“Something Worth Believing In”: 
Student Understandings of Religion and Spirituality  

by  

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Introduction

Little by little, studying the infinite possibilities of a loss of memory, he realized that the day might come when things would be recognized by their inscriptions but that no one would remember their use...At the beginning of the road into the swamp they put up a sign that said "Macondo" and another larger one on the main street that said "God exists" (García Márquez, 1967/1972, p. 53).

Stories change, and with them humanity’s search for meaning takes on different forms. Meaning-making can be understood as “the symbolic activities that human beings employ in constructing and in making sense not only of the world, but of themselves” (Bruner, 1990, p. 2). Religion is one set of symbolic activities that allows us to make sense of an ultimate reality connecting the self to the world, and transcending both. But what happens to conceptions of that which lies beyond human understanding, when traditional symbols for it lose their meaning?

This quote from One Hundred Years of Solitude illustrates the central importance of symbols in expressing profound truths. In the village of Macondo, the townspeople worried that symbols were beginning to become empty of meaning, and so they made signs to remind themselves of what they would not want to forget: the name of their community, and an affirmation of the existence of a higher power. The construction of signs as a reminder of God and community can be viewed as an allegory for religion. Formal religious institutions provide a place for a community of people to join together in a shared way of understanding the world, the transcendent, and their relation to it. The words, the prayers, the rituals, and the social mirrors of other people provide intelligibility and a way of thinking about the mysteries of life and the universe.
But we are living in a place and time where participation in organized religion, and indeed the definition of “religion” itself, is in transformation (Fuller, 2001). This is reflected in the beliefs and practices of young adults, who are moving farther away from established religious institutions to develop their own, personal understanding of religion and spirituality (Uecker et. al., 2007). This trend is apparent at Wesleyan, where an atmosphere of liberalism and independence, together with the academic rigor of a liberal arts education, contributes to a critical engagement with and skepticism of traditional forms of understanding. In my experience, many Wesleyan students have chosen not to belong to a religious community, and have lost or never learned stories about God. Without these “signs”, some are forging their own understandings of the transcendent, while others find meaning without relation to the transcendent. However, while the explanatory framework of organized religion may be losing symbolic power, a sense of something greater remains for many—myself included.

And so, like many projects, this thesis is as much a personal exploration as a piece of scholarly work. Like many of my peers at Wesleyan, I grew up without a strong sense of religion. I went to Jewish services occasionally, and celebrated holidays mainly as an opportunity to gather with family over a meal. I never felt a connection to God, or considered myself religious. And yet, I maintained a sense that there was something, something more in the world than what I could experience and perceive. But without a community of people, a text, myths, or regular practices, this sense never developed into something meaningful or intelligible. This seems to be the case for many college students I have spoken to over the years.
Is this something to worry about? Are young adults of my generation losing something important? Are we suffering from what one sociologist has deemed a “contemporary cultural crisis of knowledge and value” (Smith, 2009, p. 292)? Or are new religious forms emerging that foster conviction and direction, contributing to larger visions of what is real and true and good? These are the driving questions behind my thesis.

I examine the religion and spirituality of Wesleyan students through the lens of a psychology of self and identity. The self, conceptualized as the spirit or the soul by some, is our inner, subjective sense of being, which is continuous in time and remains relatively constant throughout our lives. Identity is how that self is presented to the outside world—the social roles we take on, with their concomitant names, relations, and rules of behavior, as well as the behavior and conversation we enact in our day-to-day lives (Scheibe, 1995). In the realm of religion, the spiritual self is one’s personal connection to something transcending the self and beyond our understanding—often conceptualized as God, spirit, or energy. Identity involves communication with others over this sense of transcendence, constructing symbols and practices around it, making it intelligible to oneself and others.

While traditional religious practices and beliefs may not be prominent among Wesleyan students, I believe that people still retain a curiosity to explore existential questions of meaning and purpose. My thesis explores how 23 Wesleyan students do this—some through religion, some through spirituality, and some without either. Although this sample is small, I believe that the narratives that arise from it can tell us something important. They provide a snapshot in time of the religious and spiritual
beliefs of a student body. This has value simply as a historical artifact. Because these beliefs develop in interaction with a complex sociohistorical context, they also reflect back to us a version of the spiritual zeitgeist, revealing some of the trends and themes pervading the spirituality of America’s youth, and also the particular forms of religion and spirituality to which they are heirs. Finally, it provides a suggestion of what the future may hold for religion and spirituality in America, as the meanings of these terms, and how they are put into practice (or not) by today’s young adults, will affect how these young adults understand themselves, how they act in the world, and what they pass on to their children.

While this study is only a small contribution to the scholarship on religion and spirituality among college students, it sheds light on a topic that has received surprisingly little attention in the literature: the understanding of “religion” and “spirituality” as separate constructs by young adults, and the development of spiritual—not just religious—identity in college. For example, in the latest literature review on the effect of college on students, there were no references to “spirituality” and only two references to “religion” (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). However, my project has one substantial precursor: in response to this gap in the literature, researchers at UCLA launched a large-scale, seven-year program of research ending in 2009 to examine the spiritual development of undergraduate students during the college years. My study is a contribution to their scholarship, and continues inquiry into many of the issues they explored. In their published results, the UCLA researchers understood spirituality as “fundamental to students’ lives,” encompassing “the values that we hold most dear, our sense of who we are and where we come
from, our beliefs about why we are here, and our sense of connectedness to one another and to the world around us” (Astin et. al., 2011, p. 4). They also included the personal qualities of love and compassion in their definition. Overall, their findings indicate that students’ spiritual qualities increase substantially throughout college, although adherence to organized religion declines.

While I did not fit these qualities into a definition of spirituality, I wanted to discover how they were manifested and expressed differently by students who identify as spiritual, religious, and neither. I began this project with the expectation that most students in my sample would not identify as religious. And I was curious whether many would identify as “spiritual,” and whether this identification involved an attempt to locate the self in the world and forge an identity that meaningfully connects the self to what is beyond it—other people, the earth, the universe, and the forces that drive it. I was also curious whether students who do not identify as religious expressed an awareness of the mysterious or transcendent. Further, I wanted to discover whether a sense of reverence infuses students’ understandings of the world, or whether, as David Woodruff claims, “we have forgotten what reverence means” in our time (2001, p. 13). Finally, I wanted to investigate whether and how students have developed values, commitments, and a sense of responsibility for making a positive impact in the world. I do not believe these qualities are limited to students who are “religious” or “spiritual,” although I hypothesized that these students would demonstrate them more often. Overall, I wanted to investigate how students make sense of themselves and the world, and what it means to them to be a
good person and live a good life—both within and outside of the perspectives of
religion and spirituality.

As a final note, I will say that it is quite difficult to conduct a project on
religion and spirituality without injecting one’s own values and beliefs into the
interpretation of findings. I have tried to keep that to a minimum here. That has
partially been made easier by the fact that I do not have firm religious or spiritual
beliefs. Like so many, I am struck by the beauty that surrounds me, in the world and
in other people. I know there is something profound and mysterious in it all, but I do
not yet know how to think about it. That, then, is my one main bias that I will state at
the outset: I believe that the world and other people should be appreciated, actively
engaged with, and treated with respect. Although I have attempted to remain neutral,
it is possible that a prejudice against those who do not express reverence for the self
and others may color my analysis.

However, all of the people I spoke to found some means of engaging with the
mystery of existence. For that I am very grateful to them, and I hope that I can
accurately express the richness and variety of their beliefs in a manner that is both
respectful and illuminating of their insights. To use a simile from William James,
their stories are like “blazes made by the axe of the human intellect on the trees of the
otherwise trackless forest of human experience. They give you somewhere to go
from. They give you direction and a place to reach” (James, 1898/1978, p. 347). I
can only hope that this project is one such a blaze, and will light the paths of others in
the future.
Clarification of Terms

Before beginning, it is necessary to address the central terms of my thesis: religion and spirituality. This is not an easy task. The literature contains almost as many different definitions as there are authors, with perspectives on these constructs ranging from the psychological to the sociological, the historical to the theological (see Fuller, 2001; Batson, 1993; Cox, 2005). In the past, religion and spirituality were often used synonymously (Fuller, 2001). Increasingly, however, they are defined in contrasting terms: while both refer to some connection with the transcendent, religion is often understood as an institution organized by its own rituals, beliefs and texts, while spirituality is often understood as a personal effort to connect with the transcendent, or otherwise find meaning in the world through emotional experience and personal reflection. (Pargament, 1999). Indeed, most of my participants understood the terms in this way.

However, this definition runs the risk of polarization, ignoring the fact that religious institutions are made up of people, many of whom experience a personal, reflective connection with a higher power or deep sense of self within a religious structure; while spirituality is always formed in a social context, and can in fact be a social activity (Pargament, 1999). The difficulty of definition is compounded by the fact that every person defines these words for themselves in a different way; among the students I interviewed, one person’s definition of religion was sometimes another person’s definition of spirituality.
Because an attempt to define religion and spirituality as separate concepts will only result as an exercise in semantics whose results will not be applicable to all, I propose that both be understood as a process of meaning-making characterized by a concern for that which transcends the immediately sensible world of daily experience. And through cultivating an awareness of that which lies beyond our physical, time-bound world, both involve the incorporation of insights gained through this awareness into one’s self-concept and lived experience.

Understood as distinct concepts, however, religion and spirituality can be defined through the lens of a psychology of self and identity. A religious identity is necessarily a social identity, situating the self within a set of beliefs and practices that are shared with others. These beliefs and practices identify that which transcends the self through myth. Additionally, these myths allow the person to structure and support self-understanding, and develop an appreciation of how to live in the world through endowing the self with purpose and meaning.

Spirituality, on the other hand, does not connect the person to a community of people with shared texts or stories on the transcendent. Because of this, a conception of that which exists beyond the sensible world is less defined, and may not even be approached or frequently reflected upon. Due to the lack of community and shared practice, spirituality is experienced as originating from within the self, as an experience of meaning, transcendence, wholeness, purpose, or "apprehension of spirit (or Spirit) as the animating essence at the core of life" (Parks, 2000, p. 131). While spirituality entails emotional experience within the self, it can become a part of one’s social identity: an understanding of the self and its relationship to that which lies
beyond the knowable world can influence behavior toward others and the
development of values and commitments.

While this is not a strict definition of the two terms, it is what I am willing to
impose on concepts that are understood in a fundamentally personal way by each
individual. Hopefully my definition does not eliminate personal experience from
religion, or social context from spirituality. Both involve the experience and
understanding of what is meaningful and valuable in life, and both involve selves
navigating within various social contexts to construct this meaning. Beyond this, I
will let the interviews speak for themselves and give my tentative definition shape
and life.
CHAPTER ONE
Introduction to the Theoretical Perspective of Self and Identity

Self: The Vertical Dimension

All human beings have a self. Self can be understood as the subjective experience of being in each moment, as well as our sense of ourselves as a continuous person throughout time—what William James called “pure ego” (James, 1890/1927, p. 329). It is what Heidegger deemed eigenwelt—our existential reality, our relationship to our “own-world” (1962/1996). Although the term “self” implies a singular, bounded entity, it is not unitary, and cannot be measured or observed. It is abstract, and only made intelligible through presentation. The way in which it is presented is dependent on context, and is “always presented as something, never as whole or entire” (Scheibe, 1995, p. 2). Thus, as James discusses in *The Principles of Psychology*, the self is contextual and multifaceted, as different aspects of the self are expressed at different times (James, 1890/1927).

Scheibe provides a useful model for understanding the self—that of the “vertical dimension.” Self is who we feel we are in relation to what is above and below—the heights of transcendence and the depths of the self. Meditation is the “connective act of the self,” allowing us to experience our inner lives as fully and meaningfully as we can, and connect with a fundamental reality (Scheibe, 1995, p. 14). Of course, what we are connecting to depends on how we conceptualize the self: some may experience connection to a universal, omnipresent energy; others may experience connection with the mysterious depths of being.
Identity: The Horizontal Dimension

While the self is an abstract concept, it is expressed and made intelligible through identity—the roles, relations, names, and other markers that a person takes on throughout life (Scheibe, 1995). From the moment of birth, parents and the larger society assign roles to the child, and these roles bring with them stories, wishes, expectations, and themes. These identifications are then processed by the person and assimilated into (or excluded from) the self that is presented in certain contexts.

Identity is socially constituted, for the way in which self is presented is dependent on the circumstances of a particular time and place, and is shaped by whom the self is presented to within those circumstances. Identity can be an individual marker such as a name, announcing “who we are” to others and ourselves. It can also connect the individual to a group of people who share that identity. This social identity is “the individual’s knowledge that he/she belongs to certain social groups together with some emotional and value significance to him/her of the group membership” (Tajfel, 1972, p. 31). Thus, identity markers are not simply abstract words but are manifested and made concrete in social life. Through the “emotional and value significance” conferred by experience in a social group, by conversing with a friend, or through interactions with social media, the self is defined.

Harkening back to Scheibe’s model of self and identity, identity can be understood as the horizontal dimension, in contrast to the vertical dimension of the self. It is based on the social interactions among people—the discussions, gestures, and modes of presentation that are manifested in different contexts. Thus the horizontal dimension links self and other, as self is presented to others through the
conversation and behavior occasioned by a particular social context. Likewise, the horizontal link runs from other to self, as the values, norms, and expectations that are enforced within a context are experienced and incorporated within the person (Scheibe, 1995).

**The Axis at Which They Meet: Being-in-Place**

Lest this definition belie a false dichotomy between an individual, private, interior self and a social, public, outer identity, it must be stated that self and identity are inextricably intertwined—they depend on each other. Their relationship can be understood as mutual validation or affirmation, linking the individual and the social. Charles Cooley developed this idea in his theory of the looking-glass self (Cooley, 1902). Through social interaction, we observe how others respond to our presentation of self—their responses provide a mirror in which we can see ourselves reflected. We then use their reactions to develop our own self-concept informed by how others see us. Thus, how we conceptualize the self is strongly influenced by social interaction. We desire to matter to others, and thus we locate the self in a way that’s meaningful given our context. By extension, if a certain aspect of self is not socially affirmed or recognized, it may be lost or remain undeveloped (Josselson, 1994).

Additionally, not every person who claims a particular identity experiences it in the same way, for identity is shaped from within as well as without. “Identity” is not a falsely reified concept separable from and imposed upon the self. Rather, it is constituted through concrete social contexts in which the self takes part, revealing, concealing, navigating, and connecting with other selves. The manner and extent to which the self is made known through a particular identity thus depends not merely
on collective societal beliefs about the group, but also on locally defined meanings and personal experience (Deaux, 1992).

**Religion and Spirituality Through the Lens of Self and Identity**

If religion and spirituality are understood as a concern about the meaning of life and how one relates to the mysteries of the earth and the cosmos, the model of self and identity provides a useful way of understanding how this is accomplished. By engaging with the vertical dimension, people come to understand how their existence relates to the world beyond them through introspection and emotional experience. And through the horizontal dimension—the structures of rituals and stories, and conversations with other people—this understanding is also given shape and definition. Religion and spirituality are never experienced purely as self or identity in isolation, as a living person is always at the intersection of the vertical and horizontal dimensions. But individuals differ in the extent to which religion and spirituality are focused on understanding the self, or whether they also involve social contexts in which this aspect of the self is presented to others.

**Religious and Spiritual Self**

William James wrote extensively on religion and spirituality of the self. In discussing the “empirical self”, or those aspects of the self that we can consciously examine through introspection, he identifies multiple selves: the social self, the material self, and the spiritual self. While the social and material selves are inherently linked to the external, physical, and temporal—other people and possessions—the spiritual self derives from within the person. It is the "core" and "sanctuary of our life" (James, 1890/1927, p. 304), one’s “inner or subjective
being...the true, the intimate, the ultimate, the permanent me which I seek" (James, 1890/1927, p. 316). According to James, identity development occurs as we construct and organize the material and social selves around this central spiritual self.

In *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, James wrote almost exclusively on religion from the perspective of individual experience, defining religion as “the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine” (James, 1901/2008, p. 31). Through description and analysis of different individuals’ experiences of the divine, he proposed that the best approach to a study of religion is to focus on the emotions and psychological characteristics of people undergoing powerful religious experiences. These experiences occur when our conscious self seems to connect with a mysterious, supreme reality, and any study of religion must involve an investigation into “the subconscious continuation of our conscious life” (James, 1901/2008, p. 371). Ritual, community, and religious organizations receive almost no mention in this work, as religion primarily “occupies herself with personal destinies” (James, 1901/2008, p. 365).

Carl Jung was also centrally concerned with religion of the self. He believed that religious experience is a psychological phenomenon, and that the personal experience of God is indistinguishable from communication with one's own unconscious mind. It is not that God and the unconscious are one and the same, but rather that the unconscious is “the medium from which the religious experience seems to flow” (Jung, 1958, p. 89). According to Jung, all people are connected through the collective unconscious—the collective psychic inheritance of all people who ever
lived—and collective unconscious and what others understand as “God” are one and the same. Only through self-examination can a person connect to this unconscious, “the only accessible source of religious experience” (Jung, 1958 p. 89).

Religious and Spiritual Identity

Religion can also be viewed from the perspective of identity—how our “spiritual selves” become known to others. One way this is achieved is through labels that we confer on ourselves, identifying who we are in a religious or spiritual sense—e.g., Catholic, Seventh Day Adventist, Reform Jewish. As mentioned earlier, this label functions as a “social role” when it joins the individual to a group holding similar religious beliefs and values. In addition to supplying the person with beliefs, religious or spiritual identity also brings with it norms of conduct: the rules of appropriate behavior. These can be written or unwritten, general or specific. For example, a religious norm could include such proscriptions as “Do not have sex before marriage,” or everyday requirements such as prayer. In other words, if social roles are parts in a play, social norms provide the script of the play (Batson, 1993).

The strength of a religious role is partly determined by a person’s reference groups: people or social groups whose judgment the person values, including family, friends, and peers. Individuals look to these groups for guidance and direction in deciding what social roles to adopt, and how to behave within those roles (Batson, 1993). The power of reference groups on religious identity is evidenced by the fact that the most significant predictor of an individual’s religious involvement is the religious involvement of her parents (Hoge and Petrillo, 1978). When the child has a close relationship with the parents and thus turns to them often for guidance and
support, this influence on religious involvement is even stronger (Bandura, 1963).

Religious or spiritual identity can also involve ritual or ceremonial action—services, christenings, bar mitzvahs, group prayer, and any other act that connects a person with others in relation to a larger whole, whether it be God, sacred energy, or community. Ritual and ceremony involve participation in an event taken to be meaningful by the person. These events, and the actions that they demand, conform to certain socially defined patterns and structures (Deutsch, 1991). When these practices are shared, the spiritual or religious self is brought into communion with others, and identity becomes mutually affirmed.

In addition to religious roles and behaviors, religious identity can also be structured around myths. Jung wrote extensively about the power of myths, relating how religious stories and symbols add meaning to life by expressing the strivings and desires of the psyche in an intelligible way (Jung, 1968). Narrative psychology understands myths, or narratives, as a means by which we deal with experience by constructing our own stories and listening to the stories of others (McAdams, 1993). Stories provide us with something to believe in, fitting religious and spiritual experiences into a meaningful structure. The expressive power of myths, however, is not eternal, and can change or fade as societies and cultures change.

Religious identity can also be developed through conversations with others, both formal and informal. Through them, religious and spiritual strivings, questions, and experiences are made public and responded to by other people. The openness and responsiveness of dialogue thus provides a forum in which we can compare and evaluate our own beliefs and experiences with those of others. According to social
comparison theory, we are driven to evaluate our own assessments of experience with
the assessments of others (Batson, 1993). Therefore, conversations about religious or
spiritual matters allow us to compare our interpretations of existential, otherworldly,
or mysterious questions with those of a reference group. If our beliefs are shared with
others, communication also involves communion—connecting with others over a
shared identity and reinforcing shared beliefs and ways of understanding ourselves
and the world (Scheibe, 1995).

As mentioned previously, a person’s experience of religion and spirituality
involve both the dimensions of self and identity. It consists of the behavior, roles,
stories, and conversation of the horizontal dimension, as well as the emotional and
psychological experience of the self connecting with what is above and below—the
vertical dimension. The person lies at the intersection of these poles: she is not pure
being, nor is she purely a presentation to others. To be human is to be a self
embedded in this world, and to be spiritual or religious is one way of understanding
the self and living in the world. The next section will explore how the current
generation of young adults in America approaches religion and spirituality, from the
perspective of a psychology of self and identity.
CHAPTER TWO  
Religion and Spirituality among Today’s Emerging Adults

Emerging Adulthood: A Distinct Life Stage

An understanding of the religious and spiritual views of Wesleyan students would be aided by locating them in relation to the broad generational characteristics of 18-22 year olds in America today. The late teens and early twenties are a unique time, a limbo period between dependent childhood and independent adulthood for many people. Some have called for the recognition of this period as a distinct developmental stage in the life course, one that has arisen only recently as a result of various social, economic, and cultural shifts in America in the past several decades. These shifts have made the path from dependence on family in the teenage years to the financial and domestic independence of “adulthood” more drawn-out than in generations past. Thus, psychologist Jeffrey Arnett has named this developmental period “emerging adulthood” (Arnett, 2000). While there is disagreement over the validity of this life stage, young adults in their late teens and twenties do tend to be defined by distinct psychological and behavioral characteristics—and many of these characteristics have direct bearing on religious and spiritual beliefs and practices.

It should be emphasized that this life stage is a cultural and historical construction rather than a biological given, and does not apply to all young adults in their twenties. Those who fall within the boundaries of its definition—including the majority of Wesleyan students—are the subjects of several broad social and cultural trends in the past 50 years. First is the dramatic increase in young Americans obtaining higher education, rising from 14% in 1940 to over 60% in 1995 (Arnett,
2000). In an increasingly information-based economy, young people feel pressure to extend formal education beyond high school and even college in order to be successful in the professional world (Arnett). Second is the increasing median age of marriage and childbirth. In 1970, the median age of marriage was 21 for women and 23 for men; by 2009 these numbers had risen to 26 for women and 28 for men (U.S. Census Bureau, 2009). Thus, instead of settling down after graduating from high school, many young adults spend their twenties exploring options for the future, developing their own worldviews and identities, and defining independent beliefs and values.

**Religious and Spiritual Identity Among Emerging Adults**

Religion is one set of beliefs and values around which emerging adults negotiate their identities. Despite being significantly more likely to define themselves as secular and non-denominational than older Americans, the majority of emerging adults in America do identify as religious. 73% identify with a particular religious affiliation, with 45% identifying as Protestant (Greenberg, 2004). However, the second-largest identity group after “Protestant” is “Not religious,” with 27% of emerging adults identifying as such; in comparison, 14% of all adults say they belong to no religious tradition (Edgell, 2009). Clearly, the identities of emerging adults in America today are more disconnected from traditional religious groups than are adults from previous generations.

An understanding of the religious identities of emerging adults must also take into account the religious identities of their parents, and to what extent those identities are expressed in the home. As mentioned earlier, parents are a primary reference
group for children, and as such provide a model for religious belief and commitment that influences how the child understands and practices religion in the future. In fact, parental beliefs and practices are significantly related to most of the religious and spiritual practices of emerging adults—a much stronger influence than that of peers. One study found that two-thirds of emerging adults perceive their religious beliefs to be similar to those of their parents (Smith, 2009).

Because parental socialization is so strongly linked to religious identity, the weakening of religious identity among today’s emerging adults in comparison with generations past can partially reflect the particular beliefs and practices of their parents’ generation. The parents of most of today’s emerging adults are Baby Boomers, a generation that tended to understand religious involvement as a personal choice rather than a moral obligation, and thus were disproportionately more likely to disaffiliate from organized religion than previous generations. Thus, today’s emerging adults are often raised in families that do not engage in religious practices, or where religious identity is not enforced in the household (Schwadel, 2010). For these emerging adults, the self is not provided with ready-made religious stories, and thus has to construct or seek those stories on its own.

While the majority of young adults nominally identify with a religious group, emerging adults typically move away from participation in organized religious practice as an expression of this religious identity. Throughout the high school years, weekly attendance at religious services drops 10%, and continues to decrease throughout the college years (Smith, 2009). One recent study documents a 22% decrease in weekly religious service attendance from adolescence to young
adulthood. Additionally, there has been a substantial decrease in the proportion of young adults attending services today compared to young adults a generation ago: 20% of 18-23 year olds in 2009 attend services weekly, in comparison with 31% of young adults in 1970. Furthermore, 35% of emerging adults say that they never attend church, in comparison with 14% of young adults in 1970 (Edgell, 2009).

As attendance at services and other traditional religious activities decreases, young adults practice and express their religion and spirituality in more informal, individually formulated ways. This can occur in group settings with friends: in one study, 68% of 18-23 year olds reported discussing their religion informally with friends monthly, while only 18% attended services monthly (Greenberg, 2004).

Identifying as religious or spiritual may also involve manifesting religious values in everyday life, or participating in activities that contribute to a sense of self-actualization such as meditation. These informal practices are influenced by social contexts such as college, as young adults leave their homes and enter into diverse networks of people with many different religious beliefs. Often, religious or spiritual identity is not shared with others in these contexts, and thus religious and spiritual practice is not socially reinforced or relevant in daily life. Thus, while a religious or spiritual self may be maintained in emerging adulthood, the expression of that self may be tempered or extinguished in particular social contexts.

**Spiritual, but Not Religious**

The distance from traditional forms of organized religion is also evident in the increasing use of the identification “spiritual, but not religious” among emerging adults. Overall, 20% of Americans identify as “spiritual, but not religious,” with
young adults disproportionately more likely to label themselves in this way (Edgell, 2009). In one study, 15% of emerging adults considered the label “spiritual but not religious” to be very true for them, while 45% considered it to be somewhat true (Smith, 2009). In another study, 35% of emerging adults described themselves as “spiritual but not religious,” in comparison to 44% who self-identified as “religious” (Greenberg, 2004). Even among those who identify with a particular religious affiliation, many are not committed to the more formal aspects of their faith, and agree that they are more spiritual than religious. In one study, 72% of 18-29 year olds claim they are “really more spiritual than religious,” regardless of religious affiliation (Rainer and Rainer, 2011, p. 47).

While the terms “religious” and “spiritual” overlap for most Americans (Marler, 2002), the increasing tendency to maintain a critical distance from “religion” while still identifying as “spiritual” can be understood through the lens of a psychology of self and identity. As youth in America are increasingly raised in families where religious identity is absent or not actively enforced, the spiritual self—that within us which wonders about meaning beyond the mundane, physical, observable world—finds expression outside of the structures of belief and practice of traditional religious institutions. Those who identify as “spiritual but not religious” often value personal experience over institutional sources of authority, and do not find the rules and structures of those institutions to meaningfully express their inner selves, seeking personal fulfillment in daily life rather than through formal practice (Fuller, 2001).
Religious and Spiritual Self among Emerging Adults

Regardless of the identifying label that emerging adults adopt, a common observation made of this age group is their tendency to prioritize the self. Emerging adults of this generation have been described as “self-absorbed” (Huntley, 2005, p. 7), a generation of individuals where “pursuing the American Dream means ‘doing whatever I want” (Greenberg, 2004). While it is unreasonable to regard emerging adults’ approach to religion and spirituality as purely self-driven and self-focused, emerging adults do tend to emphasize personal interpretation and self-actualization in their understanding of religion and spirituality. Emerging adults who identify as religious often employ a selective approach to faith, maintaining some beliefs and practices and discarding others (Winston, 2007). Thus, aspects of religious identity are accepted if they resonate with what is felt within the self, and discarded if they do not. When speaking about religion, the vast majority of young adults focus on the subjective and private, viewing the institution and community as secondary concerns (Smith, 2009). Among those who identify as spiritual, as discussed earlier, emphasis is often placed on self-understanding, personal experience, and one’s “inner” life. Thus, the perspectives on religion and spirituality among emerging adults tend to be similar to that of William James: religion and spirituality are ultimately private matters, and institutions, rituals, and community are ancillary to inner experience.

The emphasis on self within religion and spirituality among today’s emerging adults raises questions about their understanding of a greater reality beyond the self. Despite the move away from organized religious practice, the majority of emerging
adults in America today do believe in God. In one survey, 78% of emerging adults professed a belief in God, 16% were unsure, and 6% did not believe in God. Among these, 63% conceptualize God as a personal being involved in daily life, 10% conceptualize God as having created the world and then stepped back from involvement; and 17% understood God as a “cosmic life force” (Smith, 2009). So, while the religious and spiritual self is increasingly understood and experienced outside of the language, practices, and rituals of a religious institution and community, the deep meaning or power that is beyond the visible world, and to which the spiritual or religious self strives, continues to be understood as a personal “God.”

Apart from a belief in God, many emerging adults express doubt that any objective moral or social reality exists beyond their own subjective experiences. In one study, emerging adults overwhelmingly expressed disbelief in a common reality that could serve as a “reliable reference point for rational deliberation among people” (Smith, 2009, p. 45). Additionally, many emerging adults lack a strong commitment to abstract goals, and have not yet defined for themselves the causes, commitments, and ideals that guide their lives (Greenberg, 2004). This may be due in part to the fluidity and tenuousness of roles and commitments during this developmental stage (Arnett, 2000), as well as the emphasis placed on short-term, immediate goals in such contexts as the academic environment. Indeed, college has been shown to have a significant effect on the religious and spiritual practices of young adults.

**Religion, Spirituality, and College Attendance**

While a variety of factors influence the changes in religion and spirituality during emerging adulthood, one of the strongest is the college environment. Within
this environment, the peer group has been described as “the single most potent source of influence on growth and development during the undergraduate years” (Astin, 1993, p. 398). Additionally, the religious values of an academic institution have an effect on the religious and spiritual lives of students. Liberal college environments in particular result in a weakening of religious beliefs, as many liberal views run counter to religious ideologies (Lee, 2002). Unlike a century ago, most American colleges and universities today are secular institutions, and tend to emphasize academic achievement rather than development of personal values and spiritual self-understanding (Astin, 2010). Thus, when students adopt the identity of “college student” and its attendant pressures to produce and succeed academically, religious and spiritual identity may fall by the wayside.

Consequently, college has been described as “a breeding ground for apostasy,” eroding traditional beliefs and practices and fostering a secular worldview (Caplovitz and Sherrow, 1977, p. 109). Much data exist to support this understanding. Over 70% of college students decrease attendance at services, and most become less religiously active overall, spending less time meditating, praying, and discussing religion with others (Uecker et. al., 2007). Additionally, many of the experiences common to college life have been shown to weaken religious identification, such as surfing the internet, non-marital sex, binge drinking, and marijuana use (Uecker et. al.; Bryant et. al., 2003).

However, the college campus is not completely unfavorable to the maintenance or growth of religious and spiritual life. In fact, religious beliefs and convictions increase during college, despite the decrease in religious activity (Lee,
Additionally, most students continue to identify with the religion of their upbringing in college: in one study, 86% of college students retained their religious affiliation in college (Uecker et. al., 2007). Apart from organized religion, students become more committed to integrating spirituality into their lives throughout their time at college (Bryant et. al., 2003). Further disputing the claim that college is “a breeder of apostasy,” emerging adults who do not attend college are more prone to declines in religious activity and commitment than those who do (Lee, 2002). Finally, while religion is not a primary focus of American higher education, it is rarely absent from campus life, as most American universities offer a variety of religious and spiritual groups to meet student demands (Lee, 2002).
CHAPTER THREE
A Brief History of Religion and Spirituality at Wesleyan¹

The twenty-three students whose religious and spiritual beliefs are discussed later are only a small part of a large institution with a rich religious history. However, the interviews indicate that nearly every student believes that the college environment is not conducive to the development of religion and spirituality, and that Wesleyan in particular is a very secular school in its ethos and student body. This is in striking contrast to the educational vision of Wesleyan’s founders, and to the central role played by religion at Wesleyan for the first half of its history. An understanding of this history will enrich interpretation the religious and spiritual narratives of students, by illuminating their connection—or disconnect—with the heritage of the institution within which they dwell.

