the students had relatively straightforward traditional identities which were clearly instructive. This was the case for both of the Muslims and Methodists. Danny, a Methodist, was the only member of the sample who approached the religion major as professional training for a career in ministry. A few others had considered the pastorate but was currently leaning away from

---

[103] I have yet to meet any African-American religion majors at Emory and attempts to interview East Asians were unsuccessful.

[104] roughly corresponding to the 46% of U.S. emerging adults ages 18-23 from the NYSR. Smith. *Souls in Transition*. 104.

[105] though one of these has adopted substantial Buddhist practices without maintaining any Christian ones.

it. Interestingly, these Methodists' identities seemed to be the least perturbed by the religion major experience, with few identifiable shifts as a result of their religious studies engagement. This imperviousness to change was in direct contrast to the unusually acute volatility of other Christians in the sample, particularly the Presbyterians.[106] Both Muslim students described similar, generally common shifts toward greater inclusivity, modest declines in frequency of practice but enhanced internalization and significance of belief, practice and affiliation. For Evan and Lara, their respective Evangelical and Conservative Jewish identities had been extremely powerful, but oftentimes problematic, sources of identity, and both had modified them significantly through considerable struggle. Lara stated that in her teen years she felt "a strong Jewish identity, but it just didn't feel like it really fit." And in reflecting upon her current practice, she says "I have a very personal connection but I have a lot of personal...trauma, like minor traumas, and difficulties with Judaism that can inhibit me from connecting." Though their stories are extremely different, these characterizations seem apt descriptions of Evan's past experience at his "almost fundamentalist" high school and current experiences at his conservative home church.

For much of the sample, affiliation can say something meaningful about one's institutional involvement in childhood while being fairly misleading concerning current commitments, beliefs and practices. As we saw in the introduction, Farrin's "non-religious" affiliation lies in stark contrast to her characterization of herself as"religious" in the sense of being personally impacted and guided by the material she has studied. Conversely, nearly half of our "Christians" exhibited precious little personal investment into their claimed tradition. For example, Shannon reports that though her parents are deeply committed Southern Baptists, she simply never "bought it."

> *"I can't recall ever really buying into it…I went to vacation Bible school..because my friends did it. I never really remember buying into what was said, because it's like, I'm not a particularly analytical deep thinking person, but it's like, somebody's just telling you this, and it just feels kind of like sheep kind of thing."*

[106] Perhaps Emory's UMC affiliation and ordained Methodist chaplain creates some measure of identity security.

These cases of ambiguous, even misleading, self-identifications seem to suggest that for some religion majors, religious affiliation is yet another demographic "accident" of one's birth which need not describe or constrain one's actual religious and spiritual engagement.

Religious Background, Conventional Faith and onset of Transition

These often malleable religious affiliations seem to typically reflect the identification of one's parents. However, parents' affiliation may likewise indicate little about the depth and style of their engagement. Religious exploration came easiest for those whose parents are (1) *engaged and open*, meaning significantly involved in religious practice but open to a wide variety of expressions. These students tended to be encouraged and liberated in both their academic exploration of religious studies and their personal faith development through it and other avenues. However, those who deeply internalize the particular form of family practice may nonetheless still experience acute struggles and "apostasy anxiety" when exposed to other forms. For students whose parents are (2) *disengaged and open*, such anxiety is minimized or eliminated, but resources for exploration of religious phenomena in early life are likely to be limited which may make later exploration more open-ended (and potentially disorienting). Things are much more difficult for the small minority whose parents are (3) *engaged and closed*, meaning deeply entrenched in a particular religious tradition as *the* correct form of expression. For them, both religious studies and personal religious exploration may be seen as suspect, a threat to orthodoxy which would better be avoided altogether. Parents who are (4) *disengaged and closed* (i.e., staunch atheists) are also likely to discourage such exploration, but for them it is likely to be seen more as waste of time than a significant existential threat. This is similar to the likely scenario for children of those who are simply (5) *indifferent*, who may regard their child's exploration as an interesting curiosity, an impenetrable mystery, or an idiosyncratic preoccupation. The only category of parental engagement not represented in our sample was *disengaged and closed*, and a

slight majority describe their parents as *engaged and open*, indicating that such parental attitudes are likely to be influential, but not determinative.

These parental styles of engagement correspond roughly to a typology of background community dynamics surrounding religion, particularly the dominant religious environment at the school(s) where the student spends the bulk of her public social engagement. (1) Environments of active and open cross-cultural exchange may directly foster exposure to diverse religious traditions. None of my subjects described their high school communities in this way, but some had been privileged to enjoy formative exposure experiences through summer programs. For example, Jennifer had spent a summer at a camp called "Seeds of Peace" hosting delegates from Israel, Palestine, Egypt and Jordan, while Zach had spent a summer living with a family in Egypt. (2) Diverse environments without such intentionality may merely facilitate cross-cultural engagement for those with the initiative to engage such differences. For example, Taylor grew up all over the world, spending her high school years in France and Korea, exploring Buddhist sights and practices with her father. (3) Sectarian fortress-like communities may alternatively shield students from other religious and cultural perspectives and/or take an active role in presenting them as flawed and inferior alternatives. Danny and Evan both attended schools that fit this description, making their transitions to a diverse college campus much more difficult. (4) Some communities may actively marginalize religious expression in the name of tolerance and "political correctness," making religion a taboo subject restricted to "private" expression. For example, Steven recalls his independent private school's resistance to religious expression on campus:

> *"My [older brother] got called to the Dean's office cause he did this thing called "see you at the pole," where you went go pray by a pole one morning during the school year...He got called into one of our dean's office and sort of like yelled at for that because a parent had called and said it made her kid feel uncomfortable. And then he started a club after that, FCA, at our school, and I took that over from him. [five years later], my senior year in high school was the first year we got in the yearbook. And we fought and we fought for this club to be recognized. The school just didn't want to associate with any religions."*

Finally, (5) some may experience environments which seem to simply avoid the subject of religion due to propriety or indifference. Haleema describes her experience as the only Muslim family in her small town in south Georgia this way: "people were always tolerant of my religion but I felt like growing up religion was always a taboo subject. You just didn't talk about it. People were very accepting and nice. But we didn't have any interfaith dialogues because like, why break the peace?" The type of environment a given individual inhabits during their teen years will necessarily condition the way they respond to a diverse college campus community and instruction in diverse religious traditions.

The faith development models of James Fowler and Sharon Parks assume that agency is not only socially but cognitively and emotionally restricted in early and mid-adolescence. Thus, young teens are effectively *dependent* (or counter-dependent) upon *"those who count"* and the *conventions* of their community and *dualistically bound* to either embrace or reject the given *authorities*, thus *deriving* their selves and their *tacit* "ultimate environments."[107] While some claim a greater degree of autonomy in their middle school and high school years, many reflectively recognize the degree to which their views were thoroughly determined by their community context. Haleema, isolated from other Muslims, represents a more extreme case, describing her total dependence upon her parents in constructing her domestic religious practice of Islam:

> *"And so I only got one point of view--it's wrong to do this, it's wrong to do that. So I didn't really get conflicting views and let me make my own decision. It was all dictated. I know it sounds bad, but it was all dictated/mandated from my parents, which is why I had like a black and white world. There wasn't any contention, any conflict."*

For others, there is a stage of rebellion generally devoid of positive content which is just as equally dependent on local conventions to be rejected. Lara describes her "anti-Judaism phase" as simply one aspect of being "anti-everything," roundly rejecting authority and social conventions

---

[107] The emphasized terms refer to the "form of dependence," "locus of authority," "form of community," "form of cognition," "form of self" and "form of world coherence" defining the adolescent in Park's model of young adulthood (see appendix). These correspond to stage 3, "conventional faith" in Fowler's model.

across the board. Zach's portrayal of his initial "conversion" to Buddhism in middle school is more complex. Shaped by his nonreligious parents' scientific rationalism, he strongly rejected the Biblicism which permeated his school and surrounding community. When the results of an online test of religious identity indicated a slight personal preference for Buddhism, he seized the identity as an alternative to the dominant religious orientation which he had rejected. But it would take years before he would engage the tradition more seriously. Zach's case points to the importance of structural developmental analysis in assessing the nature of *apparently* autonomous expressions of religious commitment which occur before the requisite development has occurred.

Parks asserts that the transition from synthetic-conventional faith often happens through interpersonal and/or intellectual exposure to "the other." "When it is discovered that 'they' neither fit the stereotypes nor can be assimilated as a mere 'exception' into an assumed system of meaning, the dualistic world of 'we' and 'they' begins to decline in power, and the Authority by which it was composed is called under review."[108] A portion of the sample seems to have entered this transition in high school while others required the "culture shock" of the diverse Emory community to incite it. For some, this transition is brought about largely by interpersonal interaction and for others intellectual introspection plays a primary role, but it is always to some degree a dialogue between the external environment experienced and the internal cognitive structures which seek to impose coherence upon it. Some experience this transition as an exhilarating expansion of their world while others are devastated by the collapse of formally foundational structures of meaning and purpose. These affective dimensions of the experience are shaped by individual temperament and particular context, but there is usually both a deflating sense of loss and an invigorating opening of new possibilities. Sharon Parks captures these "subjective, affective, dynamic and transformative" dimensions of faith development using Richard R. Niebuhr's metaphors of "shipwreck, gladness, and amazement." She describes the transitional stage between conventional and young adult faith in terms of a cognitive embrace of

[108] Parks. *The Critical Years*. 48

an "unqualified relativism" that typically occurs in a more fragmented or "diffuse" community than the conventional community of origin. Parks argues,

> "A position of qualified relativism is difficult to sustain over time. One discovers that there is a difference between just any opinion and an opinion that is grounded in careful and thoughtful observation and reflection. One may move into a more qualified relativism, increasingly aware that discriminations can be made between arguments based on such principles as internal coherence, the systematic relation of an argument to its own assumptions, external data and so forth."