Wesleyan was founded in 1831 as a partnership between the Methodist denomination and the people of Middletown. Accordingly, it was named after John Wesley, the founder of Methodism and a strong proponent of education. It was one of many colleges in the mid-19th century founded under the patronage of the Methodists, whose religious enthusiasm was particularly prominent in the United States during this time.

¹ All history from Wesleyan’s founding to 1910 is summarized from David Potts’ book, Wesleyan University, 1831-1910: Collegiate Enterprise in New England. All history from 1971 to 2009 is summarized from results of the CIRP Survey given to incoming freshmen at colleges and universities across America, retrieved from the Wesleyan University Office of Institutional Research.
Despite its affiliation with the Methodists, Wesleyan was not founded as a sectarian institution, and did not attempt to indoctrinate religion in its students or use religious identity as a condition of admission. Instead, the early college presidents placed emphasis on a liberal education as a means of fostering social responsibility, “commitment, and action to make a difference in the world” (Potts, 1992, p. 20). This was the educational vision of the first president, Wilbur Fisk, who believed that the primary value of knowledge lay in its practical, benevolent implications. He put forth that the purpose of Wesleyan was to produce people “who will be both willing and competent to effect the political, intellectual, and spiritual regeneration of the world” (Potts, p. 20).

However, Wesleyan in its early years was clearly a religious institution. Protestantism was understood as the overarching context within which education and service to humankind must occur, and the exhortation to serve society and country were seen as synonymous with the evangelical mission to serve the church. One could not occur without the other—Bangs, Wesleyan’s second president, stated that “learning disciplines and expands the mind; religion sanctifies the heart and purifies the affections, and by uniting them, the young man is prepared to enter upon the duties of life” (Potts, p. 31). Thus, the few students who were not Christian were urged to accept the faith; while those who were Christian were encouraged to interpret their scholarly knowledge as a revelation of God’s creation, and use that understanding to spur action in the world.

This Christian outlook was reflected in classes, faculty, and the student body. Wesleyan faculty made it their mission to develop the morality and intellect of their
students within a context of a religious awareness. Teachers were recruited mainly through church networks and were deeply religious; for the first 40 years of Wesleyan’s existence, nearly all were Methodist. Wesleyan students reflected this: nearly all were Protestants, and for the first 40 years of the institution about half were Methodist. Religious identity was particularly strong at Wesleyan in comparison to other colleges; a poll in 1867 showed Wesleyan to rank as one of the highest in percentage of religious students. About a third were licensed preachers, and many graduated to become ministers.

The strength of religion at Wesleyan peaked in the 1870s and 1880s. At this time, about 80% of students were Methodist, and in the 1890s nearly 90% were Christian. Efforts to sustain piety were particularly intense among faculty and administration during this time. Students were required to attend a Sunday morning church service in Middletown and a Sunday afternoon service on campus, as well as morning services on campus every other day of the week. Themes of evangelical duty were explicitly expressed in the rhetoric of faculty and administration: Cyrus D. Foss, Wesleyan’s sixth president, believed that colleges should aid in the spiritual progress of America by being “professedly Christian” (Potts, p. 106).

The prominent role of religion at Wesleyan began to change around the turn of the 20th century. As the importance of academic expertise grew, the school hired an increasing number of professors specialized in particular areas of research; consequently, church networks were no longer the primary means of faculty recruitment. While most teachers in the late 19th century were still religious men, they were also just as strongly devoted to academic rigor and professionalism, and did
not hesitate to engage in controversial issues with the church. In addition to the move away from an all-Methodist faculty in the 1880’s, Sunday morning services were no longer mandatory beginning in 1883. Finally, the number of Methodist students, faculty, and trustees began a steady decrease from its peak in the 1880s to where it is today.

The demographic shift in students and faculty reflected a broader shift in the image and aims of the school put forth by trustees and administrators at this time. Wesleyan was a growing school, and its link to a specific denomination was understood as a potential inhibitor of this growth. Thus, Methodism was understood as a restriction rather than a virtue, and the rhetoric of administrators increasingly emphasized progressive, metropolitan values. During the 1909 inauguration of William Arnold Shanklin—the last in a long line of Wesleyan presidents drawn from the ministerial ranks—speeches hailed a “new era” for the school, in which it would become “broader in aim and sympathy” in order to foster “growth and glory” (Potts, p. 227). The gradual shift away from Methodism ended in 1937, when Wesleyan became completely independent from the denomination, and compulsory chapel was eliminated in the 1960s (Potts, 2011).

In the fifty years since then, the religious demographics of Wesleyan have been decidedly different than they were at its founding. Data from a survey given to all incoming freshmen at many American colleges and universities report that, from 1971 to 2009, the average proportion of incoming freshmen at Wesleyan identifying as Protestant was 20%; Roman Catholics made up 15%; Jews formed 21%; “Other” was 8.5%; and “None” by far has formed the plurality at 36%. In other words, on
average over a third of Wesleyan freshman in the past 40 years did not affiliate with any religion. This number was miniscule a century ago. The percentage of non-affiliated students is also particularly high at Wesleyan in comparison to other American colleges and universities. From 1971 to 2009, on average, non-affiliated students made up 25% of incoming freshmen at all other universities sampled, and 31% of incoming freshmen at all colleges sampled.

Over this forty-year period within Wesleyan, several patterns in religious affiliation emerge. The proportion of Jews and Protestants was at its highest in the 1970s. During the years 1973-1985, these denominations each made up approximately 20-25% of the students body, sometimes exceeding 25%. Throughout this decade the numbers of Protestants and Jews were nearly equivalent with the percentage of non-affiliated students: on average, the latter group hovered around 30%, representing only 5% more of the student body than Protestants or Jews during this time.

This pattern shifted in the late 80’s to mid 90’s, when the proportion of Roman Catholics and students with no affiliation climbed slightly, with a corresponding decrease in Jews and Protestants. While in 1983 the proportion of Protestants, Roman Catholics, Jews, Other, and No Affiliation was 19%, 14%, 22%, 11%, and 33% respectively, the proportions in 1989 were 20%, 17%, 17%, 9%, and 37%. The percentage of Roman Catholics reached its peak in the mid-90s, making up 19% of the student body in 1993, and then began to drop in the late 90s. However, the percentage of nonaffiliated students remained high throughout the nineties, accounting for approximately 38% of students.
In the first decade of the 21st century, the percentage of nonaffiliated students began to grow again, with corresponding decreases in the percentages of all religiously affiliated students. Thus, while in 2000 the breakdown in proportion of affiliations was 21%, 13%, 19%, 12%, and 35%, in 2005 it shifted to 18%, 10%, 23%, 5%, and 43%. In 2009, the last year in which results of the survey were recorded, the proportion of nonaffiliated students reached its highest level in the past 38 years at Wesleyan: the breakdown of percentages in that year was 16%, 12%, 18%, 7.5%, and 46.5%.

The past 40 years at Wesleyan represent a gradual secularization of the student body, with the proportion of nonaffiliated students growing from less than a third in the 1970s, to near 40% in the 1990s, to almost half of the freshman class in 2009. While all religious affiliations have decreased their representation among students, Protestants and Jews have consistently formed a substantial portion of the student body. Each made up about 20% of all entering freshman throughout the past forty years, although that number is beginning to drop gradually, especially for Protestants.
CHAPTER FOUR
Methodology

I conducted interviews with 23 Wesleyan students. A randomly-selected sample of 50 students was chosen using a random number generator, which produced a group of 50 numbers from one to 2400, each corresponding to an alphabetic list of Wesleyan undergraduates. Letters were then sent to the campus mailbox of each randomly selected student, informing them that they had been selected to participate in my research study on religion and spirituality among Wesleyan students (see Appendix A). They were informed that their participation consisted in completing a single, hour-long interview. A dollar was attached to each letter as a commitment that the students would be paid a further $7—for a total of $8—if they chose to participate. Students were informed that they could keep the dollar even if they chose not to participate in the study.

This method admittedly limits the generalizability of my findings in several ways. First, the sample is subject to self-selection bias, as there may be differences between those who answered my request for participants, and those who chose not to. I attempted to mitigate this as much as possible through the letter mailed to potential participants, which stated that I wanted to interview anyone—atheists, people who don’t give a second thought to religion or spirituality, or those who don’t fit under those labels—and not simply those who have a special interest or identification with religion or spirituality. There was considerable diversity in the beliefs and practices of those I interviewed, suggesting that the sample was not skewed toward any one subset of the Wesleyan religious and spiritual population. However, there is a chance of self-selection bias and consequent abnormal conditions in the sample group.
Additionally, paying participants in advance could be viewed as coercion. However, the invitation letter to students contained explicit permission to keep the dollar and not participate in the study, with no follow up and no record kept of non-participation. I chose to employ this method in order to assure attention for the invitation, and because it has proven in the past to yield a high response rate. I was looking for students who had thoughts and were willing to speak at length on this subject, but I also wanted a random sampling of the Wesleyan population. This method was successful in providing me with both.

After running four pilot interviews I consolidated my interview schedule to around 30 questions (see Appendix B). The interviews were semi-structured: I had an idea of the concepts and beliefs I wanted to explore, but I did not administer a standardized list of questions to each student. Because the religious and spiritual lives of my participants were so distinct, this allowed me to probe surprising or unexpected areas of inquiry when they arose—which they often did. As a result, the interviews reflect a variety of beliefs, practices, opinions, and experiences, providing a detailed body of information on religion and spirituality at Wesleyan.

I conducted a large majority of the interviews at the Wasch Center for Retired Faculty. This building is centrally located and rarely used by students, and was an ideal place for a relaxed and confidential conversation. Three students could not be interviewed at the Wasch Center for various reasons, and chose to conduct the interview in my house. I ensured that the house was empty or carefully instructed my roommates not to make noise, and conducted the interviews in my living room, with
the door closed. This seemed to provide the same level of both comfort and privacy as the room at the Wasch Center.

Prior to data collection, participants were given a consent form informing them of the aims of the study, and ensuring the confidentiality of their responses (see Appendix C). The consent form was vetted through the Wesleyan IRB. After they signed this, and prior to the interviews, participants were asked to complete two written documents. One was a self-report sheet (see Appendix D). In addition to assessing students’ age, class year, major, place of birth, and nuclear family composition, there were several questions specifically assessing religious and spiritual identity. There was a space for “Religious Affiliation, If Any.” I chose not to provide affiliations for students to choose from, but rather let them decide if and how they wanted to identify with a particular religion. Students were also asked to circle any and all of the following with which they identified: religious, spiritual, agnostic, and atheist. There was also a space for “Other” if their beliefs did not fit into any of the categories provided.

After filling out this document, students were given a survey taken from the 2009 UCLA study, “Spirituality in Higher Education.” (see Appendix E). I contacted the researchers from the study to inform them that I wished to use their material in my thesis, and they consented. I only used a portion of the questionnaire, which consisted of approximately 30 questions given to participants. Most were answered on a Likert scale, although some involved a qualitative response. These questions addressed a variety of themes, which were scattered throughout the groupings of questions presented to participants. For example, questions assessing belief in a
higher power were not clustered together, but were instead scattered among other questions assessing different variables. In coding the responses, I grouped all questions from one theme together, and computed the average response for each question. Because an “average response” could not be computed for the questions with qualitative responses, they were viewed separately.

After these documents were completed, I began the interviews. I reminded students that the interviews would be tape-recorded, but that their responses would be completely anonymous. I also informed them that they were not obligated to answer any of the questions, and were free to stop the interview altogether if they were uncomfortable. Interviews lasted about 45 minutes to an hour.

A second reader and I coded the interviews using a quantitative and a qualitative scale. The second reader is a junior Psychology major recruited through an email sent out to her psychology class, offering a half credit in return for the experience gained through participating in research. We met several times prior to coding, during which I familiarized her with the codes I had devised. We also coded a mock interview together to give us both a sense of what the experience of coding the actual interviews would be like. We coded the interviews separately, checking back in with each other halfway through and again at the end of coding. The methods used for both the quantitative and qualitative codes will be explained in turn.

For the quantitative codes, I devised ten questions assessing various aspects of the religious and spiritual beliefs and practices of students based on the interview transcripts (see Appendix F). The questions were coded on a five-point Likert scale.
Our ratings for each question were combined and averaged. Interrater reliability was then calculated to assess the strength of agreement of our responses.

My qualitative methodology was affected in some important ways by time constraints and economic considerations. Under ideal circumstances, my interviews would have been transcribed and de-identified by an independent service; in fact, I transcribed all interview material. Again, ideally, several independent readers would have read and coded these transcripts, arriving at consensus about final codes and themes through an iterative process. I, of course, was not blinded to my transcripts, and I had only one additional reader, with whom I was able to meet and confirm findings on only two occasions. To accommodate these constraints I developed a set of eight codes (Appendix G) after reviewing the transcripts carefully. I asked my second reader to review the transcripts independently to select those quotes illustrating these themes. In general, we agreed about identification throughout the interviews. Our two meetings allowed adequate time to discuss all points of disagreement and served fairly well, I hope, as a poor man’s version of an ideal iterative process. I recognize, however, that the problems and deficiencies of my qualitative methods are an additional limitation to my findings.

The responses I obtained in my interviews left me surprised, fascinated, and often inspired. Almost every student reported that this was a topic about which they rarely, if ever, had a chance to speak. Thus, as much as it was a data-gathering session, the interview was also a forum for students to work through and attempt to articulate thoughts that perhaps had only been sensed or intuited up till that point.
Despite the undeveloped nature of many of their ideas, however, students provided me with a dizzying array of information.

Because of the nature of the issues discussed, I often felt that the interview was more an intimate conversation than an investigation. Religion and spirituality are crucially important to many students, and are sometimes particularly problematic or sensitive issues. Students told me stories charged with deeply-felt emotion—I was often privy to their fears and hopes, their commitments and ideals, and their thoughts on the meaning of life and death. In the end, of course, I was in a privileged position as a psychological researcher, and the students were my research subjects. But their responses weave a complex tapestry that does not comfortably fit within the label “research subject.” Ultimately, I was left with a profound respect and admiration for every student I interviewed, and an understanding that for many, this topic receives deep intellectual engagement and emotional attention.
CHAPTER FIVE
Survey and Self-Report Data

Demographic Results

Of the 50 letters sent out to student mailboxes, 24 replied that they wanted to participate, and one dropped out. The resulting demographics of the 23 students interviewed were not precisely representative of the Wesleyan student body, but were sufficient to satisfy my requirements for a heterogeneous sample. I interviewed 12 women and 11 men, ranging in age from 18 to 22. They represented all four class years: two freshmen, ten sophomores, four juniors, and seven seniors. However, while there was considerable heterogeneity in terms of class year, gender, and religious and spiritual identification, my sample was somewhat homogeneous in terms of race and place of birth: I interviewed three students of color, and seven whose place of residence was outside of the Northeast. While these rates are below those of the Wesleyan population as a whole and therefore limit the generalizability of my study to the whole of Wesleyan, they are only a slight exaggeration of demographic tendencies of the student population. Wesleyan students tend to be white, politically liberal, relatively wealthy, and from the Northeast. Because the Wesleyan population as a whole is not representative of all college students in America, the religious beliefs and practices of those interviewed will probably not be generalizable to, say, many of the students attending Alabama State University, or to young adults who decide not to attend college. However, they provide a detailed, varied snapshot of a very small portion of my generation, whose value, I hope, shines through despite its limitations.
Students’ religion and spirituality was assessed through personal interviews and questionnaire data. Tables 1 through 3 report information from a self-report sheet given to participants before each interview.

Table 1: Demographic, Religious, and Spiritual Variables for Each Participant

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<th>Agnostic</th>
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Table 2: Cumulative Number of Students Identifying as Religious, Spiritual, Agnostic, and Atheist

- Total Religious: 3 (13%)
- Total Spiritual: 9 (39%)
- Total Agnostic: 9 (39%)
- Total Atheist: 5 (22%)
More than half of Wesleyan students identify as neither religious nor spiritual, forming the largest proportion of the students surveyed. The next largest group were those students identifying as “spiritual, but not religious,” forming approximately one-third of all students surveyed. Altogether, almost 40% of students identified as spiritual. Only 3 students (13%) identified as religious. Except for one participant who identified as both religious and spiritual, participants who identified as “Religious” did not also identify as “Spiritual,” and vice versa.

Regarding specific religious affiliations, two students identify as Catholic, two students identify as Jewish, and one identifies as Christian. The remaining 78% of participants stated no religious affiliation. Interestingly, two students identified with a particular religious affiliation, but chose not to identify as “religious.”

In this sample, gender is not significantly related to religious or spiritual identification. One out of twelve females identified as religious, while two out of eleven males identify as religious. A chi-square test demonstrates no significant difference in religious identification by gender: $\chi^2(N = 23) = 0.49, p = .45$.

Additionally, five out of 12 female participants identified as spiritual, and four out of 11 males identified as spiritual. Again, a chi-square test demonstrates no significant difference in spiritual identification by gender: $\chi^2(N = 23) = 0.07, p = .80$.

This runs counter to the finding that women, in general, are more religious and spiritual than men (Astin et. al., 2010).

Looking to identifications of skepticism or disbelief, a large portion of students (almost 40 %) identify as agnostic. The majority of these students identify
as neither religious nor spiritual; only two students identify as both spiritual and agnostic. A substantial minority (22%) of students identify as atheist; of these, only one student also identified as spiritual. Thus, while agnosticism and atheism are not incompatible with spiritual identification for Wesleyan students, for the most part students who identify as spiritual do not also identify as atheist or agnostic, and vice versa. No student identified as both religious and agnostic or atheist.

**Survey Data**

Tables 4 and 5 presents data from the CSBV questionnaire assessing various measures of students’ religion and spirituality. Looking at “Connection to religious upbringing,” it appears that very few students feel an affiliation with their parents’ religion. The average student feels “not at all” obligated to follow their parents’ religious beliefs, consistent with the individualism and self-determination of religious identity among most American emerging adults. It also appears that many students actively turn away from their parents’ religion: almost two-thirds of participants (61%) feel disillusioned with their parents’ religion to some extent or to a great extent. These data are consistent with the trend among American emerging adults to establish religious identities independent from those of their parents (Smith, 2009).

Concordant with the peripheral role of religious and spiritual practice in college discussed earlier, the average student engages in religious or spiritual activities such as praying, meditation, and reading sacred texts less than monthly. On average, however, students engage in self-reflection several times per week. As I will demonstrate later, reflection is a deeply spiritual act for some; for others it is
understood as a tool for self-understanding, separate from connection to or understanding of the transcendent.

Religion and spirituality play a small role in social relationships as well as personal practice and daily experience. On average, participants report that only

Table 4: Mean Responses for Measures of Religiousness and Spirituality

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Measures</th>
<th>Avg</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Connection to Religious Upbringing</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-description(^2): Feeling disillusioned</td>
<td>2.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>with my religious upbringing</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-description(^4): Feeling obligated</td>
<td>1.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>to follow my parents’ religious practices</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religious/Spiritual Activity(^3)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-reflection</td>
<td>4.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prayer</td>
<td>1.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meditation</td>
<td>2.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yoga, Tai Chi, or similar practice</td>
<td>2.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religious singing/chanting</td>
<td>1.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading sacred texts</td>
<td>1.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other reading on religion/spirituality</td>
<td>2.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religious/Spiritual Curiosity</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-description(^5): Having an interest</td>
<td>2.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>in different religious traditions</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-description(^6): Having an interest in</td>
<td>2.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>spirituality</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transcendence</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-description(^7): Feeling a sense of</td>
<td>1.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>connection with God/higher power that transcends</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>my personal self</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-description(^8): Believing in life after</td>
<td>1.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>death</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spiritual experience(^4) while: In a house of</td>
<td>1.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>worship</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spiritual experience(^5) while: Listening to</td>
<td>1.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>beautiful music</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spiritual experience(^5) while: Viewing a great</td>
<td>1.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>work of art</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spiritual experience(^5) while: Participating</td>
<td>1.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>in a musical or artistic performance</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spiritual experience(^5) while: Engaging in</td>
<td>1.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>athletics</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spiritual experience(^5) while: Witnessing the</td>
<td>1.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>beauty and harmony of nature</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spiritual experience(^5) while: Meditating</td>
<td>2.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spiritual experience(^5) while: Praying</td>
<td>1.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spiritual experience(^5) while: Participating</td>
<td>1.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>in a retreat</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^2\) Self-description measured on a 3-point scale, (1) “Not at all” to (3) “To a great extent”

\(^3\) Activity measured on a 6-point scale, (1) “Not at all” to (6) “Daily”

\(^4\) Experience measured on a 3-point scale, (1) "Not at all" to (3) "Frequently"
some of their friends attend a house of worship. While my sample is small, this provides a window to the larger Wesleyan community, indicating that for the most part students do not engage in traditionally religious activities, at least while at school. This mirrors the finding that there is a steep decrease in religious activity at college (Lee, 2002). In addition, participants report that only some friends share their religious or spiritual views. Regardless of what those views are, this finding communicates that religion and spirituality do not constitute a shared, social identity for most students at college, and are not an important structuring aspect of social relationships while at school.

Table 5: Qualitative Measures of Religiousness and Spirituality

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Measure</th>
<th># of Students (% of all participants)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Current views about religion/spirituality:</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conflicted</td>
<td>8 (35%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secure</td>
<td>7 (30%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doubting</td>
<td>4 (17%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seeking</td>
<td>9 (39%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not interested</td>
<td>9 (39%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>The relationship between science and religion is one of:</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conflict; I consider myself to be on the side of religion</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conflict; I consider myself to be on the side of science</td>
<td>7 (30%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independence; they refer to different aspects of reality</td>
<td>7 (30%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collaboration; they can be used to help support the other</td>
<td>7 (30%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>The ultimate spiritual quest for me is:</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To discover who I really am</td>
<td>2 (8.7%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To follow God’s plan for me</td>
<td>1 (2.3%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To become a better person</td>
<td>2 (8.7%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

5 Close friends measured on a 4-point scale, (1) "None" to (4) "All"
While religion and spirituality may not be a strong presence in their daily lives, it appears that students are interested in learning about them. On average, students are interested “to some extent” in different religious and spiritual traditions. However, although students may be interested in religion and spirituality in an abstract or academic sense, almost 40% of students are personally “not interested” in religion or spirituality. However, an equal number of students report that they are “seeking.” This implies a level of active interest, but also suggests a religious self and identity that are not yet secure or defined. Thus, it seems that many students are interested in developing the role of religion and spirituality in their lives.

Consistent with this openness and to religion and spirituality, about two-thirds of students believe that religious and scientific perspectives are both valid approaches to reality. Within that group, the same amount of students believes that they address the same reality, and that they refer to different aspects or levels of reality. Reflecting the lack of strong religious beliefs at Wesleyan, no student believed that religious explanations were superior to scientific ones. And reflective of those who do not believe in the existence of any transcendent reality, one-third of students are firmly on the side of science. However, it is important to remember that the opposition of “religion” and “science” is not the same as that of “spirituality” and science,” and that for some a sense of spirituality does not relate to the supernatural or transcendent, and thus “scientific” reality may be equivalent to “spiritual” reality. Alternatively, those who are open but indifferent to religion and spirituality may choose “independence”
or “collaboration,” but not identify as religious or spiritual. Regardless, two-thirds of students acknowledge the existence of a “religious reality,” even though they may not identify as religious.

While a minority of students identify as spiritual, a small majority of students (12 out of 23) report that they are on a spiritual quest. Of these twelve, only seven self-identify as spiritual. Why students who do not identify as spiritual claim to be on a spiritual quest may be explained by their understanding of the term “spiritual quest” to mean “quest for meaning or purpose in life,” rather than a quest that relates to a specifically spiritual identity. In any case, half of students on a spiritual quest identified goals relating specifically to self-discovery and self-development: “discovering who I really am”, “becoming a better person”, and “knowing my purpose in life.” Relating to the finding that the average student engages in self-reflection several times per week, it appears that a central motivation in students’ lives, regardless of religious or spiritual identity, is greater self-understanding.

In contrast to these students, a plurality of those on a spiritual quest identified the focus of their quest as “outer” rather than an “inner,” stating that their ultimate spiritual quest was “to make the world a better place.” These respondents formed almost a quarter of all students surveyed. Again, while perhaps not all of them identify as “religious” or “spiritual,” the high response rate for this item indicates that service to earth and to humanity are important objectives in students’ lives.

While almost all students related their spiritual quest to bettering the self or the world, almost none related their quest to God: only one student claimed that her spiritual quest was “to follow God’s plan for me.” If we understand “spiritual quest”
as indicating people’s life goals or ideals, it appears that for the most part students’ life goals are not directly tied to a higher power.

In general, findings indicate that belief in a transcendent reality is not strongly felt by the average student. On average, students do “not at all” believe in life after death. Additionally, the average student feels a connection to a higher power only very occasionally (between not at all and to some extent). While over half of the students surveyed are neither agnostic nor atheist—and presumably believe in some transcendent force—on average the sense of connection to this force is weak. Students may believe or have a sense that it exists, but it is not an active presence in their lives.

Although connection to a personal God is not common among Wesleyan students, many experience a sense of transcendence through spiritual experiences. These experiences can be, but are not necessarily, tied to a higher power. Consistent with the lack of affiliation with organized religion, most Wesleyan students do not have spiritual experiences while engaged in traditional religious activities, such as praying or participating in a retreat. However, the average participant occasionally undergoes a spiritual experience while meditating or while listening to beautiful music. Connecting back to the importance placed on self-reflection, meditation—the activity most highly rated by students as occasioning a spiritual experience—centrally concerns the individual connecting to and understanding a deeper sense of self, one that may be but is not necessarily tied to a higher power.

The next four measures assess qualities that do not directly address religious or spiritual beliefs, but rather focus on ways of thinking about the self and its place in
the world that engage with questions of meaning, purpose, and compassion.

Identification with religion and spirituality are certainly not necessary to possess these characteristics, but past studies have shown that religious and spiritual people tend to rate more highly on them than non-religious, non-spiritual students. Table 6 displays the mean score for each question with the four measures for all students, and

*Table 6: Mean Responses for Four Measures Related to Religion and Spirituality*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Measures</th>
<th>Avg</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Ecumenical Worldview</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-description⁶: Believing in the sacredness of life</td>
<td>2.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-description⁶: Feeling a strong connection to all humanity</td>
<td>2.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-description⁶: Believing in the goodness of all people</td>
<td>2.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engaged in⁷: Accepting others as they are</td>
<td>2.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Equanimity</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-Description⁸: Feeling good about the direction in which my life is headed</td>
<td>2.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-Description⁸: Being thankful for everything that has happened to me</td>
<td>2.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-Description⁸: Seeing each day, good or bad, as a gift</td>
<td>2.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Ethic of Caring</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal goal⁸: Reducing pain and suffering in the world</td>
<td>3.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal goal⁸: Becoming a more loving person</td>
<td>2.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal goal⁸: Improving the human condition</td>
<td>2.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engaged in⁹: Trying to change things that are unfair in the world</td>
<td>2.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Quest for Meaning</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal goal⁹: Attaining inner harmony</td>
<td>2.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal goal⁹: Attaining wisdom</td>
<td>3.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal goal⁹: Seeking beauty in my life</td>
<td>3.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal goal⁹: Finding answers to the mysteries of life</td>
<td>2.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engaged in⁹: Searching for meaning/purpose in life</td>
<td>2.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engaged in⁹: Having discussions about the meaning of life with my friends</td>
<td>2.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

“Quest for Meaning” measures students’ interest in searching for meaning or purpose in life, exploring life’s mysteries, and developing a meaningful philosophy of life.

⁶ Self-description measured on a 3-point scale, (1) "Not at all" to (3) "To a great extent"

⁷ Engagement measured on a 3-point scale, (1) "Not at all" to (3) "To a great extent"

⁸ Personal goal measured on a 4-point scale, (1) "Not important" to (4) "Essential"
On average, students feel that it is very important to seek and develop themselves to their true potential, attaining inner harmony, beauty, and wisdom in their lives. However, students are less engaged with more abstract questions of “meaning”: on average, students are searching for meaning or purpose in life to some extent, but tend to focus on issues of more personal, experiential relevance. This continues the importance placed on self-development and self-understanding running through the questionnaire responses.

Table 7: Average Total Score on Each Related Measure for Spiritual, Non-Spiritual, Religious, and Non-Religious Students

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Quest for Meaning</th>
<th>Equanimity</th>
<th>Ecumenical Worldview</th>
<th>Ethic of Caring</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total Spiritual</td>
<td>17.3</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>10.5</td>
<td>12.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Non-Spiritual</td>
<td>14.2</td>
<td>6.9</td>
<td>8.1</td>
<td>10.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Religious</td>
<td>15.3</td>
<td>7.7</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Non-Religious</td>
<td>18.2</td>
<td>7.3</td>
<td>8.4</td>
<td>12.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

While a quest for meaning plays a somewhat important role in the average student’s life, it appears to play a much larger role in students who identify as religious or spiritual. As seen in Table 7, the total average score on “Quest for Meaning” was significantly higher for spiritual students than for non-religious and non-spiritual students. Interestingly, however, quest for meaning was higher among non-religious students than among religious students.

“Equanimity” measures the degree to which the student feels centered, confident about the direction of her life, and is able to find strength in times of hardship. On average, student display a relatively high degree of equanimity. However, spiritual students displayed a much higher level of equanimity than non-
spiritual people. Religious people scored only very slightly higher than non-religious students on measures of equanimity.

“Ecumenical Worldview” measures the extent to which students feel that their lives are connected to all other lives, and that all other lives have a value and meaning equivalent to their own. The average student evinces a somewhat ecumenical worldview, believing in the sacred value of and connection among all life to some extent. Spiritual and religious students scored, on average, much higher than non-spiritual and non-religious students on this measure.

The final measure, “Ethic of Caring,” assesses students’ degree of commitment to helping others in difficulty, reducing pain and suffering in the world, and making the world a better place. The average student is committed to making a positive impact in the world, rating the majority of the measures as “very important” life goals. However, spiritual students tend to rate these goals as slightly more important, and achieved a higher total average score than non-spiritual people. As with “Quest for Meaning,” non-religious people scored higher than religious people on this measure.

Quantitative Results from the Interviews

Table 8 presents data from the ten questions applied to the interviews, coded on a scale from 1 to 5. The questions can be found in Appendix F. The mean response from the first reader’s codes averaged with the mean response from the second reader’s codes gives the final mean response for each question presented in the table. Correlations between the first and second reader’s findings are also shown.
Table 8: Average Responses and r-values for Quantitative Codes Applied to Interviews

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Measures</th>
<th>Avg.</th>
<th>r</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Strength of religious upbringing</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>.90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Evaluative attitude toward religion</td>
<td>2.9</td>
<td>.81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Evaluative attitude toward spirituality</td>
<td>4.0</td>
<td>.72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Emotional investment in religion</td>
<td>1.8</td>
<td>.86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Emotional investment in spirituality</td>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>.73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Level of religious activity</td>
<td>1.6</td>
<td>.96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Level of spiritual activity</td>
<td>2.7</td>
<td>.78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Strength of belief in a higher power</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>.78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Level of personal definition of religion or spirituality</td>
<td>2.9</td>
<td>.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Commitment to making a positive impact on the world</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>.68</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The r-values range from .67 to .96, with an average of .78. The strength of these correlations attest to the agreement between the first and second reader’s assessments of the interviews, and to the reliability of the coding instrument. Interrater reliability was moderate (kappa = .48), although this may result in part from the relatively low number of codes.

The average responses for the questions specifically addressing students’ attitudes toward, and identification with, religion or spirituality are typically higher for spirituality than for religion. The average student’s evaluative attitude toward spirituality is strong; in contrast, the average student displays a neutral attitude toward religion. Additionally, the average student’s emotional investment in religion is weak to very weak, while the average student’s emotional investment in spirituality is neutral. According with the results from the questionnaire, students on average engage in very little religious practice: they are somewhat to very passive in regards to engagement with religious activity. Students are slightly more spiritually active,
displaying a somewhat passive to average level of spiritual activity. Finally, religion and spirituality play a role in student’s lives, but one that is not especially articulated or developed: religion and spirituality are “present but not defined” in the life of the average student.

Three questions address information related to religion and spirituality, but do not directly look at their presence in students’ lives. First, the average student was raised in a household with a moderate to strong religious presence, encountering some religion in the home and attending services somewhat frequently, but not every week. Secondly, on average students “do not know” if they believe in God, and do not express a strong belief that “nothing” or “something” exists. Finally, in accord with the questionnaire findings, students profess a moderately strong sense of social responsibility: on average, a commitment to helping others and giving back to the world is somewhat important, but not a central concern for students.

Table 9 displays the correlations among all of the questions.

*Table 9: Correlation Matrix For Quantitative Codes Applied to Interviews*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Q1</th>
<th>Q2</th>
<th>Q3</th>
<th>Q4</th>
<th>Q5</th>
<th>Q6</th>
<th>Q7</th>
<th>Q8</th>
<th>Q9</th>
<th>Q10</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Q1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.4</td>
<td>0.1</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>0.1</td>
<td>0.51</td>
<td>0.1</td>
<td>0.53</td>
<td>0.29</td>
<td>0.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.1</td>
<td>0.81</td>
<td>0.1</td>
<td>0.76</td>
<td>0.16</td>
<td>0.44</td>
<td>0.38</td>
<td>-0.04</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.17</td>
<td>0.93</td>
<td>0.13</td>
<td>0.88</td>
<td>0.49</td>
<td>0.74</td>
<td>0.6</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.26</td>
<td>0.93</td>
<td>0.34</td>
<td>0.53</td>
<td>0.54</td>
<td>0.09</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.17</td>
<td>0.92</td>
<td>0.56</td>
<td>0.83</td>
<td>0.65</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q6</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.27</td>
<td>0.47</td>
<td>0.48</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q7</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.45</td>
<td>0.84</td>
<td>0.6</td>
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Several of the questions are strongly correlated, indicating that a relationship may exist between the items measured. Not surprisingly, “Evaluative attitude toward
religion” is strongly related to “emotional investment in religion,” with a correlation of .81. In other words, the more strongly students are committed to religion in their own lives, the more positively they view it. The same strong positive correlation is found between “Evaluative attitude toward spirituality” and “emotional investment in spirituality,” with a correlation of .93.

Secondly, both the measures of students’ attitudes toward, and investment in, religion or spirituality are related to the measure of religious or spiritual activity in their lives. “Religious activity” correlates with “evaluative attitude toward religion” with an r-value of .76, while its correlation with “emotional investment in religion” is .93. The same measures for spirituality display correlations of .88 and .92, respectively.

Finally, for spirituality all three measures of emotional investment, evaluative attitude, and activity are strongly correlated with the level of definition of religion or spirituality. In other words, the more defined religion or spirituality are in students’ lives, the higher their level of spiritual practice, and the stronger their positive attitude toward and emotional investment in spirituality. The correlations between “Level of definition” and “Evaluative attitude,” “Emotional investment,” and “Activity” are, respectively, .74, .83, and .84.
CHAPTER SIX
Student Perceptions of Religion and Spirituality at Wesleyan

Wesleyan has undergone a gradual secularization in the nearly two centuries since its founding, evidenced both in broad demographic trends within the student body and most explicitly in its break with the Methodist church 73 years ago. While official designations and survey data are indicative of large-scale institutional change, however, the perceptions of students are a more sensitive barometer of the religious and spiritual atmosphere on campus. According to my small sample of students, religion is a weak presence at Wesleyan. Furthermore, they report that many aspects of the campus culture make the cultivation of religious and spiritual identity difficult.

A Secular Campus

Reflecting the demographic trends discussed earlier, nearly every student interviewed—religious, spiritual, and neither—reports that Wesleyan is “a pretty secular campus.” Several students understand this secular atmosphere to be more pronounced at Wesleyan than at other schools: according to one, “here it’s kind of the opposite of some places, here the minority are very religious.” While organized religion is not perceived to be a strong presence on campus, some believe that spirituality is more widely represented in the student body. According to one student, “I feel like we’re probably abnormally towards the spiritual, or less religious, more agnostic side of things,” and another states “I think it might be difficult for someone to be very religious and find many people to relate to on campus. I think you can be very spiritual here, but it might be harder to be a very orthodox Christian.”
“It’s Tough to Be Religious Here”

Reflecting national data showing that the religiously disaffiliated in college tend to identify as politically liberal (Lee, 2002), students connect the difficulty of being religious at Wesleyan to the predominantly liberal political current on campus, believing that “the liberal political views tie into a religious skepticism.” These liberal views cause some students not only to be skeptical of religion, but also to openly criticize it. Students who do not identify as religious relate overhearing conversations that express hostility toward religion, remarking, “it’s pretty tough to be religious here. I haven’t been involved, but I’ve seen a lot of conversations, putting things out about religion that are dumb.” Another student understands this religious skepticism to be a defining feature of Wesleyan: “So many kids are like, ‘Aw, religion, ugh.’ I mean, it’s Wesleyan.” This young man does not feel the need to explain precisely why Wesleyan is a place where religious criticism is common. It is a foregone conclusion given the widely-accepted view of the school and its student body.

While non-religious students perceive hostility toward religion, this prejudice is personally experienced by two out of the three religious students in this sample, both of whom identify as Catholic. One of these students laments the closed-mindedness toward religion at a place that in most other respects is “really open and accepting”: “Most people would look down on it, and say ‘what the hell are you doing, you’re just reading from a book, thinking those rules still apply and they don’t. It’s something that a lot of people are quick to criticize.” While this student has rarely suffered personal attacks on his religion, he understands that it is difficult for most Wesleyan students to reconcile religious beliefs with the scientific and logical
values of higher education. The third religious student identifies as Jewish, but does not report any hostility against his religious identity.

Due to the tendency of Wesleyan students to be skeptical and sometimes critical of organized religion, and especially Christianity, the strongly religious Catholic students in the sample are uncomfortable speaking about religion or voicing their opinions on sensitive political issues. One Catholic student discusses how the liberal views of Wesleyan students often impede their engaging with her opinions:

I don’t often talk about religious issues with my friends. The times that I’ve tried, it’s just been really uncomfortable for me…People hate talking about abortion with someone who thinks it’s wrong. I have a hard time talking about it with people because they don’t like to listen.

The tension produced by these discussions causes her to hesitate in expressing her religious identity publicly. But it is not only her ideas and opinions that she feels are attacked; she also believes that possessing a religious identity causes people to view her in a more negative light: “Sometimes I feel like people look at you different, or think of you differently if they know that you are religious. And not in a good way.”

Thus, it seems that religious identity can be a personal stigma at Wesleyan, associating someone not only with a religious group but also with the problematic politics that are associated with it.

**Religious and Spiritual Students Exist, but They Keep to Themselves**

While participants rarely encounter religious students on campus, they acknowledge their presence but assume that they keep their beliefs and practices to themselves: as one student states, “I would definitely say religion exists [on campus], but I personally don’t feel a large number of people openly expressing their religion and spirituality.” This makes sense given the tendency for outward religious
expression and practice to decrease in college (Smith, 2009). Another explanatory factor for why religious and spiritual students do not make their presence widely known on campus may be the emphasis that today’s religious young adults place on personal experience over social practice in religion and spirituality (Smith, 2009). As one student remarks, “I do think that a lot of people practice spirituality in their own ways, I think it’s a largely individualistic thing.”

**Majority of Friends Are Not Religious**

Speaking personally about religion among their own group of friends, students relate that the majority of their friends are not religious. In agreement with data from the questionnaire asserting that only some of students’ friends attend religious services, participants mainly speak about the absence of religion among their friends in terms of formal practice. Many speak of friends who were raised in religious households but who left that religious structure behind in college, and are not actively involved with religion on campus. The following quotes illustrate this:

I know that most of my friends have either been confirmed, or they’ve had bar or bat mitzvahs. So they are in a religious structure, but they don’t necessarily follow those and look to those to get through a day.

I think the majority [of my friends] were raised with some sort of religion, but maybe don’t necessarily follow it. Being at college it’s sort of inconvenient to follow it here…I have very few friends who are exploring what their religion means to them now, or what a new religion would mean.

I’ve never heard any [of my friends] talk about praying or any of those more detailed religious rituals…I don’t think it’s necessarily a huge role in their life.

While religion is not often spoken about or practiced by their friends, nearly every student claims that they have many Jewish friends, reflecting the fact that approximately one-fifth of the Wesleyan student population is Jewish. Several
students who were raised in small, largely Christian towns find the Jewish population “eye-opening” or “overwhelming” in comparison to what they grew up with. For them, having Jewish friends is an opportunity to learn about and experience a new religion, and several mention joining their friends in Jewish holidays or rituals.

Although they report that many of their friends identify as Jewish, most participants get the sense that this identification is mainly a “cultural” one. The following quotes illustrate this:

I don’t think I have any religious friends. I have a lot of Jewish friends, because there are a lot of Jewish people on campus. But not Jewish friends that believe in God or the teachings of Judaism. It’s more cultural Judaism.

Most of my friends lean toward agnostic, many of them are culturally Jewish…Religion is not that important for most of my friends, I know that none of them go to temple regularly. It’s mostly just the holidays that they’ll celebrate here.

As seen in the first quote, students who identify as culturally Jewish are not understood to be religious. Rather, these participants characterize cultural Judaism as participation in “social” religious activities such as holidays or Shabbat dinners. However, their culturally Jewish friends do not attend services regularly and do not express belief in God—marks of a more “religious” Judaism.

Because the majority of participants and their friends are not religious, religion does not constitute a shared social identity. This is reflected in the questionnaire finding that only some of participants’ friends share their religious views. Friendships, and the larger peer group, are central means of social influence in college, determining the scripts of the drama of everyday life for most students. As discussed earlier, these scripts are written according to the norms of particular social roles; because religion and spirituality are not shared social roles among students, it is
reasonable to expect that religion and spirituality are not relevant to social scripts and thus are not a strong presence in students’ lives. Indeed, most participants report that religion is rarely, if ever, spoken about: as one young man said, “there doesn’t seem to be too much religious or spiritual discussion in my group of friends. There’s just other things to talk about.” Perhaps as a result of the lack of religious discussion, some participants admit that they have no idea what the religious and spiritual views of their friends are.

**Perceptions of Religious and Spiritual Opportunities on Campus**

Beyond their understandings of religion and spirituality within the student body, respondents also discussed their perceptions of religious and spiritual opportunities on campus. They are aware that religious and spiritual organizations exist at Wesleyan, and believe that it would be easy to participate in them if one were to seek out the opportunity. However, for those who do not actively seek them out—including the majority of respondents—their presence goes largely unnoticed. One student links his ignorance of these groups to his lack of exploration: “There has to be groups, obviously. I don’t really see them though…Maybe just because I haven’t been searching for it, I haven’t been looking to be a part of a community.” Another student echoes this, stating that “there are so many communities here that conduct so many activities, that when you’re not participating in one, they can kind of flow by.” So, while most students have an abstract awareness of the presence of spiritual and religious groups on campus, they are uncertain as to exactly what those opportunities are, and what they offer to students.
Several students express reservations about exploring religious opportunities on campus, based on the perception that religious services would focus on Biblical beliefs that they do not adhere to. Several quotes illustrate this:

For me, I don’t really want to go and sit in on a mass or a sermon here, because the basis of them usually is the Bible…I don’t think I’m going to look to the Bible to guide how to live my life. And for me, that’s what most of these religious services on campus would be aimed towards.

I would feel very uncomfortable, because in the end the pastor wouldn’t say, “It’s all about just loving each other and seeking out some kind of faith.” No, it would be “They will all find Christ in the end,” and that would be it for me.

If I went [to services], I would feel extremely excluded. Not in a direct way, but sort of a, I don’t know any of these songs, I cant read this Hebrew. And also, I feel like there’s a certain tension in that you’re reciting this, “Adonai, I believe in you,” and knowing that I don’t believe in God.

The majority of respondents do not identify with religion in large part due to a rejection of Biblical narratives and teachings. Thus, their expectation that religious opportunities at Wesleyan would be based on these narratives, and therefore exclusive of their experience, presumably deters them from seeking out those opportunities.

Apart from organized religious groups, few students speak about opportunities for more unstructured, non-traditional exploration of religion or spirituality campus. While a substantial minority of students identify as “spiritual, but not religious,” only two mention having heard of an organized spiritual group on campus, and even they admit that they know little about it. One spiritual student has taken part in a meeting of spiritual students, but found that the experience did not resonate with her and in fact made her uncomfortable:

There was this Consciousness Club that I was really excited about. They put up flyers last year, and it had like, are you interested in spiritual beliefs, but not necessarily a formal organization…I went, and it just seemed like a lot of people who were trying to explore a different state of consciousness, but a lot
of the methods were just, these are people who smoke a lot of weed, breath play because that puts you in a daze…a lot of things that just seem out-there and unsafe, and really not coming from an actual spiritual source…They were reaching this consciousness, but it wasn’t doing anything for them, it was leaving them in a state of nothingness.

Ironically, while this student was searching for an open, accepting space to discuss her spiritual beliefs with others outside of the exclusive “formal organization” of religion, the one spiritual gathering that she attended made her feel just as excluded as a religious service. Because spirituality for her and most others is not tied to a central text or shared set of beliefs, it may be difficult for spiritual students to gather and feel united over their spirituality. In general, the spiritual students in this sample do not seek out opportunities to gather on campus.

**It’s Difficult to Develop Religion and Spirituality in College**

Most students interviewed find it difficult to incorporate religion and spirituality into their lives at Wesleyan. Many spiritual students place special value on self-reflection and appreciating their surroundings, but relate that engaging in these activities is difficult in a college environment that encourages a focus on scholastic and social goals. The following quotes exemplify the difficulty of pursuing a spiritual practice at Wesleyan:

In places like this institutionalized environment, our goal is to have an academic product under a deadline. And if you live in that sort of environment, both the spirit and the body are not encouraged to grow and cultivate. It’s much more about the mind… So it’s harder to have a spiritual practice, because you’re not being encouraged to slow down, realize that it’s amazing to breathe, realize that the way the light is coming in the window is really amazing. That’s not seen as productive, that’s not getting to work.

I think [Wesleyan] is less conducive to being spiritual, because it’s a bubble. You’re always busy, you’re always doing things, you have very little free time. You’re either in class or you’re working or you’re with friends. Friends,
work, home, or sleep. Or eating. And there’s not much space in the middle for just being. You need a bit more free time of just peace for that to happen.

The aspects of campus life that require concrete outputs—work and social relationships—thus crowd out more abstract spiritual commitments. Because the absence of these commitments does not have the same immediately experienced consequences as, say, not handing in a paper, it is easy to neglect taking time out for “just being.”

Spiritual students also lament the materialism and pettiness fostered by the college environment. For some, however, the focus on the temporal and fleeting is just as seductive as it is frustrating. One student relates his lack of spiritual growth to participating in the culture of consumption encouraged at college:

Spiritual development has been much, much harder [at college]. Since I’ve came here I’ve become much more of a consumist [sic]. I spend a lot of money on stuff now, which is really bad…Buying stuff makes me feel awful. It makes me feel good in the moment, ‘I have this.’ But looking back on things it’s just, ‘Hm, I don’t like that, I don’t need this.’

In addition to consumerism, students cite rampant alcohol consumption, lack of exposure to nature, and the tendency to focus on trivial topics of conversation (“complaining about the food or the classes or anything really”) as limiting the opportunities to engage with anything of real meaning, and impeding any kind of deep connection with the self and others.

While some students who are neither religious nor spiritual express a desire to incorporate religion and spirituality into their lives, they find that the college environment hinders exploration of these areas. One remarks, “I would find more ways to explore spirituality if I had more time and if there wasn’t other, more pressing things”; another states, “I haven’t investigated religion or spirituality. It’s in
the back of my mind. I play two sports, so it’s hard to find time to just go around and explore these things.” While most non-religious, non-spiritual students choose not to explore religion or spirituality at college, it is important to emphasize that what they do choose to focus on is not necessarily petty or unimportant. In a touching example of this, one freshman who expresses interest in spirituality but has not explored it in college explains that his priorities are “figuring out my future, and classes, but also having someone to sit with at Usdan.” While figuring out one’s place in the cosmos can certainly be meaningful, making friends to combat the loneliness of freshman year is no less profound a goal.

**Academics Are Largely Separate from Religion and Spirituality**

Several students relate that readings and discussions in the classroom help them to develop their spirituality. Most mention courses in religion (especially Buddhism) or philosophy that have been useful in providing new perspectives on their lives. However, most students have to separate the texts from their academic context in order to meaningfully connect it to their own experience. One student describes how texts encountered in his classes can contribute to his spirituality only outside of an academic framework:

I have to read them out of the context of the class in order to really internalize them, for them to really hit me. It’s never really in the class when I’ve had that [spiritual] experience. But I’ve definitely been turned on to certain books, and then I’ll take them somewhere else where I can just be devoted to them.

Other students speak about the difficulty of connecting what is learned in the classroom to their personal understanding of religion and spirituality. One student explains how, in her Introduction to Religion course, “I had such a hard time understanding what my professor was trying to explain about something being sacred.
Because I feel like sacred is just something that happens, it’s a feeling.” The heavy theorizing of the academic study of religion can seem disconnected from what “happens” within the person. In a comical instance of this disconnect, one participant, who is devoutly Catholic and has read the Bible since he was a child, failed his Introduction to the New Testament class. When asked whether the content of the course resonated at all with his religion, he states “No, it was a completely different thing for me. I remember getting my first test back and thinking, whoa, I’m not in Kansas anymore…For the life of me I could not understand a word the teacher was saying in class.” Overall, it seems that the classroom is not a conducive space for the development of religion and spirituality at Wesleyan.
CHAPTER SEVEN
Student Definitions of “Religion” and “Spirituality”

Whether students identify as religious or spiritual is closely related to their understanding of the meaning of those terms. The vast majority of Wesleyan students reflect the increasing tendency to understand these two terms as opposing constructs (Astin et. al., 2010). Taking William James’ approach to religion a century ago, most students speak of spirituality as inner, emotional experience, focused on individual self-understanding or connection with a greater reality; whereas religion is understood as a set of rules and practices imposed from outside of the self by an institutional structure.

Religion Is an Organized Social Structure

Consistent with historian David Wulff’s claim that the term “religion” has become reified, moving from an abstract process to a fixed objective entity (Wulff, 1997), students overwhelmingly define religion in substantive terms, speaking of it as a system or institution external to the self. The word “organization” appeared eight times and “structure” appeared five times in different participants’ definitions of religion, with the common definition being “an organized set of beliefs.” Religion is therefore not directly connected with inner experience; rather, “religion is the codification of spiritual insights,” defining inner experience and making it public and shared.

Some extend the notion of a code or system to encompass specific rules and regulations: religion is “structured by its own rules that you have to follow,” providing “a set of clear guidelines for how to live life.” These rules often stipulate
“adhering to practices” for those who are members of the religion, such as “doing certain rituals, or attending certain places.” For some participants, these practices were seen as strict and demanding: being religious means “fasting when you’re supposed to fast, praying when you’re supposed to pray—it’s very rigid.”

Many students understood these rules and beliefs to be based in a shared text or a common history, lending them authority and allowing those who are members of the religion to feel a sense of continuity with the past. Some describe religion as “an organization with an underlying sacred text,” “grounded in its own writings.” Others understood religion to be grounded in tradition, viewing it as “a set of rituals that are founded in some kind of history, like a text or practice that has been around for many years,” or “a collection of ideas that has been passed down.”

However, these practices and rules do not exist in isolation from the people who adhere to them, and most students define religion as a social phenomenon, “a community organized around beliefs”; it is “following something, but also being a part of something.” For some, the word “religion” implies involvement in a specific, defined religious group; one student states, “If someone describes themselves as religious, I assume that they identify within a specific religious belief. Like saying you’re a Christian, you’re a Jew, you’re a Muslim, you’re a Buddhist.” And while some acknowledged that religion encompasses subjective, personal experience, most see it as “more of a community thing…There’s an element of the individual, but there’s also a large element of society, a religious society.”

Only two students mentioned a higher power in their definition of religion.
For them, religion necessarily “entails looking to something higher than yourself that controls the things you do, or sort of has a plan for your life that is out of your hands, and maybe you’re searching to come to terms with [that].” For these students, the practices and rituals of organized religion exist as means of understanding and connecting with this power, by “making concrete something that is abstract or that you can’t necessarily detect.” The vast majority of students, however, focus on the institutional, practical aspect of religion in their definition of the term, rather than the beliefs around which the institutions and practices are structured.

**Spirituality Is an “Individual,” “Whatever Thing”**

While religion is defined by most as a codified set of beliefs and practices that exist outside of the person, the locus of centricity for spirituality is most often understood to be the person—“spirituality is a more individual thing,” in contrast to the social nature of religion. Many define spirituality as the process of discovering how to live a meaningful life. While religion may provide a path to achieve this, spirituality is ultimately “someone’s personal philosophy as to what’s important for their quality of life.” Another student believes it arises from a desire to achieve inner happiness or satisfaction. According to her, spirituality is a “personal quest for feeling good inside. And feeling balanced. A lot of people when they’re not feeling balanced…They’ll look for spiritual[ity], trying to align things back into where they think things should be.” While most do not share her understanding that spirituality arises from inner distress, the general consensus is that it necessarily originates within the person.
For several students, spirituality involves belief in a higher power. In contrast to those who understand spirituality as engagement with the self, one student believes that the search for self-meaning is universal and not restricted to spirituality, and that “spirituality has this inherent connotation of the supernatural.” However, without the support of religious myths and narratives, the spiritual belief that “something more” exists is less articulated than it is felt or intuited; it is “a sense that maybe some type of god or energy exists, but you just don’t know how to define it.”

Regarding the relationship between religion and spirituality, many believe that religion provides definition to spiritual insights or questions. Thus, “religion can have a close relationship to spirituality in certain situations.” However, spiritual experience is not confined to organized religion; according to one student, “you can access spirituality through religion, but I also think you can find it in moments that are secular.” A religious identity may provide structure to guide in the search to answer questions of meaning and purpose, but ultimately one forges one’s own path in looking for those answers. Thus, “spirituality is religion but more personal, in that you can belong to a religion but maybe personally you hold your own unique set of spiritual ideas.” Again, religion is understood as something external to the person, something that one “belongs to,” which is made meaningful and relevant to life through spirituality.

Because spirituality is often linked with emotional experience, many understand it to be something that can occur in certain moments. This experience can occur anywhere and at any time, and is not tied to a specific location or group of people. As one student remarked, “you can just be walking around and be like, ‘Oh, I
feel spiritual right now.’’ While this feeling is appreciated, it is not necessarily defined or incorporated into a person’s identity outside of those moments: one young woman states that spirituality “can be something that you don’t necessarily have to think about. It’s not, ‘Oh I’ve determined that I’m spiritual. It can just be how you feel when you do something.’” While adhering to a religion involves adopting a specific social identity structured by rules and practice, spirituality does not have to be a defined part of one’s identity.

Because spirituality is unconnected to an identifiable doctrine, text, or social group, its definition is more amorphous than that of religion—it is “more of a ‘whatever’ thing,” where “you just tend to explore your options.” Due to this lack of definition, however, a good proportion of respondents (about one-fourth) were uncertain as to the meaning of the term. For some, this stems from a lack of exposure to spirituality; one student who grew up in a “conservative-Christian neighborhood” expresses her confusion as to its definition: “I’m pretty unclear as far as definitions of spirituality, I’m more familiar with religion…just because of the neighborhood I’ve grown up in.” For those who have not developed a personal understanding of spirituality, it can be difficult to identify what the word means in an abstract sense. Listen to this student struggling to define it: “spirituality is more general…it’s not a structured…maybe having beliefs in…I don’t really know.”

For one student, uncertainty over the definition of spirituality arises because his definition of religion is identical to many students’ definition of spirituality: a commitment to self-understanding and making meaning of one’s place in the universe:
I don’t really know what [spirituality] means…I just don’t see a huge difference between religion and spirituality, in the way I think about religion. So when I hear people say they’re spiritual, not religious, I just assume that they’re by my definition religious and don’t like calling themselves religious, and say spiritual instead…For me, religion is how people think the universe works and was created, and how their existence matters, or doesn’t matter. I feel like everybody has some way of explaining that.

For him, the term “religion” has been broadened from association with institutional beliefs and practices to include how people understand the nature of the self and the world they inhabit. However, while meaningfully engaging with existence is identified as “religion” for some and “spirituality” for others, almost all students associate religion with an institutional structure and spirituality with personal understandings of the self and the universe.
CHAPTER EIGHT
Early Exposure to Religion and Spirituality

Identity provides the story for the self. It is not only a label that we confer on ourselves, but a label that brings with it certain beliefs, practices, and ways of thinking about the self and the world. Often, it connects us with others through shared identity. The presence or absence of religious and spiritual identity is closely tied to students’ experience with religion and spirituality before coming to Wesleyan, both through their families and through other reference groups. As reported in the quantitative data, the majority of Wesleyan students were raised in a home with a moderate to strong religious presence, attending services often and sometimes every week. However, a substantial minority was raised with little to no religion in the home. While most students raised in religious households eventually drifted away from organized religion, they tend to maintain some sense of religious or spiritual identity currently. Those students who were raised with little to no religion in the home generally do not identify as religious or spiritual.

Students Raised in a Religious Household: Religion Was Not Personally Meaningful

Students raised in religious households report that the decision to identify with and practice religion in childhood, as well as the impetus to maintain that identity religious identity, was guided by parental practices. Thus, students rarely felt personally compelled toward religion: as one states, “religion was never a ‘I’m here because this is something I need to understand.’” One student who attended a Unitarian Universalist Church as a child describes how her mother’s presence was the main draw: “I went because my mom kind of pushed me to… If my mother had
stopped going, I probably would have stopped going as well. It wasn’t something that I felt strongly enough about to go on my own.” Because it is difficult to engage with the abstract beliefs and regulatory practices of religion as a child, some students report that the most meaningful aspect of religion was the opportunity to be close with family, rather than with God. As one student notes, “I found services more as a time to spend time with my mom, it was a family thing, it really wasn’t religious and fulfilling.”

Consequently, experience with organized religion was accepted but not personally meaningful for the majority of students raised in religious households. One student who attended an Episcopal church every week as a child relates that religion “was more of a perfunctory thing than a meaningful thing, for me growing up. So I didn’t see any soul searching involved in going to church.” Students often frame their lack of religious engagement in childhood in terms of a lack of emotional stimulation. Speaking of her Jewish heritage, one student claims: “rationally I understood the historical connection, but emotionally or intuitively I never really felt it,” while another recalls, “I talked to God through prayer, but in the end it was all my imagination creating these things. I never had that kind of powerful emotional relationship.”

While a higher power was encountered through readings from religious texts or addressed through prayer, it was rarely experienced personally. One student raised in a reform Jewish family reports that as a child, “there was never anything transcendent about religion for me. To be that young is just to completely not have any grasp on what God is.” Several students recall praying to an abstract God but not
receiving any response or sensing its presence. As a young child, one student remembers “learning to pray, but not feeling like it ever worked for me,” while another states that “prayer was always, ‘God’s there and he’s looking at me, and when I talk to him he doesn’t talk back.’

**Freedom and Flexibility in Religious Upbringing**

For most students raised in a religious household, religion was presented as an option, not an obligation. When they were young, their parents brought them to services and taught them about their religious heritage; as they grew older, they encouraged freedom of choice. One student who attended an Episcopal church on and off as a child states that “my parents were pretty lenient about it and gave me a lot of freedom… after [my confirmation] they said, well, now you’ve been educated and you can decide what your views are.” By asking them to “decide what [their] views are,” this freedom encouraged students to engage with their religion rather than rejecting it outright as something forced upon them. Occasionally, freedom was accompanied by responsibility, which further pushed students to question the meaning and importance of religious engagement. One student who attended Catholic mass every week as a child recalls, “My parents would give me the independence to not go to church if I didn’t want to, but I would have to do something productive in the house instead of just sitting on my ass watching TV.” This young man now proudly identifies as Catholic—so it seems that religious engagement was ultimately more meaningful for him than Sunday morning cartoons.

Several students who were raised in religious households were taught to actively question and engage with their religion. One student who attended Hebrew
school through middle school relates, “I definitely spent a lot of time questioning, and that was something my Jewish environment really supported, and I now feel like that’s an essential part of Judaism.” Another who was raised reform Jewish, and now considers himself to be strongly spiritual, recalls the openness to discussion in his synagogue: “Questions were always encouraged, and I asked all kind of questions…There was a lot of space for thought.” While this student does not explicitly identify this questioning as a contributing factor to his current spiritual identity, is not difficult to imagine how this kind of open dialogue led to the engagement with questions of deep meaning and purpose that characterizes his spirituality now.

**Strict Religious Upbringing: A Minority of Students**

However, for a minority of students (about 20%), religion was an integral part of family life, and participation in religious activities was understood as a familial obligation that was not to be questioned. Like the students raised in more moderate religious households, religion for these students was largely formulaic and not deeply meaningful. However, they were not given the freedom to decide whether or not they wanted to adhere to a religious identity. One young woman raised in a strict Muslim household recalls being forced to pray:

I used to hate it because I’d be watching my favorite show, and it would get interrupted because this mosque would come on the TV, and it would be the prayer call. And I was like, why can’t I just watch my show, I can pray later. I actually stopped praying when I was 12, I just pretended I did. My mom would be like, you should go pray, and I’d be like, OK. And I would just go to my room and call one of my friends for five minutes, and come back and be like, all done.
Adherence to organized religion was understood to be both an annoyance and an imposition. And because religion was not to be questioned or denied in her family, she felt the need to hide her lack of identification with and practice of Islam.

**The Cultural and Social Aspects of Religion Were Meaningful**

While religious beliefs and teachings rarely engaged Wesleyan students as children, the social and cultural aspects of religion are remembered as important and meaningful. One student recalls the reasons for her engagement with Judaism as a child: “There was singing, I loved singing…I just like hanging out with people and dressing up and eating food.” While students may not have consciously acknowledged community as important when they were children, looking back now they realize that it was quite meaningful—and that this kind of community may be difficult to find outside of religion. One student voices these realizations about his Christian youth group:

> It was a youth group but it was also just a group of friends. It was a fun community, and you don’t really have an agnostic community or an atheist community. They don’t come together and sing songs about being atheist so much.