I will argue that this is exactly what happens through engagement in the "community of imagination" of the Department of Religion. Whether students arrive with a conventional faith, in relativistic transition, or in the nascent stages of young adult faith, the nature of the collective enterprise of religious scholarship forces them to construct a more adequate young adult faith and provides a wealth of resources for doing so.

Constructing Adult Faith Within the Community of Imagination

Parks describes the progressive movement of form of community from the conventional community of adulthood to a transitional diffuse community to the ideological community of young adulthood and on to the self-selected community of adulthood. It is perhaps here where it is most important to emphasize her acknowledgment that these theoretically discrete formations often overlap in reality. Moreover, individual students experience varying degrees of community connection with their colleagues in the Department of Religion. No student clearly identified the department as their primary community, and I am certainly not arguing that all religion majors share intimate bonds with one another. Lara specifically emphasized that she has not viewed the department as a candidate in her search for a primary spiritual community and expressed a lack of interpersonal connection with most of her colleagues. "I actually don't feel like the religion majors are a community in any sense. I don't know half the people." This lack of community is due in part to the relatively large size of the department and the wide variance in particular curricular constructions renders the community fairly diffuse. However, this fragmentation is also a function of an ideological commitment to inclusivity highlighted by several students. For

example, Evan stated, “I see it as like religious studies is this really broad discipline that hasn’t really defined itself yet and so there’s room for all these different voices.” Danny expressed this norm of inclusivity more forcefully, “I think that we [would] be remiss if we ever excluded someone, saying that they don't have a place at the table.” This commitment to inclusivity can ring of relativism at times, as when Stacey states, “if I’ve gotten anything from religion classes it’s that you kind of have to let everybody do their own thing.” But in context, we see that Stacey is actually describing a normative ideological commitment to tolerance and sensitivity to others in view of one’s own controversial commitments. Describing a violation of this norm Stacey reflects,

> *“I was offended because I felt like religion majors spend so much time trying to not offend anyone. Like I literally feel like every time I speak in class I’m like “what can I say that won’t be offensive to anyone.” And I feel like she just completely disregarded that. And I feel like it’s almost this unspoken rule that you kind of have to think in the back of your mind that there is probably someone in this room that thinks differently than you do and its your job to make sure you don’t offend them. Because people like, it makes religion different than any other subject, because people aren’t really going to be offended if you don’t believe in the same economic policy that they do, but someone might get upset if you call their religion fake.”*

Some religion majors go so far as to express norms of engagement that seem to frame the religion major as a self-selected community of commitment. Shiv asserts,

> *“You do have a lot of room to grow. If you’re willing to take the time and effort to take the readings and read them personally and try to apply them to your life and see them for what they really are, you’ll get a lot out of it. But if you just want some pasttime just to read and you know, get through. It’s definitely not the right major for someone like that.”*

For her part, Megan emphasizes such commitment with less emphasis on existential meaning-making:

> *“I can’t imagine having studied anything else. And I would definitely recommend it to people if it’s what their passionate about. If it’s just something that they are doing because it’s easy, or this or that, I wouldn’t recommend it because that kind of cheapens the study of it for people who are serious.”*

Incorporating all of these perspectives, we can understand the Department of Religion as functioning as a self-selected community of imagination with collective ideological commitments which maintain space for diffuse individual perspectives. As Evan puts it, “we all appreciate

[each other's] perspectives. I think there's a kind of solidarity because we made a choice to be a religion major. And so you're never really entirely critical of [another's engagement]." While there are shared characteristics and experiences (including the mandatory 490 and 300 courses), the specific interests and curriculum of each student shape a unique and formative "community within the community" with which (s)he engages. I will now proceed to my six-stage hybrid analysis of faith formation in the community of imagination outlined in section II, illustrating both the unity and diversity within the religion major experience through this model. Like Parks, I see this process as linear, cyclical and reoccurring repetitively throughout the life course. Before progressing through the five moments in the act of imagination, I will frame the choice to become a religion major as a "probing commitment" to the authority of the institutional structure, professors and authors which constitute the "mentoring community of imagination," a theme which will run throughout the subsequent five "moments" in the act of imagination.

Locus of Authority: Embracing the Mentoring Community of Imagination

In Fowler's model of faith development, a crucial element of the progression from "synthetic-conventional faith" to "individuative-reflective faith" is the replacement of external authority with a critically aware internal authority. Parks criticizes this characterization as overly simplified, arguing for a discrete intermediary stage in which the young adult self-consciously chooses among the multiplicity of external authorities one(s) which confirm her own observations and lived experience and offer tools to further develop her emerging critical awareness.[109] I argued earlier that these subjects (and their peers) accept the powerful social function of higher education and the authority of its representatives rather uncritically. It is important to emphasize that this is in large part because of the autonomy the college selection and major selection processes afford them, empowering them to construct their own curriculum from a wide variety of options.

---

[109] Ibid., 86.

After collecting a few demographic facts, I began each interview by asking students to tell the story of how they came to Emory and subsequently chose to major in religion. With the exception of two students who only applied to Emory for logistical reasons and one who's "conservative" parents restricted her options to the Atlanta area, most of the students chose Emory among a wide variety of options. Several specifically cited their desire for a "diverse" environment and a liberal arts curriculum as primary factors in their decision. A indicated that superior scholarship packages were too enticing to pass up, while a couple candidly acknowledged the fact that Emory was the "most prestigious" school to accept them played a large role in the decision. The important thing to emphasize is that even those with restricted options clearly felt that the decision to submit to the institutional authority of Emory University was ultimately their own. For Evan and Haleema in particular, choosing to come to Emory required controverting their conventional religious authorities. Evan met resistance from faculty mentors at the Evangelical school he had attended for 13 years.

> *"[They] were like 'I'm really concerned that you've decided to go to a secular university. I wonder if you're going down the wrong path.' And one even went so far to say that she didn't think it was God's will that I went to Emory. And I thought that was pretty hurtful to be honest, because it was like, you know I've really tried to get to this point, and feel called to this place, I really tried to discern it and you just tried to use your evangelical vocabulary to influence my decision. And there was just like a fundamental disconnect there, [at] the place I spent 13 years--kind of feeling like an outsider where you were always an insider."*

While Evan's mentors wanted him to attend a prestigious Evangelical college, Haleema's mother encouraged an Islamic alternative to western higher education. "She wanted me to enroll in an Islamic academy and become like an Islamic scholar and study the Quran and like forget the traditional American undergrad. Not that she doesn't value education, she just wanted to channel in it in a specific direction." Even in these cases where students met resistance, they were ultimately empowered to make what was perhaps the biggest decision of their lives, one that would define the next four years and powerfully shape their future trajectories.

The selection of the major was perhaps the second biggest decision many of the students had made. For a select few students, this decision was relatively clear by the time they arrived on campus, having already enjoyed studying religion in high school. Take Ellie for example:

> *"I knew coming in I was premed. I actually wanted to be a religion major. I went to Jewish day school from K to 12, so I knew a lot about Judaism, but not that much about other people's religion…I wanted to learn about others, and I thought a good way to learn about other people is through studying religion…where you get a historical and sociological perspective."*

Similarly, Megan developed a passion for religious studies through the mandatory curriculum at her Catholic high school, particularly once it ventured away from teaching Catholic orthodoxy to explore historical-critical Biblical scholarship, prompting existential reflection.

> *"It just absolutely fascinated me and hit close to home because I had grown up Catholic, but with a whole different spin on something that was very meaningful. And as I went through high school I started thinking more about studying religion. And the kind of lens that I brought to it was that I really wanted to know why people, including myself, did the things that they did. Why do you sit somewhere for an hour every weekend for some kind of intangible something that you can't put your finger on, something that you can't name, but we let it guide our lives."*

Danny's is another unusual case in the sample. While several students report having to constantly correct the widespread misperception that the religion major serves as preparation for ministry, Danny is the only individual in this sample who squarely fits the stereotype.[110] Danny began his college career as a political science major preparing for law school, but two summers working in leadership roles at a United Methodist children's camp reoriented him toward seminary and the pastorate with an undergraduate religion major along the way. "For me becoming a religion major was more about my career path. I found it interesting and I thought it lined up really well with what I wanted to do with my life. That probably makes me a more unique case."[111]

---

[110] A few other Protestants in the sample expressed having had interest in ministry at some point, but among these only Steven identifies such interest as having been a primary motivator in his decision to major in religion. This vocational interest, like most of the other Protestants in the sample, has since waned.

[111] Kevin is also an outlier, spending the first three years of his college career striving toward medical school only to switch gears and spend a fourth and fifth year obtaining a religion major in addition to his chemistry major.

For a majority of students, plans for their curriculum were vague, and a general interest in religion (of varying degrees) and probing commitment to liberal arts education led them to take electives in the Department of Religion which "hooked" them. Several of these students had studied religious traditions with which they were personally engaged with, either through confessional study, as in Rachel and Lara's formal visits to Israel, or through recreational reading, such as Shiv's exploration of Hindu and Christian scripture/literature and Zach's self-instruction in elementary Buddhist philosophy. Only Farrin had never been formally affiliated with a religious tradition, though even she reports discussing it with her parents and occasionally attending church with peers in her suburban community in north Georgia. She describes her curiosity about religion developing out of her recognition of her ignorance on the subject upon arriving at Emory. "I took an Islam course and that was so eye opening, and that's when I really found out that I really didn't know anything and I wanted to take it further." This self-professed ignorance is not entirely unique, as the vast majority, even those with substantial knowledge of their own traditions had very little understanding about how academic religious studies was conducted and taught at the college level. Many, like Ali, were quite surprised to discover that it was not "theologically based." Through their first few electives these students had to learn what they could about the norms of discourse within this manifestation of the cumulative tradition of religious studies and make a "probing commitment" to be shaped by its particular construction of authority. This is particularly remarkable considering the aforementioned varieties of resistance religion majors report receiving from family members and friends who see such education as professionally useless, uncomfortably odd, or ideologically threatening.[112] In order to make such a commitment in the face of such resistance, these students had to place their trust in the mentoring resources provided by their professors through their coursework.[113]

---

[112] Notable exceptions include two students with family members who are academics, and thus, we might infer, value education as an end of itself and not merely a means.