While the social bonds formed through a religious community were important for many students, the joys of shared religious rituals and celebrations are most often understood as completely separate from religious beliefs. One student who was raised in a strict Muslim household in Kuwait fondly remembers Ramadan:

> I would love fasting just because of the community. Everyone was doing it. So you’d complain about being hungry all day, and then at five there’d be all this food and you’d be like, oh my God, this is awesome. But I don’t think it was religious, it was more like a social thing.
Because the student does not connect the happiness of the communal celebrations to God or to what she learned in services, it is labeled as “not religious.” Again, this indicates the lack of engagement with religious beliefs among Wesleyan students growing up.

**The Importance of Religious Community Leads Some to a Brief “Religious Phase” in Adolescence**

The importance of community explains why several students briefly became heavily involved in religion during their adolescence. These students were raised in families where religion was present but not strongly enforced, and chose to join a religious group outside of parental encouragement mainly to cultivate and strengthen social relationships. One student who joined a youth group in middle school relates, “I had some friends who were involved with [the church], so I wanted to get more involved in those things.” He played in a band called “Extreme Faith” with his friends, and for him, “The parts I more enjoyed were the personal connections, the music we’d play. The rituals and prayers not so much.” Engagement with religion was more an opportunity to forge relationships, rather than to engage with religious teachings. Another young woman was introduced to her youth group through friends, and went on to become “crusader active” in the organization. For her, the religious community provided structure and leadership; she remembers: “I looked up to these parents, and we had younger leaders who were really easy to connect with. I was in a rebellious stage where I didn’t want to listen to my parents no matter what, but I still wanted guidance in some way.” While the benefits of social relationships were the primary reason for their intense religious engagement, these students naturally accepted religious beliefs. As the former member of Extreme Faith stated, “I wasn’t
super hardcore about [religious belief]. I didn’t question it that much. I just took them for what they were.”

However, these beliefs soon emerged as problematic or false, which made participation in the community difficult. One student recalls, “I just kind of started to think that it was all kind of dumb…I started to lose my religion and then at a certain point I couldn’t justify taking part in that institution any more, after I had disavowed the things that we taught.” For another student, those teachings clashed with certain aspects of her identity. When she came out as a lesbian in high school, she felt that the Christian teachings that she had accepted wholeheartedly were suddenly turned against her. She states: “throughout high school my faith started crumbling…I felt betrayed by my family, by the organization that coddled me through my youth.”

While religious beliefs and community had at one point offered comfort and security, there came a point where they became too painful to follow.

**Rejection of Religious Identity in Adolescence**

Because religious beliefs and practices rarely resonated with students in childhood, almost all ceased attending services during adolescence. One student relates that, after completing his bar mitzvah, “I was done. It’s like graduating from high school and peaceing out: ‘I’m out of here, thanks, see you later!’” Through this analogy, he portrays being a member of an organized religion as an important developmental phase, but one that did not form a permanent part of the self and that he was not sorry to leave behind. For other students, their departure was the result of an active process of critical engagement with their religious upbringing: one student raised in a Jewish household relates, “When you’re little you just go wherever your
parents bring you. When I was older and I would definitely think critically about a lot of the services. I was able to say, I think I’m just going to stay home.”

For most students raised in homes where religion was an expected fact of family life, the move away from religion during adolescence reflected a rejection of teachings and beliefs that had been problematic, and even painful, from the start. One student raised in a strict Christian family recounts his struggles with received Christian morality:

I remember thinking as a child that good people go to Hell as well because… the Bible says don’t eat pork, and I was like plenty of good people, moral people eat pork, but they’re going to go to Hell? So as a teen, just coming to terms the idea that morality and piety aren’t necessarily synonymous.

With the increase in autonomy and critical thinking of adolescence, this student was able to acknowledge his misgivings over religious beliefs, and stopped identifying with religion in his early teens. As another student raised in a strictly Catholic household matured into adolescence and learned more about himself, he realized that not only did Catholicism not resonate with his inner self, but that it directly attacked that self. He states:

I'm bisexual, that plays a part in [my rejection of religion]…The general hatred of everything that’s not heterosexuality was hard for me growing up. And on top of that, I saw it as a restrictive thing, a not-open thing. I spent most of my time worrying about things, like am I doing things that are going to send me to hell, am I doing things that are wrong? And this whole morality that wasn’t my morality, it was someone else imposing their morality on me.

Religion was never his own—it was something imposed from outside the self, something regulative and antagonistic. Thus, when he was around fifteen, he “snapped” and officially renounced his religion.
“Religion Was a Non-Issue”—Students Raised Without Religion in the Home

A significant minority of students was raised with little or no exposure to religion within the nuclear family. Almost every student raised in this kind of household does not currently identify as religious or spiritual.

For some students, “religion was a complete absence” in the home. Parents rarely if ever brought them to services, and religious practices and teachings were not invoked in the home. According to one student, who is now an atheist: “Neither one of my parents influenced any religion in my life or input any religion in my life, where I had to go here or there.” Many students link their lack of exposure to religion as a child to their current a-religious identity. As one student states, “We were never raised with any religion, so even if I wanted to make my own choice to not believe in it, I wasn’t even presented with that information, like ‘this is what exists.’” Another student states:

This isn’t something I was raised with, so it all seems sort of far-fetched. I don’t understand why anyone isn’t wondering, you just sort of accept it. So I’m hesitant to be vulnerable to that belief, or I put myself in this category where I wasn’t raised in this belief and so I don’t accept it.

Without the familial impetus to explore religious questions, students rarely embark on that exploration independently. Therefore, for students raised in secular households, the possibility that religion could form an important component of their self-concepts and worldviews is rarely engaged with, let alone accepted.

Students Raised in a “Culturally Religious” Household

Several students identify their upbringing as more “culturally” religious than “religiously” religious. For these students, religion was primarily encountered in the home through holiday celebrations, although these celebrations did not involve
attendance at services or any recognition of the religious beliefs underlying the holidays. One student relates the separation of holiday celebrations from religion during her childhood: “We just celebrated holidays as something fun, in the most mainstream possible way… I don’t think I really thought about [religion] outside of those moments.” Another provides an interesting characterization of secular holidays: “We celebrated holidays, but not in a religious way, just in an American way.” Her family’s understanding of holidays as a time for social gathering, eating food, and giving gifts is emblematic of a predominately secular American culture.

Among these “culturally religious” students, the identification “culturally Jewish” is particularly common, and five of the students surveyed identify their upbringing as such. As one student says, “My family was culturally Jewish, to the extent that we celebrated Hannukah. But that’s about it. I did not go to temple or church or anything like that.” For some students, “cultural Judaism” involved connecting to Jewish history and tradition in addition to celebrating holidays. For one, religion “was always more about heritage, and protecting and keeping and remembering traditions and language versus necessarily rituals or services, because we never went to services regularly.” Other students felt a connection to Jewish history through family members who survived the Holocaust. One young man states, I probably felt most connected [to Judaism] because my grandfather was in the Holocaust… I felt that I had a broader inheritance of a tradition that made me distinct from the rest of the world in important ways. That was in some ways a source of pride, that lineage. That connected me to… a historical past, maybe more so than a religious past.
Thus, while these students may have connected with Judaism through a sense of continuity with history and traditional practice, the specific religious beliefs and practices were not as highly valued or incorporated into identity.

**Meaningful Early Experiences Influence Current Adoption of Religious or Spiritual Identity**

Students who currently identify as religious or spiritual—both those who were raised in religious households and those who were not—often relate this identity to early experiences or relationships that provided personally meaningful perspectives on religion or spirituality. Recalling William James’ proposition that a belief is accepted when it is shown to make a difference in one’s life (James, 1907/2005), these early experiences taught students how to incorporate religion and spirituality into their lives, moving it from an abstract, “external” concept to one that was understood both intellectually and emotionally.

For some, this perspective was bestowed by a close family member. One young man, who was raised Episcopalian but who now identifies as spiritual, relates how his grandfather gave him a way of understanding religion that he found personally meaningful:

> He made my perspective on Christianity much more personal. He said, ‘If this doesn’t relate to you, you shouldn’t feel like you have to go to a church to really find meaning from this. He would give me different books to read…He switched the emphasis from God to family for me…That changed my perspective, from looking at a sometimes angry God, omniscient, he made it more about the togetherness.

The “sometimes angry God” encountered through Biblical myth is what turned many students away from religion in their youth. However, when the focus is turned toward “real life” rather than abstract myth, students can recognize the sacred in what
surrounds them: other people, the earth, and themselves. Another student gained this personal perspective on a higher power from a close friend who belongs to a Unitarian Universalist church. Through conversations with this friend as a young girl, she began to understand God as

a representation of the perfect way of being, of the best way of conducting your life based on an ethical code that was laid out by [Unitarian Universalism]... I was always wary of the term “God” and what that meant, and I wasn’t really ready to subscribe to it. But I was very ready to pull apart the ideas that were laid into it.

Thus, she began to write her own story of what a transcendent force might be, and how it could play a part in her life. This story began with the God of organized religion, but was transformed from something that she was “wary of” into “an understanding of what it means to be on this earth and to be a good person.” She now defines this as her sense of spiritual identity.

The few students who continue to embrace the religion of their youth had similar childhood relationships and experiences that helped them to build a meaningful perspective on religion. One, who identifies as Jewish now, speaks about a “foundational rabbi” from his childhood, who structured his Hebrew school class by “always asking us to question things...if he had not been a rabbinical voice in my life, I probably would not identify as Jewish.” And while earlier he had “believed in God as much as I believed in Santa Claus,” learning about existentialism in middle school helped him to reformulate his conceptions of a higher power:

I didn’t really have a way of understanding why I wanted to believe in God or what part of it until I took the [existentialism] class, and realized that when you really get down to it, there’s no reason to believe in anything and we create our own reasons. And I felt like having a traditional Jewish understanding of the world and also questioning it, and also overall believing
that the world matters and the whole universe together makes up some sort of God was something I felt like I could live with.

While many other students who were raised in religious households may have had an abstract conception of God in their youth, that conception would most likely remain abstract and impersonal without “a way of understanding why [they] wanted to believe in God or what part of it.”

Finally, a religious identity is more likely to be accepted if the problematic aspects of religion are engaged with in childhood. One student found that his father’s wisdom and positive outlook on Catholicism helped him to understand the religion more deeply, and ultimately adopt it as his own identity:

He’s always thinking of the glass as half full, he’s always thinking about how good his life is…And if I ever have questions of doubting my religion or why do I believe this, I always ask my dad. And it seems like he always has the right answers. The questions that I haven’t answered yet, I think he’s found them. And it’s helpful to get that kind of perspective from somebody else, to maybe help my own path along that road.

These early experiences allowed students to understand religion and spirituality in a personal way, providing both guidance and the freedom that allowed them to find the answers for themselves.
CHAPTER NINE
Rejection of a Religious Identity

Nearly all students interviewed do not currently identify as religious, understanding religion to be problematic or inapplicable to their lives. This reflects a natural continuation of the rejection or lack of internalization of religious beliefs that many discussed as children and adolescents. Because most maintain a “skeptical and therefore avoidant” stance toward religion, they do not express curiosity to explore or develop a religious identity at this point in their lives. This is supported both by research cited earlier indicating low levels of religious participation in college (Uecker et. al., 2007), as well as by the results of the quantitative analyses indicating low levels of evaluative attitudes toward and engagement with religion. Several common themes emerged in students’ discussions of their problems identifying with organized religion.

A Religious Text Is Just a “Dead Piece of Paper”

One major criticism of organized religion is its dependence on texts whose proscriptions and teachings are not applicable to modern society. Many students believe that religious texts have human rather than divine origins, and therefore view those texts as inherently tied to the time and place in which they were written. Consequently, they express incredulity that members of a religion could accept a text without exploring its provenance; as one young woman states, “I have problems with holy texts. Like, who wrote this, why doesn’t anybody care who wrote this, it didn’t just appear here, how do we know who Jesus was, I don’t understand.” Therefore, the power and importance that many religions place on a central text is understood as irrational and problematic, and students express discomfort identifying with a religion.
that would compel them to ground their belief in these texts. One states, “I love books. But they should be taken as books. It’s hard for me to think of believing everything with my whole self, in one book. So maybe that’s where my uncomfortability comes from, grounding in this one dead piece of paper.”

Often, specific Biblical myths are seen as false and uninspiring of belief. As one student notes,

The things I define as Christian beliefs aren’t those things that are moral and that are good, like be kind to your neighbor, I would equate that with just a moral belief. But as far as particularly Christian, that’s like Jesus Christ, our savior, stuff like that that I don’t believe in.

In general, myths of a transcendent reality—heaven, hell, Jesus Christ, God—are difficult to believe in, because they cannot be verified or concretely experienced in our world. And because of their human origin, these myths are understood as arbitrary and therefore fictional; as one young woman states, “I definitely don’t think heaven or hell exists… if you just look at the progressions of religion as historical doctrines, the evidence of where these ideas popped out, seven deadly sins and purgatory didn’t even exist until the fourteenth century. Some pope pulled it out of his ass.” This skepticism towards religious myths recalls Jung’s observation that “a myth is dead if it no longer lives and grows. Our myth lies mute and gives no answers” (Jung, 1963, p. 332).

**Religious Beliefs and Teachings Are Problematic**

Many religious teachings and beliefs are understood to conflict with our current status as a society, and particularly with the progress forged in areas of human rights and social justice. As one student notes, “now we live in a totally different world, and any sort of Biblical dogma is dangerous and likely to lead…to poor
understanding and to limited understanding, versus freeing ourselves to think critically and openly.” Thus, adherence to a religion is understood as inherently limiting and prejudicing one’s perspective through the lens of the text. For some, these problematic beliefs and teachings are what specifically hinder them from exploring religion. One student states, “I’ve seen a lot of the prejudices that come with some of the tenets of Christianity, just because I come from a very conservative area. I feel like that draws me to look for something else [other than religion].”

Other students speak personally of certain religious teachings as limiting the happiness and freedom of themselves or people that they know. One student is upset that her Jewish friend feels an obligation to marry another Jew: “I’m like, this is blocking you from leading your life…Yeah I believe in tradition, but I don’t believe in unhappiness.” For others, certain religious beliefs are personally harmful. One lesbian student remarked, “The Bible says that homosexuality is wrong…And it’s hard for me not to think that of the entire church…So for me it’s a personal politic, I don’t want to participate in something that in some way is persecuting people like me, or people in general.” The linking of the Christian church with a belief that attacks and devalues a part of her self makes it impossible to adopt that religion as her identity. As she poignantly states, “I’m not going to walk through the church doors and feel at home. I’m going to feel like a stranger.”

Religions Are Formed by People, and People Are Fallible

Some students understand religion’s problems to arise from the fact that religions are guided by people, and that people are inherently fallible. One student believes that the power hierarchies of organized religion inevitably lead to corruption
and manipulation. According to her, “human beings are not ideal deities, they’re corrupt. And there’s a lot of people who use their power as a spiritual adviser to just take advantage of people, to take advantage of their faiths and hopes and their comfort with them, for their own means.” While certain religious beliefs may be worthwhile, joining a religious group opens those beliefs up to the interpretation of others who may have their own, potentially harmful agendas, making membership in that group problematic. Another student links her problems with religion to human selfishness: “I believe in the goodness of people, but I also believe in greed and one’s own desire to achieve and succeed in life. And I think it’s nearly impossible to divorce organized religion from greed.”

**Religious Rules and Regulations Are Restrictive**

Many students view religious rules and regulations as restrictive and oppressive, and do not see the benefit of adhering to them. One student has difficulty understanding her parents’ commitment to prayer, because she does not see it yielding observable, pragmatic results in their lives: “I’ll watch my parents pray and I’ll be like, well that’s dumb, they could be doing something else that’s less of a waste of their time… I don’t see what it’s doing for them.” Further, these practices are seen to refer to a higher power or an afterlife. Because many students do not believe in these concepts, they do not understand how something invisible and abstract can possess the power to structure people’s lives so strictly. One student notes, “it just seems ridiculous to me to have to commit to doing something five times a day and dropping everything, or praying and asking someone that you have no idea if they exist or not to take control of your life.” The prospect of submitting to these required
but fruitless exercises are what turn many away from adopting a religious identity. As one student remarks, “to say that you have to do this, this, and this, or pay this amount, or dress like this or don’t dress like this, or behave like this or don’t behave like this, it seems completely counterintuitive…That’s usually why I’d say I don’t see religion as a strong part of my life, because of things like that.”

**Religious Groups Can Be Divisive**

Finally, students take issue with the exclusivity of religious groups. As one student put it, “to me, they’re just sort of cult-like.” Through codes and rules, religions define boundaries that automatically shut out people whose experience does not fit within those boundaries. One student states, “anytime you put a strict structure around something, an absolute, which is what religion does, you run into problems. Because ‘absolute’ immediately sets up this dichotomy of what [it] isn’t, and it immediately starts excluding people or experiences.” This exclusion can lead to pain and suffering, and even violence. One student who rejects religion reflects on this: “all the people who were killed or died or forced in or out [of religions]. All these stupid rules or traditions or ways they have of dividing…Why would we put ourselves in silly tribes that don’t mean much anymore, that segregate and divide?” In addition to being considered on this broad, global scale, the discomfort and pain arising from exclusion is also located in more immediate, local contexts. One student remembers her uneasiness with the services following the recent deaths on campus: “I feel uncomfortable and I’m like, why did you choose that language right now? Why did you choose to read Hebrew right now? Why did you choose to do things that put the community out of your experience right now?” Especially in moments where
people are vulnerable and need to feel connected to one another, the exclusivity of
religion can be frustrating.

**Acknowledging Community as a Benefit of Religious Identity**

When pressed as to whether a religious identity could offer anything positive, most non-religious students agree that it could—but assert that these advantages can be enjoyed just as well outside of religion. One student discusses the importance of religious community, but then states, “I think having friends that are open to talking to you about their beliefs is the same thing, and I think that’s something I will always have.” Others expand on the importance of religious community, but conclude that the benefits of this community are not confined to religion and can exist apart from religious beliefs; according to one student, “the only thing that would draw me in would be the community aspect, and I don’t think you need religion to create a community…we should be able to create [community] without the dogma.”

**Lack of Identification with Religion**

Due to the perceived weaknesses and limitations of religion, most students do not identify as religious. Religious groups, texts, and practices are understood as “baggage” that students do not want attached to their identities. As one states,

> It’s all of the trappings that come along with religion that I have a problem with. Because, whereas faith is an individual thing, it comes from within, all the trappings of organized religion tend to come from the hands and words of human beings, which are not perfect. I never wanted to identify with that.

Because of their aversion to these “trappings,” as well as the fact that many have not had any contact with religion since adolescence, most students do not see religion as something that could be personally meaningful.
However, some see the possibility of adopting a religious identity in the future. One student muses,

“Maybe I’ll need that extra something in my life, and maybe I’ll decide it’s religion. But right now, religion is at its low point participation-wise for me…Maybe in five years or so I’ll work on that…Only later, when I’ve figured everything out, does it make more sense to be religious.”

Religion is not understood as a priority—it is merely an “extra something.” Because religion is not viewed as something integral to life, non-religious students experience no inner motivation to seek it out; as one states, “I’m not looking for something to fill religious a void in my life.” Another student granted that, if a dramatic change occurred in the future, she perhaps would turn to religion: “maybe if there’s some life-changing event that happens, and I seek some sort of inner peace. But probably not, I don’t really see myself ever being really affiliated with any sort of religious beliefs.” Thus, religion is seen as completely separate from these students’ lives currently; only through a change within the self or the context it inhabits could it become resonant, and be adopted as a meaningful part of identity.
CHAPTER TEN
Acceptance of a Religious Identity

Among the students surveyed, five identified with a particular religious affiliation, three of those five identified as religious. Among those three, two identify as Catholic and one identifies as Jewish. It is perhaps curious that several students feel that they are part of a religious group, but do not identify as religious. What the quantitative data do not convey, however, is the complexity of factors surrounding students’ understandings of religious identity. Four of these factors were particularly salient throughout the interviews: ties to the religious affiliation of the nuclear family; adherence to formal religious beliefs and practices; and a connection to a religious community. Whether students choose to identify as religious, or choose to affiliate with a religious group, depends to a great extent on their understanding of and engagement with these four factors.

Identifying as “Religious” Implies Adherence to Religious Beliefs and Practices

As seen in most students’ definitions of the term, “religion” implies subscription to a codified set of beliefs and practices shared by a group of people; in other words, students generally equate “religion” with “organized religion.” Students who do not identify as religious almost unanimously view these beliefs and practices in a negative light. While religious students do incorporate some of these beliefs and practices into their lives, they too recognize that they can be problematic. As one religious student states, “that’s always everyone’s least favorite part about religion, organized religion.” However, those who identify as religious have found ways to make these beliefs personally meaningful and therefore acceptable. Generally, what separates students who identify as religious from those who only identify with a
particular affiliation is that the former adhere to at least some of the beliefs and practices of organized religion, and feel a sense of connection to a community of similar followers.

**Different Approaches to Religious Beliefs Among Religious Students**

Students who identify as religious adhere to some of the beliefs and teachings of their religion, but “don’t believe everything unconditionally.” In particular, the two Catholic students discuss questioning controversial Biblical teachings regarding homosexuality. The religious student who identifies with Judaism does not mention grappling with this issue, as his religion accepts homosexuality. While both Catholic students do not blindly accept church proscriptions against homosexuality, they hold different opinions regarding this issue. This stems in part from the different levels of importance that each student places on the Bible. One Catholic student—who also identifies as spiritual—states:

> Despite the fact that Catholicism places so much emphasis on the Book, and I’m Catholic, I don’t necessarily believe in every word…There’s a ton of stuff I don’t agree with, especially with regard homosexuality. The church is against it, I’m completely for it. Everybody has their own choice.

While he disagrees with some Biblical teachings, he makes it clear that he still identifies as Catholic. Thus, religious identity for him does not rest on complete acceptance of everything in the Bible. The other Catholic student has more trouble reconciling the beliefs of Catholicism with her desire to accept others whose lifestyles may conflict with her religious teachings:

> Gay marriage, or just being gay in general, that I still have a problem with…I understand why it’s not OK to be gay according to the way that they describe it in the Bible. But at the same time I don’t have a problem with it. So I get confused…Mostly I fall on the side of Catholicism, logically I agree with Catholicism. These things make sense because of the way that we were
created, and to what end we should be doing these things. But at the same
time I find it hard to condemn people for it and I don’t want to.

Biblical beliefs are a stronger part of this student’s Catholic identity than they are for
the first student, a contrast that is revealed in their distinct conceptions of human
purpose. She believes that “we were created” with a certain purpose in mind (i.e.,
reproduction), and that people should act in accord with this purpose. However, the
first student believes that “everybody has their own choice,” and their actions should
not be guided by a purpose imposed from outside of themselves. Therefore, while
these two students proudly identify as Catholic and critically engage with Biblical
beliefs, their approach to those beliefs, and the conclusions they draw from them, are
distinct.

The Importance of Questioning Belief

Beyond controversial religious beliefs, two out of the three religious students
discuss questioning their beliefs in general as an integral component of their religious
identity. The Jewish student states: “I think being really religious means being
constantly questioning things and constantly considering it, and never really be too
sure. Because it’s the kind of stuff that you can never be positive about.” Because
many religious beliefs are abstract and not provable, they can be difficult to accept—
as most Wesleyan students found in their childhood. However, the religious students
chose to engage with these beliefs, and through working to understand them were
able to claim a religious identity as their own. A Catholic student illustrates this:

Instead of just going [to church] and having stuff go in one ear and out the
other, I chose to make a conscious effort to pay attention, to listen, to engage
myself…And that process of expanding my own knowledge of religion has
aided me in finding my own happiness, my own peace and being in that
religion. But I’ve had to grapple with it just about every day. There are a lot
of times when I think, is this really what I think, is this really the way to go, do I even know myself… The only way you can have a legitimate faith in something is if you question it first. Because if you believe in it after you question it then you know for a fact that, at least to you, it’s true. So despite the fact that I’m Catholic and I believe in X, Y, and Z, I still don’t know. But every time I self-reflect, every time I go to mass, I think that I get a little bit closer to finding those answers.

For this young man, as well as for the Jewish student, critically engaging with religious beliefs allowed them to incorporate and adapt those beliefs to their lives; further, this process has ultimately contributed to their happiness and well-being. Because these students understand questioning beliefs to be a defining feature of religious identity, they see it as a process that will continue for the rest of their lives.

The Catholic student quoted earlier states,

> The big questions I’m grappling with, I think I’m going to be grappling with them for a while. It’s not something where I’m going to wake up one day and go, ‘Oh, now I know’…I’m always going to try to find better ways of thinking of myself or thinking about God.

Because of the importance placed on questioning religious beliefs, these two students believe that one does not have to accept all of the teachings of a religion to subscribe to that religion. According to the Catholic student,

> In their own religion, everyone has the choice to criticize or accept…Even though you affiliate with a certain denomination, you make of it what you will. I’ve found evidence of that in my life…I don’t agree with everything that the Catholic Church does or says. But I still proudly identify as a Catholic.

This understanding grants a level of freedom and flexibility within a religious identification, allowing him to embrace his religion despite its flaws by approaching it through his own perspective. Through this process of personally defining what their religion means to them, students can identify with their religion without relinquishing control over their own identity.
**Students Who Affiliate but Do Not Identify as Religious: Rejection of Religious Beliefs**

In contrast to the religious students, the two students who affiliate with a religion but do not identify as religious maintain that one cannot ignore the controversial beliefs of a religion if one chooses to fully identify with it. One, who identifies as Christian but not religious, explains why he could never identify as religious:

If I belong to an organized religion, I would feel that I need to accept every facet of that religion, that everything that religion says is moral and immoral is true…I couldn’t bring myself to ignore a particular aspect of religion, just because it doesn’t fit with our modern day morality…That’s probably why I never see myself in an organized religion…I wouldn’t feel like I had the power to alter it, because it’s bigger than myself. It’s not my perception, it’s the religion.

The other student, who identifies as Jewish but not religious, explains her issues with joining a religion and only accepting some of its beliefs:

There’s then this element of hypocrisy…For my own logic, I could never identify as religious because I could never balance the two, either you’re in or you’re out. You can’t pick and choose from a set of laws if that’s what they’re telling you to do.

Unlike the religious students, who are willing to engage with and even reject certain beliefs of their religion, religiously affiliated but non-religious students are uncomfortable identifying with something that they do not completely agree with.

Like most Wesleyan students, the two who affiliate but do not identify as religious do not accept formal religious beliefs. One of these students is forging her own spiritual path outside of organized religion, actively seeking to develop her own beliefs that are not defined by the church. In contrast, the other student is not
positively working to develop his own beliefs; instead, he is still grappling with the beliefs of his Christian upbringing:

In terms of religion, mostly I think in a reactionary way to my parents’ religious views. I don’t often come to the point where I establish my own [beliefs]…It’s more so developing my disconnect with my parents’ religions…Christian beliefs are so ingrained in my head, that really at this point it’s more of a question of whether or not Christianity is true, and if it’s not then I’ll get to that other stuff.

He maintains some sense of religious identity by identifying as Christian. However, while he has largely renounced the Christian beliefs of his upbringing, the connection to his religious roots exerts a powerful force, making it difficult for him to publicly state that he does not hold those beliefs:

Q: Do you believe in heaven, hell, and God?
A: That’s the limbo stuff.

Q: What exactly do you mean by limbo?
A: I could never, it’s just fear of God was so instilled in me, that to say that there is no heaven there is no hell there is no God is just, ehhhh, it’s just a no-no. So I’d much rather doubt.

Q: Is there something in you that questions and says maybe there isn’t?
A: Oh yeah. I just won’t define myself that way.

In explaining why his religious beliefs are “in limbo,” he does not affirm any of these beliefs, and clearly has a sense that they are not true (“Oh yeah”). However, the power of his religious upbringing acts as a vise, preventing him from fully acknowledging the possibility of disbelief, and impelling him to claim some adherence to Christian beliefs.

While students who identify as religious engage with Biblical beliefs to a greater extent than those who do not identify as religious, all students who affiliate
with a religion maintain some belief in a higher power. For some who identify as religious, faith in God is the core of their religion; according to one Catholic student, “Religion, for me, is believing in a higher power.” Those who affiliate but do not identify as religious do not name it God, emblematic of their rejection of textual narrative. However, all five sense that it is a part of the world. This will be explored in more detail in the section on Self.

**Varieties of Practice Among Religious Students**

Along with adherence to organized religious beliefs, engaging in religious practice is what most often separates students who identify as religious from those who do not. Indeed, for one Catholic student, “religion is…adhering to the practices and traditions of a certain religious group.” Among the students who identify as religious, there are some commonalities and many divergences in the practices they adhere to, and the strictness of that adherence.

While all five students who affiliate with religion attend services regularly when they are home, only those three who identify as religious feel an inclination to attend services that extends beyond familial obligation. Two of the three relate that commitment to religious practice is difficult at school, and that they are “too busy” to attend services on campus. The third religious student, however, has made it a point to attend Catholic mass every week at Wesleyan since he arrived:

I try to go to mass regularly here…I’ve typically been going every week…Mass on campus really started out my sophomore year. But my freshman year I went to mass at St. Sebastian, down on Washington Street. This student’s commitment to attend services was so strong that he sought out a church off campus when Catholic mass was not offered at Wesleyan his freshman
year. While not all religious students share this commitment at school, all maintain a connection to the church or synagogue of their youth.

In addition to attendance at services, the two Catholic students pray regularly. One prays every day at school; although the academic environment can distract attention away from God, she believes that “prayer lets God know that you still care, that you’re still trying to make a connection.” The other religious student views prayer more as an opportunity to give thanks for what he has in his life: “I say the bed prayer every night, just being thankful and asking for this and that.” While prayer fulfills different functions for these two students, it forms an equally important part of their religious identities.

Reflecting the importance of religious practice to religious identification, the third religious student actually wrote “religious sort of” on his self-report sheet. When asked to explain the qualification of his religious identity, he stated:

I do identify as Jewish, although I’m not a frequently practicing Jew…I don’t spend much of my life praying…I wrote ‘religious sort of” because when I say religious, people would assume that I go to synagogue regularly, and I haven’t been to synagogue in a really long time…I think about the way that the world works, I believe that it fits together, so I identify as religious.

Although he does not pray or attend services frequently, he hesitates to fully identify with religion. However, for him, as for the other two religious students, religious identity is ultimately defined by personal experience in the context of the formal aspects of that religion. According to one Catholic student:

I think [practices] are meaningful. Catholicism stresses that common experience in church, and rituals themselves are great. I love doing them, I love holding my sisters’ hands when we pray…But I find more joy and greater satisfaction out of self-reflection, just sitting down, taking a deep breath, and understanding that you’re a part of that big community.
Students Who Affiliate but Do Not Identify as Religious Do Not Engage in Religious Practice

The students who affiliate but do not identify as religious do not understand their affiliation with a religion as necessitating engagement with religious practice.

The student who identifies as Jewish, but not religious, claims,

I don’t feel an obligation to go to services during the holidays…If I was home I’d probably go on the high holidays because it’s a tradition…For me, services play a role in [Judaism] but it’s not vital. Because I feel like there’s so many things that go into being Jewish that’s outside the temple atmosphere, the temple’s really for worshipping. So while I can really enjoy a service, and I don’t feel a need to go there constantly to necessarily identify as having a Jewish heritage.

For this student, identification with Judaism involves a sense of connection to “tradition” and “heritage.” However, this is separate from identification with religion, which implies “worshipping” within a defined structure of belief (as well as within the defined structure of a temple). Because her beliefs are not defined within that structure, she does not feel impelled to attend services. The other affiliated-but-not-religious student feels a similar personal disconnect from services, but a stronger sense of obligation to attend with his parents. He remarks: “I’ll probably stop going to church when I get my own house. But every time I visit my mom I’ll go to church until I’m 60 and she’s 90.” A sense of accountability to his parents is intimately tied into his religious identity, a topic discussed in the next section.