[113] As previously mentioned, a disproportionate number of these students (and the overall population of religion majors) spent their first two years in Emory's small liberal arts associate's program at Oxford

Parks grounds her concept of the academic community of imagination in the etymology of the verb "to educate," or "to lead out." She states, "to educate young adults is to lead them through the relativizing of all knowledge and into the responsibility of composing truth and commitment within a relativized, complex world."[114] The young adult exercises their developing "self-aware critical discernment" to determine which mentors in the community offer the most promising resources for the construction of meaning and submit to their authority. Such mentoring may take a variety of forms. For many, it is the professor who initiates the student into a new way of thinking about the world. For example, Haleema highlights the influence of Dr. Wilson in sharpening her critical and contextualizing abilities.

> *"He's very…structured, like he wants to contextual and nuance everything. So he doesn't let us get away with saying like the Jewish people when we're talking about the ancient Israelite people. I feel those distinctions had a lot to do with shaping my idea of religion as a whole: everything is specific, everything has its context, you can't generalize."*

Every student was able to identify such influences on their intellectual development, indicating a very basic level of trust that the intellectual skills these professors possessed were worth acquiring and incorporating into one's perspective. Many also referenced a variety of more personal forms of influence. Some identified particular professors as modeling general personal qualities that they strive to emulate. For example, Shannon expresses great admiration and affection for Dr. Fitzgerald:

> *"If I could be anybody when I grew up, I'd probably want to be her. She's just so interesting, she's just fascinating. I respond well to professors with high expectations, I like that. And she is one of those people, for sure. So I was like, I don't want to disappoint you, and she really…knew what she was talking about...She's interactive and she's thought provoking."*

Zack, Kevin and Jennifer respectively describe some of their professors as providing not only academic but "religious" instruction in the philosophy, narratives and practices of the Buddhist

---

College. This overrepresentation is likely due in part to a self-selection bias resulting from the program's special commitment to liberal arts education. But according to these students' accounts, the engaging instruction of the professors who constitute the school's tiny Department of Religion played a large role as well.

114 Parks. *The Critical Years*. 139.

tradition. Zach and Kevin especially have incorporated these practices, concepts and stories into their daily lives in obviously meaningful ways. Describing the development of his practice, Zach recalls that after arriving at Emory, "there was this huge leap [when] I started meeting geshes and monks and teachers and getting to go abroad. And that was huge, that changed everything, changed my understanding and engagement."[115] Finally, a few students report developing deeper relationships with professors outside of class, through which they have received much needed counsel during times of "shipwreck." In Evan's case, the struggle was over how to integrate the academic authority of religious studies with pre-existing commitments to confessional orthodoxy.

> *"I remember asking [two professors] pretty personal questions about what does it mean to like retain your faith in this environment, and why are you all still identifying as Christians, in light of these methods of studying...I wouldn't say the conversations were apologetic. But they would say something that would resonate with even my experience of contemplative practice…like looking at Scripture at different levels of meaning...They were able to articulate that, which gave me a model to follow. And they also encouraged me, like now I feel like that was so rude of me to pose the question that way. And they were just so gracious in that, and helped me understand that transition. And I think that without that, if I had been to a school where people were more indifferent or not as sensitive, I don't know if I would have stuck with it."*

Evan's account illustrates clearly that young adults make an intentional investment in the authority of mentors who provide resources which illuminate their lived experience and enable them to make probing commitments in a relativized world. While the mentorship most students experience may not be so intimate, I believe the difference is primarily one of degree. In choosing a religion major, all of these students have taken the road less travelled and willfully submitted to institutional and individual authorities which they trust will help equip them to navigate our complex world more meaningfully.

Form of Cognition: Probing Commitment through Conscious Conflict

As Evan's case illustrates, this educational "leading out" towards a more adequate and robust faith typically begins when the student is confronted with knowledge which exposes the

---

[115] In Zach's case, this engagement occurred through the Department of Religion, Students for a Free Tibet events and the Tibetan Studies program in Dharamsala, India, all of which are shaped by the Emory-Tibet Partnership.

inadequacies of his synthetic-conventional composition of reality. Each of these students first experienced instances of such "conscious conflict" in high school. But in most cases, the lack of an adequate "holding environment" prevented the growing fractures in their synthetic-conventional faith from becoming fully conscious and engaged critically until college. Parks argues that "the academy has a particular responsibility and a unique capacity to serve as a center of conflict…It is part of the educator's task to initiate the learner into a discipline of definition and critique so that the nature of the dissonant, the unresolved, and the mysterious is clarified."[116] We have already seen Haleema testify to Dr. Wilson's effectiveness in initiating her into this discipline. But it is crucial to emphasize that he was also able to establish a safe space through precise historical discourse, one in which Haleema could sustainably hold the conflicting historical narratives of academic religious studies (ancient Israelite religion is an antecedent of Judaism, Christianity and Islam) and her conventional faith (Jews are the descendants of Muslims who proudly went astray when they rejected the revelation entrusted to Muhammed) in tension. As Parks emphasizes, "if either overdistancing with the conflict or an avoidance of the conflict altogether are to be averted, the conflict must be held in a 'context of rapport.'"[117] This rapport helps students deal with what I call "apostasy anxiety," fear that the challenges to their conventional faith might overwhelm it completely. Stacey reflects,

> *"At first I think I was kind of worried that studying other religions would....I don't want to say damage my own, but that it might change my own, and I wasn't sure if I was OK with that. But I guess I just kind of started studying different religions regardless…and I realized that's exactly what I wanted to be doing."*

Stacey has indeed experienced formidable challenges to her faith, but Dr. Norton's contagious enthusiasm for the subject and engaging instruction made her want to stick with it. Several students maintained that such struggles were inevitable. When I asked Steven if he would encourage someone interested in majoring in religion to take the plunge, he issued a word of caution based on his fairly intense experiences of conscious conflict.

---

[116] Ibid., 142.
[117] Ibid., 120.

> *"I questioned faith while I was doing. I was like what's going on? On the class on the historical Jesus, we did New Testament contexts and we were like 'this is what it really means.' And it was like 'What? I never heard that at church...' So I think depending on the person I would encourage it. I think if you're going to be a religion major your faith is going to be questioned at some point."*

While Steven, Danny, Evan, and Haleema all emphasized struggle with such specific conflicts between confessional teaching and scholarly interpretations, a more general wrestling with the existential problem of religious pluralism was a much more prominent theme, one referenced by nearly every respondent.

The religiously active Christians in the sample tended to experience the most acute exclusivity crises in the sample. A conventional explanation of this phenomena might point to the greater emphasis placed on belief and salvation/damnation in western Christianity (as opposed to orthopraxy). Indeed, the doctrinal question regarding the ultimate fate of those who do not profess Christ does seem to weigh on some of these Christians minds, particularly those raised in Evangelical settings. But there are clearly other dynamics at play here. Perhaps the solid Christian majority in the U.S. makes it easier for Christians to longer preserve an illusion of religious hegemony as "the norm," thus avoid confronting the relativity of their commitments. These particular Christians' exclusivity crises seemed to revolve around behavioral norms as much as beliefs. For example, Megan, who describes herself as assiduously "going through the motions" without deep investment in belief in a personal God as a thoroughly involved member of her Catholic community, experienced a most intense crisis when her recognition of the "exclusivity" of Catholicism led her to fully reject it temporarily.[118] Academic religious studies gave Megan "a different way to talk about religion, not just to stop talking about it, but to put on a different hat and go in a different direction." Thus, the discipline and department functioned as a "holding environment" for Megan to continue to probe for a livable young adult faith when she could no longer affiliate with Christianity because of its exclusivist claims. Danny's exclusivity crisis

[118] It should be noted that it was not only engagement with religious studies that, but Megan's interpersonal involvement with Southern Baptists at Oxford who employed a "very open and obvious rhetoric of exclusivity" that exacerbated Megan's exclusivity crisis.

followed a nearly opposite trajectory. His freshmen year he shunned all those who did not conform to the conservative moral strictures of his home community regardless of whether they claimed Christianity or not. He then realized that his attitude had obstructed potentially life enriching and world expanding relationships and began to open up to others. We see similar patterns of "culture shock" and interrogation of the exclusive claims of one's convention community in the story of relatively sheltered Haleema. Perhaps the expansionist orientations of the Christian and Islamic traditions' may render the question of other religion's legitimacy especially acute. Stacey, for example, reports constantly asking herself, "Is there room for everything? Can there be room for everything? It's something that people who are non-religion majors I'm sure think about, but it's not something they are confronted with on a daily basis the way you are when you are a religion major."

In contrast, Shiv, who grew up a member of a minority community of Hindus in a small town in Kentucky and was constantly engaged with Christians peers, seems to have been much more comfortable engaging with the conscious conflict inherent to religious studies. Nevertheless, he describes his arrival on the vastly more diverse Emory campus as an experience of "culture shock." When I asked him if he thought the diversity and permeability of the Hindu tradition had mitigated the struggle I had seen others experience, he reflected upon the initial uneasiness of probing for a faith sufficiently adequate to comprehend his expanding world.