Connection to Religion Through the Family

Students who identify with religion relate the strength of this identity to a connection and sense of continuity with their parents’ religion. While aspects of that religion may be problematic, they remain identified with it in part because it is the religion that they know. One young man who struggles with much of his Catholic
beliefs states: “People ask me, ‘Well then why are you Catholic?’ And I say, ‘It’s because I was brought up as a Catholic’…Really, the sects of Christianity are split by such thin hairs.” Because of these “thin hairs,” he does not perceive much difference between identifying as Catholic or as any other Christian denomination. But because his parents are Catholic, he maintains that identity.

Another student who identifies as Christian but not religious is a fascinating case study in the power of familial religious beliefs and expectations. This young man has largely rejected the religious beliefs of his strict Christian upbringing, and feels no personal desire to attend church. However, he feels an obligation to retain the label “Christian” out of respect for his parents. Explaining why he does not completely distance himself from identification with Christianity, he states:

I don’t believe every aspect of [Christianity], but…I would never seek to disrespect it. I don’t want to disrespect Christianity, or my parents’ religion, or my parents and their religious beliefs.

Christianity is deeply important to his parents, and they instilled a respect for the institution and beliefs that he holds to this day. Although he personally does not hold many of those beliefs, his upbringing imbued them with a weight and importance that he feels they possess in and of themselves. Therefore, disidentifying with religion would be disrespectful not only to his family but to the notion of “religion” itself.

Revealing the internal conflict between respect for Christianity and his own religious doubts, he became quite uncomfortable when asked to speak about his religion. Although he had written “Christian” but not “religious” on his self-report sheet, he expressed confusion over which identity label truly defined him:

Do you consider yourself to be religious?
[Long pause] It’s a conflicting course, it’s a… I consider myself to be in limbo.

Q: That implies in between two things. What are you between?

A: I would probably never say I was an atheist. And I couldn’t necessarily prescribe to a specific denomination. It’s something I think about a lot, I don’t know exactly what I am… Agnostic is probably not the proper term for it, but should Christianity be correct?

Q: Do you consider yourself Christian?

A: Do I consider myself to be Christian? I wouldn’t say Christian, I just would say not atheist, and not agnostic. But somewhere in between Christian and agnostic…I’m just not going to say I’m not Christian.

He clearly has problems identifying with Christianity, noting that he “couldn’t necessarily prescribe to a specific denomination,” and that he “wouldn’t say Christian” when asked to identify himself. However, he had written “Christian” as his religious affiliation. When pushed to explain how he justifies his decision to identify with a religion that he does not believe in, he recognizes that it may not make sense, but that choosing to maintain a nominal adherence to the religion of his parents is ultimately the path of least resistance: “It’s just totally my religious upbringing, and it’s just been ingrained…Why say you’re atheist? At that point, just say, kajenfjk. Just mumble when anyone asks you.”

This participant illustrates the complexity of “religious identity,” as well as the power that parental religious beliefs exert over that identity. This raises the question of the nature of religious identity. If one writes “Christian” on a survey, as this young man did, do they automatically possess a religious identity? This question cannot be answered here. But if identity is understood as what links us to the world, what we present to others, then this young man does have a religious identity.
Because, when asked whether he truly identifies as Christian, he answered with only a trace of irony, “Yeah…Well it says on Facebook.”

**Ties to Religious Heritage**

Relating to the discussion of “cultural Judaism” discussed earlier, the student who identifies as Jewish but not religious chooses to identify with Judaism because “it’s like a heritage and an ethnicity, along with a religion.” Therefore, Judaism is primarily a cultural—rather than religious—identification for her. When asked to explain her identification with Judaism but lack of identification with religion, she states,

If I were to have children in the future…I would want to raise them Jewish in the sense that I’d want them to know their history and the culture of where they’re coming form. So for that reason I would have them go to Hebrew school, just so they can keep the language and prayers alive, in the sense of just heritage and tradition.

For this student, connection with a Jewish lineage of cultural narrative and practice is what forms the core of her religious identity. And by explicating this identity through invoking how she would raise her own children, she extends that lineage into the future and demonstrates her commitment to keeping it vital and thriving.

**Ties to Religious Community**

The final component of religious identity is connection to a religious community. Through this community, a religious identity becomes a social identity, providing opportunities for communication with others who share similar beliefs, values, and experiences. Students who identify as religious express joy and satisfaction in connecting with others over a shared religious identity. One Jewish student discusses this:
I like how being Jewish kind of gives you something to talk about with people…I like the existence of all the Jewish youth programs that connect people…I like that it’s something that other people can understand.

For this student, religious identity is a social cachet—it is a talking point, a means of connecting to others. And not only does it provide something to talk about; it provides the satisfaction of mutual recognition. In his words, “it’s something that other people can understand,” and through this mutual understanding his identity is both affirmed and reflected back to him in others.

The two Catholic students also relate a sense of fulfillment through connecting with other Catholics. One speaks about connection through shared religious experience and understanding:

If you find somebody else in the world, anywhere, and if they told you they were Catholic, I would instantly feel a better connection with them than I previously did. It’s something you have a commonality with, something you can both identify with…It’s somebody who understands the same kinds of things that you do.

For the other Catholic student, a sense of shared identity stems from a shared belief in God rather than from identification with Catholicism as a whole:

I feel a sense of connection to other people that believe in God. Not to say that I can’t feel a sense of connection to people who don’t, but it’s not the same…Two of my best friends here don’t believe in God. And I can still be friends with them. But there’s no connection…That connection [of] being in church, recognizing that other people feel the same thing.

While all three religious students feel linked to a broader religious community, how they experience that connection, and what they feel they are connecting over, depends to a large extent on how they have defined their religious identity. Whether this identity centers on belief in God or traditional religious culture, however, all have an understanding that their religious identity is shared with others.
Despite this, religious students relate that a connection to a tangible religious community is a relatively unimportant aspect of religious identity for them. The Catholic students in particular expressed the opinion that church is less a place for social connection over religion than it is a place for personal reflection. When asked whether they feel connected to their church community, one student states, “That’s a tricky question with Catholicism. You could say a sense of community for the fact that people will congregate in this one building once a week, but other than that…”

The other Catholic student expands on this:

For me religion is a very private thing, so I don’t really feel like I’m part of a community when I’m in a church. I guess there is a sense of community in that you’re all believing and professing the same beliefs…But I personally don’t do religion with other people.

This was a fascinating response, and one that is telling about the meaning of religious identity for the three religious students in this sample. All three adhere to some of the beliefs practices of their religion, and connect with others over their religious identity. Thus, their links to the social, formal aspects of religion are important, and differentiate them from those students who do not identify as religious. Ultimately, however, religion for them is “a very private thing,” recalling William James’ definition of religion as “the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men [and women] in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine” (James, 1901/2008, p. 31).

**Strengthening of Religious Identity at Wesleyan in Response to Pressure**

Although devoutly religious students face critical or doubtful opinions of religious beliefs from much of the student body, this has not caused them to question or move away from their religion. Rather, their religious identities have grown
stronger since coming to college. The two Catholic students interviewed relate the strengthening of their faith in response to adverse pressure at Wesleyan:

The fact that so many people disagree with what I think paradoxically makes me want to believe it more. Because we’re Wesleyan, we like to be different, everyone likes to be different, and for me belief is something that you don’t have to explain, I think it’s beyond explanation.

Being placed into an environment like this where there are very few Catholics, and there’s not a constant reminder of religion everywhere, I think it’s a test of my religion and my faith, and in that sense I think that my religion has grown, my faith is stronger now. It’s not really changed, but my beliefs are more firm.

For these students, their minority status as “religious” makes them adhere more strongly to their religious identity. Because they encounter opposition and a lack of support from the student body, they are pushed to reflect on their beliefs in order to defend and maintain them. This is an example of the finding that group identification often grows stronger when members of that group face prejudice or hostility from other groups (Andersen and Taylor, 2011).
CHAPTER ELEVEN
Spiritual Identity

An Individually-Determined Identity

Spiritual identity is more difficult to define than religious identity, because it does not offer a common set of laws or practices to which people can subscribe. Unlike religion, spirituality is not an explicitly social identity—there is no such thing as a “spiritual community.” Therefore, spiritual students understand their identity to be largely individually-determined. While “religion tells us how to live and how to be and how to feel,” spiritual students engage with living and being and feeling on their own terms, looking to themselves and the world around them for guidance and inspiration. Thus, spirituality is essentially connected to personal experience, and as such can be difficult to articulate; as one respondent states, “spirituality is so hard to talk about just because it’s so intangible.” However, what connects all those who identify as spiritual is a commitment to engaging with their own existence. It involves attempting to answer the questions, “Who am I?” and “How do I want to live in the world?”, with an understanding that the answers to these questions are not going to be found through the beliefs, practices, and traditions of any one group.

Rejecting Participation in an Organized Group

Spiritual students choose not to belong to an organized group because it would inevitably not allow them to express their unique beliefs and feelings—it would be “an inherent dilution of a more pure form of understanding.” One spiritual student explains her hesitancy of joining an organized religious group through her wish to avoid “subscribing to a group that follows a strict set of beliefs and really attempts to
shape a worldview based on notions that are, in my view, more fluid than can really be fixed into a practice.” Students would rather experience and define these “notions” for themselves, rather than having an external institution define it for them. Thus, one student states, “I tend to choose or explore routes that allow me to just be with me, as opposed to sitting in front of a pastor or a rabbi or a book that’s telling me how I should be feeling or experiencing these things.”

Other students avoid a communal experience of spirituality because they believe that their spiritual beliefs and goals are unique to them, and therefore would not be understood by anyone else. One young man explains his decision not to engage in spirituality with other people:

Most people are just going to serve to be distractions and they’re going to provide understandings that aren’t actually answering the questions you’re trying to answer…It becomes a wary relationship with people, in that part of the goal is to find the universal theme…that connects us. But on another level, you have to understand that you’re looking for things that most people aren’t looking for explicitly, and that most people don’t understand.

This quote illustrates how spiritual students understand spirituality as an ultimately individual path. Because it is defined by the individual, it is a perspective on the self that not everyone shares and is therefore open to misunderstanding or dismissal, which this student wants to avoid. Thus, rather than risk confusion or setbacks on his spiritual path, he travels alone.

“Spirituality Is Inspired by Other People”

However, spirituality is not a completely individual experience, and spiritual students will often have informal discussions with friends about spirituality. As proposed by social comparison theory, we evaluate our own assessments of experience with the assessments of others (Batson, 1993). Therefore, these informal
conversations allow spiritual students to compare their interpretations of existential or mysterious questions with those of a reference group, helping them to approach those questions and sometimes inspiring them with new perspectives. When questioned whether her spirituality is more individual than social, one student responds, “Yes, I totally would say that, but I would say part of my spirituality is being in the world and being in groups and being, not alone. It doesn’t happen in a vacuum, my spirituality is inspired by other people.”

Indeed, many spiritual students initially discovered and cultivated spirituality as a meaningful part of their identity through discussions with friends. These conversations allow students to reveal their spiritual selves to others, and through attempting to articulate this self they develop an understanding of what spirituality means to them. These conversations also generate new ideas that increase self-understanding or provide a fresh way of approaching the world. One spiritual student states,

Through conversations with my close friends, that’s where I derive a lot of my spiritual ideas. I have some friends who are very Buddhist, and I find through conversations with them, talking to them about philosophy, or sometimes they’ll suggest a book to me that will be very powerful.

Thus, conversations and recommendations from friends contribute to the growth and development of his spirituality.

Spiritual conversations are often informal, coming from a position of inquiry into questions of meaning that is not based in the certainty or definition of organized religious beliefs. Many spiritual students embrace this lack of certainty One spiritual student explains,
I would say [support for my spiritual identity] has come from the people that I’ve connected with. It’s not necessarily a group connection, but again it’s from other lonely wanderers tumbling through life, and thinking about these aspects… Speaking to other people who encourage me to seek these things out for myself. Who can offer these experiences, but they’re not giving me any definites that I then have to grapple with, like ‘Oh, do I believe this?’

These conversations with “other lonely wanderers” are an open forum for discussion, where there is no “right way” of understanding the self and the world. Through them, she has been able to find social support and validation for her spirituality outside of an organized spiritual community.

**Acknowledging that a Spiritual Community Would Be Beneficial**

Although spiritual students choose not to subscribe to an organized group, many acknowledge that being a part of such a group might be beneficial for them. Even the young man who labeled other people as “distractions” on his spiritual path allowed that “maybe for a lot of people, perhaps myself included, it may be hard to develop [spirituality] without all that, the weight, the gravitas, the history that religion brings.” However, for most spiritual students this is an abstract acknowledgment, not a deeply-felt need. Thus, while one student recognizes that being a part of a group might “add a lot of depth and importance” to her life, in the end she says: “I suppose it’s just not something that I’ve put the time into.”

However, several spiritual students feel a strong desire for more structure to their spirituality, and wish that they could find a community of people with which to share it and develop it. But at the same time, they realize that the inherent limitations of joining a community with set beliefs and rules will probably keep them from ever finding a spiritual group that feels real and genuine. One student relates: “I’m
probably going to be wanting a group experience for the rest of my life; I don’t think
I’m going to necessarily find it.” Another expands on this:

I’m hungry for a spirituality that I can put a name on, like ‘this is what I
believe.’ But I don’t know if there’s a little box that I can check to say this is
what my spirituality is. I don’t think a group of people or a community has to
be flawless in order to be true or relevant to someone…But to dive into
something and to eventually find the flaws will hurt.

While she wishes she had more definition to her spirituality, that wish is tempered by
fear that joining a group may make her a part of something that is not relevant, and
possibly even harmful, to her own spiritual understanding and experience.

**An Identity Unstructured by Specific Beliefs**

Spiritual students have largely chosen not to engage with the narratives and
beliefs of organized religion, viewing them as attempting to limit and define
experience that, by its nature, is indefinable. Therefore, most spiritual students relate
that “spirituality is more something I feel or experience. It’s not really structured by
beliefs.” This lack of articulated beliefs is one way in which students differentiate
religion from spirituality; as one student states, “When I think of religion I think of
more belief to it, that you believe in more than you do with spirituality.” Because of
this lack of narrative structure, spirituality is generally not guided by particular
precepts: “spirituality is less putting a name or face on one’s beliefs” than it is “a
thing that flows through everything I do.”

** Spirituality Is the Process of Answering the Question, “Who Am I?”**

Because spirituality is centrally concerned with understanding the self and
how it fits into the world, those who identify as spiritual are actively searching for
what kind of people they want to be. Thus, development of spiritual identity for
many means development of a larger sense of identity, defining the self through participation in social activities and groups. One young man states:

My spirituality has grown a lot from being involved in the Wesleyan community, whether it be through being on the crew team, or being involved in a number of musical groups, or being a tour guide, or outreach, all of these things simultaneously and collaboratively went into making my experience grow, because all of these things interact in some way and through their interaction fosters a deeper sense of spirituality.

Through discovering what he wants to do with his time, he further discovers who he is—and for him, this process of self-definition is synonymous with spirituality. And as many note, college is an especially important time to define one’s identity, when “everyone has a blank slate, so they’re really trying to discover, from that blank slate, what’s going to be written on me in a few years.” The cumulative writings on that slate add up to a meaningful life narrative, and contribute to a sense of spiritual self-development. According to one student, “All of the things that I do here [at Wesleyan] have helped define who I am, and when I talk about that I’m talking about spirituality.”

One student, however, relates that development of a specifically spiritual identity difficult at college. Her spirituality involves exploration of a transcendent reality unstructured by the myths and practices of organized religion; however, she does not feel support for this exploration from the student body:

I would say I’ve developed less spiritually here. I feel hesitant or embarrassed to say things like reincarnation or spells or any of those types of things. Because you have these two different aspects here at Wesleyan. You have this scientific, atheist, agnostic community…It definitely calls into question a lot of inconsistencies. So I’ve felt that pressure, like don’t believe, how can you believe this, none of this makes sense. And then I have people who are spiritual, who are coming across as complete nutballs. So I don’t want to talk about those things, or it’s harder for me to find confidence in those elements when I’m seeing it reflected back at me in those two ways.
Like the religious students, the “scientific, atheist” community at Wesleyan has put pressure on her spiritual identity through incredulity and even disdain for her beliefs. However, while the religious students can positively affirm their identity through connecting with others religious students, she sees her own spiritual identity “reflected back” to her in a negative way. Adopting the identity label “spiritual” links this young woman to other spiritual students; but because spirituality does not look to established doctrine or belief, the beliefs and practices of other spiritual students may not be in line with hers, and may in fact seem absurd or ridiculous, weakening her confidence in her own spirituality.

**Spiritual Practices Foster Self-Reflection**

Most spiritual students do not have defined practices that they understand as strictly “spiritual.” As one states, “I don’t really have my own specific set that I go through on certain nights of the week.” Apart from formal practices, however, many spiritual students discuss the spiritual importance of activities that allow for self-reflection. Several students speak of playing music as an important spiritual activity, and others mention taking walks and “anything that allows me to be outside, in nature.” These activities help spiritual students to focus on what is really important—being alive and present in the world. For one young woman, this awareness of her own vitality comes through dance:

Sometimes it feels like, even though it’s a dance class, that I’m in my head. And sometimes I’m just like, oh my God I have blood in my veins, and I’m alive, and this is incredible…I like going into my dance class with a spiritual intention, and not everyone has it.
For her, and for all other spiritual students, spiritual activities are largely pursued for the inner experience they afford, and their “spiritual” nature is not something that is shared with or recognized by others.

Because most spiritual students value activities that help them to become more aware of and attuned to their bodies and minds, yoga and meditation are common spiritual activities. The majority of spiritual students practice yoga and meditation only occasionally, but several students are devoted to practicing yoga and meditation every day. For these students, their practice is a central pillar of their spirituality. One relates:

If you want to learn something on a deep level you need a practice…It’s not like I don’t have the time to meditate; I don’t have the time to not meditate. Because it makes me such a more effective individual, because I don’t want to be sick.

The students who regularly meditate or practice yoga do so because the practice produces beneficial results in their lives, helping them to feel more physically healthy but also to feel more aware of themselves, of their thoughts and emotions. For one student, however, these results are not the primary goal of meditation; rather, the purpose is to develop discipline by regularly taking time out to connect with herself:

When I first started [meditating] I saw it as this disconnected task that I had to do to feel relaxed, and if I could’ve put a token in a slot and gotten the same results I would have. But I learned that it had to be integrated into my life, and once I accepted that, that it was a practice more than just the result, it became more important to me, and I appreciated it and embraced it more.

For her, the journey is as important and valuable as the destination.
CHAPTER TWELVE
Connecting with the Self

The self, as discussed previously, is that part of our inner lives which we experience as constant and continuous in time. It is abstract, and made concrete through the labels, social relationships, and language of identity. Whereas identity is constituted through the horizontal dimension of social commerce, self can be visualized as existing on the vertical dimension, experienced through self-reflection or meditation. As we look inward, questions arise: “What am I?” “How does the universe work, and how do I relate to it?” Religion and spirituality provide a means of approaching these questions and rendering the mysteries of the self intelligible. Through prayer, self-reflection, or meditation, religious and spiritual students develop an understanding of a self that transcends the particularities of time and place, a self that is somehow most “real” or “true.” Of course, religion and spirituality are not the only way in which students can approach and try to understand the self; indeed, non-religious and non-spiritual students also self-reflect and find their own ways of approaching the questions of self. This chapter presents the variety of ways that Wesleyan students understand and connect with the self, both within and outside of religion and spirituality.

“Spirituality Is Focused on the Self”

Interview findings suggest that those who identify as “spiritual” have a special interest in understanding the self. As discussed earlier, spirituality among students is generally not characterized by social practice, nor is it defined by specific beliefs. Rather, spirituality can best be defined as “engaging with yourself in the world, with
your existence,” as one young woman put it. Regardless of whether or not this existence is understood to relate to a transcendent power, the desire to know the self, to “dig deep within yourself and discover who you really are,” is a defining feature of spirituality.

The Importance of Self-Reflection

Every spiritual student discussed the importance of self-reflection to their spirituality. Indeed, one spiritual student claims that “spirituality is self-reflection.” While reflection is a common component of students’ spirituality, its motivation and purpose differs among students. For some, self-reflection is an opportunity to cultivate a connection with the transcendent:

My spirituality is focused on the self. Because I immediately separated myself from the organized aspect and institutions and religious figures, I wanted to find a pathway that was more self-centered, something that I could explore on my own. So that way I could be sure that if I experienced anything transcendent, it wasn’t being tainted or influenced by another person, it was something that I had experienced with myself, with my own feelings.

Here, the inner experience channeled through self-reflection is understood as a mark of authenticity and truth. Because it is “not tainted” by the interpretations and perspectives of others, she can trust that what she experiences relates to her personally, and can decide for herself how to interpret these experiences.

While some spiritual students explore a connection with the transcendent through self-reflection, most self-reflect in order to connect with themselves, regardless of whether or not they believe in a higher power. For some, this self-reflection is motivated by feelings of pain or vulnerability. One young woman, who was strongly religious as a child but who now identifies as spiritual after renouncing
her religion, explains how the focus of her spiritual inquiry in times of stress has moved from a God beyond her, to the self within:

There are a lot of moments where I feel vulnerable, and typically in the past I would’ve prayed. Now I just sort of lose myself in thought, not necessarily thinking about a specific doctrine, or any sort of rubric necessarily. But self-reflection is what I fall into, and I think it provides relief and sometimes answers. Where they come from, I don’t know.

Another student was motivated to begin meditating when she suffered a period of intense anxiety and depression several years ago. During that time, she reports feeling like she was battling her self—as if there were something within the self that she wanted to get rid of. But through meditation, she was able to make peace with her self through an increased awareness of her inner life:

I started to feel more connected to myself. It became more and more spiritual for me and started to define my life…The ethos of meditation, which is for me being present and noticing your feelings, I began to incorporate that into every moment of my life, rather than just the moments of meditation.

Meditation helped her to develop a more true, “more connected” sense of self. Therefore, her sense of self was transformed through spiritual practice; as she later remarks, “I think of that self two years ago as my old self.”

The Layered Self

The importance placed on self-awareness suggests the conceptualization of a self composed of layers or dimensions, which can be explored by looking inward. Indeed, many spiritual students utilize the language of “depth” in their discussions of self, seen in the following two quotes:

Spirituality is about how you relate to yourself. And if you start to delve into yourself and go deeper and deeper and peel back the layers, you find huge infinite worlds within yourself.
There’s so much more to discover, and everything I’ve ever done has only just scratched the surface. I know the depth exists. And if I stay on the surface understanding, that’s the scary part, when I know I could’ve found something real and something deep.

These descriptions of the “infinite worlds” within the self recall Jungian psychology, which is organized around a core Self within the person. While Jung understood this self as continuous with a divine, transcendent force (Jung, 1958)—an understanding which not every spiritual person shares—it seems that most spiritual students are in accord with his conceptualization of a self composed of layers of meaning and truth, and share his belief that “who looks inside, awakes.”

The conceptualization of a self composed of layers further suggests the existence of a “core” self, and many spiritual people are centrally concerned with connecting to and embodying a self that they experience to be most true and genuine. As one student states, “spirituality is being more true to myself…trying to find the truest self that I can, that I have. When I can take my brain and trivial thoughts out of the picture, and be reduced to the core of what really makes me happy.” Self-reflection allows students to become aware of their inner lives away from the petty and material distractions of daily life, and connect to a self that is not contingent on the outer world.

One young man who regularly engages in yoga and meditation relates how those spiritual practices remove him from social life, allowing him to shed the masks that he necessarily dons in social situations. He believes that these masks—these

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identities—are inherently false, and only through self-reflection can he connect to who he really is:

By meditating, you remove yourself from the petty. When you’re sitting quietly, what is that self that you’re sitting with, versus the self that’s frantically trying to print out a paper or get to class…You realize that they’re roles, and they’re costumes, and they’re put on top of another self that sits under everything we do all the time. And to ignore that self is dangerous for our own health, and for the health of our communities. That self is a lot saner because it’s a deeper self…Sitting, observing these flows of energy through your body, observing your thoughts, observing yourself, I’ve come to understand that all these roles are really as ridiculous as somebody playing a part in a play. And it doesn’t mean I’m not going to do them, it gives strength to when I do them, an understanding that they’re not real. And that the me that sits behind [them] is the important one I have to look out for.

These words recall William James’ discussion of the material, social, and spiritual selves. Through meditation, this student is able to connect to his “spiritual me,”—"the true, the intimate, the ultimate, the permanent me which I seek" (James, 1890/1927, p. 304). Along with James, he understands this self as the most enduring and intimate part of the self, much more so than the “material me” of physical possessions, or the “social me” of how one is seen and responded to by others. And, like James, he understands true self-development to occur when these “outer-contingent” selves come to be organized around the central, spiritual self (James, 1890/1927).

**Spirit**

Several spiritual students use the term “spirit” to discuss their true, inner selves. One student believes that all people have a “mind, body, and spirit,” and takes her understanding of spirit from Hegel:

Hegel says the spirit is the starting grounds, the starting point from which we make all decisions that would define the self. So it’s like your individuality sort of. That place from which you jump into the world is your spirit.
Another student broadens the definition of spirit to encompass the whole person:

“Mind and body and soul, I think those three can be a part of spirit, your spirit…It’s all interconnected.” While the exact definition of and boundaries around spirit may differ for these two students, they both understand spirit as embodying the true nature of “the person”—our “individuality,” our “mind and body and soul.” Additionally, for these students “the spirit” is a part of all humans’ constitutions; but whether or not it becomes a full part of life depends on one’s choice to define it as something worth engaging with.

**Self-Reflection Contributes to Personal Well-Being**

Most spiritual students remark that they are most happy and at peace when they are connected to this true self. As one student states, “if you can work in harmony with your mind, you’ll experience so much more joy in everything that you do, and connect with people and connect with yourself and know yourself.” This state of well-being can help students deal with difficult situations. While life brings sadness and stress, self-reflection helps students to discover “a contendedness lying below,” and reminds them that no matter what occurs in their lives, they can always “look inside themselves and be in tune with the world, and find happiness through meditation, and find happiness through that quiet that is.” For one student, self-reflection is “a good way to put things in perspective whenever I feel like a day was totally worthless.” By focusing his thoughts on himself rather than on the events of the day, he can focus on what he truly loves and values, and realize that they will endure, while whatever was causing pain will pass.
A Spiritual Connection Between the Body and the Self

Several spiritual students discuss self-reflection as contributing to an awareness of both the body and the self, and the close connection between the two. One student claims, “my body and the really amazing accident of life grounds my spirituality.” For her, a central tenet of spirituality is what she calls “embodiment”: “to be fully, holistically engaged in yourself, in all the ways that you can.” This involves awareness of the physical nature of the body—breath, heartbeat—as well as how thoughts and emotions interact with those physical sensations.

Yoga and meditation have helped some spiritual students achieve this embodiment: one explains how yoga allows him to achieve “union between mind body and breath…When I do it I like to just be as present in my body and my breath as possible.” The student quoted earlier who suffered from anxiety found that meditation helped ease both her psychological and physical symptoms:

Meditation made me realize how important the mind-body connection is, and how powerful the mind is over the body and your perceptions of things…The more I was able to work out my mind in terms of focusing and being present and not being stuck on little trains of thought, I realized that some of my physical symptoms started to dissipate.

The notion of “presence” is one repeated throughout the narratives of spiritual students. By cultivating this presence in their bodies, spiritual students work to develop a sense of self that is grounded in the physical, and a full awareness of what it means to be alive.

Approaching Religion from a Spiritual Perspective of the Self

One religious student also identifies as spiritual, and for him religion has been most meaningful in helping him to better understand the self: “It pushes me to self-
reflect…that what Catholicism has done for me…[It] has really helped me achieve an inner peace.” For him, the formal beliefs and practices of Catholicism are secondary to the opportunity it affords to contemplate the self and its place in the world. And like the spiritual but not religious students, this reflection brings him a sense of personal well-being.

Self-Reflection Among Non-Spiritual Students

While non-spiritual students rarely discuss engaging with the self, several do. One explains that, although he does not believe in God and therefore does not identify as religious or spiritual, “I think the search for self-meaning is pretty inherent…While I don’t necessarily subscribe to a religion, I don’t really know what I’m doing here either.” Two phrases are crucial in this quote: “search for self-meaning” and “what I’m doing here.” The former demonstrates that he understands the self as something to be explored and developed. While he does not identify as spiritual, this search links him to the efforts of the spiritual students discussed earlier. Secondly, that he is concerned with “what I’m doing here” communicates an engagement with his existence, and a focus on attempting to discover how his self meaningfully relates to the world he inhabits. While God does not enter into his understanding, it does play a part in many other students’ understandings of self—a topic that will be explored in the next chapter.
CHAPTER THIRTEEN
Conceptions of the Transcendent

An Energy that Connects Everything—But It’s Not Called God

About half of the spiritual students—and several non-spiritual students—believe in a transcendent force that links the self to the forces of the universe. As one student states, it is an “energy that exists in everything, that everybody can tap into.” This energy is clearly differentiated from the omnipotent, judgmental God of the Bible; one student says, “It’s not this supernatural metaphysical otherworldly thing. I don’t think that there’s something up there that’s the hand of fate that’s guiding things, or allowing bad things to happen to teach us lessons.” As opposed to a God that is “up there,” the energy is inherently of the world, driving the cycles of life and death and underlying all physical and chemical reactions. Therefore, it is “more natural than supernatural.” One student connects this energy to the laws of physics:

I have a very deep interest in physics, and understanding the ways in which the forces of the world combine to create the physical space that we live in…As science gets more and more advanced, we’re getting further and further…into what I consider the essential power that defines life and gives it meaning and structure. My understanding of a higher power is an essential energy and drive that exists in everything, and it is completely unintelligible to me. But this power has worked over however many eons of life to create the world and the experiences we have now.

Because the word “God” connotes an anthropocentric, mythical deity, these spiritual students choose not to label the energy God because, as one states, “trying to construct a higher power based on our categories of meaning takes away from how beyond our individual understandings it will inevitably be.” Another student believes that “God” is merely a label for a universal, transcendent reality: “giving it a name,
all that does is it makes it more tangible.” Applying this label would not make any difference in the nature of his beliefs:

There are some unbelievably intricate, wonderful forces in this universe. And what’s going on is so big and so awesome in the highest sense of that word that it almost makes the higher power question a moot point. It seems obvious that there’s something that keeps the particles together…All of the complexity seems to me enough proof that there are huge things happening in this universe, that the question of whether it’s a God or this or that, who cares?

While this student believes in “something that keeps the particles together,” he feels that “the higher power question” is “a moot point” because deciding whether or not to call it God does not change the awe-inspiring sense of the interconnectedness of things.

Atheism Does Not Preclude Belief that the Universe Is Meaningfully Connected

Several students share the sense that the self is meaningfully connected to the forces of nature, but identify as atheist. For them, identifying as “agnostic” would acknowledge the possibility of a supernatural being separate from natural forces, forces which they believe are ultimately governed by scientific laws. One spiritual student expresses how the awesome beauty of nature is ultimately not an indication of a higher power:

How sunflower seeds have the same ratio as the bones in my body, or, there are moments in existence, in how the universe is constantly expanding, and there are these symmetries of shapes and numbers and somehow all the organs in my body make it so that I live and sleep and eat food and go to the bathroom and breathe, all of that is really amazing, and I’m in awe of that. Does that mean I believe in a higher power or spirit? No.