> *"So I think that definitely that struggle was there in the beginning. And that was more like me trying to realize what I was and why I was doing these things. Like what does it mean, what was the emphasis, why, you know? Maybe before it wasn't as permeable but it was more a learning of concrete traditions, ideas, you know, just certain themes. But you know I would always wonder like why these themes?"*

For Lara, immersion in the inclusivist ethos permeating the Department of Religion conflicted more with her experience of interdenominational criticism than with Jewish views towards adherents of more distant religious traditions, informing her ongoing probing commitment to her Jewish identity.

> *"It was going against what my experience with religion was that so it had to change. I don't think that religion has to be judgmental. I mean I think that like the judging between the Jewish denominations was ridiculous. But I think it's like...it's hard to separate I mean...if you're going to study religion and you're not judgmental. Then how do you decide to then go do this religious practice instead of that one?"*

Like Lara, Rachel had been raised as a Conservative Jew and became attracted to Modern Orthodoxy when visiting Israel as a teenager, and her exposure to religious studies had a similar impact.

> *"It has made me question the idea that there's one specific religious belief that has to be true. I sort of appreciate where other religious beliefs are coming from and acknowledge that they're very meaningful for a lot of people. But studying other religions hasn't really made me question what I believe in."*

It seems that the strong ethnic component and emphasis on orthopraxy over orthodoxy in both Hinduism and Judaism may result in such experiences of conscious conflict impacting one's probing for a form of practice and identity rather than threatening one's commitment to the tradition in general. But for all of these subjects, conscious conflict with other ways of knowing and being naturally leads to reflection upon one's identity in relation to "the other."

Form of Self: Cultivating Self-Awareness through Pause

Parks argues that the greatest weakness of the academy as a community of imagination is its ability to create space for the contemplation conscious conflict demands, a practice she calls "pause."

> "In the moment of pause the conscious mind remains passive, or better, 'permissive'…The activity beneath the surface may be likened to 'an interlude for scanning' for integrative patterns—some of which may already be present, others of which may have yet to appear in experience."[119]

A few professors do seem to be adept at creating opportunities for pauses for processing. Evan reflects on the impact his two mentors made on him as he observed them,

> *"carving out these spaces for people to speak out of their experiences. Which was interesting in a class that's supposed to be so like academic or scientific or whatever. But I think that's the nature of religion that those fundamental questions and like woundedness just come out. And they were very generous to let them come out."*

---

[119] Ibid., 120.

These professors are making themselves available for students to share their experiences of conscious conflict through both class discussions and one-on-one meetings during office hours. Another way professors create opportunities for pause is through practices. Multiple students have learned to meditate through a meditation class taught by the Tibetan teacher Geshe Lobsang Tenzin Negi which included intensive "labs" of extended meditation. For example, Kevin learned a prayer practice he now practices twice daily. He describes it as valuable method of reducing stress and preparing him for the day or winding down at night. Jennifer has utilized a book called *How to Meditate* assigned in her Religion and Healing class to cope with negative emotions.

> "Whenever I'm like stressed out or like feel guilty about something or like I'm feeling something that I can deal with, but I'm not, I'll like look it up in the index. And then I'll read this paragraph, and I'll be like "Oh." It just like gives me a perspective that I feel like really helps me."

But perhaps more often than not, there is precious little space in these students' jam-packed semesters to pause. Such periods of rest and reflection may have to wait for breaks in the schedule. For example, Haleema recalls retrospectively processing the conscious conflict experienced in her ancient Judaism class: "Yeah it was like finally at the end of the semester I was be like 'WHOAAA! That's so familiar!'"

While pause may take many forms, from taking a break from studying to exercise, to sleeping in on a Sunday to relaxing with friends and sharing small talk, the structure of my interview produced much more data on forms of pause which might could be considered religious practices. These practices can function as forms of pause and repose that can lead to greater self-awareness and clarity concerning the existential questions posed by experiences of conscious conflict. For Danny, regular prayer is a two-way conversation that is as much about listening as it is about expressing one's self. "It's like that communication. And I think a lot of times the biggest thing I try to do when I pray is think about the format. It's like thanksgiving, praise and then like listening and then ask what you want. And listening can be done through the avenue of scripture reading." Similarly, Stacey describes her nightly prayer ritual, ingrained in childhood, as

something she can't imagine not doing. She describes it as more of a pause to reorient herself than a source of connection with the Divine:

> *"Just like thinking about other people for 15 minutes out of the day because I know that if I didn't do it I might not do it any other time of my day. So I think it's more kind of getting my head together. And um....just thinking about other people, as opposed a really spiritual thing."*

Haleema tries to make as many of the prescribed prayers as possible, though she admits the university schedule doesn't always make it easy. She makes as many as she can on time (about three per day on average) and performs "make-up prayers" for those she misses. This prayer practice and diligent fasting during the month of Ramadan both serve the same purpose of *dhikr*, or "remembrance of Allah," putting the mundane details of her life in perspective. Evan's substantial regular engagement in contemplative practices excluded, such regular practitioners are in the minority among the sample. But only a few indicate that they never engage in such practices. For most, practice is sporadic, but when it occurs it is personally motivated and intentional. For some, like Steven, it is more of a social affair. Differences in tradition, form or frequency notwithstanding, such practices offer an opportunity for these students to engage their sense of "the ultimate conditions of existence" beyond themselves. Such recognition can provide a release from the pressure to resolve the conscious conflicts they encounter and open the mind to new integrative patterns.

The practice of self-reflective introspection is arguably a more common form of pause for most of these students, contemplating their evolving identities and probing potential vocational commitments they might pursue in the future. Some cite their religious studies coursework as a catalyst for pause to ruminate on big, "meaning of life" questions. For example, Danny reflects,

> *"I think the courses allow you to grapple with the material, but a lot of times there really aren't answers. I think it's impractical to expect like, after I've come out of this course I'll understand like the reason for finding meaning in life. And so it's just like that exercise of like trying to figure out and look at an issue [more deeply]. And through a lot of my elective classes I've been able to do that."*

Thus, "grappling" with the big questions raised in courses leads to a self-awareness about the limits of human knowledge while furthering one's probing commitment toward the lifelong pursuit of understanding. Zach reflects on the difficulty of distinguishing his religious and academic engagement with Buddhism because his religious search for meaning is so "rational" and "academic." Thus, for him, subjective meaning-making is dependent upon engaging coursework as an "objective listener" ("as much as you can be"), pausing to open oneself up to the images conveyed through course materials as a medium for growing understanding of the human condition. This striving to eliminate bias in order to more objectively perceive the nature of reality creates a self-awareness about one's positionaliy and biases. Evan recalls how the mandatory 300 class helped him to pause and critique his own assumptions along with those of the authors.

> *"We wouldn't really focus so much on what they were saying and if it was true or false but more like how they said what their argument was and like presuppositions they bring into that. And that kind of added another layer of understanding, so like, why do I write the way I do, and how do I approach the things I do, and what power structures am I sort of implying in what I'm saying."*

Sometimes critiques engaged in class may be experienced on a personal level. The challenge to defend one's imagining of reality can create an opportunity for enhanced self-awareness which then guides further probing commitment. As a Jew who has engaged with a variety of traditions and experimented with alternative forms of practice, Lara found herself defending such syncretistic innovations in her Modern Judaism class, leading her to reflect critically upon her appropriation of Hindu images into her practice during time spent in India.

> *"Like what does it mean that I have image that I don't really understand the history behind?...I know that I'm changing what they are. And I think that that's limiting to me too because, I know I'm using my imagination with them. When I engage with Jewish practice I can be more...I'm more easily engaging in something that I experience as real, an actual manifestation of something in my spirituality. Like I can feel power that is not my imagination, but I also have like...I also intentionally use my imagination in my spirituality."*

Such self-reflection about one's engagement with meaningful symbols can sometimes render them "broken." As Paul Tillich argues, when a symbol is broken, its power to represent the

ultimate is compromised.[120] The young adult in the throes of faith transition craves new images which apprehend a complexified understanding of the ideal. Pause opens the individual's mind to perceive and receive **"**a unifying and simplifying image that shapes into one the disparate elements of the conflicts."

Symbolic Function: Articulating the Ideal through Image

Fowler argues that stage 4 individuals are bent on "demythologizing" the symbol, asking, "but what does it mean?" in order to extract the propositional truth conveyed. Parks tends to deemphasize the drive to demythologize, allowing for a wider variety of forms of symbolic engagement and function, for as she and Tillich argue, ultimate reality can only be represented through symbol.[121] While such images can be found through any discipline, religious studies constantly exposes students to a uniquely concentrated collection of time-tested images purporting to represent the ultimate conditions of existence. Thus, Parks' general call for professors to take moral responsibility for their powerful role as providers of images to meaning-hungry young adults is particularly appropriate for religious studies academics. She provocatively frames the syllabus as a "confession of faith" which implicitly identifies the "worthy images, insights, concepts, sources and methods of learning that [the professor] has found to lead toward a worthy apprehension of truth."[122] Thus, she argues "Educators must recognize that the images they offer are being appropriated in the meaning-making process of each learner, often in vastly different ways....Yet it is the student's imagination that finally conditions the truth that will be 'learned.'"[123] Parks identifies four criteria by which young adults will evaluate the power of presented images in order to selectively appropriate them for their ongoing project of meaning

---

[120] Tillich, Paul. *Dynamics of Faith*. New York: Harper & Row, 1957. 41-54.
[121] Ibid. While I see the role of the demythologizing orientation in this stage, I too think it necessary to at allow for more variety. I would argue that Jungian temperamental type, i.e. intuition vs. sensing, thinking vs. feeling may be more determinative for symbolic function than age/stage. Thus, I frame the general function of both metaphoric and propositional symbols as sources the expansion of understanding in young adult faith.
[122] Parks. *The Critical Years*. 174.
[123] Ibid., 150.

construction. They seek images "(1) that give fitting form to truth, (2) that resonate with their lived experience, (3) that capture the 'ideal' and (4) that recognize and name the dynamic character of ongoing transformation."[124] While the most effective symbols will possess all four qualities, it is helpful to highlight examples in the experiences of our subjects one by one.

Shannon found the contextualized stories of the religious dimensions of the lives of everyday women from her *Women, Religion and Ethnography* class to convey "how religion is actually practiced" much more effectively than the orthodox forms presented through historical survey, textual or theoretical courses she took. She appreciated

> *"going in-depth with one specific group of people, looking at their religion; looking at what they eat, what they wear, how they do it. It just feels like you learn a lot more about people based on what they do...It's much easier and more entertaining to read a story somebody's telling you, than somebody's theory about their story that they're telling you."*

Similarly, Evan described finding truth in the novels of Fyodor Dostoevsky, Flannery O'Connor and James Joyce *because* their characters' experiences and expressions of faith resonate with his own. Evan also referenced one of his professor mentor's expressions of faith as an image which faithfully represented his own experience of transcendence.

> *"She said, she doesn't think that everyone like feels this way or necessarily experiences being in this way. But when she sits there, like when she goes on retreats to St. John the Evangelist. And she said when she sits there at the Tabernacle with a candle in front of it, she feels a longing and that longing makes sense for her. And I would say in a similar way for me there's that longing and attraction."*

Zach's lived experience of engagement with Tibetan Buddhist philosophy and poetry at the Buddhist Institute of Dialectics in Dharamsala through the Emory-Tibet Partnership involved progression towards truth within an ideal community. Both elements are embodied in the shrine he created after his return:

> *"The shrine I think is just a way for me to connect and feel a part of the community. It's not like Tibetans come to my shrine, it's just that it reminds me of the tradition. And it makes me happy on a personal level. I have statues and images. And they're meant to serve the purpose of reminding you of the philosophy behind it. Like they've started to pick up those roles."*

---

[124] Ibid., 147.

Similarly, Ali seems to have glimpsed the ideal in the Hindu and Muslim architecture he compared through his directed study with Dr. Samuels.

> *"So the esoteric and the exoteric dimensions of both of them are just mind blowing. So at one level it just looks like simple architecture, but once you really connect it with the theological tenets of the faith you see them popping all over...And that's what really got me, looking behind the surface and trying to see what's beneath the surface."*

The image of the ideal hidden in the mundane thus provided a powerful experience rippling outward from this expository comparison of the physical structure of two buildings. Likewise, Kevin perceived ideal virtues such as generosity and compassion in the Jataka tales, motivating him to learn more about Buddhist traditions. These stories of the Buddha's previous lives as Bodhisattvas tell an ongoing story of transformation through successive reincarnations culminating in the attainment of Nirvana as Shakyamuni. Steven's aforementioned experience of conscious conflict through the *Ethics of Jesus* course was assuaged when his professor provided a more personal image of ongoing transformation through religious studies. The professor decided to hold an additional optional class meeting for the Christians in the class who were struggling with the conflicts between their conventional images of Jesus and the historical Jesus presented in the class. "I think that really helped. He sort of showed that you can be in academic study of religion, understand and look at it logically and still believe at the same time. And you don't need to separate those two; you can be both." The professor's story sufficiently resonated with Steven's own experience to provide a vision of resolution to his current crisis. While these aforementioned images were novel, Parks emphasizes that educators can also provide opportunities for students to reconstruct more adequate versions of images already present. Taylor, a Catholic, describes how her in-depth instruction in the Hebrew Scriptures produced a powerful new image of God, demonstrating the satisfaction of all four criteria in a single image:

> *"It had always been troubling to me that God just kind of -- how do I say this -- He's like always the same, that's how He's depicted that He's always the same thing. But then when you get down to reading the text, you see He has flaws, He gets angry, He develops over time. It gave me, personally, the hope that I could also mature over time. And at the*

> *same time, it was also interesting to me that people don't seem to pick up on the idea of God maturing, because He wants you to do that."*

Here we see Taylor's engagement with scripture which conflicted with her fracturing symbol of an unchanging God providing a new image which seemed to more truthfully represent an ideal corresponding to her lived experience of dynamic transformation. Whether novel or reconstructed, such images demand what Parks calls a "repatterning" of one's conception of the ultimate conditions of existence which releases a powerful surge of energy for further exploration of reality.

Form of World Coherence: Repatterning and Release toward World Engagement

Parks argues that such image informed "repatterning" often requires guidance. The mentoring community of imagination helps the student to draw connections between the particular insight and the larger whole and identify concomitant implications when courses are explicitly grounded in the realities of students' everyday lives. For example, the weekly practice of critiquing contemporary news articles in 490 gives students a chance to apply the theoretical tools and analytical skills acquired to better understand events shaping their world. Ali applies Talal Asad's theory of symbols, a powerful image which resonated with his experience, for example, to the recent uproar in Afghanistan over the unintentional burning of Qurans by NATO officers.

> *"Symbols are continually evolving and they're dynamic and they're based off of the connections they have with the community and with particular people. So if you look at the Quran for example, for some people it's a very divine symbol and for some people it's not. And I guess I was thinking that but I wasn't able to articulate it very well [until reading Asad]. And that's something that just keeps coming up in my writing again and again."*

Thus, the resonant theoretical image releases energy to share one's insights with the world. As Parks argues, "one of the consequences of the release of tension and energy is a feeling of enlargement, a new quality of openness to self and world."[125] The release of energy helps the young adult move from the construction of an explicit, ideal system that is "over against" the

[125] Parks. *The Critical Years.* 126.

world "as is" to a more mature testing of their ideals against the reality of the actual. One form of such testing is the sharing of new insights with conversation partners. Zach expresses a constant need for such dialogue:

> *"I'm always looking for someone around me that I can talk to about [my studies], because that's always been important to me to have someone to discuss these things with outside of class. I think I probably feel the most isolated and like alone when I can't have intellectual conversations with people around me if it's like an extended period of time."*

For many this motivation to engage insights gained through religious studies through dialogue centers around the resolution of the problem of pluralism and the exclusive claims of their religious traditions.

Religion majors are energized to engage their religious differences with "others" by repatterning which occurs through both insights into their own traditions and others with which they are engaged. For the devout members of our sample, such repatterning and engagement requires a great deal of conscious effort. Evan spoke repeatedly about the value of religious studies in equipping him with vocabulary to engage a "post-Christian" world.

> *"I don't know if I would [utilize a Catholic understanding of Christianity as the fullest expression of relationship with God] because it tends to denigrate like other traditions to say that they don't have like a fullness. But at the same time I mean I do affirm these creeds that talk about Jesus as the Resurrection and life found through him. And I find the term Logos, like the Word or whatever to be very helpful within an interreligious setting. Like Tillich talks about participation in being and confronting non-being. And I could say I believe like my relationship with Christ is participation in being and like acknowledging non-being, and conferring that usually with terms with being as relates to Christ and non-being as relates to sin. And I could say that in an interreligious setting and it would seem like it would be appropriate and not abandoning an orthodox perspective, or a perspective that I would like to consider orthodox. And so I think that developing this vocabulary has been helpful while at the same time expanding."*

Haleema has also reframed key boundary-defining terms in her tradition to enable engagement with others. The shock of familiarity that accompanied her study of ancient Israelite religion repatterned her views of Judaism which released energy to engage images present in Islam in new ways that promoted further engagement with other religious traditions. The experience cast the depiction of Abraham as a Muslim in the Quran in a new light, expanding her concept of what it meant to have faith and submit to God.

> *"Yeah, so faith transcends identifying markers. So it's a universal concept. And lately it's been branching out…beyond "People of the Book." Like I've asked about people who ascribe to polytheistic traditions. Like do I think that just because they believe in more gods that they're going to go directly to hell, because they could have been the best person in any other way...yeah I think that's one thing that's been a significant change in my beliefs over the last couple of years, my declining dependence on that [traditional] marker."*

For those less deeply invested in their traditions, such expansive repatterning is somewhat simpler, often taking the popular form of "many paths to God" rather than a precisely articulated pluralistic theology. For example, Shannon, who never quite "bought in" to the Southern Baptist Christianity she was exposed to growing up expresses her repatterned inclusivity rather straightforwardly:

> *"I think learning about other traditions has helped kind of illuminate my own, because it really isn't so different. Why does God have to be attached to just a Christian God or a Jewish God or a Muslim God? Why can't God be all these things for different people. But like I said, I would still – if asked, if pressured, would probably still identify as Christian."*

But for others, pluralism doesn't seem to present any special problem beyond the more general challenge of engaging diversity proactively. For Ellie, the repatterning and release through religious studies is toward a generally more comprehensive understanding of the world which motivates a deeper engagement with others through one's vocation, medicine in her case.

> *"Like in my religion and healing classes, [we learned that] when a person comes to you and is sick, you have to actually realize that they're not just the illness or the disease, but they have a history, and they're within a community. I think that's important. The religion major has ingrained that in me. When you look at someone, you really need to look at them…As I said it provides you with a much more broader, a much more comprehensive perspective on life… I think that's really taught me you…need to have a much more global understanding."*

Here Ellie is moving towards interpretation, expressing acquired insights through public action.