While she does not believe in a transcendent force that connects the self to natural processes, recognizing how the self relates to those processes—and appreciating their magnificence—allows her to feel connected to a larger, meaningful system. As
another non-spiritual atheist student explains, “It’s just really important to acknowledge that you’re not the only thing in the universe…Nature is guiding all of us. It gives me a trust, trusting that there is some natural rhythm and I’m a part of it.”

An Appreciation that Something Beyond Us Exists, but “I Don’t Think It Needs a Following”

While many spiritual students—and some non-spiritual students—sense the existence of a transcendent force, others possess an uncertain sense that the transcendent exists, but do not express an interest in developing this awareness or incorporating it into their daily lives. They believe that it is important to acknowledge the existence of something larger than oneself, but do not feel the need to devote time and energy to worshipping it or orienting the self toward it for guidance or support. As one student states, “I don’t think it needs a following…There’s something connecting us all, but it’s almost better to just appreciate that, but don’t fuss with it too much.” Therefore, these students do not orient the self toward the transcendent for guidance or support, or experience it as an active presence in their lives and the world. As one spiritual student states, “I believe in the idea that a higher power can put everything in place, and then step back and let it be.”

A Minority of Spiritual Students Cultivate Awareness of What Is Beyond Them

Several other spiritual students, however, believe that it is crucially important to connect with this force. One student believes that people can “tap into” this energy, and by “bring[ing] that into yourself, just focusing your mind and your thoughts on positive things,” one can direct it to certain means. Another student believes that understanding this force can similarly help people to live their lives in a
more positive way: “It’s fascinating to take as many steps as we can to get closer to understanding that power, and I think that’s incredibly meaningful in defining the best ways of carrying on our individual lives and building our societies.” Therefore, attempting to understand the energy and incorporate it into life has implications not only for the self, but also for the positive development of society.

Several spiritual students actively cultivate a connection to this energy or larger system through interacting with nature. One discusses how horseback riding is often a spiritual experience for her:

I really feel very much connected to animals and to a notion that there is deep spirituality beyond the human experience. And to be able to understand our own spiritual experience, we should be able to open it up to a broader experience of living things. So it’s very meaningful to me to go and interact with another species and to really feel like there’s a connection there.

Another spiritual student—an atheist—makes it a point to connect with her natural surroundings on a regular basis. She wrote “interest in deep ecology” as her religious affiliation, which she defines as “the principle that humans are equal to all other inanimate and living things that are organic on the earth.” While she realizes that it is impractical to live her life as if she were equal to a rock, she finds it fulfilling to adopt this perspective because it is “in those specific moments of feeling how I fit into my environment that I really feel grateful.” Here she narrates her interaction with a tree:

My breath right now is interacting with you chemically, and your oxygen is affecting me, and me standing next to you right here is actually pushing down on your roots, and you, you’re giving me shade. I love thinking about the ways in which everything is an agent, I think that’s amazing.

Although she does not believe in a transcendent force that connects her to the tree, her willingness to engage with her natural surroundings demonstrates that she endows
nature with a special power and value. Furthermore, that power and value is understood to be an active and integral part of her life.

**Life After Death Is Energy Transferred**

Several students who have faith in a cosmic energy believe that when they die, their energy reenters the larger life force of the earth. As one student states, “The energy is just passed on. It’s just a constant circuit… If you die, you just become part of the bigger life of the planet.” Another spiritual student extends the idea of an energy circuit to encompass the possibility of reincarnation:

Reincarnation makes the most sense to me…when we die, our energy gets recycled back into the world, so we come back as new living creatures…Not even necessarily to learn anything, it’s just this constant process of regeneration that’s going on everywhere. Even scientifically, matter and energy is not destroyed, it just changes form.

Here again is the reference to science, and a grounding of spiritual beliefs in physical, natural laws. So although these students’ beliefs allow them to invest the self with a sense of continuity before life and after death, they do not believe in heaven or hell, which are understood as “supernatural” and purely in the realm of religion.

**Spiritual Uncertainty Over the Existence of an Afterlife**

Most spiritual students express uncertainty and vagueness in their beliefs in the continuance of self after death; for example, one states that “reincarnation is a possibility…but I can’t get more specific than that.” However, most do not feel uncomfortable about their lack of certainty or attempt to further define their beliefs, because an understanding of the afterlife is not a central part of their spirituality. Rather, they focus on living now, in this world: “the way I cope with not knowing
[about an afterlife] is I focus more on the now, and I think just be a good person, take care of myself now.”

While most spiritual students are not bothered by their uncertainty, one spiritual student experiences intense fear from not knowing what comes after this life. She was devoutly Christian during her adolescence but now rejects Christianity, and has lost the certainty of belief in life after death that religion gave her:

There was actually a point in my life where I was not afraid of dying because of my beliefs…Now, not having that, I am absolutely petrified…And for me as a child and a young adult, feeling OK with dying was a huge step in my life, and to lose it so quickly, all those fears came back, of dying…But now, it’s really hard for me not to believe that something happens after death, some sort of spiritual thing. I definitely do not believe that when you die, it’s done.

She expresses an anguished uncertainty about whether her self continues on after death that is in direct contrast to the secure beliefs of the religious students, discussed in a following section. And yet she believes that there is continuity of self after death; but like so many spiritual students, this belief in “some sort of spiritual thing” is sensed but not articulated or securely held.

**Belief in God Among Religious Students: The Same Name, but Different Meanings**

Although all three religious students believe in a higher power and call it God, their conceptualizations of this power are varied. The two who identify as Catholic speak of God as the omnipresent, omniscient force presented in the Bible. As one relates, “I find God evident in everything. Everybody has God within them.”

Although both Catholic students experience God as an omnipresent force, they have different understandings of how that God relates to the self—particularly as it relates to free will. The Catholic student who also identifies as spiritual understands God as
all-powerful to the extent that He endows each person with a self and with the
capacity to decide what to do with that self:

I don’t think you were born with a purpose in life. Because that implies that
everything was meant to happen for a reason, and I don’t think it is. I think
you’re given a set of tools, and you make of them what you will. I think you
are given the mind to utilize your abilities and what’s around you…I think
what makes God present in everyday life is that you have the option to do
whatever you want despite what you are given.

The personal reflection and self-understanding that this young man engages with
through spirituality contributes to his sense of freedom and self-efficacy. God places
that self in the world and lends it power and potential, but ultimately he has the
freedom to forge his own path.

In contrast, the other Catholic student believes that God determines the
direction of her life, and endows the self with a purpose that is outside of her control:

God is the constant, it’s my self that changes. There are times when I
understand more, I understand what I should be doing, and my place. Not
specifically or anything, I don’t know my specific purpose in life. Sometimes
I know when I’m doing something that’s good or right.

Her understanding of self is placed in the context of a God that requires certain things
of her, things that are “good” or “right.” And while God is an unchanging “constant,”
her sense of self shifts in relation to it, in the sense that it becomes “more worthy” by
following the path that God has set. When asked how she knows that she is doing
something “good or right,” she answered, “I’ll just feel it.” Ultimately, her criterion
for belief is the same experiential, affective one discussed by the spiritual students.

Interestingly, the third religious student, who identifies as Jewish, has a
conception of a higher power similar to that of many spiritual students. Like them, he
speaks about a higher power as a universal, integrating force that is “more natural
than supernatural,” and rejects the omnipotent, controlling God of the Bible. Unlike them, however, he chooses to call this force God, infusing the term with new meaning so that it resonates with his own experience of the world:

I don’t think about a higher power as something that’s external to our world, something I’ve never interacted with that is God that is above earth…People used to say that God is in every part of us, and that didn’t make sense to me…Like, is there some part of my liver that’s the Godly part? And with time I started thinking…Nature, the way the atoms and everything interact, I think that’s so beautiful and amazing that I can call that God. Some people are like, well it’s beautiful and amazing and it’s science. Well OK…I think of a higher power being the way that everything adds up, every atom and every person and every planet all adds up to something worth believing in, as opposed to something that is not worth believing in.

While both he and many spiritual students sense that their selves are a part of a meaningfully-integrated universe whose natural functioning is driven by a connecting force, they define that force (and therefore define themselves) with different terminology.

Although they conceptualize a higher power in distinct ways, all three religious students find evidence of God through personal experience. Thus, God is not an inert, lifeless entity taken from “a dead piece of paper,” but is embodied within themselves and the world around them. Consequently, in their discussions of God religious students rarely discuss the “arbitrary” Biblical myths spoken about by non-religious students. For example, one Catholic student continues to struggle with his belief in Jesus, but finds evidence of his belief in God in the world around him:

It really is hard for me to fathom this guy turning one loaf of bread and a fish into feeding thousands and thousands of people. It’s hard for me to believe in a burning bush, it’s hard for me to believe in somebody walking on water. But the fact of the matter is, I look, and I find God in everyday life, just because of the simple things, and the beauty in the things that a lot of people take for granted.
He experiences God through the awe and appreciation he feels toward the earth, rather than through otherworldly miracles. Another Catholic student turns to God in times of distress and feels supported and comforted: “sometimes I have trouble reaching out to other people, so just reaching out to God and sharing in that sense is really helpful for me.” Therefore, for the religious students God is not the abstract, otherworldly being identified by many non-religious students, but is experienced here on earth, in this life.

**Religious Afterlife—A Variety of Beliefs**

Like their conceptions of the self in relation to a higher power, the three religious students differ in their beliefs in how that self will continue on after death. The two Catholic students believe in heaven. But while both have faith that life after death exists, the Catholic student who also identifies as spiritual displays less certainty in this faith:

> It’s something that I won’t ever know for certain until that fateful day comes…But it’s something I believe in because I want to have hope. I think personally that I live in a heaven on earth. I have it so good…And I just don’t want that to end, so of course I believe in life after death…The fact that I have hope in it is something that makes me want to believe.

His belief in life is grounded in the joy that he gains from living. And while he does not know for certain whether his self will continue on after death, he displays James’ “will to believe.” In light of insufficient evidence, he believes because it gives him hope, refuting the notion that “dupery through hope is so much worse than dupery through fear” of holding false beliefs (James, 1896/2005, pp. 207-208).

On the other hand, the second Catholic student has a firm belief in the afterlife, which provides her self with a sense of purpose:
I think that believing in something is nice…An afterlife that’s after all this, that’s something to keep going for, there’s an initiative. I don’t know my specific purpose, because that’s not for me to know. But just the idea of an afterlife is something, it’s a goal.

While the first student focuses on the joys of earthly life as proof that there must be an afterlife, she focuses on what comes after this life, and grounds her certainty in the afterlife in her belief in God. She states, “In my mind, if you don’t believe in God then I don’t think you’re going to heaven…Believing is a key part in moving on.”

Because she believes in God, she is assured that that self will continue to exist with Him after death.

Unlike the Catholic students, the Jewish student does not believe in heaven. Rather, he conceptualizes the soul as the traces one leaves in the world—“how the world would be different if you were to remove someone from history”:

The way that I think about the soul, I think about a trail that people make…The footsteps they leave, the interactions that they have, and the changes that they make on the world…I like that idea…After people die and their bodies aren’t functional, they still have that carved path in the world that maybe inspires other people toward love, maybe it inspires other people toward hate. That’s a tangible idea of the soul to me.

Although he believes in “God” and identifies as religious, his beliefs in the afterlife (like his belief in God) perhaps have more in common with spiritual students than with the two religious students. He does not believe in a transcendent soul that continues on after death; rather, his beliefs are inseparable from nature or humanity and are therefore grounded in the “tangible.” However, while his beliefs are vastly different in content from those of the other religious students, he takes the same comfort and security in his beliefs as they do. Like them, his beliefs allow him to make sense of the world, which he “likes,” echoing the words of the Catholic student.
who stated, “believing in a higher power or just that there’s something after this—I like that.”

**Religious and Spiritual Students Display Similar Conceptualizations, but Different Levels of Certainty**

The narratives that religious and spiritual students employ in discussing their belief in a transcendent energy are sometimes very similar. However, what differentiates the religious students from the spiritual students is the firmness of their belief. For example, one religious student acknowledges that he cannot ultimately prove his belief in God as the connecting totality of all universal forces, but nevertheless holds firm to that belief: “It all being connected and it all being one whole, that’s definitely something I believe in. But I don’t think I could necessarily understand the whole, being one part of it, and I’m ok with that.” While many spiritual students share his sense of “it all being connected,” the unknowable nature of that connection makes it difficult for spiritual students to claim the certainty of belief that religious students do. One spiritual student explains the uncertainty of her belief in a higher power:

> Sometimes I worry, am I just afraid of the other option [not believing] because it’s so bleak, am I just trying to keep [my belief] because it’s just a way to cope with things? But at the same time I feel like…People have always sensed something. It’s this intangible something connecting us all. So I don’t think nothingness is the answer and I don’t know what is, but I think that there is something. Which is such a frustrating definition.

Unlike the religious student, who is content with believing in something without proof because it allows him to feel like he lives in a world that makes sense, this student finds it more difficult to say that she truly believes in something when it is so “intangible.” However, she maintains faith despite her uncertainty.
Additionally, both religious and non-religious students express awe for the beauty of nature, but differ in their certainty over whether this awe indicates the existence of a higher power. The following quotes exemplify these different interpretations by a spiritual and a religious student:

I look around where I am, and am like, there is no fucking way there can’t be a God, look at how awesome all this stuff is…I’m sitting in my house I can see this huge mountain ridge, and the changing leaves, and I’m like, there is no way this is this beautiful. There are a lot of moments where I’ve been like, there has to be. And yet, I don’t know.

I find God in…the beauty of nature. I’m a big nature guy, I look to nature a lot and I find peace with it…I sit around and I think, there’s not way that all of this happened by chance, there’s no fricking way it works like that.

The similarity of the language and concepts in these two quotes is remarkable: for example, when contemplating nature both students are struck with the idea that “there’s no f*cking way” that God does not exist. And yet the first, spiritual student remains in doubt. He recognizes the possibility of a God because of a sense of wonder that he feels in certain moments. And yet he does not possess the firmness and constancy of belief demonstrated by the Catholic student, who looks at the miracle of nature and calls it God.

Finally, one non-religious, non-spiritual student has a sense of a higher power that is similar to that of the Catholic students discussed earlier. He shares their belief in something larger that endows the self with a purpose beyond his understanding and control. However, because he no longer believes in the Christian God of his upbringing, he is uncertain how to conceptualize this “something larger”:

A: I do think that I have some relationship with self in the form of talking to a higher power, or asking questions.

Q: What do you mean by asking questions?
A: I don’t know, sometimes you get in doubt and you pray. I flip flop I guess. I don’t necessarily seek a relationship with it on a constant basis...I just couldn’t accept that there is nothing bigger than humanity, that possibly there’s something bigger going on that I don’t know about, that I’m not fully aware of. I wouldn’t necessarily put the heaviness of a God or religion...It’s just something, a feeling.

Q: Is it deserving of worship?
A: No...But there are times when a person can’t help but feel there’s a path set out for them. Or you feel something there, like a narrator...Something watching your life unfold from the outside...It’s nice feeling like your life has more meaning than what’s in front of you. So maybe it’s just comfort, that doesn’t have much of a foundation.

Q: Do you feel the presence of this higher power within you?
A: I don’t know. I don’t feel like it’s something that’s necessarily within me, maybe it’s some separate entity. I don’t know, I don’t know, I don’t know.

Like the two Catholic students, this respondent senses that there is something beyond him that provides guidance and, to some extent, shapes the trajectory of his life. He even echoes the language of one Catholic student who stated: “I think that believing in something is nice, believing in a higher power” when he says “it’s nice feeling like your life has more meaning than what’s in front of you.” Like her, he gains strength and a sense of well-being through believing that his self is a part of something that is infinite and stable.

Unlike the two religious students, however, his belief in a higher power is not firm or constant. He “flip flops,” looking to it when he is feeling uncertain or lost, but not necessarily experiencing it at other times. And it is less a firm belief than it is “a feeling,” and one that he wants to separate from “the heaviness of a God or religion.” “Heavy” implies the “baggage” of organized religion: the myths, practices, and social structures of, for him, the Christianity of his upbringing. And yet, while he
has discarded this heaviness—this identity—and no longer identifies as Christian, the “feeling” that his self is not alone in the universe remains.

**Non-Religious, Non-Spiritual Students: Acknowledging the Unknown, but “We’re Not Meant to Figure It Out”**

Students who do not identify as religious or spiritual almost uniformly do not believe in God or any kind of transcendent force. However, some do express awe similar to that of the spiritual students when contemplating the natural world. Several discuss the amazement they feel when contemplating the limits of the universe. For one atheist student, “analyzing how small we are compared to the rest of whatever’s out there” makes her “feel very small and uncertain.” Another states, “I think it’s incredible and mind-blowing and incredibly unlikely that the earth is the way that it is…I want to use the word magical just because it’s so mind blowing.”

This awe comes from an acknowledgement of the unknown—most non-spiritual, non-religious students believe that ultimately “we will never be able to understand the complete workings of our universe.” However, many report that they rarely, if ever, ponder the mysteries of existence, and do not engage with a wider perspective beyond what they experience in their own lives; as one states, “I don’t often think about the universal picture, tying everything together. It’s just not something that crosses my mind often.” Rather, they prefer to focus on the concrete tasks, relationships, and obligations of daily life. Regarding her belief in a higher power, one student states:

> It’s not a priority for me. I’d rather enjoy life presently than think about life after death and that kind of thing. I don’t feel like I need to spend energy deciding where I came from and what’s going to happen. It’s just not important to me.
Spirituality and religion, then, are understood to refer to origins and endings, “where I came from and what’s going to happen,” but not to life as she lives it currently.

Others express the opinion that searching for an ultimate explanation for what we are and why we are here is futile and unproductive. The following quotes illustrate this:

> Evolutionarily speaking, we’re not meant to figure it out. There might not be an answer…Once you get down to the smallest level it’s just random, just probability. So to try and subscribe meaning to it might not make sense.

> I don’t have the basis and the ability and the concepts to analyze why every human being who exists or has existed was on this earth…To me, it’s almost not a question that should be asked. Because what’s the difference between asking it and not asking it?

This echoes the question of the spiritual student quoted earlier: “the question of whether it’s a God or this or that, who cares?” Unlike him, however, most non-religious, non-spiritual students do not sense that there is “something that keeps the particles together” that is “so big and so wonderful and so awesome in the highest sense of that word.” That is one clear difference between spiritual and non-spiritual students’ understandings of the universe: the former believe that the physical world is invested with transcendent meaning: a force, energy, spirit, or God that animates and links all living things. The latter, for the most part, believe that “to try and subscribe meaning to it might not make sense,” and so do not endow the unknown with a name or a meaning beyond that which can be empirically verified.

**God Conflicts with Logic and Science**

Non-spiritual, non-religious students discuss their disbelief in a higher power by referring to its incompatibility with a universe governed by scientific laws. As one student states, science “allows you to explain things that are happening now…It is a
way to describe the universe that works.” God does not “work” because is only an abstract myth, and cannot “explain” or “describe” as science does. In order to explain what we don’t understand, these students turn to logic and empirical investigation; because “if we’re unable to understand it, there’s some logical explanation that we’re just not going to come upon,” and “maybe we’re just not smart enough to understand the physics behind it.” But human knowledge continues to progress: “Before people discovered certain laws of physics or certain ways in which nature operates…they must have thought it was the gods. And now we have an explanation for it.” So although they recognize that there are mysteries in the universe, they hesitate to connect these mysteries to the transcendent, because a belief in anything that is not tied to physical evidence will ultimately be disproved.

Many non-spiritual, non-religious students cite lack of proof for why they do not believe in God. Some equate belief in God with belief in unicorns: one occasionally entertains the possibility that God exists, “but then I think, maybe there are also unicorns and fairies all over the place. It’s probably more likely that there are unicorns.” Another states “I’m unsure about God to the extent that I’m unsure about unicorns. I can’t prove that there aren’t unicorns, so I’m not going to claim that there aren’t. But I’m not going to espouse the belief that they are either.” Thus, these students would only feel comfortable believing in something that is supported by positive evidence. Because nothing tangible or concrete indicates the existence of a God, nothing impels them to believe in it. Others do not even engage in questioning the existence of a higher power because it makes them uncomfortable to contemplate questions with no empirical or logical grounding. One states, “I would rather not
introduce logical contradiction into my thinking. I like to have straightforward questions that I can figure out, or that have some sort of support…and religion and spirituality don’t have that.” Another relates, “I don’t really see what the point of wondering is, when I might as well wonder about other, more concrete things.”

**God Is an Abstract Myth Detached from Personal Experience**

In discussing their disbelief in a higher power, most non-spiritual, non-religious students speak of God as an abstract idea. Most report that they have “never felt a connection to a higher power,” and therefore speak about God as something separate from self and the world, a Biblical “supreme being manipulating things” or an anthropomorphized “person, or just a figment of someone’s imagination, responsible for controlling the whole world.” One student believes that “we created God” because “everything has a physical basis, and if it doesn’t then it’s a construct of human beings, it’s a construct of our minds.” Another student explains his doubt that a God could ever be personally meaningful in his life:

Some explanation that originated a couple thousand years ago by people who thought the earth was flat…Some abstract concept of a God, it seems like a weaker explanation than just admitting defeat. So I don’t think I would take comfort from that.

This student does not grant the possibility that God is present in the world; rather, God is an “abstract concept” constructed by humans as a means of providing false comfort.

Several other non-religious, non-spiritual students speak of God in the same abstract way, as something detached from self, but profess an interest in bringing this idea into their personal experience. One states, “I’d like to believe in something. It’s like having your own little secret.” Although they have an ambiguous sense that
something transcendent exists, they do not personally experience it or have the conceptual structure to speak about it. One young woman says, “there’s so much luck, I feel like there’s gotta be something maybe. I just don’t know what it is.” Others acknowledge their uncertainty, but do not feel compelled to work to clarify it for themselves:

   It’s something I’m interested in figuring out, but I feel like it should become clear without me having to…I just always thought that it would become clear and that I’m still young. But at some point I might be inspired to more actively figure it out.

   I have no idea where to start, so I kind of just don’t bother. Sometimes I’ll think about it and be like, I wonder what it is, I wonder when people will figure it out.

These students grant the existence of God some possibility of truth. But like many of the students who reject any acknowledgment of the transcendent, they speak of God as an abstract concept, whose existence can be “figured out” like a difficult math problem. And at this point in their lives they are leaving the figuring out to others.

**We’re All Matter and Chemicals**

While some non-religious and non-spiritual students do contemplate the possibility of a higher power and life after death, the majority does not believe in a force that transcends physical matter. Therefore, they conceive of the self as solely a product of chemical and physical forces, and reject the idea of a soul or a spirit. One student believes that the entirety of the person can be described in terms of “some combination of physics, biology, and chemistry”:

   Everything that we are is some combination of chemical things going on in our brain, perceptions that we have, signals that we send out. There is some scientific basis to all of that. I think it could be argued, that since the beginning of time, things were destined to play out the way that they were,
because everything is just a bunch of physical laws taking place as matter interacts.

In an important sense, he bestows upon the laws of physics the same determining, omnipresent power that some associate with God. His understanding that “things were destined to play out the way that they were” removes a certain amount of agency from the self, just as the Catholic student places the purpose of her life outside of her hands, in the power of God.

Because most non-religious, non-spiritual students do not believe in a transcendent spirit within the self, they do not believe that the self continues on in any form after death. One student states that people are “carbon molecules, and are just going to be recycled back some day…There’s not any specific soul part of you that still remains.” Another atheist student firmly disbelieves in life after death; however, in contrast to the spiritual student quoted earlier who was “petrified” of what happens to her self after death, he states “I’m OK with dying and not existing. If you told me I was going to die tomorrow, I don’t think I’d freak out.” Just as the religious students take comfort in their beliefs in the afterlife, he is unafraid of death because of the security of his belief that the self merely disappears when the body dies.
CHAPTER FOURTEEN
Spiritual Experiences

While the majority of Wesleyan students do not firmly believe in God, many
report having spiritual experiences. The descriptions of these experiences tend to
conform to psychologist Abraham Maslow’s definition of “peak experiences”:

Sudden feelings of intense happiness and well-being, possibly the awareness
of an "ultimate truth" and the unity of all things... The experience fills the
individual with wonder and awe.... [One experiences] the loss of placement in
time and space with, finally, the conviction that something extremely
important and valuable had happened, so that the subject was to some extent
transformed and strengthened even in his daily life by such experiences

The themes of self-transcendence, awe, transformation, and resulting happiness and
well-being run through most students’ narratives on spiritual experiences. While
these experiences occur in a variety of settings and are interpreted differently by
different students, the ways in which they are described are remarkably similar.

Spiritual Experiences in Nature

As discussed earlier, most spiritual students look to nature for spiritual
meaning and feel a strong sense of connection to the natural world. Several report
having out-of-body experiences in nature, where they feel as if the self is transformed
or merges to become a part of the larger natural environment:

Something about being outside, from being very small, how special it is and
important it is to be outside. I can remember... having a spiritual experience,
of really being able to be inside of my body and also look at my body and
realize that I was part of this greater environment... it’s like a gaze shift
happens.

I was swimming with this school of fish, and I remember feeling like whoa,
this is an incredibly spiritual experience. I was part of this family of fish, and
it was almost this out of body... as in, I wasn’t a human anymore, I was a fish.
I remember thinking that there was more to life than what’s in front of you.
While these students do not mention a higher power or transcendent energy in their descriptions, they do endow nature with transcendent meaning. By interpreting their experiences as “spiritual” because of a sense of union with something beyond themselves, they recognize a meaning and importance in nature that goes beyond what is empirically observable.

**Spiritual Experiences Through Drugs**

Several spiritual students report undergoing spiritual experiences while under the influence of hallucinogenic drugs, which can reveal new perspectives on the self and the universe, and how they relate to each other. One spiritual student believes that hallucinogens “can serve as some of the peak experiences you can have,” revealing a truth and beauty in the world that one might not be conscious of without the aid of chemical substances:

> We’re creatures of habit…But for a couple of hours, all these filters we have that create our reality disappear, and all of a sudden…It’s like being a little kid and looking, as if for the first time, at things that you’ve seen so many times before. And it’s a powerful experience in that it reminds you that you’re not ever seeing things the way they are…I start thinking about things on so many different levels, because the world is broader and not simple.

Through drugs, he gains access to a more truthful and honest way of seeing the world. He is able to look at his surroundings and notice the details—the grain of wood, the texture of grass—and also look beyond the surface of things to the meaning that exists behind the “filters.” This relates to the spiritual notion that layers of depth exist within the self and in the world: like the transcendent experience of swimming with fish discussed earlier, these drugs reveal to him that “there’s more to life than what’s in front of you.” Further, this young man relates that this understanding can be
incorporated into spirituality beyond these experiences, through “a renewed sense of responsibility for pursuing the goal of deeper understanding.”

Spiritual Experiences and Art

For many spiritual students, viewing or creating art is a spiritual experience because it provides a meaningful perspective on their lives. Through externalizing and expressing their own experiences, it articulates “ultimate truths” about life, and allows them to feel that these truths are shared with others who participate in the act of viewing or creating art with them. In a remarkable demonstration of this shared, meaningful experience, three different participants related undergoing a spiritual experience at the same slam poetry performance:

The most recent spiritual experience I’ve had on campus, I was at the chapel…It was a spoken word performance, he was incredible. He didn’t only change my opinions on spoken word, but he had some pretty inspiring words about how much control we have over our own situations.

[The slam poet was] trying to describe life in a way that hasn’t been described before. Taking the things that everyone has done or can relate to, and spinning them in a way that maybe hasn’t been told before, so that people got new perspectives on their lives. And that I think is a very very spiritual thing.

I went to a poetry slam yesterday. It was awesome…I was in awe of people…It’s like tapping into this system. It felt like everyone was seeing the same thing. I guess that was a spiritual moment, everyone was together.

These three students possess different understandings of the self and its place in the world—the first two identify as spiritual, while the third does not. However, the words of the slam poet gave them all a meaningful perspective on their lives that in some sense allowed them to transcend their selves by “tapping into this system.” Everyone was hearing the same words and “seeing the same thing,” and in this way
each of their individual experiences were made universal, transformed into “things
that everyone has done or can relate to.”

**Spiritual Experiences Through Music**

Many spiritual students report undergoing spiritual experiences through
music. For some, music becomes spiritual when it is experienced with others. One
spiritual student discusses attending a concert:

Everybody was together and singing, and it was such a powerful moment, and
I realized that…there’s this amazing musical bond that can connect you to the
other people and the universe and connect that whole, feeling like you’re a
part of something when you’re in a place and experiencing music together.

Through the communal experience of music, he was able to glimpse what Maslow
defined as “the unity of all things,” which, as he later goes on to say, “totally connects
to my belief about God, that it all fits together to this one giant thing, and we’re just a
small part of it.” Thus, music provides tangible evidence of and support for spiritual
beliefs.

Other spiritual students speak of music as transformative. This supports
Maslow’s definition of peak experiences as leaving one with “the conviction that
something extremely important and valuable had happened, so that the subject was to
some extent transformed.” This spiritual student explains the transformative power of
a concert that he performed with his choral group:

Knowing that what you are doing as a group of people is amazing, is
powerful, it’s dramatic. It is affecting other people, it is certainly affecting
you… I had never felt more a part of something…It was just an incredibly
spiritual experience. I think that was definitely a moment for me when I was
like, wow, this is real.

For this student, music is “dramatic” because it fundamentally changes his experience
of self. But in addition to affecting his inner experience, it also links him to other
people who are experiencing that transformation. Like the previous student, music allows him to feel like he is “a part of something” larger than himself; he later states his belief that “there is some sort of externality that is at play when a group of musicians get together.” Like the previous student, music supports his spiritual beliefs—through personally experiencing a transformation and seeing it in others, music manifests the transcendent energy that he believes is a part of everything, and affirms his belief that “this is real.”

For several other spiritual students, the spiritual experience of music is more personal. Playing music is an opportunity for them to be completely absorbed in an activity and experience a falling away of conscious awareness. This is similar to Csíkszentmihályi’s notion of “flow,” where one is completely involved in an activity for its own sake: “Self-consciousness disappears…The sense of time is distorted…A person’s entire being is stretched in the full functioning of body and mind” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997, p. 32). One spiritual student even uses the term “flow” in explaining the experience of playing music: “If I’m playing music, I become totally engaged and reach that level of flow…There are moments where there are no thoughts in my mind and I’m just aware of my body, and I could be anyone.” Like the previous student, she feels transformed by music; but for her, the transformation is more akin to an absence of self rather than an expansion: she “could be anyone,” as the interference of the conscious mind is removed.

**Spiritual Experiences Among Non-Spiritual Students: Transcendent in the Moment, but Separate from Their Overall Sense of Self**

Several non-religious, non-spiritual students report undergoing similar experiences through music. Their descriptions convey the same sense of
transcendence experienced by the spiritual students in nature; one young woman states that live music “takes me out of a reality that I’m normally in…I feel not tied down to my body, it’s an experience that’s beyond myself.” Another student speaks about the one time in his life when he has experienced this transcendence, when he was performing with a choir:

We were singing and there was this one moment where I just broke through, and I was just really happy….A better way to describe it is sort of the deepest happy I’ve ever felt. Happy is sort of an everyday word. That’s as close as I’ve had to having a spiritual experience.

However, while non-spiritual students have undergone transcendent experiences quite similar to those of spiritual students, they do not attempt to explore the source of this transcendence, or to incorporate an understanding of it into their broader worldviews or daily experience. This is a clear difference between students who identify as spiritual, and those who do not. Thus, the first student claims: “I experience moments that are spiritual, but I wouldn’t define myself as spiritual…If there were a lot of [those moments] they probably wouldn’t mean as much. So I don’t look for more.”

The second student relates that he has never experienced that same level of happiness, and that he has “never thought about it” since then. Thus, spirituality is isolated from daily life by non-spiritual students.

**Perspective Influences Interpretation of Experience**

The way in which students interpret transcendent experiences depends on the concepts and perspectives that they bring to those experiences. Thus, while a spiritual person might explain these experiences by referring to a cosmic force, non-spiritual students interpret it using other concepts. One student who used to believe
in God, but is now an atheist, explains how his interpretation of transcendent experiences changed along with his belief in God:

In the moment, you feel like you’re taking part in something larger than yourself. In the past I would have been inclined to attribute that to some kind of religious force…I get the same feeling now, although not religious in context.

Thus, he still experiences the same feeling of being a part of “something larger.” But because he does not believe in God anymore, he does not link this experience with “some kind of religious force.”

Another student discusses the feeling that she occasionally gets in nature, but seems to lack conceptual architecture with which to structure that experience:

If I’m in a field or something, I get this feeling. I can never tell if it’s just, I’m very happy, or if it’s a spiritual moment. Because I don’t really know what a spiritual moment is…I feel like it should be something that happens. Like ‘this is a spiritual moment,’ with a flashing sign.

Emotions do not clearly indicate their source or reference, and require personal definition and interpretation. Thus, what one experiences during a spiritual moment is not inherently spiritual: as William James states, “religious sentiment” is not a psychologically specific emotion but is rather an emotion like any other, only directed toward a religious object (James, 1901/2008, p. 31). But because this young woman does not have a meaningful religious or spiritual object—or an interpretive structure which provides one—the emotions remain ambiguous and undefined.
CHAPTER FIFTEEN
Approaching the Sacred

Part Three: Self in the World

The previous two sections demonstrate how religion and spirituality is experienced and expressed in different ways, and to different degrees, through self and identity. But the person is not a self or an identity in isolation—life is experienced as the interaction of the two dimensions. This section is concerned with the point at which those dimensions meet: how Wesleyan students find meaning in their lives, how they see their lives as relating to others, and how they understand what it means to be a “good person” in the world. While some use religion and spirituality as overarching philosophies to approach these topics, all students—whether they identify as religious, spiritual, or neither—have some sense of what it means to live a “good life.” This section explores students’ understandings of “the good life” in three chapters. The first two chapters present the results of asking students to define and identify what they find sacred in their lives, and what they have faith in. This was meant to reveal what they value most highly—what gives their lives meaning, stability, and guidance. The third chapter presents students’ understandings of morality: how to be a good person, and how to live life in a way that takes into account the well-being of others, in addition to one’s own happiness.

The Sacred

Approximately half of the students interviewed were able to meaningfully apply the word “sacred” to their lives. All of the spiritual students but one, two of the three religious students, and one non-religious, non-spiritual person related it to
something in their lives. The remaining students either found it to be a completely meaningless word and therefore inapplicable to their lives, or refused to apply it because nothing in their lives embodied “the sacred” as they define the word.

**Things Are Not Inherently Sacred—People Imbue Them with Sacred Meaning**

In general, students believe that “the sacred” is a human construction of meaning, and that nothing is inherently or universally sacred. As one student states, “I think sacred is an ‘in the eye of the beholder’ type of thing.” Another expresses the opinion that “things are sacred because people make them sacred… I think it’s something that humans do.” While many students share this perspective, they differ in whether or not it inhibits their ability to find the sacred in their lives.

**“The Sacred” is Connected to Experience**

While students understand that what they find sacred may not be sacred for other people, those who meaningfully apply avoid making universal claims of sacredness by connecting “the sacred” to people, places, and things that are a part of their own lives; as one participant states, “the sacred is connected to what I’m experiencing.” Additionally, connecting “the sacred” to lived experience divorces it from association with the holy, otherworldly “sacred” of organized religion—concepts which, as we have seen, do not resonate with most students. Rather than understanding “sacred” as inherently connected to the divine, students believe that “sacred can be more attainable than that, I don’t think sacred has to be this untouchable thing that we all aspire to. I think it’s important to feel like you have sacredness in your life.” Interestingly, the two religious students who understood the word—and who believe in God—did not directly relate their understanding of the
sacred to a higher power, applying the sacred to concrete aspects of their lives rather
than viewing it as “untouchable” or in any way existing apart from this world.

“The Sacred”: What Is Most Important in Life

Students who use the sacred define it as that which is of utmost importance to
them: sacred is “the opposite of worthless”; “something that I can never take for
granted”; “things that are precious to me”; “something that is most meaningful in
juxtaposition to other things.” While students place special value on the sacred, the
endowment of value is not unidirectional—as one student states, while “the sacred is
something you really value, it’s also giving back to you and values you.” This
reciprocal valuation experienced through the sacred gives meaning to one’s existence:
“sacredness allows you to feel like your life is worthwhile. That feeling of self-worth
is really important, that there are things around you that are special.” Finally, because
the sacred is understood as an integral part of life, as “something that you can’t live
without,” students devote time and energy to connect with or protect what they find
sacred; one young man states, “Sacred things feel more special and worthwhile than
anything else so…I spend a lot of my time pursuing and trying to support them in any
way I can.”

Out of the ten people who identified the sacred in their lives, six identified
their familial and social relationships as “sacred.” As one student relates,

I think my relationship to my parents is really meaningful to me, and in that
sense a sacred thing in my life. I’d put it on a pedestal and say this is one of
the things I need the most, that is most important to me, that defines me. This
is one of my pillars, if you will.

Nature was also commonly discussed, with three people speaking about its sacred
importance. Echoing the image of the pillar in the previous quote, one student
believes that “the earth is sacred…It should be put on top of the pedestal of any religion because it’s the most important thing in our existence.” Finally, three students identified music as sacred; as one student says, “I feel more than myself when I’m playing music.” Thus, what is sacred in students’ lives both defines their identities through social relationships, and allows them to connect with their true selves.

The one non-spiritual, non-religious student who identifies the sacred in his life invests sacredness in something quite distinct from the music, nature, and social relationships identified by the spiritual students. Ironically, what he identifies as sacred is the very faculty that he uses as a basis for his rejection of religion and spirituality. He states, “I invest sacredness in logical reasoning and education, kind of the opposite of faith…Because if you don’t use those tools available to you, human understanding, then you can’t really live a justifiable life.” Like the spiritual and religious students, what is sacred for him is also what is most meaningful, “what you can’t live without,” just as it is for the spiritual and religious people. Unlike them, however, the sacred for him is essentially located within the individual rather than outside of it.

**The Impossibility of Using the Word “Sacred”**

Two students—one spiritual and one non-spiritual—would not apply the word sacred to their lives because they understand “sacredness” to be a human, cultural construction, and applying the word sacred would erroneously presume the supreme value of something above and beyond humans or culture. Thus, one spiritual student states that
The word sacred imbues meaning upon an object or a concept based on a human notion of importance. It involves structures of cultural meaning that create an object which is meaningful in those structures but not beyond [them]…I certainly would not use the word sacred in my life.

Like many of the students who would use the word sacred, she believes that sacred meaning is to some extent arbitrary and personalized. Unlike them, however, she is uncomfortable creating her own structures of sacredness and making perhaps arrogant claims for the importance of her own beliefs.

Several non-religious, non-spiritual students cannot meaningfully use the word sacred because of its associations with organized religion, which these students have distanced themselves from and which they view with skepticism or disdain. Several acknowledge that outside of a religious structure the word could indicate “a really profound and extremely important thing in your life”; but because the term has such strong religious connotations, they would rather not use it and risk associating what is “extremely important” to them with religious beliefs that they do not adhere to. Relating to the aversion to the sacred as inherently based on a “human notion of meaning,” one student made an audible sound of disgust when questioned about the sacred, claiming that “sacred is just too much of that extra blob of religious things that should not be associated with what is important…It’s objects, it’s symbols, it’s human things.”

Two non-religious, non-spiritual students likewise define “sacred” as “something that’s of highest value to a person,” but do not have anything in their lives that they invest with that kind of superlative value. One states that “sacred is a very strong word, and I don’t think I’d ever go about using that word. I can’t think of something that’s sacred to me.” Another explains why he does not identify anything
as sacred in his life: “I definitely respect a lot of things, and I’m appreciative of things, but I don’t know if I’m like “gasp” every time I see them.” For him, the word sacred implies something that inspires awe and deep reverence, which he does not feel in response to anything in his life on a consistent basis.

Finally, several students could not apply the word to their lives because they do not have an adequate definition for it. Interestingly, one of these students is devoutly Catholic, and one of the few respondents who believes in a monotheistic God. In response to the question of what is sacred in her life, she answered, “I don’t know, I’ve never really thought about it. That doesn’t have meaning for me.” One spiritual student also does not truly understand what “sacred” means, but finds this lack of definition to be a cause for concern:

The sacred, or sense of things being sacred, has been a little bit lost in our world these days…I don’t know how to go about applying it real well in this world, but I think it would be very healthy to think critically about what’s sacred, what does sacred mean…The loss of the sacred is an important thing to consider. But I’d be wary to use it without thinking about it critically.

He goes on to explain that if he were to define sacred, it would mean something that is worthy of both respect and awe, and believes that it is essential to have things that we respect and revere in our lives. But because “sacred” is such an important word, he hesitates to use it without fully understanding its meaning, because “it’s easy to say this or that’s sacred, and the word starts to mean nothing.”

**Relationships Are Profoundly Important**

While nearly all non-spiritual, non-religious students did not apply the word “sacred” to anything in their lives, semantic complications were partially bypassed by asking them to speak about what is profoundly important in their lives, apart from the
word “sacred.” As it was for the spiritual and religious students, the overwhelming response was close relationships with friends and family.

Although they do not use the word sacred, these students speak similarly to spiritual and religious students in identifying close relationships as a source of meaning and self-definition. For one, family is “the underlying support system to everything.” Another finds the deepest fulfillment in her life through “meaningful connections with people…If I could share an experience with one person, talking to them all night and from that point on we had this connection, that is what is most important to me.” A third student discusses her need for self-validation through human connection:

I am a very independent person, I like to be by myself. But when it comes down to it, after being with myself for a while I need to be with other people. And I need to feel like I’m important to other people…I need to know that I have a significant influence on their life.

Although these students do not identify their relationships as “sacred,” the reciprocal recognition and affection that appear in their descriptions mirror the definition of sacred provided by a spiritual student: “something you really value, and it’s also giving back to you and values you.”
CHAPTER SIXTEEN
Having Faith

Uncertainty About Faith

Like the word sacred, many students are uncomfortable or unfamiliar with the word faith. Several cannot apply it to their lives because it is simply not a word that they ever use or think about in relation to themselves. As one student says, “it’s just not a word that is in my head that often.” Others find it difficult to separate the word “faith” from its associations with organized religion. One student says, “I don’t think I can put [faith] in a context that makes sense to me. Faith has a lot to do with organized religion and with subscribing to a set of structured beliefs,” which she does not subscribe to. Another student finds that his distaste for organized religion makes it difficult to meaningfully consider faith: “I hate the word faith, it’s a bad word. Maybe if I thought real hard for a long time, I could find something. But it has such a strong connotation of religion, it’s really hard for me to get around it.”

Several atheist, non-religious and non-spiritual students do not have faith in anything because they define having faith as holding “an unjustified belief, or a belief without proof,” which makes them uncomfortable. They emphasize logic and empirical evidence as a measure of truth, and therefore understand having faith as merely a delusional belief, “a convenience, a heuristic or something…You want it to be true and therefore you believe it.” This causes one student to claim, “I don’t want to have faith in anything. Because I don’t want to be the kind of person who believes in something without having a reason for it.” By “having a reason,” he means a foundation in fact or logic. Interestingly, he is the student mentioned earlier who identified fact and logic as sacred because they are “the opposite of faith.”
Several spiritual students also express the discomfort of having faith in something intangible, but are able to have faith because they connect it to something tangible and concretely experienced. Thus, one spiritual student relates, “I have faith in things that I’ve helped make”: the people she loves, natural spaces with which she has cultivated a relationship, and, herself. These are all things of whose existence she can be certain, because she “can always return to them and find something again.”

Another spiritual student believes that faith may not be logical or empirically verifiable, but that it can be meaningfully held if it is connected to personal experience:

Faith is based off of something that maybe you’ve never seen. And it’s very important [because]…The belief that it’s possible to reach a particular place is fundamental to my ability to muster the drive that will help me get there…But it can be dangerous if you haven’t critically understood why it is you’re looking for what you’re looking for, and you just use faith as a tool for disregarding reason…Faith should be based on personal experience. If faith remains entirely divorced from experience, and you never have glimpses, then maybe you should question your path more critically.

Faith for him is a functional belief, giving him strength and motivation to pursue his spiritual goals. But his faith is not the “unjustified belief” shunned by the student in the previous paragraph—he ensures that his beliefs are grounded in or “justified” by the reality of personal experience, and that they do not cause him to disregard logic or reason.

**Faith in People**

Many people—both spiritual and non-spiritual—do not express discomfort or awareness of the tension between believing in something and not having proof for it, defining faith as “something that you trust, something that you hold close to yourself, despite the fact that maybe not everybody else thinks the same way.” Regardless of
religious or spiritual affiliation, most respondents place this trust in people. Many have faith in friends and family with whom they have a close relationship. Others profess “faith in the power of good” within people. One non-religious, non-spiritual student has “faith that the people I associate with…are generally good and want to help me and not hinder me in whatever my life’s path.” Another non-religious, non-spiritual student likens her faith in the goodness of people to a safety net:

I have faith that there’s some sort of support system… If people actually knew how bad other people can feel, then they would never let them get to that point… If you start getting sad, you just talk to someone, next thing you know, you’re fine again. It’s like there’s this net, I guess it’s faith, belief in people, and you’ll bounce back.

Although her faith in a net of social support is not based in concrete evidence, her trust in its existence allows her to feel like she is a part of something larger and interconnected, which will be there for her if she needs it.

**Faith that “Things Are Going to Be OK”**

Several spiritual students express faith that their lives have a meaning and purpose that may be invisible to them, but which gives them hope that “things tend to work out.” One student has faith that “you’re going to find your way. Faith in allowing the universe to come around for you.” Another extends this faith into the future, professing a belief that

eventually I will create a life for myself that’s utter happiness. I don’t think that’s going to happen right away, but I have faith that I will be able to surround myself with things that are important to me. That things are going to be OK.

The three religious students also profess faith that the universe is meaningful and, as one states, “that it pertains to you and has something to do with you.” The two Catholic students identify this trust as faith in God, while the Jewish student
defines his faith as “taking a sense of security from the irrational and believing it all works. It is faith in the larger world outside yourself.” Although religious and non-religious students identify the object of their faith differently—“the irrational,” “God,” or “other people,” for example—they all trust that they are a part of something larger and interconnected, and feel supported because of that trust.
CHAPTER SEVENTEEN
Moral Understanding

Through their discussions of sacredness and faith, students express that relationships with other people are crucially important in their lives. In addition to addressing the meaning that social relationships bring to their lives personally, students were asked to turn their orientation outward, and discuss their understanding of what it means to be a good person in the world.

Religion Is Not Necessary for Morality

Both spiritual and non-spiritual students believe that religion is not necessary for morality. While they acknowledge that some religious teachings may hold moral value, this value can exist outside of the beliefs and practices of organized religion; as one spiritual student states, “A moral attitude does not have to come from religion. I think it should be part of the human experience.” Many believe that this attitude can be cultivated outside of organized religion through the family, and most students identify their family as the source of their moral values.

Several students express the opinion that adhering to a religion might actually make them less moral. One student believes that religious morality involves simply following what the Bible says; in following these principles, he states, “I don’t really have to think about them, I just have to know that God says that they’re what I should or shouldn’t do.” Without organized religion, however, you “don’t have those resources, and you have to use internal principles” and therefore “you’re a much more ethical person if you’re not following religion.” Another student provides personal testimony to this assertion. She was devoutly Christian during her adolescence, but broke with the church in high school:
When I had Christianity, it was almost like a crutch. This is what Christianity says you do, so do it. And now that I don’t have that doctrine force fed to me, I feel like every decision that I make on my own that I feel is a morally right decision, I become stronger. And I’m more likely to do it in the future.

Although religion provided moral guidance in her youth, her lack of critical engagement with its teachings made that morality seem external to the self, “force fed” to her. Now that she does not have that “crutch,” she develops her own moral principles built through personal experience and thoughtful engagement. And with the growth of these principles, she feels that her sense of self becomes “stronger” and more defined.

**Religious Morality**

Among the three students in this sample who identify as religious, only one explicitly relates her morality to religion and to God. While she sees her moral choices as determined by what the Catholic Church has deemed right and wrong, ultimately she focuses on God rather than the church as the principal judge and determinant of her moral behavior:

Certain things I wouldn’t do because in the Catholic Church they’re wrong...If I am confronted with a moral choice, in my thought process there’s something religious that’s informing it. It’s more about, not necessarily pleasing God, but not disappointing God. Not doing something that, because it would disappoint God, would ultimately hurt me...Usually things that have to do with sex or drugs...There’s temptation out there, and we’re all being tested. Just not giving in to things like that.

Because she believes that God has set a path for her leading to the afterlife, moral decisions are interpreted as points along that path that could ultimately “hurt” her by causing her to stray from that path. Importantly, in discussing morality she focuses on immoral behavior that she should avoid, rather than positive moral behavior that she should cultivate. When asked whether religion dictated how she *should* behave in
addition to how she shouldn’t, she states, “I guess I don’t really think about morality in that sense.” The other two religious students have very different conceptions of morality, which will be addressed in future sections.

**Morality Among Non-Religious, Non-Spiritual Students: Subjective and Context-Dependent, but “Works Out to Some Form of the Golden Rule”**

In general, non-religious, non-spiritual students are skeptical of absolute morality, and believe that “right” and “wrong” are personally determined. As one student states, “It’s subjective, and it’s easy to say that something is wrong when there’s probably another story, or some justification for it, and everything is completely context-dependent.” Another student conceptualizes good and bad as existing on a “gradient” without any absolute endpoints:

I don’t think I would ever classify anything as completely bad or completely good, even if it was the most awful thing in the world. I would still be like, well there was a reason this happened. I like to chop off the ends and just consider the gradient in the middle.

As a result of contextual factors, situations requiring moral decisions are viewed as gray areas without moral endpoints, for which “one set of moral rules can’t possibly be sufficient.” Students who express these views are not guided by a higher moral authority; the locus of and authority for morality is the individual. As one student relates, “a lot of morality is just based on what I want, because it’s so subjective…You just kind of have to do what’s right for you individually.”

Some students express confusion over what their morals are. Due to the cultural and situational dependence of conceptions of “wrong” and “right,” one student states, “Morality…Admittedly, I can’t figure it out. I have a lot of research to do before I get an answer for myself. I have issues with it—not that I’m against it, I
just don’t know what I make of it.” Another student also claims, “I have to study these things more” before reaching any conclusions regarding his duties to others. When asked whether he thinks he will reach these conclusions, he states, “Maybe, I don’t know. I change my mind too much about things.”

Despite their uncertainty over explicit rules of right and wrong behavior, most non-religious, non-spiritual students believe that they possess a moral sense that guides them to make the right decisions. One student states, “I’d like to think I have a compass that points me to do good things over bad, and that I at least am aware of when I’m doing something immoral.” Morality is therefore understood as a tendency or potential to make the right decisions, rather than specific principles governing those decisions. Because it is only activated in certain situations, it is not usually a conscious presence and is therefore difficult to articulate; one student states that for her, morality is “something that’s more under the surface. I don’t know that I’ve ever really thought about it explicitly.”

While good and bad behavior are understood as context-dependent and defined by the individual, most students agree that “a lot of what we see as right and wrong basically works out to some form of the golden rule.” Many emphasize “treating people with respect,” “doing what I would want people to do to me”; “be kind to others, and don’t hurt people.” Several mention “helping people where you can,” and discuss the importance of combating egocentrism: as one states, “don’t be so distracted with yourself that you don’t see what’s going on with other people.” However, these principles tend to be communicated in brief, abstract statements, and are not expressed as forming crucial component of their self-concepts or life
philosophies. Further, non-religious, non-spiritual students generally do not speak about helping others as an obligation or a daily commitment; as one states, “I do believe in sort of helping others, I’m not entirely devoid of wanting to help humans in general. I think you can get a lot out of that without needing to feel like you have to.”

**Uncertainty About Pure Altruism**

In their discussions of morality, several non-spiritual, non-religious students explicitly mention uncertainty over the existence of pure altruism. One student spoke about his morality as “feeling better about myself by helping people. I’m not sure if I believe in true altruism other than that doing good things happens to make me feel good.” While he may be motivated to help others, he focuses on the benefit to himself over the benefit to others as the source of this motivation. Another student believes that “good” behavior can only come from a natural, unconscious impulse; therefore, helping others is usually not “doing good” because “you’re thinking about other things while you’re doing it…knowing that you played a role in making it happen. You’re doing selfless things to largely contribute to your own selfish desires.” Because of this, he states, “I don’t think people should try to do good,” because setting out with the intention to benefit others inevitably involves conscious forethought and thus is ultimately self-centered.

**Lack of Morality in Day-to-Day Life**

Although most non-religious, non-spiritual students believe that doing good is important—whether for themselves or for the greater good—many claim that they do not live in a particularly moral manner in their day-to-day lives. The student who believes that good and bad exist on a gradient claims, “I try to lead my life kind of in
the middle, I don’t really care if I do bad things, I don’t really care if I do good things. I’m usually leaning towards the good side but not really caring, whatever happens happens.” Another student states, “I’ve never tried to live in a particularly moral way, or according to a set of morals. I don’t have to make tough decisions. And maybe I’m a little bit apathetic.” Thus, for many non-religious, non-spiritual students, “being a good person” is not a central, actively pursued goal in their daily lives. Furthermore, this is not seen as a major cause for concern. One student believes that “there’s potential” to be helpful in her daily life, but that normally she does not utilize this potential; when asked whether that bothered her, she said, “I’m not upset about it.” However, one young woman reveals a glimpse of guilt over the lack of altruistic behavior in her life:

A lot of times I’ll just sit around and hang out with my friends, and we could be at a homeless shelter scooping shit out, but realistically that’s not going to happen. I don’t feel guilty for not doing good things all the time, that would be crazy. But sometimes it’s just like, oh.

The demands of social and academic life are strong in college, and it is easy to become focused on the self and forget the needs of those around you. However, it is during moments of remembering those needs that this student stops and says, “oh.”

**Commitment to Making the World a Better Place**

Although some students find it difficult to actively pursue “good” behavior at college, nearly every student expresses a commitment to giving back to the world as an overarching life goal. Some do not yet know how they will accomplish this, but relate a general desire to “do things for other people, improving other people’s lives”; or “doing something that has an impact, no matter how small, in the world.” Others discuss particular directions toward which they wish to channel their idealism: joining
the peace corps, conducting research to help cure diabetes, and contributing to environmental policy, among others. In contrast to the global scope of these aspirations, another student focuses on a more local goal: “I want to do something important that leaves the world a better place, even if it comes down to just making money to support my family.”

Students relate different motivations for wishing to give back in the world. For some, “doing good” is seen as personally rewarding and contributing to one’s own well-being; one young woman asks, “If you can have fun while you do good things, then why would you do stupid shit?” One young man demonstrates self-awareness in relation to the suffering of the world as motivation for wanting to orient his life to service: “it’s unfair that some people have more than others. And it would be unfair that, if I have the capacity to help these people, I shouldn’t.” Another student brings a note of existential purpose into her desire to make an impact in the world: at the end of her life, she wants “to have accomplished something, because otherwise it’s like what did I do here in life? If you don’t leave your mark then what was the point all together?”

While the vast majority of non-religious, non-spiritual respondents profess a desire to serve the greater good, a small number express uncertainty over whether helping others should be an overarching goal in their lives. Their struggle centers on the attempt to balance personal self-interest with concern for the well-being of others. One student states, “I’m not sure how important I think contributing to society is, or whether I want to find meaning more in just myself and what makes me happy.” Another student hesitates to devote her life to community service, because “in real
life, you don’t really get paid for that stuff.” While these students have not yet decided the extent to which their lives will be devoted to serving others, it is an issue that they are consciously engaged with; as one says, “it’s something I have to keep working on, to figure out a balance” between the self and other people

**Morality Among Spiritual Students**

In general, spiritual students communicate a deep sense of moral obligation to other people, and identify this as an integral part of their spirituality. As such, morality is part of a broad spiritual philosophy, focusing on self-awareness and self-development as a means of fostering a connection to other people and ultimately making a positive impact in their lives.

**“Not Losing Sight of the Broader Experience”**

Every spiritual student discusses the moral importance of placing the self in relation to the “big picture,” stepping outside of one’s narrow, individual perspective and realizing that one is a member of a larger community of people. For most, this is a central pillar of their spirituality—one young woman defines her spirituality as “a dedication to gaining a better understanding of what my place is in the world, while not losing sight of a broader experience outside of myself and my daily tasks.” Through widening their perspective, spiritual students realize that the lives of others hold just as much value as their own; as one states, “my life in my own little world might mean a lot to me, but in the greater sense of the greater good, I would not expect my life to hold more value than another.”
Being aware of the importance in transcending one’s individual perspective pushes some spiritual students to work to understand the perspectives of others. One spiritual student states:

I think that it’s extremely important to make an effort to understand other people’s points of view. And if I’m not able to understand them, at least to accept them and understand that other people’s perspectives are just as valuable as my own.

Furthermore, making the effort to widen their social perspective allows spiritual students to recognize that others are shaped by social and psychological factors that may be invisible to them. This helps them to become more tolerant, and avoid judging others based solely on their actions. Thus, for another student, spirituality is “guided by a view that everyone is good in their nature. And if anyone is really unkind or cruel...There’s always something else going on, like with that bully in middle school.”

**Cultivating a Connection to Other People**

The attempt to transcend egocentrism closely relates to the importance that many spiritual students place on feeling connected to others—the “Ecumenical Worldview” measure in the questionnaire. Indeed, many students define spirituality as the attempt to develop this sense of connection; as one states, “spirituality is being in tune with the people around you, with humanity as a whole.” Often, recognizing the limitations of one’s individual perspective spurs the revelation that other people are just as trapped in their own ways of seeing things. This serves as motivation to transcend these limitations and connect with others. One spiritual student states:

Everybody feels like they’re alone in some way, and in that sense we’re all unified. People feel like they’re under the microscope of other people, and it’s easy, just getting so caught up in your own issues that you don’t realize
that we are all connected…So it’s important, really making an attempt to connect with people and see who they are and accept who they are.

Another spiritual student uses a deep self-awareness of his own inner life as a basis for understanding that everybody shares the same experience of consciousness. Therefore, his focus on self ultimately helps him to connect that self to others:

All these things serve to divide us and put us in categories, the roles, the categorizations, nationalities, races, genders…When we push that shit aside, we are all that same consciousness that just sits there and watches and listens and has incredible powers to observe our own thoughts. That is remarkable, and it connects us in a hugely important way…The ideal is to find that inner self, and from there, to be able to see that in other people. That’s a big goal for me…And it could be a route for compassion and universal love.

While some focus on the self as a means of connecting with others, others emphasize connection through community. One spiritual student is an atheist, but still feels that she is a part of something larger than herself through “believing that the human community shares something. [That] is my idea of bigness, is that there’s connectivity when you pursue it.” This pursuit is a central tenet of her spirituality, and through cultivating an awareness of how she relates to “the basic human experience” she feels that she is connected to all of humanity, past and present:

We’re made of stars, we’re all made of star material. We’re all created out of these same molecules. [There is] a basic human experience, a ‘you’re by the ocean I’m by the ocean.’ Even if I’ve never met you, or even if you were 400 years ago, I’m still breathing your breath, it’s just amazing that we’re all connected! There’s just so much history and richness in both your connection to people, but also [to] how the earth has been worn and changed. We’re all affecting each other.

Like the previous student, she communicates that this sense of connection is important because it leads to compassion and empathy:

I can have compassion for you, and you can have compassion for me, because we share similar things as women and as humans, people of the same age. Any moment you can find compassion in the world I think is connecting.
Our interview was one such moment for her, as she was able to relate to me and therefore connect her experience to my own. This exemplifies a mutual acknowledgment between the self and the other, and through it, the other becomes known and is no longer a stranger.

Several spiritual students who discuss the existence of a transcendent force, discussed in the previous chapter, believe that this force arises from, or is synonymous with, human connection. One spiritual student describes this force as “an experience of the interconnectedness of beings, and the way in which our personal experience of life relates to that of the rest of the world.” Like the student quoted in the previous paragraph, a sense of human connectivity and a belief that she is part of a social collective is her idea of “bigness.” Another student explains that his experience of the transcendent is inherently tied to social connection:

I find spirituality in the fact that there’s something intangible that none of the [people] can describe…Any group of people working together, I strongly feel that what is created from that group experience is much greater than each individual…I think the sense of spirituality, that energy, inherently comes from people interacting with other people.

Therefore, connecting with others taps into something that transcends individual experience. And this sense of transcendence is not only experienced in certain moments, but is something that constantly informs a spiritual awareness of what it means to be a good person.

Morality and Spirituality: Two Sides of the Same Coin

The awareness that the self is only one part of a larger whole, and that all people within that whole are connected to one another, strongly informs the morality of spiritual students—including the spiritual student who also identifies as religious.
Indeed, for one spiritual student this awareness forms the basis of both her spirituality and her morality:

My sense of morality is completely dependent on and defines my sense of spirituality. My understanding of morality tells me that I am not the most important person…there are an infinite number of other beings out there that have an importance just as much as I do. My spiritual sense tells me that it is important not to just do what’s best for me, but to do what’s best for others and for the general experience. And as much as I have the power to affect positive change in the world around me, that’s an important goal.

Because most spiritual students define spirituality as an attempt to meaningfully understand the self and how it relates to other people and the larger world, spirituality and morality often overlap.

**Spiritual Self-Awareness Contributes to a Sense of Morality**

Many spiritual students utilize self-awareness as a tool for moral behavior. For one student—who is both religious and spiritual—this awareness is a way of constantly keeping myself in check. Because being a good person means never saying woe is me. Being a better person means having a better understanding of yourself. Being a better person means using that understanding of yourself to best help the world and others.

Self-awareness helps him to avoid being preoccupied with his own problems to the extent that he ignores the world around him. It also allows him to become aware of his own strengths, increasing his ability to act in a way that effectively helps others.

For many spiritual students, the self that they connect with through reflection is not passive or static, and is constantly being examined and developed. This is demonstrated in the following quotes:

I really want to find out what I’m capable of in this world, in an experiential practical way. And so for me, spirituality is very much tied into self-development. I know there’s a me out there that’s capable of more than what I’ve done. And that me is something I’m looking for all the time.
Spirituality is trying to make myself better, for myself and for everyone else. That’s how I become a better person, not by sitting on my ass…What defines you is, are you just going to settle, or are you going to keep trying to do better things, are you going to move in a different direction?

Thus, “being a good person” is an active, constant process of self-discovery.

Notably, these students understand this process to be synonymous with spirituality.

For them, and for many other spiritual students, identifying as spiritual means engaging in self-awareness in order to discover how best to behave in the world.

**Morality Is Helping Others Whenever You Can**

For most spiritual students, “being a good person” involves helping others.