Form of Community: Ideological Commitment and Interpretation

In Parks' model, "interpretation" connotes the claiming of one's voice in order share insights gained with others. Every paper religion majors write can potentially serve as an opportunity for such ideological interpretation, particularly more advanced, self-directed forms of autonomous research like the case study assignments in the required courses 300 and 490 and the

optional honors thesis. In my interviews, students unanimously highlighted growing confidence in their ability to clearly articulate their ideas as one of a major benefit of the religion major.[126] According to Parks the primary function of the community of imagination in the moment of interpretation is that of a necessary sounding board: "Young adults require initiation into an awareness of their dependence upon a larger community for both the confirmation and contradiction of insight."[127] She argues that the appropriate "form of community" for the young adult is "ideological," offering an opportunity for them to articulate an ideal vision of the world as it ought to be, oftentimes through critique of the world as is. This need for collaborative evaluation of one's academic interpretation has been a consistent and prominent theme in our 490 class. Our instructors has repeatedly reminded us that "scholarship happens through collaborative group work. It is not a solo enterprise." Moreover, they self-consciously have structured the class in order to provide such opportunities for collaboration in a variety of ways.

But Parks' concept of interpretation is intimately tied to the realization of full-fledged adulthood through the testing of commitments. We have seen how the religion major plays a pivotal role in the contradiction of previously held notions in conscious conflict and the confirmation of emerging insights through images. But for Parks, interpretation is not complete until actualized through social affiliation and public action. Here we begin to look beyond the classroom toward "the relevance of that work for life in the world" (to quote the Goals of Religion Study), i.e., the application of knowledge gained toward "positive transformation" "in the service of humanity" (to quote the university vision and mission statements). Parks argues that such public commitment is the reconciliation between one's clarified identity and ideals and the practical demands, realities and limitations of the social world, a process that can take several years. As these students look beyond graduation, they are faced with the daunting task of integrating their interpretations of themselves, their ideals and the "real world" in order to

---

[126] Several also pointed out that this is a benefit common to all writing-intensive liberal arts majors.
[127] Parks. *The Critical Years.* 160.

identify a community which enables them to test and actualize their crystallizing faith commitments. A small minority appear well on their way to resolution. At the far end of this pole of the spectrum we have Danny, whose religion major itself is a reflection of his commitment to pursue a career as an ordained minister in the denominational institution he was baptized into as an infant. Ellie seems similarly secure in her somewhat denominationally flexible commitment to Judaism and unwavering pursuit of a vocation in medicine. Ali describes settling comfortably into his Ismaeli Shi'a identity years ago and seems more or less set on some kind of career in business. Others are moving gradually towards crystallizing probing commitments. For example, Taylor has been mentored toward testing her commitment to religious studies through graduate work in a variety of ways. One professor simply made himself available for discussions concerning her academic and vocational interests, allowing her to think aloud and bounce ideas off of an expert in the field. Another professor was more proactive, initiating a conversation in which she forcefully expressed her desire for Taylor to continue her studies at the graduate level. Yet another has helped connect Taylor to the wider community of religious scholars beyond Emory. Lara has also benefitted from mentors who have exposed her to a variety of ways of potentially integrating her passions for her Jewish faith, music, religious studies, and inter-religious dialogue. Similarly, Evan is weighing options for pursuing his passions for religious studies and contemplative practice including the professorate, ministry and the monastic life. But for the majority, vocational trajectories are vague at best. For most, passions and ideals have been clarified to some degree, but the way forward to engaging those passions may take some time to step back and "pause." Take Kevin for example:

> *"I want to do something that may involve medicine, but...would be connected to Buddhism or religion in some way or looking into religion, to be a teacher or PhD at some point...But not for a little while, I wanna take some time off and see...where I really wanna go, there's many, many options that are open. I figured I'll find that out [if I] take a year break. At this point, now that I've already had all of these transitions, I kind of want to switch it around and make religion my priority because I feel like it's really affected my life…"*

Kevin's reflections illustrate that for many the challenge to make a vocational commitment to realize one's passions in the real world is intimately linked to the equally daunting challenge to complete the transformation of their religious affiliation from yet another demographic accident of one's birth to a personal faith commitment.

It seems that the deconstruction of reified religious entities and their boundaries and ideologies may render the task of publicly affiliating with a religious identity and community particularly difficult. Though he has not engaged in Christian practice in several years, has been studying Buddhism for the past two and now engages in daily practice, Kevin is more comfortable identifying as Christian than Buddhist. Throughout our interview I could see that his engagement with Buddhism was enormously meaningful to him and affected his daily life, but my probes couldn't reveal any clear Christian influences at all. He ultimately says that he would like to consider himself "Buddhist by religious tradition but Christian by faith." He seems to mean that he believes in God and salvation through Jesus on some level, while finding "inner happiness" and existential comfort through his Buddhist practice. We have seen how Farrin still labels herself as "non-religious" even while recognizing the profound ethical influence upon her as evidence that she is "really religious," though not in a way that aligns with any particular tradition. Taylor, who unambiguously describes herself as a theist, reads the Bible constantly, and engages in a whole host of Catholic, Buddhist and "new age" practices has somehow settled on "secular Catholic" as the most appropriate public identification. Shiv, thoroughly engaged in his Hindu tradition while appropriating a number of practices and teachings from other traditions, is like much of his generation in increasingly preferring the more vague, individualistic descriptor "spiritual" to the institutional connotations of "religious." Stacey still claims Christianity but is clearly uncomfortable with the exclusive claims implied by this affiliation. Megan continues to be skeptical of Catholic doctrine and teaching while planning to continue to participate in the communal practice which has been so formative for her. Jennifer, whose religious studies

experience has been accompanied by declining commitment to Christianity and increasing interest in Buddhism, simply prefers to avoid any and all affiliative labels at this point. Similarly, Zach says he increasingly shies away from publicly labeling himself as a Buddhist, not because of any misgivings about the tradition, but because of the limiting stereotypes that others may apply to him. He has similar misgivings about labeling himself "religious" or "spiritual." For all of these students, the lines between their religious studies and their personal religious commitments have been blurred thoroughly, greatly complexifying one's religious identity in the process. Even hijab-wearing Haleema, who strikes me as a fairly devout, mainstream Sunni Muslim has found this identity confused by her studies:

> *"I have very strong Sunni roots, but it's hard to define what Sunni is, it just means not Shi'ia. So there's no real thing as like Sunni thought, it's not one constant thing…so I don't know how to answer what kind of Muslim I am. All I can say is not this, not that, not this. So...I don't know. I feel like my practice of religion has strongly been influence by my undergraduate religion."*

When it comes to religious identity, perhaps the ideological commitment to rigorous critique defining the religious studies community of imagination offers more in the way of contradiction than confirmation, making the challenge of religious identification in pluralistic 21st century America exceptionally difficult. As these students struggle to arrive at a public identity which does justice to the complex, multifarious images of the ideal they have constructed through their deep engagement with the dizzyingly diverse world of religious phenomena, one can admire the integrity in their resistance to the pragmatic compromise of adult faith, the commitment to engage the world on its terms. But one is left to wonder what might become of their complex, conflicted engagements with religious phenomena when they leave the "holding environment" of the community of imagination. I share Parks conviction that they are going to need a new community to continue to confirm and contradict their insights, but perceive the task of finding a religious institution that can address their unique needs to be quite daunting. Parks' entire argument for young adulthood as a discrete life/faith stage rests on her assertion that the prerequisite for such

public commitment is the reconciliation between one's clarified identity and ideals and the practical demands, realities and limitations of our increasingly complex social world. In the persistent ambivalence, promise and vulnerability of these adult religion majors, we see confirmation of her theoretical contributions.

CONCLUSION: LIMITATIONS, IMPLICATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

I have employed a "pragmatic historicist" ethnographic design informed by relevant empirical literature, an exploration of the social, historical, institutional and intellectual context, and a particularized theoretical model of faith development through higher education to investigate the research question: "How does engagement in critical academic exposure to religious phenomena within a diverse community of practitioners of religious studies influence the subjective faith of young adults?" I have employed a six-stage analytical model informed by Sharon Parks and James Fowler's models of faith development to highlight four defining developmental movements in the religion major experience:

> 1) The overwhelming of students' conventional conceptions of reality through exposure to a wide variety of religious traditions, beliefs and practices within sustained critical dialogue among a diverse community of scholars, creating a need for expansion of their faith perspectives.
>
> **Demonstrated primarily through *Form of Cognition: Probing Commitment through Conscious Conflict.***
>
> 2) Exposure to a wide variety of religious representations of the ideal from which students adaptively reconstruct a more personally meaningful and comprehensive conception of "the ultimate conditions of existence" with the assistance of intentionally selected scholarly mentors.
>
> **Demonstrated primarily through *Symbolic Function: Articulating the Ideal through Image.***
>
> 3) The acquisition of life skills including analysis of complex social-historical phenomena and articulation and defense of controversial claims and convictions which empower students to proactively engage the challenges and complexities of their social worlds with courage and competence.
>
> **Demonstrated primarily through *Form of World Coherence: Repatterning and Release toward World Engagement.***

4) Struggle to reconcile their ideal identities, aspirations and conceptions of the "ultimate conditions of existence" with the actual social realities students confront and the compromises they require.

Demonstrated primarily through *Form of Community: Ideological Commitment and Interpretation.*

Through these four movements these individuals made constructed an independent, young adult faith. Each is "(1) aware of one's own composing of reality, (2)participate[s] self-consciously in an ongoing dialogue toward truth, and…(3) take[s] responsibility for seeing and reweaving a fitting pattern of relationships between the disparate elements of self and world."[128] I have argued that their embrace of the authority of the mentoring community of imagination of the Department of Religion through their major has played an important role in the development of an independent adult identity and suggested that it may have also complicated the challenge to publicly realize that identity through tested adult commitments.

Limitations

The above summary of my argument is a story about human meaning making through the negotiation of a dizzying array of cultural, social, psychological, political, religious, spiritual and educational forces conditioned by time and space. And like all human beings, my ability to attend to and elucidate these complex interactions is limited by my powers of perception, which are in turn conditioned by all of these particularities, most of all the time and space allotted to me. I have chosen a narrative format so that the reader (especially the reader who is also one of my subjects) can hopefully grasp and identify with the temporal and spatial progression of this construction of meaning. But like any narrative, it obscures alternative meanings and narratives in the very act of shedding light on its themes. However, I believe that this very particularly and subjectivity of the story I have told provides an illustration of the very process of meaning-making I hope to describe in the lives of my subjects. Just as I have argued that engagement in the Emory religious studies community has shaped the faith of my subjects, this project has

[128] Parks, Sharon. *The Critical Years: The Young Adult Search for a Faith to Live By*. San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1986. 6.

profoundly impacted my own faith consciously and subconsciously. Thus, the writing of this thesis is itself "an expression of [dynamic] faith," and each and every interview has been a collaborative process of "faithing," to use James Fowler's terms. But as Robert Bellah argues, this subjective involvement is inherent to all social scientific study:

> "In the social sciences we study the same kind of beings that we are. Unlike the natural scientists, we are not 'outside' what we study and certainly not 'above' it. To imagine that we are is to deprive those we study of their dignity by treating them as objects. It is also to imagine that we understand them better than they understand themselves because our heads are not filled with the muddled ideas, false consciousness, traditions, and superstitions (murk and vestiges) that theirs are…We can undertake inquiry only by continuing our dialogue with those we study and relative to whom we are as much students as teachers."[129]

My subjects have certainly been my teachers, and I hope to continue to learn more from them as they read and critique this story about their "faithing" through religious studies and emergence into adulthood.

Of course, my particular method of social scientific inquiry has strengths and weaknesses. While my semi-structured interview and participant-observation methods yield a contextualized, in-depth look into the experiences of these religion majors which reveal complex dynamics and commonalities, my study lacks the breadth to make broad claims about religious studies in other contexts. The lack of a comparison group is certainly a weakness. Thus, my suggestions that religious studies might make a particularly acute impact on faith development (in comparison to other majors) are entirely speculative. Ultimately, I have not *proven* the religion major at Emory to *cause* anything. I have simply collected and represented many causal attributions by the individuals engaged in this practice which the reader may choose to trust or doubt. As these mainly consist of memories of past experiences, global reflections, and self-representations, they are reconstructions and acts of faithful imagination in and of themselves. By focusing on common structural patterns of development, I have not given as much attention to differences and contrasts, though I have tried to represent the diversity of the sample as faithfully

---

[129] Bellah, Robert. "The Ethical Aims of Social Inquiry." *The Robert Bellah Reader.* Page 397-398.

as possible. Of course, there are many other kinds of factors and outcomes that I have neglected in favor of the ones I have chosen based on my biased view of what I have found to be most interesting. In light of my focus on faith development, a significant weakness is that my interview and coding procedures were only generally informed by Fowler's *Faith Development Manual*, thus I can not claim to psychologically evaluate the "official" faith stage position of any particular individual in the group. I can only make informed estimations based on my knowledge of the theory and the subject in question. However, this too is merely the downside to one of the study's strengths. By starting with a series of broad, open-ended questions about the religion major, religious background, current beliefs and practices, and potential interactions between all of them and selecting a theoretical framework based on the data that emerges, I believe I have mitigated the distortions of deductive imposition and enhanced the reliability of my claims.

Implications

I have argued that the powerful impact of religious studies education on these individuals problematizes many of the false yet operative binaries exposed through the 490 course (i.e., secular/religious, religious studies/theology, confessional/non-sectarian, etc.). But like Parks, I do not see this as a unique problem for religious studies. "Educators of young adults have little choice about whether or not they will influence the recomposing of faith and the formation of the dream that will shape later adulthood, for this is the central agenda of young adults."[130] Thus, any professor who is reaching students in a profound way will necessarily be providing resources to be appropriated in their faith (re)formation projects. Thus, it is fallacious for a professor to say "we're only interested in the development of their minds (not their faith)" as one recently told me. For as Parks argues,

> "It is the whole life of the student that, rather than the mind alone, is being addressed and recomposed by the encounter with a professor who affirms the mind in the self. The whole fabric of a student's life, multiple dimensions of meaning, are being transformed

[130] Parks. *The Critical Years*. 150.

> when he or she is enlivened by new vistas of understanding and invited into and trusted in new arenas of competence."[131]

Thus, while this research would seem to raise significant questions surrounding of the "separation of church and state" had it been conducted at a publicly funded university, I would argue that any university truly educating its students is already engaged in shaping their whole selves, including whichever aspects of them are deemed "religious." Still, I have argued that the subject matter of "religion" does make religious studies more directly engaged in these matters, and suggested that it *may* be more impactful for faith development than other majors. Thus, I believe Parks' calls for self-conscious responsibility for the role one plays in faith development (and the challenging of religious commitments) is particularly appropriate for professors of religion. As Parks provocatively argues, "when the academy serves as a community of imagination, initiating the young adult into a self-conscious composing of truth in its most comprehensive dimensions, the true professor serves, inevitably, as a spiritual guide."[132] Again, this is not a controversial option, but rather a role the *profess*or necessarily plays in the lives of their meaning-hungry students. "The one who teaches because he or she has something to profess will scarcely be able to avoid the role of spiritual guide. Thus, the issue resolves into one of what sort of guidance the professor will elect to provide."[133]

I am not suggesting that professors are responsible for providing pastoral care for their students. That is, of course, the job of chaplains, campus religious organizations and congregations. Faith development research in general, and the particular cases of structural expansion of transformation described here offers a cautionary tale to religious institutions who would obstinately resist the relativization and "spiritual struggle" which often occurs through the world expanding college experience. Those who try to theologically stiff-arm the alternative perspectives their college attending congregants encounter in order to maintain an obedient flock

---

[131] Ibid., 172.
[132] Ibid., 165.
[133] Ibid., 173.

of synthetic-conventional sheep are likely to lose adherents and wound them in the process. Congregations who want to actively keep their young adult members involved should create opportunities for them to share their experiences, doubts, new inspiring images and probing commitments without censure. Stage 4 and 5 members of the congregation might also serve to counsel them and provide hope for resolution and continued growth through testimony about past struggles and subsequent deliverance (as we saw in the optional *Ethics of Jesus* lecture Steven referenced). Finally, religious adapters like Shiv and Taylor may benefit from new institutional forms which create space for cross-polination and polyphonic practice.

Future Directions

Though it has fallen off the radar since Fowler's retirement, I believe that faith development theory offers promising new directions for social scientific research on religious change in college. Future qualitative studies might compare different types of majors, institutions, religious groups, racial and ethnic groups, genders, etc. Through this project I have grown particularly interested in how temperament might play into the engagement with or resistance to diverse religious phenomena and the "repatterning" of one's faith that occurs through these "conscious conflicts." One might investigate how "openness to experience" or Carl Jung's temperamental type theory (particularly the perceiving vs. judging scale developed by Myers and Briggs) might inform the ways in which particularly individuals negotiate religious education and pluralism. While efforts to create a reliably pencil and paper measure of faith stage have thus far been unsuccessful,[134] quantitative studies might explore the impact of religious studies in a wider variety of institutional settings along the lines identified by Parks' theoretical model. The enlivening experience of conducting this research has encouraged me to continue to pursue one of these promising lines of further exploration myself and has thus been a testing of probing commitment in its own right.

---

[134] Astley, Jeff. "On Gaining and Losing Faith with Style: a Study in Post-Modernity and/or Confusion Among College Students." In Francis, L.J., Katz, Y.J. (Eds.) *Joining and Leaving Religon.* Trowbridge: Gracewing, 2000.

References

Allport, Gordon. *The Individual and His Religion: A Psychological Interpretation.* New York: Macmillan, 1950.

Asad, Talal. "Reading a Modern Classic: W.C. Smith's *The Meaning and End of Religion*." *History of Religions*. 40 (3), 2001.

Astley, Jeff. "On Gaining and Losing Faith with Style: a Study in Post-Modernity and/or Confusion Among College Students." In Francis, L.J., Katz, Y.J. (Eds.) *Joining and Leaving Religon.* Trowbridge: Gracewing, 2000.

Bellah, R. N., Madsen, R., Sullivan, W.M., Swidler, A. Tipton, S.M. *The Good Society*. New York: Vintage Books, 1991.

Brown, Delwin. "Academic Theology in the University or Why an Ex-Queen's Heir Should Be Made a Subject*." Religious Studies, Theology and the University.* Ed. Cady, Linell and Brown, Delwin. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002. 137.

Brown, Delwin. "Refashioning Self and Other: Theology, Academy and the New Ethnography." *Converging on Culture: Theologians in Dialogue with Cultural Analysis and Criticism.* Ed. Brown, Delwin, et al. New York: Oxford University Press, 2001.

Bryant, Alyssa and Astin, Helen. "The Correlates of Spiritual Struggle During the College Years." *The Journal of Higher Education*. 79 (1), 2008. 12-14.

Bryant, A.N. "Exploring Religious Pluralism in Higher Education: Non-Majority Religious Perspectives among Entering First-Year College Students." *Religion & Education*. Vol. 33(1), 2010.

Bowman, L.M.A. "Understanding the Study of Religion in Undergraduate Programs of Religious Studies as Religious Education." *Religious Education.* Vol. 101(2): 143-146, 2006.

Cady, Linell. "Loosening the Category That Binds." *Converging on Culture: Theologians in Dialogue with Cultural Analysis and Criticism.* Ed. Brown, Delwin, et al. New York: Oxford University Press, 2001.

Cherry, C., Deberg, B.A., Porterfield, A. *Religion on Campus.* Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2001.

Chesnek, C. "Our Subject 'Over There?': Scrutinizing the Distance Between Religion and Its Study." In Cady, L.E., Brown, D. (Eds.) *Religious Studies, Theology and the University: Conflicting Maps, Changing Terrain.* Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001.