Most relate that they attempt to do this in their everyday lives by being attentive to the needs of others and utilizing opportunities to help whenever they arise:

I try to help people whenever I can, without asking things in return. Relieving suffering of people close to me. Whatever I can do, whether it be talking or bringing someone something when they’re sick, simply being with them in their time of need. Whether it’s been my ability to inspire others to bring out the best of themselves. I think I’ve had a lot of chances to do that here, and I think that I’ve realized them to the best of my abilities.

Interestingly, this student identifies as both religious-Catholic and spiritual. While the other religious-Catholic student used “not disappointing God” as her criterion for whether a behavior is good or bad (discussed in a previous section), this student does not look to God as a moral guide. He says,

If I help somebody else I don’t think, ‘oh this is good, I’m doing it for God, I’m getting Jesus points.’ I’m doing it because I genuinely like helping other people…I don’t think there’s a bank where it’s like, you racked up 19 points today, or you did something stupid, you lost 27 points.

Although the other Catholic student does not conceptualize the consequences of her actions as “Jesus points,” she explicitly relates those consequences to God’s expectations of her. The spiritual Catholic student, on the other hand, relates the
consequences of his actions to other people; as he later goes on to say, “It’s to everyone’s best interests to do the most good you can.”

**A Spiritual Commitment to Give Back to the World**

On a broader scale, spiritual students express the desire to make a positive impact on the world throughout their lives. This connects to the understanding that their lives are closely related to the lives of others, which brings a sense of responsibility to use their personal strengths to improve the human experience. For several spiritual students, an awareness of the privileges and resources that they possess impels them to share those resources with those who need them. One states:

I’m a wealthy white woman with an education and I’m an artist, and I feel like it’s very much my responsibility to deal with and address issues in the world that I can add a voice to that other people can’t. That feels like a mission. Do I want to end all pain and suffering on the planet or do I think I can do that? No, no no no no. But…when something difficult or beautiful relates to my life story in a really important way, I feel like it’s so important for me to talk about it, or to share, because I know how…My power on the planet is being an empathetic being and being an artist, and I need to use that.

Here, the importance of human connection and empathy comes into play as a means of improving the lives of others. This young woman feels that it is her “mission” to translate what relates to her “life story” into something that relates to other people’s stories, therefore linking her life to theirs. This may help others to see something “difficult or beautiful” in a new way, and will perhaps allow them to deal with their own pain and suffering.

Another spiritual student believes that global problems originate in the hearts and minds of individuals. Therefore, his spiritual mission is a search for new ways of thinking and feeling that would improve the health of the planet:
What I want to do with my life is figure out the best ways of understanding and sharing ways of thinking about ourselves and the world that could perhaps lead to much healthier people and way healthier communities...Now seems to be a make or break time in the history of our world and our species. So I get excited by the world, and I want to be a part of positive change. And I don’t see a way to be a part of positive change if my own self isn’t in line.

Finally, several spiritual students speak of their larger mission in life as making any kind of positive change in the lives of others—even if it is only one person. One young woman states:

I’d like to make a difference in some person’s life...I don’t want to be this little creature that just keeps taking things in and not giving back...I don’t think that my life will either be measured in what career path I take, or who I end up spending my life with. When I die, I would hope that someone somewhere is better because of me.

Making a positive impact in other’s lives and not living selfishly are therefore understood as marks of a life well lived. For many spiritual students, living a meaningful life, making a positive impact in the world, and deep self-awareness are merely different facets of their sense of spirituality. One’s inner life and the larger world—self and identity—are vast and mysterious, and spiritual students engage with these mysteries in order to understand how to live for both the self and others. This is eloquently expressed in this young man’s discussion of spirituality:

It comes down to not wanting to waste life. It’s such a huge rare gift to be given life, and I feel like 1. I have a huge responsibility to myself to not take for granted experiences and to not miss out on things I could’ve done and understood and accomplished. And then 2. To everybody else in the world and everything else, I feel this intense need to give back. And the two relate in that if I don’t give back as much as I can and if I don’t find as much peace and happiness with myself as I can, it’s a wasted life...Understanding, even if it’s just because it’s the most deeply satisfying thing, that my life is about other people and about [their] health and well being, is hugely motivating for how I choose to live.
Conclusion

Understanding life is sacred…Giving people different perspectives on how to understand life is sacred…That’s what novels do, that’s what poetry does, that’s what movies do, [is] help people understand life, in maybe not necessarily a real way…But it gives people something to look at…It’s about looking at what that is and seeing how that story manifests itself in your life.

We are all story-tellers. We are born with a self, but the nature of that self and how it relates to the larger world is not given to us. It is up to us to give shape to our lives, and we do this through story; for “to make meaning in life is to create dynamic narratives that render sensible and coherent the seeming chaos of human existence” (McAdams, 1993, p. 166). As the student quoted above notes, stories give us a perspective on our lives. And while that perspective may not be universally acknowledged as “true,” if we see it manifest itself in our lives it is true enough.

The epigraph beginning this thesis addresses sacred storytelling. The townspeople in Marquez’s story constructed signs—stories—to remind them that God exists. These signs “give people something to look at,” and provide a way of interpreting the unknown as transcendent, awesome, profound. One can interpret this excerpt as an allegory of religion: through its myths, practices, and community, religion helps people to “read” experience as meaningfully unified and integrated. But in our demythologized world, many people do not find religious narratives meaningful. In a world without signposts announcing that God exists, people must construct their own understandings of what connects the self to the world, and whether both are infused with transcendent meaning and value.

I embarked upon this thesis with several questions. I hypothesized that Wesleyan students are moving away from organized religion—but that they continue
to grapple with the questions, “who am I,” and “how do I fit into the world around me?” In approaching these questions, I wondered whether students expressed an awareness of the transcendent. Related to this, I wanted to investigate Woodruff’s claim that “we have forgotten what reverence means” (2001, p. 13), and explore whether students view their world and other people with a sense of awe, regardless of their belief in a higher power. Finally, although students may not belong to a sacred community or look to a higher power for guidance and support, I wondered how they defined moral values—how they work to foster both a good life and a good society. These inquiries produced several conclusions.

First, it is difficult to make a definitive statement about religion based on this sample, because the few students who do identify as religious approached their religion in highly personal ways. This confirms previous findings that emerging adults tend to individually define what their religion means to them, rather than accepting all beliefs and teachings of a faith (Winston, 2007). While all three place different levels of importance on the Bible and religious practice, ultimately they focus more on the subjective and private realm of religion—self-reflection, connection with God, contemplating how the world works—and view the institution and community of religion as secondary concerns. This too confirms previous research findings on religion among young adults (Smith, 2009).

Confirming my hypothesis, the majority of participants do not identify with an organized religion. This provides a strong contrast to national data, which indicate a high level of religious commitment among emerging adults in America as a whole. For example, the UCLA study of American college students reports that 75% affiliate
with a religion and 25% attend services frequently (Astin et. al., 2010). In contrast, only 17% of students in the current sample affiliate and only one reports attending services frequently. Based on this small sample, Wesleyan students are atypical in regard to religious identification, distancing themselves from organized religion much more than the average American college student.

In spite of the overwhelming rejection of organized religion, many Wesleyan students in all groups—religious, spiritual, and neither—express a sense of the eternal, the ineffable, the mysterious. One student, who identifies as spiritual, but not religious, states:

There’s this movement now of questioning what you’re doing and what you’re believing, versus 200 years ago with this is what you’re told and this is what you did…That structure is what’s hindering spiritual exploration, because it’s claiming to give you all the answers, and if you’re still having those questions obviously those answers are not working for you…Kids are shedding the trappings of organized religion, but they’re still grappling with those basic spiritual questions. Until somebody floats down from they sky and is like ‘I’m here, this is what’s going to happen to you after you die,’ people are going to be wondering.

Most students are grappling with questions of what exists beyond the material, observable world. Some find answers to these questions through belief in God or a higher power. While all three religious students believe in God, the large majority of non-religious students in this sample—both spiritual and non-spiritual—do not. This contrasts with the UCLA finding that 75% of American college students believe in God (Astin et. al., 2010).

While most students in all groups do not have a firm belief in God, only 25% firmly reject a belief in the transcendent. These students all identify as non-religious and non-spiritual. On the other hand, all students who identify as spiritual profess an
understanding of the transcendent. One-half of these students, and one-third of the non-spiritual students, express an ambiguous sense of the transcendent, forming a plurality of students in this sample. The other half of the spiritual students, as well as two non-spiritual students, have more well-defined, articulated beliefs in a transcendent reality. Among the non-religious students in this sample, spiritual students are much more likely than non-spiritual students to believe in the existence of something transcendent.

The students who express uncertainty about the transcendent can only offer vague conceptualizations of what it might be. However, many express that they want to believe in something, even if they do not know what that something is; as one states, “I’d like to believe in something. It’s like having your own little secret.” Without guidance or a social context that promotes defining and pursuing this, however, most “have no idea where to start, so I kind of just don’t bother” thinking about it.

The non-religious students who have more of a defined sense of the transcendent speak about it in remarkably similar ways. Most are in accord with Abraham Maslow’s understanding of the transcendent as “a force, a principle, a gestalt-quality of the whole of Being, an integrating power that expresses the unity and therefore the meaningfulness of the cosmos, the ‘dimension of depth’” (1964, p. 55). While not all conceptualize the transcendent as Maslow’s “integrating power,” they have a sense of “depth” and “bigness”—an awareness of the complexity of the self, and also an acknowledgment that “you’re not the only thing in the universe.”
Acknowledge this, they realize that there is something within the self and the earth that is not objectively knowable, that is beyond the limits of their full understanding.

A special aspect of transcendence is an experience of awe, reverence, and the sacred in daily life. Indeed, those students who believe in something that transcends the self—most of whom identify as spiritual—express a deep respect for life, for the earth, and for other people. For most spiritual students, spirituality is just that: an awareness of the beauty and mystery in the self and the world. As one states, “spirituality is thinking about what’s going on in here [pointing to his chest], but then it’s also about looking at the rest of the world and just having that sense of awe from what’s going on…And what’s going on is so much bigger and more mysterious and wonderful than what we could even perceive.” Among the spiritual and religious students, all but one in each group identify the sacred in their lives.

Many students, however, have no experience of these concepts in their daily lives. As one states, “The sacred, or sense of things being sacred, has been a little bit lost in our world these days…I don’t know how to go about applying it…in this world.” Most non-religious, non-spiritual students—and even one religious student—do not speak about the world in which they live with a sense of awe and wonder. This may be due, in part, to the college environment; as one states, “I don’t stop enough to appreciate the beauty in things in everyday life…It’s hard, there’s such a schedule now, I have too much to think about…I probably don’t appreciate life enough.”

A sense of the sacred implies moral responsibility, for what we hold sacred is what we value most highly, and our understanding of what is of highest value guides
our actions and commitments in life. Students in this sample revealed a spectrum of attitudes about morality—some inspiring, some dismaying. Nearly every student, regardless of their religion or spirituality, places high value on relationships. Most respondents understood the word “faith” as trust and reliance in something, and the vast majority place that trust in their family and friends. Students in all groups place special value on connections formed with others, and are aware that, in the end, it is other people that make our lives most meaningful.

Closely related to the sense of connection to others is an understanding of how one should behave in relation to others. Remarkably, almost every student desires to make a long-term positive impact in the world, regardless of religion or spirituality. Students differ in knowing how to achieve this—some want to devote their lives to community service or environmental policy, while others wish to make some contribution to “the greater good,” even if they do not yet know how. Overall, students express a desire to avoid devoting their lives to selfish pursuits, and do not want to be “just another Joe or Bob who sits in his apartment and watches TV and goes to work from 9 to 5.” While these students are only a small sample of the current generation, they provide a snapshot that suggests broader attitudes and ideals.

Apart from more abstract future goals, the desire to make an ongoing positive impact in others’ lives is articulated more clearly and passionately by spiritual students than by non-spiritual students. In general, spiritual students understand their lives as inextricably connected to the world and to humanity, and this connection fosters empathy and compassion for the larger system within which they live. These qualities relate to several spiritual variables identified by the UCLA researchers:
Ethic of Caring—our concern for the welfare of others and the world around us; and Ecumenical Worldview, our sense of connection to others. They defined these variables as distinctly spiritual qualities—and indeed, spiritual students in this sample scored higher on these measures than non-spiritual students. Furthermore, these two variables are positively correlated. Spiritual students tend to see themselves as part of the weave of humanity, and experience a sense of self in full integration with the people around them. From this sense of connection grows a responsibility for the welfare of other people. The compassion and idealism in their narratives is inspiring, and refutes the idea that my generation is suffering from a “cultural crisis of knowledge and value” (Smith, 2009. p. 292).

In contrast, many non-spiritual students express some combination of confusion and apathy in their discussions of morality. Perhaps related to this, few speak about the importance of connecting with humanity and the larger world. Morality is contextual and focused on the individual—“you just kind of have to do what’s right for you individually”—rather than oriented toward other people. This supports the finding that emerging adults tend to doubt the existence of an objective moral reality beyond their own subjective experience (Smith, 2009). Several students relate that they have not yet decided what their duties are to other people, while others are unable to articulate their morality at all. Although most students abstractly identify their morality as “some form of the golden rule,” many confess that they do not live morally on a day-to-day basis.

For a variety of reasons, study participants have overwhelmingly rejected the institution of organized religion as an agent of moral education. Where can emerging
adults turn for guidance as they develop their own moral awareness? The family is one important source, to be sure. A second is the institution of education, which in this current study is Wesleyan itself. According to Wesleyan’s mission statement, the purpose of the school is to build a community of students “who think critically and creatively and who value independence of mind and generosity of spirit.” Although Wesleyan broke from its religious affiliation with religion 73 years ago, it maintains a belief that “there is something in man which cannot be weighed on hayscales.” (Potts, 1992, p. 143). Further, Wesleyan professes a commitment to cultivating spirit as a goal of higher education. But how to cultivate “spirit,” and for what? Interestingly, civic engagement is nowhere mentioned in Wesleyan’s mission statement, save for the ambiguous term “generosity.” This is a remarkable absence, especially considering that Wesleyan’s founders viewed social responsibility as a primary educational concern. As Wilbur Fisk, Wesleyan’s first president, stated, “I have done educating youths for themselves. My object hereinafter will be to educate…for the world” (Potts, p. 19).

Many interviews, however, reveal that it is particularly difficult at Wesleyan to be attentive and responsive to one’s inner life as well as one’s surroundings. One student expresses his concern over the negative effects that the college environment has on the lives of its students:

There should be more alarm bells going off, looking at the way people act here. Whether it’s the social scene, it’s based off alcohol for the most part. And then most people treat their bodies in really unhealthy ways, and don’t have very healthy relationships with themselves or with the people around them. There’s a lot of unhappiness, a lot of desperation, a lot of sadness.
According to this student—and many others in this sample—the “generosity of spirit” stated as central to Wesleyan’s educational mission is not strongly encouraged on campus. Furthermore, incentives promoting civic responsibility are difficult to pursue in a life filled with “friends, work, home, sleep, or eating.”

In their conclusion, the UCLA researchers noted that they were “dismayed that higher education has paid so little attention to students’ inner lives…We believe higher education potentially can, and should, play [a role] in students’ spiritual development…not only developing students’ cognitive capacities but also attending to their moral and character development” (Astin et. al., 2010, p. 138). Interestingly, they equate spiritual and moral development, and define spirituality as “the values that we hold most dear, our sense of who we are, the meaning and purpose that we see in our work and our life, and our sense of connectedness to one another and the world around us” (Astin et. al., p. 4). For them—and for many of my participants—spirituality is an understanding of how to be a good person and live a meaningful life. These qualities are crucial to becoming a good citizen of the world, whether or not they are identified as spiritual. As Maslow states: “An education which leaves untouched the entire region of transcendent thought is an education which has nothing to say about the meaning of human life” (1964, p. 58).

Our social and educational context undoubtedly shapes how we make meaning in life—but the individual also holds power to make meaning. To paraphrase Sartre, we are thrown into this world, and it is up to us to give it meaning by writing our own stories, creating our own signs. Although meaning-making may not require “transcendent thought,” many non-religious, non-spiritual students had
difficulty identifying “meaning” in their lives, and some even asserted that their lives lacked meaning. One states:

I don’t think that there’s any meaning to my life. In the grand scheme of things, my entire life span will be nothing in the continuum of time, and I won’t have any impact…But there’s nothing I can do about that. So just choosing to believe something else doesn’t change the reality.

This may be true. But, as one spiritual students notes, “we create our own reality.” One is reminded of the quote from Einstein: “There are two ways to live your life—one is as though nothing is a miracle, the other is as though everything is a miracle.”

Even if God no longer exists and religion is meaningless, one can still view the world with awe and wonder, and transcend the self by seeking to live in communion with other people and the natural world. And while this perspective may “understand life in maybe not necessarily a real way,” it can allow us to feel that life is worth living, for the self and others. This is beautifully stated by one student:

Even if it is a disillusionment…finding meaningful connections with other people, and falling in love and having babies, all those things are really amazing ways of living…And to say that it doesn’t matter is like, OK, but you also have this opportunity to make meaning, so do it. You have these hands and this body and this heart, you can go into the world.

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APPENDIX A: RECRUITMENT NOTE SENT TO PARTICIPANTS

You have been randomly selected to participate in my senior thesis on religion and spirituality at Wesleyan. If you choose to participate, you will receive a total of $8; this dollar is my commitment to that. Your participation consists of a one-hour interview on the role of religion and spirituality in your life. If you agree to participate in the interview, you will receive the additional $7; if not, you can keep the dollar.

I am interested in how students make meaning in the world, both within and outside of the conventional framework of religion. Because my aim is to document the varieties of religious and spiritual experience at Wesleyan, I’m looking for a wide range of participants—not just people who are strongly religious or spiritual, but also those who are uncertain, searching, don’t necessarily fit under a label, agnostic, or atheist. I want to hear your stories. If you wish to participate in this study, send me (Meredith Steinman) and email at msteinman@wesleyan.edu.

P.S. There will be homemade brownies at the interview.
APPENDIX B: SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

How would you define spirituality?
How would you define religion?
Are they synonymous terms?
What was your religious upbringing like? Were you raised in a religious family?
Did you identify with religion as a child?
Do you currently practice religion with your family?
Is organized religion meaningful to you?
  If so, why? If not, why not?
Are you currently part of a group with which you share a religion or spirituality?
  If so, how often do you meet with them?
Do you currently take part in any religious or spiritual activities, practices, or rituals?
  If not, why not? If so, what are they? How are they helpful to you?
Do you speak to anyone about religion or spirituality? Who? How often?
How often do you think about religion and spirituality?
  When are they brought on? By what?
Do you practice religion or spirituality on campus (individually or socially)?
Do you seek out opportunities to help you grow spiritually or religiously?
Do you think there are lots of opportunities for spiritual growth on campus?
  If not, do you wish there were more opportunities?
Do you wish you were able to develop spiritually or religiously more?
Do you have specific religious or spiritual beliefs?
  If so, what has contributed to these beliefs?
  Have any readings contributed—philosophy or theology?
Do you believe in a higher power, something transcendent or omnipresent?
Do you believe in life after death?
How would you define faith?
  Do you have faith in something? What?
How would you define sacred?
  Is anything sacred to you? If so, what?
Do you feel connected to the earth? To other people?
If religious or spiritual: Has your religion or spirituality evolved over time?
  If so, how?
  What experiences have changed your religious or spiritual beliefs?
If religious or spiritual: Does your religion or spirituality help you through difficult times?
If religious or spiritual: Is religion or spirituality a motivating force in your life?
If religious or spiritual: Does religion or spirituality infuse every aspect of your life, or is it only experienced in certain moments?
Do you have a sense of morality?
  Does religion or spirituality inform your morality?
  Is your sense of morality intuitive or explicit?
Do you have ideals or large life goals?
APPENDIX C: INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Participant Consent Form

I state that I am over 18 years of age and agree to participate in a program of research being conducted by Meredith Steinman, senior psychology major, and overseen by Professor Karl Scheibe of the Wesleyan University Psychology Department. The focus of this research is on the varieties of religious and spiritual experience among Wesleyan students. The project will investigate the religious and spiritual narratives that are utilized by Wesleyan students through semi-structured interviews.

There are several anticipated benefits of this study. This topic is important to many people, some of whom perhaps don’t often get the opportunity to speak about their experience and beliefs. It is hoped that this project will help students to reflect on and clarify for themselves the different factors that form their spiritual beliefs. As a social benefit, the results of this project will stand as a psychological snapshot of a student population in a particular time and place. It can be used to supplement research on religious and spiritual patterns among college students, and the results may suggest further inquiries and lines of research.

There are no physical or financial risks known in this study. Some participants may experience mild emotional discomfort when discussing the topic of spirituality. Such discomfort is unlikely to be outside that realm of emotional discomfort experienced in everyday life. I have been reminded by the researcher that my participation is completely voluntary, and I understand that if I do feel uncomfortable, I may discontinue my participation in the study at any time with no penalty.

I understand that all of my responses will be held in strict confidence and will not be identified in any publication of the results. Specifically, I understand that the data collected from this research will be stored in Professor Karl Scheibe’s office, on the second floor of the Wasch Center for Retired Faculty, in locked cabinets and that only Meredith Steinman and Karl Scheibe will have access to the data. The data will be coded so as not to identify me by name and will be destroyed by Meredith Steinman.

I understand that in return for serving in this experiment, I will receive $8. I further understand that participation in this research is voluntary, that I may ask questions, and that I am free to withdraw from the experiment at any time. I understand that if I choose to withdraw from the experiment, I will still receive $8. I further understand that I will be given a copy of this consent form to keep for my own records. Finally, I understand that if I have any comments, questions, or concerns following the experiment, I may contact Professor Karl Scheibe by telephone (860-685-2273). I may also bring complaints about the experiment to Dr. Lisa Dierker, Chair of the Wesleyan Psychology Department (860-685-2137).

Name of Participant (print clearly):
Signature of Participant: Date:
APPENDIX D: SELF-REPORT SHEET

Name:
Age:
Class Year:
Major:
Religious Affiliation (if any):
Hometown:
Family members with whom you grew up:

Brief Questions
Do you identify as (circle any that apply):
Religious
Spiritual
Agnostic
Atheist
Other:
APPENDIX E: CSBV QUESTIONNAIRE ON RELIGION AND SPIRITUALITY: PAGE 1

The remaining questions are being asked as part of a special study that the Higher Education Research Institute is conducting on students’ beliefs and values. Even though not all questions may seem equally relevant to your personal views and experience, we appreciate diverse viewpoints and value all responses. As with the previous questions, all of your responses are held in the strictest professional confidence.

42. Please indicate the importance to you personally of each of the following:
(Marking one for each item)

- Reducing pain and suffering in the world
- Attaining inner harmony
- Attaining wisdom
- Seeking out opportunities to help me grow spiritually
- Seeking beauty in my life
- Finding answers to the mysteries of life
- Becoming a more loving person
- Seeking to follow religious teachings in my everyday life
- Improving the human condition

43. Please indicate your agreement with each of the following statements:
(Marking one for each item)

- Love is the root of all the great religions
- All life is interconnected
- Believing in supernatural phenomena is foolish
- We are all spiritual beings
- It is futile to try to discover the purpose of existence
- People can reach a higher spiritual plane of consciousness through meditation or prayer
- The evil in the world seems to outweigh the good
- Most people can grow spiritually without being religious
- People who don’t believe in God will be punished
- Non-religious people can lead lives that are just as moral as those of religious believers
- Pain and suffering are essential to becoming a better person
- The universe arose by chance
- In the future, science will be able to explain everything
- While science can provide important information about the physical world, only religion can truly explain existence

44. For me, the relationship between science and religion is one of: (Mark one)
- Conflict
- I consider myself to be on the side of religion.
- I consider myself to be on the side of science.
- Independence; they refer to different aspects of reality.
- Collaboration, each can be used to help support the other.

45. Do you pray?
- Yes
- No (Skip to #46)

46. If you pray, why do you pray?
(Marking one for each item)

- For help in solving problems
- To be in communion with God
- To express gratitude
- For forgiveness
- To relieve the suffering of others
- For loved ones
- For wisdom
- For praise God

47. How often do you engage in the following activities?
(Marking one for each item)

- Self-reflection
- Prayer
- Meditation
- Yoga, Tai Chi, or similar practice
- Religious singing/chanting
- Reading sacred texts
- Other reading on religion/spirituality

48. Please indicate the extent to which each of the following describes you:
(Marking one for each item)

- Having an interest in spirituality
- Believing in the sacredness of life
- Feeling unsettled about spiritual and religious matters
- Feeling good about the direction in which my life is headed
- Feeling a sense of connection with God/Higher Power that transcends my personal self
- Feeling a strong connection to all humanity
- Feeling disillusioned with my religious upbringing
- Having an interest in different religious traditions
- Being committed to introducing people to my faith
- Believing in the goodness of all people
- Being thankful for all that has happened to me
- Seeing each day as good or bad, as a gift
- Believing in life after death
- Feeling obligated to follow my parents’ religious practices

49. Which of the following best characterizes your concept of or experience with God?
(Marking all that apply)

- Universal-Spirit
- Love
- Father-figure
- Mother-figure
- Teacher
- Part of me
- Savior-Mystery
- Protector
- Creator
- Nature
- Supreme-Raing
- Judge
- Enlightenment
- None-of-the-above

50. Have you ever had a spiritual experience while:
(Marking one for each item)

- In a house of worship
- Listening to beautiful music
- Viewing a great work of art
- Participating in a musical or artistic performance
- Engaging in athletics
- Witnessing the beauty and harmony of nature
- Meditating
- Praying
- Participating in a retreat
- Other

51. Do you believe in God?
- Yes
- Not sure
- No
APPENDIX E: CSBV QUESTIONNAIRE ON RELIGION AND SPIRITUALITY (PAGE 2)

52. The ultimate spiritual quest for me is: (Mark one)
- To discover who I really am.
- To follow God's plan for me.
- To become a better person.
- To know my purpose in life.
- To make the world a better place.
- To know God.
- I do not consider myself to be on a spiritual quest.

53. In what ways have the following experiences changed your religious/spiritual beliefs? (Mark one for each item)
- New ideas encountered in classes.
- Romantic relationships.
- Personal injury or illness.
- Parental divorce or separation.
- Death of a close friend or family member.
- Natural disasters.
- The events of September 11, 2001.
- The war in Iraq.

54. Please indicate your agreement with each of the following statements: (Mark one for each item)
- What happens in my life is determined by forces larger than myself.
- Whether or not there is a Supreme Being doesn't matter to me.
- I gain spiritual strength by trusting in a Higher Power.
- It doesn't matter what I believe as long as I lead a moral life.
- I have never felt a sense of sacredness.
- I find religion to be personally helpful.
- I know someone I can turn to for spiritual guidance.
- My spirituality is a source of joy.
- It is difficult to reconcile the existence of a loving God with all the pain and suffering in the world.
- I do not expect my religious convictions to change in the next few years.
- To be truly religious, a person must accept all the teachings of their faith.

55. How would you describe your current views about spiritual/religious matters? (Mark all that apply)
- Confused
- Secure
- Doubting
- Seeking
- Not interested

56. My spiritual/religious beliefs: (Mark one for each item)
- Disagree Strongly
- Disagree Somewhat
- Agree Somewhat
- Agree Strongly

- Have helped me develop my identity.
- Are one of the most important things in my life.
- Give meaning/purpose to my life.
- Help define the goals I set for myself.
- Provide me with strength, support, and guidance.
- Lie behind my whole approach to life.
- Have been formed through much personal reflection and searching.

57. How many of your close friends:
- Share your religious/spiritual views?
- Are searching for meaning/purpose in life?
- Go to church/temple/other house of worship?

58. Please indicate the extent to which you engage in the following activities: (Mark one for each item)
- Not at all
- Occasionally
- Fairly
- To a great extent

- Searching for meaning/purpose in life
- Trying to change things that are unfair in the world
- Accepting others as they are
- Having discussions about the meaning of life with my friends
- Being honest in my relationships with others

59. During the last year, please indicate how often you have:
- Participated in community-food or clothing drives.
- Helped friends with personal problems.
- Donated money to charity.
- Felt distant from God.
- Felt that your religious/spiritual beliefs are a source of strength.
- Felt inspired by God.
- Felt that your religious/spiritual beliefs are a source of weakness.
- Felt angry with God.
- Felt that your life is filled with stress and anxiety.
- Been able to find meaning in times of hardship.
- Been able to express gratitude to others.
- Been able to feel a sense of serenity.
- Attended a close, worship, or retreat on matters related to religion/spirituality.

60. Do you give the Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) permission to include your ID number should your college request the data for additional research analyses?
- Yes
- No

The remaining ovals are provided for questions specifically designed by your college rather than the Higher Education Research Institute. If your college has chosen to use the ovals, please observe carefully the supplemental directions given to you.

THANK YOU!
APPENDIX F: QUANTITATIVE CODES FOR INTERVIEWS

1. How religious was this person’s upbringing?
   1: Not religious at all—never encountered religion as a child
   2: Encountered minimal religion—celebrated holidays, occasional services
   3: Religion was a moderate presence—encountered some religion in the home; attended services with family or friends in an uneven way
   4: Somewhat religious: attended services more frequently than holidays, but not every week; at least one parent actively religious
   5: Very religious—services at least once a week; at least one parent very religious

2. What is this person’s evaluative attitude toward religion?
   1: Extremely negative—disdainful, angry towards religion
   2: Somewhat negative—thinks it is problematic, but not strongly negative
   3: Neutral—does not care
   4: Positive
   5: Very positive

3. What is this person’s evaluative attitude toward spirituality?
   1: Extremely negative—disdainful
   2: Somewhat negative—thinks it is problematic, but not strongly negative
   3: Neutral—does not care
   4: Positive
   5: Very positive

4. What is the potency of this person’s emotional investment in religion?
   1: Very weak
   2: Weak
   3: Neutral
   4: Strong
   5: Very strong

5. What is the potency of this person’s emotional investment in spirituality?
   1: Very weak
   2: Weak
   3: Neutral
   4: Strong
   5: Very strong

6. What is this person’s level of religious activity?
   1: Very passive
   2: Somewhat passive
   3: Average?
   4: Somewhat Active
   5: Very Active
7. What is this person’s level of spiritual activity?
   1: Very passive
   2: Somewhat passive
   3: Average?
   4: Somewhat Active
   5: Very Active

8. What is the strength of this person’s belief in God or some transcendent energy?
   1: as certain as possible that it does not exist
   2: Not sure, but there is probably nothing
   3: Does not know
   4: Pretty sure there is something, but does not wholeheartedly believe
   5: Certain that God or “energy” exists

9. How well defined or developed is religion or spirituality in this person’s life?
   1: Not present at all
   2: Occasionally present, but not defined
   3: Present but not defined
   4: Present and somewhat developed
   5: Present and well-developed

10. What is the strength of this person’s commitment to helping others or giving back to the world?
    1: Not at all a priority
    2: Slightly important
    3: Somewhat important
    4: Important, but not a central concern
    5: A top priority
APPENDIX G: QUALITATIVE CODES FOR INTERVIEWS

1. Does this student make a distinction between religion and spirituality? If so, how?
2. Did the student encounter religion as a child? Was it meaningful?
3. Presence or absence of identification with organized religion. If absent, why?
4. Belief in God. If expressed, how is a higher power described?
5. Spiritual Experiences
6. Sense of awe for the world and other people
7. Wesleyan is not conducive to the maintenance or growth of religion and spirituality
8. Commitment to helping others and giving back to the world
REFERENCES


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