Clydesdale, Tim. "Abandoned, Pursued, or Safely Stowed?" *SSRC*. Feb 06, 2007.

Corcoran, H.A. "A Synthesis of Narratives: Religious Undergraduate Students Making Meaning in the Context of a Secular University." *Concordia*, 2007.

Fowler, J.W. Stages of Faith: *The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning*. New York: HarperOne, 1981.

Gill, Sam. "Embodied Theology." *Religious Studies, Theology and the University.* Ed. Cady, Linell and Brown, Delwin. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002.

Holcomb, Gay and Nonneman, Arthur. "Faithful Change: Exploring and Assessing Faith Development in Christian Liberal Arts Undergraduates." *New Directions for Institutional Research.* 122, 2004. 100.

Mayrl, D., Oeur, F. "Religion and Higher Education: Current Knowledge and Directions for Future Research." *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion,* 48(2): 260-275, 2009.

Parks, S. *The Critical Years: The Young Adult Search for a Faith to Live By.* San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1986.

Patel, J. "Do Students Retain Their Religious Identity in College?" Honors Dissertation. Emory College, Department of Journalism, 2010.

Pearce, L.D. Denton, M.L. *A Faith of Their Own: Stability and Change in the Religiosity of America's Adolescents*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2011.

Regnerus, Mark; Uecker, Jeremy. "How Corrosive Is College to Religious Faith and Practice?" *SSRC*. Feb 05, 2007.

Robertson, Lori. "Fact check: Santorum on College, Faith." *USA Today* News. Feb 27 2012. http://www.usatoday.com/news/politics/story/2012-02-27/fact-check-santorum-college-faith/53274624/1

Sawicki, Marianne. "Religion, Symbol, and the Twenty-Year-Old Demythologizer." *Horizons*. 11(2): 320-343, 1984.

Small, J.L., Bowman, N.A. "Religious Commitment, Skepticism, and Struggle Among U.S. College Students: The Impact of Majority/Minority Religious Affiliation and Institutional Type." *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion.* 50 (1): 154-174, 2011.

Smith, Christian and Snell, Patricia. *Souls in Transition: The Religious & Spiritual Lives of Emerging Adults*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2009.

Smith, W.C. *The Meaning and End of Religion*. New York: Macmillan, 1962.

Tillich, Paul. *Dynamics of Faith*. New York: Harper & Row, 1957.

Appendix A: Interview Schedule

BACKGROUND

1. First, I need to know your age, your year here at Emory, any other majors/minors, etc.
2. Please tell me a little about your background. Where you grew up, where you went to school, how many siblings you have, what your parents do for a living, and so on. \
   a. Tell me about your college selection process; how did you decide to come to Emory?

MAJOR SELECTION

3. Tell me a little bit about your selection of your major(s). When did you first consider majoring in religion? What were some of the experiences that encouraged you to choose to be a religion major? How and when did you finally decide to declare your religion major?
4. Were there any obstacles to choosing a religion major? Did anyone discourage you from majoring in religion/advocate an alternative option?
5. How satisfied have you been with your decision? Have you enjoyed the experience? What have you liked and disliked about it? What have you gained from majoring in religion?
6. How do people generally react when you tell them you are a religion major? Describe the variety of reactions.
7. Do you plan to continue to pursue religious studies formally in the future?
   If so, what do you hope to study? Do you have specific long-term professional goals in this field?
   If not, do you have any specific ideas about professions you are considering pursuing? How do you think your religious studies might directly or indirectly prepare you for this/these field(s)?
8. Would you encourage others to consider a major in religion? Why or why not?

MAJOR EXPERIENCE

9. What kinds of classes have you taken? Have you pursued a focus in a particular tradition or topic? How did you choose this focus/these classes?
10. Have any of the classes you have taken have been particularly interesting, influential or impactful? How so? Tell me about these experiences.
11. Are there any professors who have been particularly influential for you? How so?
12. Have you read any works/authors/articles that have made a strong impact on you? Which and how so?
13. Have your classes fostered lively/interesting class discussions? Any that were particularly memorable? What do you remember about them?
14. Has your study of religion sparked any interesting conversations with your peers outside the department? If so, give some examples…

PERSONAL RELIGIOSITY

15. First, tell me a little about your religious background. Were you raised in a particular tradition? How central was this identity to your childhood? Did your family engage in religious practices frequently? What kinds of beliefs and practices were most important?
16. How would you describe your religious beliefs now? Maybe three or four sentences that would summarize the most important beliefs.
17. Do you participate in any formal religious organizations, either here on campus or at home?
   What kind of activities and practices do you engage in?
19. Can you tell me how you came to be involved in this group? Why did you join?
   What is the most important thing you get out of this group?
20. How did you come to these beliefs and practices? Tell me about your spiritual development/"journey"? Are there any particularly significant experiences which has shaped your beliefs?
   b. If significant changes have occured: Have these changes caused any conflict with family, friends, etc.?

21. Can you tell me what "spirituality" means to you (how do you distinguish this concept from "religion"? How important is spirituality to you? In what ways would you say spirituality is a part of your identity? Do you engage in any regular practices you would consider to be spiritual?
22. Do you ever read Scripture? How does this reading influence you?
23. Do you pray regularly? Can you tell me about it?
24. a) Do you believe in God or a Higher Power?
    b) If yes, what is your image of God? How do you view God?
    If no, how do you feel about others' belief in God?
    c) Do you believe we are capable of communicating with God? How close do you feel to God? What do you do to feel closer to God?
25. How do you feel about religious traditions other than your own? How do you engage people from different religious traditions? Are you comfortable discussing your beliefs with them? Have you had any interesting interactions with peers from other traditions during your time here at Emory?

RELIGIOUS STUDY AND RELIGIOUS BELIEF AND PRACTICE

26. Did your personal religious beliefs influence your decision to become a religion major? How so?
27. Do your personal beliefs influence the way you process/interpret the material you encounter in your religion classes?
28. Has your study of religion influence you to reexamine or adjust any of your own religious beliefs? Did you expect/anticipate changes in beliefs?
29. Has your study of religion encouraged you to try any new religious practices (i.e., meditation, prayer, scripture reading, rituals/services, etc.)? Have you increased or decreased the frequency of any particular practices since majoring in religion? Did you expect practices to change as a result of studying religion academically?
30. Has your study of religious traditions other than your own changed the way you view that/those traditions or other religious traditions in general?
31. How sharp of a distinction is possible between personal religious engagement and academic study of religion? Is it appropriate to voice your own beliefs in class? What topics are considered "out of bounds" for classroom discussion?
    b. How possible is it to be objective/impartial/unbiased regarding religion?
32. Have you encountered any identifiable biases in your study of religion, either for or against particular traditions, types of engagement, or ideological positions?
33. How candid have professors been about sharing their own beliefs? What do you think is appropriate?
34. Overall, do you believe your study of religion impacted your religious/spiritual life--how strongly? Would you say you view the influence of religion on society more or less positively as a result of your studies? Do you consider yourself to be more or less religious now than when you first began studying religion at Emory? Did you expect the academic study of religion to have such an impact?

Appendix B: Coding System

Descriptive Codes:

Religiosity
    background beliefs

- background practices
- current beliefs
- current practices

Expectations (of religion major experience)
- expectations of change in perspective
- general expectations of nature of experience
- expectations of future applications/benefits

Academic Experience Influence
- professor influence
- course materials influence
- in-class peer interaction influence

Non-Academic Experience Influence
- personal interaction
- religious institutions
- extracurricular materials

Bias-Subjectivity/Objectivity Negotiation

Religion/Spirituality/Faith Distinction

Interpretive Codes:

Motivators (studying religion, religion major selection process and post-graduate study)
- positive motivators
- negative motivators

Perspective Modification
- belief reframing
- practice reframing
- other concept modification
- self-concept modification/identity negotiation
- religion concept modification

Belief Modification
- renouncing previously held belief
- instilling/inspiring new belief
- challenging previously held belief

Practice Modification
- practice reduction/cessation
- practice increase/adoption

Expectation/Experience Correlation
- explicit correlation
- implicit correlation

Pattern Codes:

Emerging into adulthood
- awareness of composition of reality
- self-conscious dialogue toward truth
- responsibility for reweaving relationship between self and world (faith)

Faith formation
- (problems of) faith and belief
- shipwreck: loss of anchors of trust
- faith as truth and trust
- faith as act

- faith as suffering
- faith as a verb

Form of Cognition
- authority bound dualistic (ao)
- unqualified relativism (transitional)
- probing commitment (ya)
- tested commitment (a)
- confirmed commitment (ma)

Form of Dependence
- dependent/counter-dependent (ao)
- fragile self-dependence (ya)
- confident self-dependence (a)
- interdependence (ma)

Form of Community
- conventional (ao)
- diffuse (transitional)
- ideological compatible communities (mentoring) (ya)
- self-selected class or group (within world-as-it-is)
- open to 'others' (ma)

Form of self
- derivative (ao)
- self-aware (ambivalent) (ya)
- self-reflective (centered) (a)
- wise-hearted (ma)

Locus of authority
- 'those who count' (outside the self) (ao)
- spokespersons or group procedures (validated by self) (ya)
- self (validated by group) (a)
- dialectic between self and selves in other groups (ma)

Form of World Coherence
- tacit system (ao)
- explicit system ('over-against') (ya)
- explicit system (world engaging) (a)
- multi-systemic (ma)

Terms of the Structure of the World
- interpersonal (ao)
- "ideal" (ya)
- pragmatic/ideal (a)
- integration of pragmatic & ideal (ma)

Type of Religiosity
- Abiders
- Adapters
- Assenters
- Avoiders
- Atheists